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Review Article

What did it mean to live in a medieval monastery?

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- *Reconstructing past monastic life, volume 1: bioarchaeology, life and death. New trends from archaeological, bioanthropological and documentary perspectives*. Oxford: Oxbow; 979-8-88857-173-6 paperback £48.
- *Reconstructing past monastic life, volume 2: diet, landscape and monastic space. New trends from archaeological, bioanthropological and documentary perspectives*. Oxford: Oxbow; 979-8-88857-175-0 paperback £48.

Researching medieval monasteries

Walking through the remains of a medieval monastery, we are often struck by an unusual sense of immediacy. Cloisters, refectories and dormitories appear to lend themselves readily to imagination, encouraging us to picture the rhythms of communal prayer, labour and silence that once structured monastic life (Hedstrom 2019). This enduring visibility is reflected not only in the archaeological record but also in modern heritage landscapes. Of the approximately 1200 international monuments currently designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, more than five per cent can be broadly classified as monasteries (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/?search=monasteries&components=1&order=country). As outlined by Roberta Gilchrist, modern excavations are frequently conducted alongside the preservation of monastic ruins and their interpretation for the public (Gilchrist 2014). Monasteries, therefore, appear almost familiar, their space easily populated in the mind, helped in no small part by cultural representations ranging from historical reconstructions to literary works such as *The name of the rose* by Umberto Eco. Yet this apparent accessibility raises an important question: how far can archaeology move beyond evocative spaces to reconstruct the lived realities of monastic communities? Medieval monasticism was neither marginal nor socially withdrawn. From its fourth-century origins in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, monasticism developed into a range of institutional forms across medieval Europe. Throughout this long history, it both shaped and was shaped by the secular world around it. For over a millennium, monasteries and religious orders were prominent features of the western social and political landscape, with their leaders holding positions of influence that

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extended far beyond cloistered walls (Lawrence & Burton 2023). To understand what it meant to live in a medieval monastery, therefore, is also to situate these communities within broader networks of power, reform, patronage and critique, and to acknowledge the varied experiences of men and women who pursued religious life under different historical circumstances.

In both eastern and western Europe, monasteries were long viewed as exceptional and largely self-contained Christian institutions. Twentieth-century scholarship, strongly shaped by art and architectural history, prioritised monumental churches and stone-built complexes, while the broader social and spatial dimensions of monastic communities received comparatively little archaeological attention (Lavan & Bowden 2003). This focus reinforced an idealised model of monastic settlement centred on monumental architecture, often overlooking smaller or urban foundations and, in some cases, identifying monastic sites primarily through textual tradition rather than archaeological evidence.

The question '*What did it mean to live in a medieval monastery?*' has, in different forms, shaped the archaeology of medieval monasteries itself. Research on monastic landscapes has often been described as developing through two broad interpretative phases. Between *c*. 1970 and 1995, studies largely influenced by processual archaeology focused on monasteries as economic, technological and institutional systems, addressing historical and functional questions at regional scales. Since the mid-1990s, however, post-processual perspectives have increasingly redirected attention towards cultural and social dimensions, encouraging archaeologists to reconsider these well-documented sites as lived environments and to ask more explicitly what everyday life within monastic communities may have meant (Gilchrist 2014).

Life within medieval monasteries followed highly structured temporal and behavioural frameworks, organised around cycles of prayer, labour and discipline. In western monasticism, these rhythms were fundamentally structured by the Benedictine Rule, formulated in the sixth century and commonly summarised through the principle *ora et labora* (prayer and work), which regulated both spiritual devotion and everyday activity (Hedstrom 2019). Such principles were materially enacted through labour practices that shaped monastic landscapes, as demonstrated archaeologically by the active role of monastic communities in technological and agricultural innovation (e.g. the creation of mill complexes and fishpond systems; Astill *et al*. 2005).

The successive five editions of C.H. Lawrence's *Medieval monasticism* (2023) offer a picture of the historiographical evolution of the field itself. What began as a unifying institutional narrative has, over time, incorporated questions of reform, intellectual life, religious women and, most recently, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. The changing emphases across editions testify not to incompleteness, but to the dynamic transformation of monastic studies over the past four decades.

