

Historical Evidence for Medieval Hermitages

Molly Mather

When was the medieval period?

The medieval period began in 476 AD, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and its emperor, Romulus Augustulus. It lasted almost 1,000 years, ending around 1400-1450 AD.

What is a hermitage?

A *hermitage* is a small and usually secluded dwelling which was lived in for religious reasons, such as to escape the temptations of the world. They could come in different forms, including caves (like at Anchor Church or Volkmarskeller) and small huts (like at Inner Farne). The first known use of the word 'hermitage' comes from the 14th century. A person who lives in a hermitage is called a *hermit*. The first known use of this word is from the 12th century and comes from the ancient Attic Greek word ἐρημικός (*erêmos*), meaning 'lonely' or 'solitary'. Another name for a hermit is 'anchorite', a term first used in the 15th century which comes from the ancient Greek ἀναχωρέω (*anakhōréō*), meaning 'to withdraw' or 'to retreat'.

What historical evidence do we have for medieval hermitages?

We don't have much historical evidence for medieval hermitages, as most of our evidence is archaeological. Although the historical evidence tends to be brief with vague mentions of hermits or hermitages, we do have a few larger works that go into greater detail. One such example from the 8th century AD is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a history of Christian churches such as Inner Farne, Northumberland, where Saint Cuthbert is known to have lived. We also have the *Life of Saint Cuthbert* about the same saint and Felix's *Life of Guthlac*, a hermit who lived in Crowland, Lincolnshire — both of which were written shortly after their deaths in the 8th century AD.

Another clue we have for medieval hermitages can be found in common features within place names. For example, the following hermitages all contain the word 'anchor' (from 'anchorite') in their name: Anchor Church in Derbyshire, Anchor Church Field in Lincolnshire, and Gallt yr Ancr in Powys, Wales.

What historical evidence do we have for Anchor Church in particular?

We have very little historical evidence from the medieval period for Anchor Church in particular. Aside from the word 'anchor' in its name, our only other evidence is a fragment of an early printed book that has been preserved as part of a later book from 1545 AD. This fragment describes a Saint Hardulph who had a cell in a cliff a little way from the River Trent ("*saynt Hardulche has a celle in [a c]lyfee a lytell frome trent*").

Other Medieval Hermitages

While we may not have much historical evidence for the hermitage at Anchor Church, we do have more for other hermitages. From these, we can interpret and better understand how Anchor Church may have been used and inhabited.

Volkmarskeller, Blankenburg, Germany

Another example of a cave hermitage similar to Anchor Church can be found in Volkmarskeller, Germany. It is a limestone cave with two exits and a vertical shaft in the ceiling. One of the oldest

documents we have for cave hermitages refers to Volkmarsheller. It dates from 956 AD and states that King Otto I gave Quedlinburg Monastery a church and a nearby cell for a hermit. It is said that Saint Liutbirg (c. 870 AD) lived here, but this is unlikely. However, the hermit Bernhardus (1118 AD) was known to have lived here. Not long after Bernhardus, the hermitage was merged with the Cistercian monastery of Michaelstein in 1147 AD and was slowly abandoned over time.

Inner Farne, Northumberland, England

Inner Farne is one of the 20 islands that make up the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland, England. Although there was a hermitage on Inner Farne, it was unlike Anchor Church and Volkmarsheller because it comprised a small hut-like structure instead of a cave. It is described in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and the *Life of Cuthbert* as made of stone, timber and straw, or tuft.

Several hermits are known to have lived at Inner Farne, including Saint Cuthbert (c. 634-687 AD), Aethelwald (died 699 AD) and Bartholomew of Farne (died 1193 AD). The last known hermit was Thomas De Melsonby, who died there in 1246. After De Melsonby's death, the site became a Benedictine cell and was inhabited by two monks at a time.

Conclusion

The caves at Anchor Church are an ideal site for a hermitage as they offer the necessary seclusion needed for a hermit to withdraw from the world, just like the sites at Inner Farne and Volkmarsheller. All three of these sites have at least one hermit that was believed to have lived there during their past history.

References

Derbyshire Historic Environment Record <https://her.derbyshire.gov.uk/Monument/MDR4300>
(Accessed 21 September 2023)

Heritage Gateway

https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=8298&resourceID=19191 (Accessed 21 September 2023)

Historic England 2018 Hermitages: Introductions to Heritage Assets. Swindon. Historic England.
(<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-hermitages/heag205-hermitages/>)

Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anchorite> (Accessed 21 September 2023)

Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hermit> (Accessed 21 September 2023)

Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hermitage#h1> (Accessed 21 September 2023)

National Trust <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/discover/history/architecture/what-is-a-hermitage>
(Accessed 21 September 2023)

National Trust <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/north-east/farne-islands/history-of-the-farne-islands-buildings> (Accessed 21 September 2023)

Schulze-Dörrlamm, M. 2018. The use of caves for religious purposes in early medieval Germany (AD 500-1200). In Bergsvik, K. A., and Dowd, M. (Eds) *Caves and Ritual in Medieval Europe, AD 500-1500*, pp. 219-231. Havertown: Oxbow Books.

Simons, E. 2021. Anchor Church Derbyshire: Cave Hermitage of Summerhouse? A Case Study in Understanding a Rock-cut Building. In *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society* 28: pp. 347-60.