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Saint Saviour Monastic Cemetery, Bermondsey Abbey

During 1984 and 1988 excavations were carried out in Bermondsey at the site of the medieval Cluniac priory St Saviour located on the south side of the Thames almost directly opposite the famous and infamous Tower of London. St Saviours was founded in c.1089 by William Rufus on the former royal manor of Bermondsey (Steele, 1988).



A total of 201 individuals were analysed from Bermondsey Abbey and entered on to the WORD database.

The Cluniac order was a medieval organisation of Benedictines centred at the abbey of Cluny in France. At its height it was a major religious force in Europe with nearly a thousand houses throughout Europe who all showed obedience to the abbot at Cluny (Lawrence, 1984).

There were some burials that predated 1089 but what was identified as the 'Monks' cemetery (Area OA2) directly overlay these earlier burials. The earliest recorded named burial in this area was of Hadwise who died in 1099. Burials continued in the cemetery until the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1538.

The layout and periods of deposition were distinguished through rows that varied in alignment relating to the changes of the church buildings. The burials were all of a standard Christian style. Within the Monks cemetery nineteen stone and mortar cist burials were found which, was a form of burial that continued throughout the

duration of the priory. One of these was located in the Chapel (Building.2) and a 'pillow' burial was located in Chapel A.

Preservation

Preservation varied but was generally quite good and completeness for the majority of males was very good. The completeness of those adults not possible to assess was extremely poor.

Preservation	N=	%
Good	119	59.2
Medium	64	31.8
Poor	18	9

Table 1 Skeletal preservation

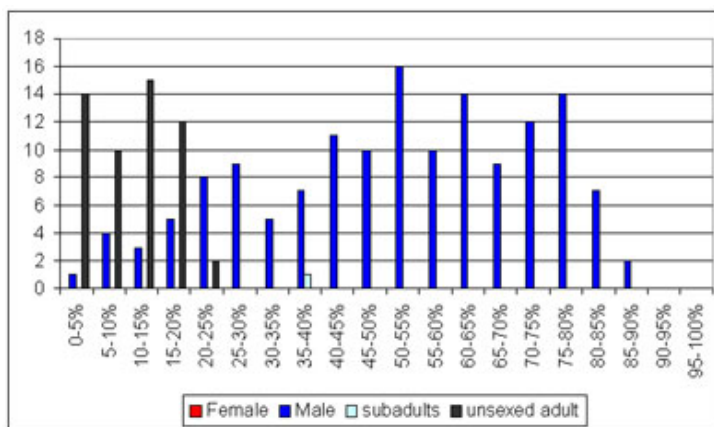


Figure 1 Skeletal completeness (N=201)

Demography

Of the 201 skeletons analysed there were 200 adults and one sub adult. Of these individuals there were 147 males, 2 individuals of indeterminate sex and 51 where it was not possible to establish sex estimation. Clearly there is a marked biased towards males but this biased has also been found at other monastic sites and therefore should not be perceived as unusual. The majority of adults died in the 36-45 year age category with the one sub adult in the 12 -17 year age category (fig 2 & 3).

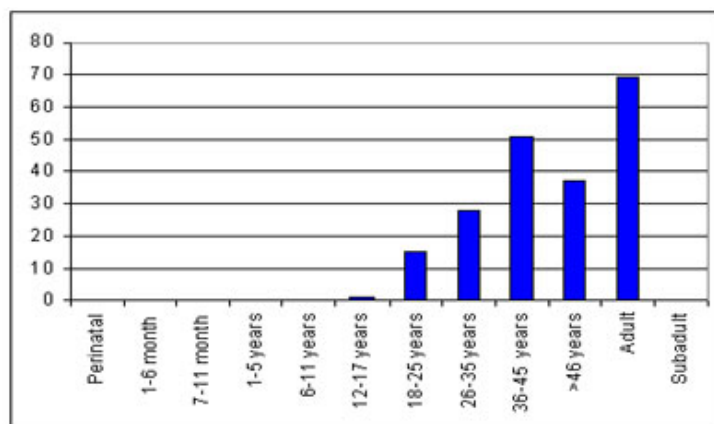


Figure 2 Age distribution (N=201)

