Earliest monastery in British Isles discovered in



What the site may have looked like during the late Saxon period David Lawrence

A community excavation made possible by National Lottery players has made an incredible discovery at a site linked to tales of King Arthur.

Radiocarbon dating has revealed that monks buried in a mediaeval cemetery at Beckery, near Glastonbury, lived during the 5th and 6th centuries. It is the earliest archaeological evidence of monasticism in the British Isles.

[quote=Richard Brunning, Site Director]“The ancient origins of the Beckery site may explain why later medieval writers linked it to figures such as King Arthur and Saint Brigit.”[/quote]

Discovery and dating

The excavation and investigation was carried out by the South West Heritage Trust as part of the HLF-supported Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership.

It re-investigated the site of a medieval chapel that was first excavated in the 1880s by John Morland and again in the 1960s by Philip Rahtz.

The 1960s excavation uncovered an extensive cemetery of at least 50 people. Almost all were adult males, leaving little doubt that this was a monastic graveyard. The new excavation uncovered seven of those skeletons for scientific dating, proving that the earliest monks died in the 5th or early 6th centuries AD, with burials continuing in the 7th to early 9th centuries. The monastic use of the site may have ended in the later 9th century when Somerset was attacked by Viking armies.

Tales of King Arthur and Ireland's patron saint

Medieval writers would often link Beckery to King Arthur and one of Ireland's patron saints, Saint Brigit – this discovery offers a clue as to why.

Site Director Richard Brunning from the South West Heritage Trust said: "Archaeology is providing evidence that can get us beyond the uncertainty of the historical sources. The ancient origins of the Beckery site may explain why later medieval writers linked it to figures such as King Arthur and Saint Brigit."

He added: "It is great to show that a community excavation can produce results that revolutionise our view of the origins of monasticism in Britain and Ireland."

Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership

Awarded £1.8million by HLF, the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership is led by the Somerset Wildlife Trust and works to celebrate, protect and share the heritage and wildlife of the landscape.

Nerys Watts, Head of HLF South West, said: "This discovery just goes to show the incredible hidden heritage and untold stories still to be discovered within our landscapes. Thanks to National Lottery players, we're delighted to support the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership which is bringing organisations together and putting communities at the heart of the landscape's future."

Find out more on the South West Heritage Trust website.



Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership Scheme