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A mediaeval accident at work

During the mediaeval period two great industries, agriculture and building, occupied the mass of the working population in this country either directly or in the trades allied to them. The great delight in researching this period is in studying the illustrations depicting men and women at work in manuscripts, painting, sculpture, or in carving. The burden of ill health resulting from work must have been considerable and allusions are sometimes made to it, particularly in reference to mining, but detailed accounts of occupational diseases seem very thin on the ground. There is little doubt that those who were engaged in building must have suffered a good deal from accidental injuries and we know that a number of cathedrals, for example, collapsed with loss of life. Only when someone of importance was injured, however, do we find a written account; thus we know that Williams of Sens who supervised the rebuilding

of Canterbury Cathedral after the fire of 1174 fell from some scaffolding and sustained serious injury but survived. I have been able to find only a few illustrations of accidents at work, one of which is shown here. It comes from a double sided painting by Lorenzo di Niccolo Serini (1342-1411) depicting episodes in the life of St Vita. The original is in the town museum of San Gimignano in Italy. A workman is shown putting a roof on a small building and as he is working the scaffolding on which he is standing breaks but his fall to the ground is prevented by the miraculous intervention of the saint; judging from the state of the scaffolding, this was the only safety measure available to him. Details of other illustrations of mediaeval hazards at work would be much appreciated.

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