Age	N=	%
Perinatal	0	0.0
1-6 month	0	0.0
7-11 month	0	0.0
1-5 years	0	0.0
6-11 years	0	0.0
12-17 years	1	0.5
18-25 years	15	7.5
26-35 years	28	13.9
36-45 years	51	25.4
>46 years	37	18.4
Adult	69	34.3
Sub adult	0	0.0

Table 2 Age distribution (N=201)

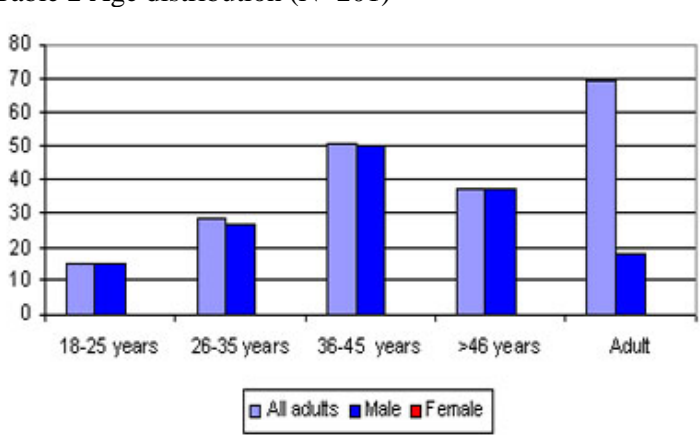


Figure 3 Adult male and female distribution (N=200)

	All adults	%	Male	%	Female	%
18-25 years	15	7.5	15	10.2	0	0.0
26-35 years	28	14.0	27	18.4	0	0.0
36-45 years	51	25.5	50	34.0	0	0.0
>46 years	37	18.5	37	25.2	0	0.0
Uassigned Adults	69	34.5	18	12.2	0	0.0
Total	200		147		0	

Table 3 Male and female distribution by age in the adult population

Stature

The stature estimates were consistent for the period (Roberts and Cox 2003, 248) but the maximum estimates did appear quite high.

Sex	Avg_stat	SD	VAR	MIN	MAX	N
Female						0

Male	171.59	4.4	19.2	158.5	179.5	52
Unsexed	170.1	6.7	44.6	162.8	176.4	5

Table 4 Stature estimation from femoral length

Pathology

The individuals from Bermondsey Abbey so far reflect a pathological profile not that unexpected of the medieval period; however, there were some interesting aspects to note. Most noticeable was the high frequency of trauma in the incidence of healed fractures at 10% and Blunt force trauma at 2%, indications perhaps of a more urban environment.



The observation of button osteomas also seemed to have a high prevalence at 3.5%. Dental wear was in some instances markedly pronounced and could possibly be seen not just as the result of coarse food stuff but possibly an indication of the teeth being used as a tool. Perhaps not so surprising was the presence of several cases of DISH and non specific periosteal reactions having a high prevalence as well as osteoarthritis.

[Pathology table for Bermondsey Abbey](#) (Word 117kb)

Vertebral pathology

Table 5 provides a crude distribution of vertebral pathologies so far recorded in the adult population. Osteophytic lipping and Schmorl's nodes were most frequently observed and also a high rate of osteoarthritis.

	All adults			Male			Female		
	N	n	%	N	n	%	N	n	%
Osteoarthritis	141	64	45.4	136	64	47.1	0	0	0.0
Osteophytosis	141	105	74.5	136	101	74.3	0	0	0.0
IVD	141	61	43.3	136	61	44.9	0	0	0.0
Schmorl's nodes	141	94	66.7	136	91	66.9	0	0	0.0
Fusion	141	10	7.1	136	10	7.4	0	0	0.0

Table 5 Distribution of vertebral pathology by sex in adults with one or more vertebrae present

Dental pathology

The dental pathologies so far revealed a perhaps not unexpected high rate of

calculus but there was a noticeably high prevalence of hypoplasia .This could be attributable to many factors but may be an indication of early life stresses or periods of malnourishment.