Reconstructing the embodied experience of monastic life, therefore, requires shifting attention from architecture alone to the regulated rhythms through which these communities lived daily. It is precisely at this intersection between regulated daily practice, embodied experience and material transformation of space that recent bioarchaeological research has begun to redefine the archaeological study of monastic life. Advancing the

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archaeology of medieval monasticism requires a more holistic approach that integrates space, ritual, embodiment, death and landscape into the study of religious life (Gilchrist 2014). If Lawrence's successive editions chart the historiographical transformation of monastic studies, the two volumes edited by Lluís Lloveras, Carme Rissech, Jordi Nadal and Philip Banks represent the most recent stage of this trajectory: the bioarchaeological turn. The question, however, remains whether this ambitious interdisciplinary project succeeds in bridging the long-standing divide between material space and human experience. Rather than providing a comprehensive summary of all contributions, this review focuses on the chapters that most convincingly explain this holistic framework in the reconstruction of monastic life.

Bioarchaeology, life and death

Volume 1 on *Bioarchaeology, life and death* sets out with an ambitious promise. Framed by the editors within the broader intellectual trajectory of monastic archaeology and explicitly invoking interpretative approaches that seek to move beyond architecture and institutional history, the volume seeks to reconstruct lived experience within medieval monastic communities. The expectation is therefore not merely the presentation of skeletal data, but a bioarchaeology capable of engaging with the rhythms, constraints and embodied realities of religious life.

One of the volume's strengths lies in the quality and transparency of the data presented. Many contributions function as detailed research reports. In this sense, the book provides an important platform for primary results and ongoing research projects, ensuring their accessibility to a wider scholarly audience. The chapters dedicated to population-level analyses, demography and stress indicators sit alongside more focused palaeopathological investigations, creating a spectrum of scales from individual biography to collective patterns.

Yet the volume's ambition to reconstruct monastic life is only partially realised. While the individual studies are often well executed, they rarely engage in substantive dialogue with one another. Contributions drawn from the same geographical or even archaeological contexts do not consistently cross-reference or build upon each other's findings. The structural organisation of the volume, divided into sections on health and human remains, life pathways in monastic contexts and animals in the monastic environment, provides thematic clarity, but not necessarily interpretative integration. In the absence of a synthetic concluding chapter, the empirical richness accumulates without being fully drawn together.

This limitation becomes particularly apparent in the Iberian material, which forms a significant portion of the case studies. The density of data from these contexts might have enabled a more ambitious comparative or cross-sectional synthesis. Instead, the reader is left to undertake this integrative work independently. The result is a collection of solid contributions that do not fully realise the holistic perspective promised in the editorial framing.

Geographically, the volume is also slightly uneven. Although presented as addressing Christian monasticism in the medieval West, the material is heavily concentrated in the

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Iberian Peninsula, with limited representation from elsewhere in Europe. This imbalance does not diminish the value of the individual studies, but it narrows the comparative horizon that the title might initially suggest. The case studies span a remarkably broad temporal range, from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. While such diachronic breadth has the potential to illuminate long-term continuities and transformations in monastic life, the implications of this chronological diversity are not systematically addressed by the editors. Studies from late medieval, early modern and even modern contexts are presented alongside earlier material without sustained reflection on how institutional reform, post-medieval transformations or changing ecclesiastical frameworks may have shaped bodily experience differently across time. As a result, the category of 'medieval monastic life' risks becoming temporally elastic rather than analytically precise.

Finally, the theoretical dimension receives relatively limited attention. Only one chapter, from the medieval Austin Friary in Cambridge, England, explicitly attempts to imagine the embodied demands and physical burdens of monastic life in a sustained interpretative manner. It is here that the volume most clearly aligns with the broader historiographical shift toward lived religion and the embodiment of monastic life. Elsewhere in the volume, theoretical reflection is implicit rather than foregrounded. The potential of bioarchaeology to illuminate not only biological conditions but also the structuring principles of religious discipline, daily routine and communal identity is acknowledged but not fully developed.

Despite these structural limitations, the empirical foundation for a more integrative approach is clearly in place. Several chapters exemplify a substantial range of case studies, encompassing human osteological analysis, palaeopathology, demographic reconstruction, and, in a broader understanding of bioarchaeology, archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological evidence. Several contributions, particularly those from Santa Catalina da Siena, Belmonte, Spain, and the Cistercian Abbey of the Dunes in Koksijde, Belgium, stand out for their interdisciplinary breadth. In these cases, osteological data are contextualised to reconstruct past lives. These chapters convincingly demonstrate how integrated methodological approaches can move beyond descriptive reporting to offer interpretative insights into living conditions in medieval monasteries.

