'Holyest Erth of England?'
Glastonbury Abbey: Saints, Sanctity and Pilgrimage

Judith Dunkling

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Abstract

This paper examines the principal point that one will hear or read about Glastonbury during the medieval period: is that its abbey was a great centre of pilgrimage in England, along with Canterbury and Walsingham. Research concerning aspects of the abbey's history and pilgrimage status is relatively scarce for such a venerable abbey, and this is because of the perceived unreliability of the primary texts relating to the monastic community's history. This study draws on the principal primary texts from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* by William of Malmesbury and *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* by John of Glastonbury.

The cults of various saints were promulgated at Glastonbury during the abbey's history. These are examined in three groups: firstly, early saints from the Celtic regions, some of whom play a role in the foundation narratives of the abbey. Secondly, St Dunstan who represents a period of intense monastic reform in the late tenth century, and is symbolic of the call to holiness of life through a monastic vocation. Thirdly, there are two saints who feature in the Bible, namely the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph of Arimathea. In addition, King Arthur is a figure who plays a significant role in the abbey's history, but who defies categorisation into any of the above.

Even by the standards of medieval religious houses, Glastonbury held an extensive collection of relics, and the significance of these is examined using the four surviving relic lists. Despite the abbey's reputation as a major pilgrimage centre, this study shows how little contemporaneous textual and archaeological evidence for pilgrimage to Glastonbury survives. The possibility of Glastonbury Tor also being a focal point for medieval pilgrimage to the town is considered.

The final chapter explores the role of antiquity in the development of the abbey's self-understanding, spirituality, and even its architectural development during the medieval period. This paper argues that it was the holiness engendered by its perceived antiquity, rather than the cult of specific saints, that is the key to understanding the life of, and pilgrimage to, Glastonbury Abbey from the early medieval period through to its suppression in 1539.

Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction

Although the exact details of its foundation and origins are lost to us today, the Benedictine house of Glastonbury was one of the most ancient and venerable abbeys in Britain during the medieval period.   By the time of its suppression in 1539, Glastonbury had gained, alongside great wealth and prestige, considerable renown for its connections with a variety of saints, its relics, shrines and antiquity.

This paper will use primary sources dating from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries and archaeological and scholarly discoveries from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to examine the spiritual and pilgrimage cultures at the abbey from its foundation until its suppression. The cults of saints associated with Glastonbury Abbey, and the development of those cults will be examined. Relics of saints were an important part of devotional life in the medieval period, and the significance of the extensive collection of relics held by Glastonbury and their part in the development of the abbey's understanding of itself will be explored. It is frequently said that Glastonbury was a major pilgrimage centre in the medieval period, and the experience of the pilgrim, the use of space and surviving evidence for pilgrimage to Glastonbury will conclude Chapter Two. The antiquity of the abbey was of great significance to the religious community. Indeed, the two major medieval chronicles about Glastonbury Abbey both include 'antiquity' in their titles.[1] The third chapter will, therefore, explore the importance of antiquity at Glastonbury and its associations with the perceived sanctity of the site, giving a spiritual import to its historical lineage.

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[1] *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* by William of Malmesbury and *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* by John of Glastonbury.

Chapter One: The Saints and Their Cults

In his sermon for St David's Day on 28 February 2021, the Archbishop of Wales began his talk with a short biography of St David. During this biographical exposition, the Archbishop made reference to David having founded 'some ten monasteries, including those at Menevia, which we now know as St David's, and Glastonbury.'[2] That St David founded the monastery at Glastonbury is just one of the many stories that interweave and swirl through the long and venerable history of the abbey and have continued up to the present day. Some of these legends, particularly relating to King Arthur and Joseph of Arimathea, remain firmly imprinted on the public consciousness. A pilgrimage guide from almost a century ago captures this romantic image by eulogising Glastonbury as a 'remote land of Arthurian myth and seafaring', referencing Joseph of Arimathea reaching England, and coming ashore on the slopes of Wearyall Hill in the town.[3]

It is difficult to untangle the various threads of saintly devotion at Glastonbury and to give an exact timeline for the development of cults based on particular saints. The evidence for these cults is not always comprehensively documented and the principal primary source materials for the history of Glastonbury Abbey, namely William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* from the 1120s, and John of Glastonbury's *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* from the mid-fourteenth century, have both been heavily interpolated with later material and post-date the rise of certain saintly cults at Glastonbury. It should also be borne in mind that there was a wider trend within monastic churches in the medieval period for there to be several shrines and reliquaries within a particular abbey church, and for these to be a focus for lay veneration which attracted offerings rather than there being just one specific focus for devotion at any given time.[4] This chapter will explore the cults of those saints who had a particular prominence at

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[2] 'Sunday Worship', *St. David's Day*, BBC Radio Four, 28 February 2021. <bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000sq5j> [Accessed: 13 March 2021].

[3] B.C. Boulter, *The Pilgrim Shrines of England* (London: Camelot Press, 1928), pp. 15-16.

[4] Michael Carter, 'The Relics of Battle Abbey: A Fifteenth-Century Inventory at The Huntington Library, San Marino', *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, 8 (2019), pp.309-343, pp. 325-6.

Glastonbury from its earliest recorded history until its dissolution in 1539, beginning with the saints from the Celtic regions who were especially venerated in the period before the Norman Conquest and represent the missionary and evangelistic thrust of the early Christian communities in the British Isles. The concept of living a holy life was represented by St. Dunstan, who was Abbot of Glastonbury between 946-957CE and later Archbishop of Canterbury. Dunstan's cult was especially popular at Glastonbury in the eleventh century. The thirteenth to sixteenth centuries saw the pre-eminence of two biblical saints, namely Joseph of Arimathea and the Blessed Virgin Mary. From the late twelfth century, there was also an attempt to raise the profile of King Arthur at the abbey, a (probably mythical) ruler rather than a saint, heralding changes in understandings of the role of the state and the monarch as a religious entity in wider society.

