

Earliest monastery in the British Isles discovered in Somerset

Supporting information

Monasticism in the British Isles

The monastic tradition had spread to present-day France at the beginning of the 5th century shortly after that part of the Roman empire had been conquered by the Franks. Various Lives of Saints, such as of St Patrick, suggest that the monastic ideal had probably spread to Britain and Ireland at some time in the 5th century.

Association with Saint Brigit

Later medieval writers recorded the visits of King Arthur and Saint Brigit to Beckery. Saint Brigit (AD 453–524) was an Irish nun who is credited with founding several monasteries in Ireland. William of Malmesbury (writing in about AD 1135) and John of Glastonbury (writing in about AD 1400) record a visit by Brigit in AD 488. She is said to have left behind relics, including a bag or wallet, a necklace, a small bell and some weaving implements. These relics were displayed to pilgrims in the medieval chapel that was later built on the site. A hole or opening in the side of the chapel was thought to bestow forgiveness of sins on those who crawled through it.

Association with King Arthur

William of Malmesbury (writing in about AD 1135) recounts that King Arthur experienced a vision of Mary Magdalene and the infant Jesus in the chapel at Beckery.

Link with Glastonbury Abbey and Glastonbury Tor

The site of Glastonbury Abbey lies just over a mile away from Beckery, on a peninsula of hard geology that projects into the wetlands of the Avalon Marshes. Imported

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Mediterranean pottery dating from the late 5th to early 6th centuries has been found in association with timber buildings on the site of the later abbey and on nearby Glastonbury Tor. These may have been secular buildings in use at the same time as Beckery monastery. Glastonbury Abbey was probably founded by the kings of Wessex towards the end of the 7th century.

More Details from the Excavations

The excavations took place over three weeks in May 2016 and covered an area of about 20 metres square.

Geophysical survey on the site by Geoflo Ltd showed the chapels, several other stone buildings and a possible enclosing ditch. The excavation proved that the ditch was made in the Iron Age and finds of Iron Age and Roman pottery across the site show that there was some activity on the site before the monastery was founded.

The seven individuals who were dated consist of three largely complete burials, two partial burials that had been badly damaged by the foundation trench for one of the medieval chapels, one person represented by a single extra leg bone in one of the complete graves and a jaw fragment from the 1960s backfill. The analysis of the bodies was carried out by Amanda Bailey. The three largely complete burials could all be identified as males, two past middle age and one under 25 years old. The other remains could only be identified as being from adults.

One of the men had suffered a severe fracture of his upper left arm. Although it had healed, it would have been visibly deformed. All the complete skeletons show that the individuals undertook hard physical work during their lives. Isotope analysis showed that all six of the individuals had a similar diet of terrestrial food rich in meat and/or dairy products while the other individual had much less meat/dairy in his diet. Further isotope analysis is planned in order to try to determine if the monks were from the local population or if they had come from further away.

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The radiocarbon results suggest that the earliest individual died between AD 406 and AD 544.

From the late Saxon period onwards Beckery was the site of a chapel. The 1960s excavation suggested three building phases of the chapel, the first in wood and the later two in stone. The new excavations suggest that there was another stone building phase, between the other two. The site appears to have been abandoned after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, but the ruins of buildings were still visible in the 1790s.

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