	Caries			Calculus			Hypoplasia			Periodotitis			Periapical lesions		
	N	n	%	N	n	%	N	n	%	N	n	%	N	n	%
Male	106	43	40.6	106	105	99.1	106	85	80.2	106	81	76.4	106	37	34.9
Female	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0
All adults	106	43	40.6	106	105	99.1	106	85	80.2	106	81	76.4	106	37	34.9
Sub adults	1	1	100.0	1	1	100.0	1	1	100.0	1	0	0.0	1	0	0.0

Table 6 Distribution of dental pathology by sex in adults with one or more vertebrae present

Discussion

The individuals analysed from the monks cemetery provided some interesting results and would lend themselves to further research as an individual group but also with comparable monastic and medieval sites such as the Royal Mint and Merton Priory and those outside London.

The assemblage would provide a good opportunity for further research into the monastic way of life with comparisons between the different orders and possibly even attempt to identify if any of the individuals came from France.

As yet it would appear that no other Cluniac burial ground of such comparable size has been excavated and so would highlight further their potential for interesting research. Recently noted are renewed excavations in Bermondsey perhaps revealing more burials and comparable skeletal material further enhancing knowledge of the site and monastic order.

Links related to Bermondsey Abbey

- [Bermondsey Abbey summary information](#) (Excel 35 kb)
- [Bermondsey Abbey data downloads](#)
- [Previous research on Bermondsey Abbey](#)
- [Bermondsey Abbey pathology photos](#)
- [Link to bibliography](#)

Links to excavations on this cemetery

Saint Saviour Monastic Cemetery, Bermondsey Abbey, Abbey Street, Long Walk, Southwark SE1
Sitecode [BA84](#)

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Bermondsey Square Regeneration

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Bermondsey Square lies within the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Bermondsey Abbey, founded as the Cluniac Priory of St Saviour, in c. AD 1086. The monastery became a Benedictine Abbey in AD 1399 and was [dissolved by Henry VIII in AD 1538](#). It is known that the priory church lay to the north-east of the Square, with cloister buildings located in the area to the east of the Square, while to the west lay the Inner Gatehouse and Courtyard. Prior to the Abbey the site had been the foci for Prehistoric, Roman and Saxon occupation and activity. After the dissolution of the Abbey some of the buildings were adapted as the mansion of Sir Thomas Pope's House. The last upstanding Abbey building, the Inner Gatehouse, was demolished in the 19th century, by which time much of the area was covered in poor housing, factories and warehouses. The present square layout dates to the mid 18th century, but reflects the layout of the monastic courtyard, with Tower Bridge Road having been constructed across it in the late 19th century.

Some archaeological work has been undertaken in the past in the area of the church on the north side of Abbey Street in 1956 and 1962, and to the southeast of Tower Bridge Road in the 1980's where the infirmary, ancillary buildings and part of the monastic graveyard were found.

The current excavations for Igloo Regeneration Ltd are part of the redevelopment of the Square. This redevelopment, which is supported by the London Borough of Southwark, will include domestic housing, commercial, retail and restaurant premises, and community facilities. Of particular importance will be the continued operation of the famous New Caledonian Antiques Market with its purpose-built trading and storage areas within the new development scheme. However the redevelopment will also be facilitating the research into the development of the Abbey and the rich archaeological features and deposits, which date from modern times back to prehistory.

Building over a Scheduled Ancient Monument means that every effort is going into the design of the works and structures to preserve as much of the archaeology in the ground as possible for posterity.

Photos

Photo 1

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Looking east - showing archaeologists cleaning part of the south tower of the western entrance to the Abbey Church.

Photo 2



Looking east - to the right is a medieval wall, which ran from the area of the Inner Gateway to the church enclosing the inner precinct of the Abbey. A later chalk lined post-medieval well can be seen in the foreground.

Photo 3 & 4

Looking east - showing the substantial medieval and early post-medieval remains uncovered in the north-east part of the Square. These included part of the south tower of the western facade of the Abbey church, the main south wall of the church and in the background cellars that were part of the 16th century 'mansion'. This



incorporated and therefore preserved, parts of the Abbey within its construction.



Photo 5



These brass studs are all that remain of 18th century timber coffins

Photo 6

A skeleton lying within the remains of a timber coffin. The human remains shown in photos 5 and 6 are probably part of an



18th century dissenter's graveyard located on the western side of the Square. All of the post-medieval inhumations will be exhumed prior to development in accordance with the Burial Act and all will be re-interred at a later date.

