

Mysterious skeleton revealed to be that of unusual lady anchoress of York Barbican

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A photo of skeleton SK3870 on site at the excavations at York Barbican. Credit: On Site Archaeology

The rare and unusual life of an anchoress, a woman who devoted her life to prayer while living in seclusion, has been unearthed by the University of Sheffield and Oxford Archaeology, thanks to a skeletal collection now held at the University.

Analysis of the collection, which includes a staggering 667 complete skeletons dated to the Roman, Medieval, and Civil War era, has revealed one in particular that is likely Lady Isabel German, an important anchoress—or type of religious hermit—who is documented to have lived at All Saints Church in Fishergate, York, during the 15th century.

As an anchoress, Lady German would have chosen to live a life of seclusion. Living inside a single room of the church without direct human contact, she would have devoted herself to prayer and accepted charity to survive.

Skeleton SK3870 was discovered in 2007 during excavations at what was once All Saints Church on the site of the famous York Barbican. Not found in the cemetery alongside the others skeletons in the collection, this medieval woman was buried in a tightly crouched position within the apse of the church foundations, a small room located behind the altar.

Only clergy, or the very rich were buried inside churches at this time, so the new study suggests the location of this highly unusual burial makes SK3870 a [prime candidate](#) to be that of the All Saints' anchoress, Lady German.

Dr. Lauren McIntyre, University of Sheffield Alumna and Osteoarcheologist at Oxford Archaeology Limited, conducted the analysis of the historical and osteoarcheological evidence, which included using radiocarbon dating and isotopic investigation to examine skeleton SK3870.

The study is published in the journal *Medieval Archaeology*.

Dr. McIntyre said, "The location of the skeleton in the apse suggests this was a woman of high status, but the crouched burial position is extremely unusual for the [medieval period](#). The lab research also shows

the woman buried at All Saints Church was living with septic arthritis and also advanced venereal syphilis. This would have meant she lived with severe, visible symptoms of infection affecting her entire body, and later on, neurological and mental health decline.

"Lady German lived in a period of history where we typically think of there being a strong association between visible and disfiguring illnesses and sin, with that type of suffering seen as a punishment from God. While it is very tempting to suggest that someone with visible disfiguring disease would be shunned or want to commit to living as an anchoress as a way to hide from the world, this research has shown that this might not be the case. Such severe disease could also have been viewed positively, being sent by God to grant martyr-like status to someone special."

Becoming an anchoress in the 15th century, when women would realistically have been expected to get married and become the property of their husband, could also give them an alternative and important status in both their community and the male-dominated Church.

Dr. McIntyre added, "The new study data allows us to explore the possibilities that Lady German chose to devote herself to a life of solitude as a way to remain autonomous and in control of her own destiny. This chosen lifestyle would also have made her a highly significant figure within the local community, and she would have been viewed almost like a living prophet."

The story of Lady Isabel German and the collection at the University will be the focus of a new episode of *Digging for Britain*, to be broadcast on Sunday 12th February at 8pm on BBC Two.

The episode will also explore the experimental archaeology happening at the University, which has conducted the first reconstruction of salt processing technology from the Neolithic period. This exciting research

conducted from an archaeological sciences laboratory team and led by teaching technician Yvette Marks, reveals evidence of the earliest salt production site to be found in the U.K. at Street House Farm in Loftus. The site dates to around 3,800 BC and is now believed to be one of the first of its kind in western Europe.

Lady German's skeleton, now held in the University of Sheffield's collection, makes up one of the hundreds of full and partial remains excavated from the site at York Barbican. Most of which are made up of local residents as the site developed through the ages.

Dr. Lizzy Craig-Atkins, Senior Lecturer in Human Osteology at the University of Sheffield, said, "The York Barbican collection is the largest we currently curate at Sheffield. Its excellent preservation, highly detailed archaeological excavation and recording by Oxford Archaeology and very long period of use, which spans the Roman period to the Civil War in the 17th century, provides our post-graduate researchers and visiting archaeologists around the country with an extraordinary learning resource.

"It will continue to provide new insights about the world and lifestyles of the people of York throughout history and Dr. McIntyre's analysis goes to show how extraordinary they can be. The collection has given us the opportunity to investigate a type of life rarely reflected in archaeological records."

More information: Lauren McIntyre et al, The All Saints Anchoress? An Osteobiography, *Medieval Archaeology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/00766097.2022.2129682](https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2022.2129682)

Provided by University of Sheffield

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