

Archaeologists find 'lost' monastery ruled by Queen of Mercia

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Credit: University of Reading

The discovery of an Anglo-Saxon monastery in Berkshire, unearthed this summer by archaeologists, gives unique insight into the life of one of the most powerful women of the Early Middle Ages and her likely final resting place.

The location of the 8th century monastery in the Berkshire village of Cookham, on the banks of the Thames, was a mystery until now, despite being well known from contemporary historical sources. Written records show it was placed under the rule of a royal abbess: Queen Cynethryth, the widow of the powerful King Offa of Mercia.

Now, archaeologists at the University of Reading and local volunteers excavating in the grounds of Holy Trinity Church—one of the rumored locations of the monastery—have made a breakthrough discovery. The team has uncovered the remains of timber buildings which would have housed the inhabitants of the monastery, alongside artifacts providing insights into their lives.

Dr. Gabor Thomas, the University of Reading archaeologist who is leading the excavation, said: "The lost monastery of Cookham has puzzled historians, with a number of theories put forward for its location. We set out to solve this mystery once and for all.

"The evidence we have found confirms beyond doubt that the Anglo-Saxon monastery was located on a gravel island beside the River Thames now occupied by the present parish church.

"Despite its documented royal associations, barely anything is known about what life was like at this monastery, or others on this stretch of the Thames, due to a lack of archaeological evidence. The items that have been uncovered will allow us to piece together a detailed impression of how the monks and nuns who lived here ate, worked and dressed. This will shed new light on how Anglo-Saxon monasteries were organized and what life was like in them."

A network of monasteries was established on sites along the route of the Thames to take advantage of what was one of the most important trading arteries in Anglo-Saxon England, enabling them to develop into wealthy economic centers. The stretch of the Thames in which Cookham falls formed a contested boundary between the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex, so the monastery here had particular strategic and political importance. In spite of this historical background, the exact location of the monastery has been long debated.

Wealth of evidence

The excavation, in August, sought to answer this question by investigating open spaces straddling the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, which still stands today.

The team have discovered a wealth of evidence including food remains, pottery vessels used for cooking and eating, and items of personal dress including a delicate bronze bracelet and a dress pin, probably worn by female members of the community.

Clear evidence has emerged for the layout of the monastery which was organized into a series of functional zones demarcated by ditched boundaries. One of these zones appears to have been used for housing and another for industrial activity indicated by a cluster of hearths probably used for metalworking.

'Influence and status'

Dr. Thomas added: "Cynethryth is a fascinating figure, a female leader who clearly had genuine status and influence in her lifetime. Not only were coins minted with her image, but it is known that when the powerful European leader Charlemagne wrote to his English counterparts, he wrote jointly to both King Offa and Queen Cynethryth, giving both equal status.

"We are thrilled to find physical evidence of the monastery she presided over, which is also very likely to be her final resting place."

Cynethryth joined a religious order and became royal abbess of the [monastery](#) after the death of her husband, King Offa, in AD 796. Before his death he had ruled Mercia, one of the main Anglo Saxon kingdoms in

Britain, which spanned the English Midlands.

King Offa is considered by many historians to have been the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king before Alfred the Great. He is known for ordering the creation of the earth barrier on the border between England and Wales, known as Offa's Dyke, which can still be seen today.

Cynethryth is the only Anglo-Saxon queen known to be depicted on a coin—a rarity anywhere in Western Europe during the period. She died sometime after AD 798.

Provided by University of Reading

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