Particularly compelling is the multidisciplinary study of the convent of Santa Clara in Pontevedra, Spain, where carpological evidence, wood analysis, textile remains and osteological data are brought into dialogue to reconstruct aspects of everyday life within the cloister. Here, plant remains and material traces are not treated as isolated datasets but as interconnected strands of lived practice, allowing glimpses into diet, craft activity, spatial organisation and funerary behaviour. The integration of environmental and material evidence enables a nuanced reconstruction of the rhythms and material conditions that structured life in a convent.

A similarly evocative contribution comes from the study of Santa Maria de Pedralbes in Barcelona. In this case, animals are not discussed merely as passive components of the monastic economy, but as active presences within the cloistered environment. The identification of paw prints impressed into the drying bricks of the fourteenth-century Gothic cloister, on both ground and upper floors, offers a striking reminder of the permeability of monastic space and the entanglement of human and non-human actors in

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daily life. Such material traces subtly destabilise the image of the monastery as a sealed, purely contemplative environment, revealing instead a dynamic, inhabited space in which animals, too, left their mark.

The treatment of sex as a biological category is generally adequate; however, its translation into questions of gendered experience is largely absent. Consequently, the volume offers only a limited engagement with how monastic discipline may have been embodied differently by men and women, or how gender intersected with age, status and institutional context in shaping daily life.

If Volume 1 centres on the embodied dimensions of monastic life, it simultaneously points beyond the body itself, towards the dietary systems, spatial hierarchies and environmental infrastructures that made such disciplined lives materially possible. However, this impression of cumulative richness without full integration anticipates a structural issue that recurs in Volume 2.

Diet, landscape and monastic space

Volume 2 expands the perspective from the body to the broader material and environmental contexts of monastic life. By focusing on diet, landscape and spatial organisation, it situates religious communities within the ecological and architectural frameworks that sustained them. While some contributions engage productively with written sources, particularly in relation to monastic rules, such integration remains localised rather than structurally embedded within the volume as a whole.

In contrast to the geographical concentration observed in Volume 1, the dietary section of Volume 2 draws on case studies from England, Spain, France and south-eastern Europe. This broader European spread enhances the material's comparative potential and reinforces the sense that monastic subsistence strategies were both regionally embedded and structurally comparable across contexts. It is noteworthy that stable isotope analysis, now a standard tool in bioarchaeological reconstructions of diet, is entirely absent from both volumes. This absence is striking, yet not necessarily detrimental. The strength of the zooarchaeological datasets, particularly where butchery practices, age-at-death profiles and anatomical representation are analysed in detail, allows for a nuanced reconstruction of dietary regimes without recourse to isotopic data. In some respects, the material evidence itself proves sufficiently eloquent. Detailed analyses of sheep and goat, pig, cattle, fish and molluscs reveal not only species diversity but also patterns of slaughter, carcass processing and preferred anatomical portions. The chapter on Sant Agustí Vell in Barcelona stands out for the completeness of its zooarchaeological assessment and the clarity with which it links animal remains to patterns of monastic subsistence. In this sense, dietary reconstruction becomes a means of approaching the lived experience of monastic communities. These analyses ultimately reinforce a point emphasised by scholars such as Gilchrist (2014) and Lawrence (2023): monasteries functioned as economically organised and often highly self-sufficient communities. The material record demonstrates how carefully structured systems of procurement, husbandry and consumption underpinned religious life. The inclusion of a chapter based solely on documentary evidence, 'Vinum oleum cerca spens et mel' (wine, oil, wax,

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provisions and honey), highlights the continuing importance of written sources in understanding monastic dietary regulation. In addition, occasional references to monastic rules, most notably the Rule of St Augustine, add interpretative depth. Yet such engagements remain confined to individual chapters. Here, a comprehensive framework to connect the different findings would have been helpful, but again the reader is required to synthesise the implications across the contributions themselves. Also of note is the study of the Abbey of Notre-Dame sous l'Eurin in northern France, which compares two distinct occupational phases to examine potential shifts in dietary practices and preferences. By combining archaeozoological evidence with documentary references to monastic regulations, the study further demonstrates how dietary preferences may have shaped patterns of meat processing and preservation across distinct occupational phases. This diachronic perspective reveals the analytical potential of the amount of data, illustrating how monastic subsistence could respond to changing institutional, economic and regulatory contexts.