Photo 7



Archaeologists cleaning medieval chalk foundations on the western side of the Square. These remains are probably part of a range of buildings that would have stood against the precinct boundary wall running along the east side of Bermondsey Street.

Photo 8



Showing one of the many pile locations excavated by to a depth of c. 3.50m below modern ground level. Note the post-medieval chalk lined well and the modern sewer pipe in the foreground.

Photo 9



A working shot of archaeologists starting to excavate pile positions along the northern frontage of the Square. Note the antiques market still trading in the background.

Photo 10

Archaeologists excavating medieval chalk lined cist tombs.



Photo 11

An archaeologist cleaning a medieval stone 'ashlar' block reused in a later post-medieval wall. Note the graffiti scored on to the face of the stone. The original position of the stone within the abbey is not known. It was found reused in a post-medieval wall in the south side of the nave; this formed part of the northern wing of the 16th century mansion of Sir Thomas Pope, a building that in part survived as tenements into the late 18th or early 19th centuries.



Photo 12

The graffiti on this stone block shows a [helm](#), shield and sword. Parallels in medieval armour suggest the carving dates from the late 14th century. It probably intends to depict the characteristic "great" helm of that period, furnished with plumage or a crest. The sword, which is placed behind the shield, is probably a single-edged [falchion](#). Armorial graffiti is not unusual in medieval churches, and sets of shields and helms form one of the main recurring themes of these carvings. Shields are usually charged with personal devices, but the simple saltire on the Bermondsey shield is far too general a device to suggest a coat of arms; it may be that it was intended simply as a



symbolic representation.

Photo 13



Anglo-Saxon hooked tag. The tag is made of thin triangular copper-alloy plate, and decorated with a circle-and-dot pattern. This object was used to fasten clothes and accessories such as bags and purses. The sharp hooks on these tags suggest they were hooked straight into the material rather than used in conjunction with a corresponding "eye". The hooked tag is a characteristic Middle to Late Saxon dress accessory, ranging in date from the 7th and through to the 11th centuries. At Bermondsey, the tag was found together with two sherds of pottery, dating broadly from the 10th to 11th centuries; however, very similar hooked tags are known from Middle Saxon sites at Southampton and York. This is an important find, as Bermondsey is known from documentary sources as the site of a Middle Saxon Minster.

Photo 14 & 15



Carved stone head
The stone carries the carving of a female face alongside a section of squared moulding. The carving appears to be Romanesque in style (though there is also a resemblance to the fourteenth-century Decorative period). The human face is somewhat unusual in the Romanesque context, as much of the decoration used in this period in England was foliate or geometrical. The main exceptions were external; doorways, tympana and corbel-tables. However, this stone does not appear to be from any of



these contexts, as the lack of weathering suggests that it was part of an internal feature. It is likely that the stone marked the springing point of an arch, or was a decorative label-stop. The arch which it decorated may have framed a doorway or window, or been incorporated into arcading. It is likely that it was one of the latter two, as the carving is relatively small-scale. The mouth of the carving has been damaged. Although it is unclear at what point this damage occurred, it is interesting to note that destruction of the mouth and/or eyes of carvings and paintings of saints was a common tactic used by sixteenth-century Protestant reformers in order to destroy the power and value of 'idolatrous' images.

Photo 16



Stairs leading down into a cellar, part of Sir Thomas Pope's 'mansion'. Incorporated into the construction of these stairs but not visible was the carved stone head.

Photo 17

Looking west - in the foreground archaeologists at work within the cellar of Pope's 'mansion'. The main south wall of the church is to the right and the south tower of the western facade of the church is in the far background.



Photo 18

Gargoyle set into the foundation of the tower. The stone carries a piece of figural sculpture, representing what appears to be a human head or face. It is crudely carved, with skull-like teeth and no discernable nose (although this 'sheared-off' effect may have been created by a mason's mistake or later damage). The shape and style of the face suggest a 12th-century date, though it is possible that the carving is earlier. The location of the carved stone within the tower foundations is curious, and may represent either re-use of earlier masonry (thus giving the stone a pre-C12th date), use of reject carvings for building material in out-of-sight locations (making the stone contemporary with the tower's construction) or the deliberate creation and placement of a carving within the foundations during the construction of the tower, possibly as an amulet against demons or other evil influences. Such practices were common during the C12th and remained so until the



Reformation.

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