The transition from the topic of diet to that of space is therefore not entirely abrupt. After all, foodways are inherently spatial practices, embedded in kitchens, refectories, storage areas and refuse deposits. A small number of contributions begin to bridge the relationship between food consumption and monastic spatial organisation, hinting at the volume's integrative potential. The study of Santa Maria de Pedralbes, for instance, explicitly connects faunal remains to specific monastic spaces, such as the refectory, kitchen, infirmary kitchen and associated refuse deposits. Although no substantial dietary differentiation between these areas ultimately emerges, the attempt to correlate consumption practices with spatial function represents an important methodological step.

The second half of the volume, devoted to landscape and monastic space, offers a similarly varied but uneven collection of studies. Contributions range from spatial modelling approaches to architectural, stratigraphic and territorial investigations across Castile, the Western Alps and insular contexts. These chapters demonstrate the richness of material evidence available for reconstructing monastic environments and the economic strategies that sustained them. Yet, as in the dietary section, the analytical dialogue between contributions is limited. Landscape, architecture and resource management are examined in parallel rather than as interlocking dimensions of a single monastic system.

The space syntax analysis of Santa Maria de Pedralbes provides a structured examination of spatial hierarchy and accessibility within the monastic complex. The study successfully identifies central nodes and circulation patterns within the architectural layout. Yet the implications of these spatial configurations for the individuals who inhabited and moved through these environments are left largely unexplored. The modelling of space is rigorous; the reconstruction of lived spatial experience is less fully articulated. The question of what it meant to inhabit these hierarchically organised environments thus remains partially addressed.

Among the most compelling contributions in this section are the studies on water management, particularly the analyses of the Cistercian nunnery and Sant Pere de les Puelles in Barcelona. Both chapters move beyond architectural description to examine hydraulic systems as structuring elements of monastic life. The study of the Cistercian

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nunnery integrates documentary and archaeological evidence to reconstruct water supply, treatment and distribution systems. In doing so, it situates hydraulic infrastructure within broader patterns of daily organisation and institutional regulation. Water emerges not merely as a practical necessity but as a resource carefully managed within a disciplined and self-regulating community. Similarly, the chapter on Sant Pere de les Puelles situates the monastery within its wider urban fabric, examining irrigation channels and horticultural practices in relation to the surrounding city. By foregrounding the interaction between monastic enclosure and the urban environment, the study demonstrates how monasteries functioned as self-sufficient, active participants in local ecological and economic systems rather than as isolated spiritual enclaves.

Read alongside the zooarchaeological analyses of dietary practices, these studies reinforce a broader pattern: monasteries were not only spiritually regulated communities but also highly organised systems of resource management. The diversity of meat consumption, the evidence for controlled slaughtering practices and the archaeological confirmation of hydraulic infrastructure collectively point toward structured forms of self-sufficiency. In this sense, the material record substantiates what documentary sources have long suggested regarding monastic economic autonomy.

Concluding remarks

Whereas Volume 1 seeks to reconstruct monastic life through the body, Volume 2 expands the perspective to diet, landscape and built space. Together, the two volumes promise a holistic reconstruction of medieval monasticism; yet the integration between these domains remains partial. The individual sections are, in many respects, empirically rich and methodologically rigorous. What is lacking is not necessarily a final synthetic chapter, which may have been an ambitious undertaking, but rather a more sustained editorial commentary capable of maintaining the project's holistic aim while critically engaging with each section in relation to the others. In several instances, individual contributions, however excellent in their own right, appear to extend beyond the volumes' declared thematic focus. At least one chapter in each volume sits somewhat uneasily within the overall framework, reinforcing the impression of structural looseness.

More broadly, the internal organisation of the volumes raises questions. Rather than clustering chapters thematically, chronologically or geographically to foster stronger comparative dialogue, the arrangement often appears to preserve the structure of the original conference sessions. As a result, studies addressing similar themes or time periods are dispersed across sections, limiting the possibility of cumulative interpretation. A more deliberate editorial regrouping, whether by period, regional focus, methodological approach or thematic clusters, might have enabled clearer lines of argument to emerge and strengthened the interdisciplinary ambitions articulated in the Introduction.

Taken together, the two volumes reveal the vitality of contemporary monastic archaeology and the richness of its empirical foundations. At the same time, they expose the continuing challenge of moving from empirical accumulation to interpretative synthesis. The volumes provide an impressive body of evidence, yet the fundamental issue that

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frames this review—what it means to live within these disciplined and materially structured environments—is only partially answered, inviting further integrative work.

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