There are relatively early references to Glastonbury being held in great reverence within Ireland and Wales and associated with saints from those regions. Although, as previously stated, his work *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* has been heavily interpolated at a later date, William of Malmesbury wrote that 'St David revered the sanctity of Glastonbury church'. William goes on to write that because of this, David's relics were reputedly moved to Glastonbury in 962CE, some four hundred and twenty years after his death.[5] Writing around thirty-five years earlier than William, the Welsh scholar Rhygyfarch states in his *Life of St. David* that Glastonbury was the first of twelve monasteries to be founded by David in the sixth century.[6] Both Rhygyfarch and Adam of Damerham, a monk at Glastonbury writing in the thirteenth century, make reference to a 'precious sapphire' or a 'sapphire altar' which St David brought to Glastonbury for fear of invaders and which was kept hidden away for centuries.[7] In their work on Welsh pilgrimage, Terry John and Nona Rees cite Rhygyfarch as writing that this reputed portable altar or 'Sapphire Altar' was described as 'potent with

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[5] John Scott, *The Early History of Glastonbury: An Edition, Translation and Study of William of Malmesbury's De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1981). p.65.

[6] James P. Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey: The Holy House at The Head of The Moors Adventurous (Revised Edition)* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publications, 1996), p.110.

[7] H.F. Scott Stokes, *Glastonbury Abbey During the Crusades (Extracts from Adam of Domerham): The Somerset Folk Series No.28* (London: Folk Press Ltd., 1934), p.14.

miracles', and that it was kept hidden after David's death and never seen by men.[8] Another medieval scholar, Giraldus Cambrensis, wrote at the end of the twelfth century that the altar was held at Llangyfelach, and set this against the story that the altar was rediscovered in a doorway of the abbey church at Glastonbury by Bishop Henry of Blois, which suggests keen competition for this particular relic.[9] This competition over relics extended to the physical remains of St David, as by the later middle ages Glastonbury claimed the majority of the physical relics of David, whilst St David's Cathedral claimed their relics were his genuine remains. Glastonbury's claims to David evolved despite the decree of Pope Callixtus II in 1120 that two journeys to St David's Shrine in Menevia would be regarded as equivalent to one journey to Rome.[10]

The tradition that St Patrick was the first abbot of Glastonbury was certainly in circulation by the time of William of Malmesbury. John Scott argues in his introduction to *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* that the tradition of Patrick as the first abbot of Glastonbury can be traced back at least to the tenth century and possibly to St Dunstan himself, and that there is evidence of veneration of St Patrick at Glastonbury during the eleventh century.[11] William himself tells the story that:

> Patrick returned to Britain in his old age, and later came to Glastonbury and finding twelve brothers living there as hermits, he gathered them together, and assuming the office of abbot, taught them to live a communal life.[12]

William continues that Patrick was at Avalon for thirty-nine years, died and was buried there, and that the custom was for Irish pilgrims to visit Glastonbury and kiss the relics of their patron.[13] There is a further record in John of Glastonbury's *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastionensis Ecclesie* that, when the new abbey church at Glastonbury was dedicated, the

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[8] Terry John and Nona Rees, *Pilgrimage: A Welsh Perspective* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2002), p.72.

[9] John and Rees, *Pilgrimage: A Welsh Perspective*, p.72.

[10] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p.112.

[11] Scott, *Early History*, p.1.

[12] Scott, *Early History*, p.55.

[13] Scott, *Early History*, p.61.

bodies of the saints were moved from their graves in the Old Church, including Patrick who had been buried to the right of the altar, and were placed in shrines in the new church.[14]

De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie does makes reference to a 'Charter of St Patrick', which is said to be an autobiographical narrative by the saint himself. In the charter, 'Patrick' writes how, having converted the Irish and establishing them in the Catholic faith, he returned to Britain and was led by divine guidance to Glastonbury where he found the community of anchorites. This charter would indicate some form of organised monastic existence at Glastonbury as early as the mid-fifth century.[15] However, scholars such as H.P.R. Finberg and Ronald Hutton agree that the 'Charter of St Patrick' is probably a later interpolation to *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* in a different hand,[16] which Hutton claims is a forgery dating from around 1220.[17] Hutton also summarises the problem that none of the hagiographies of St Patrick mention him making a return journey to Britain, the foundation on which Glastonbury's tradition rests. One possibility that had been put forward over at least a thousand-year period is that there could have been two Irish missionaries called Patrick, who were blended into the one figure that we know as St Patrick. As Hutton writes, 'this has, however, never been proven, and probably never will be.' It would seem that the monks of Glastonbury could have been aware that there were two separate men involved.[18]

When we consider the reputed Irish connections with pre-conquest Glastonbury, it is intriguing to note that the settlement is referred to in a ninth-century document, *Cormac's Glossary (Sanas Cormac)*. In his glossary, Cormac explains the etymology of many Irish words and in his explanation of 'mogheime'; Beth Frances cites that he describes how the Irish had previously settled in and controlled parts of Britain. Amongst the places that

[14] James P. Carley (Ed.) and David Townsend (Trans.), *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey: An Edition, Translation and Study of John of Glastonbury's Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1985), p.179.

[15] H.P.R. Finberg, *West-Country Historical Studies* (Newton Abbot: Latimer Trend & Co., 1969), p.70.

[16] Finberg, *West-Country Historical Studies*, p.70.

[17] Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon & London, 2003), p.74.

[18] Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, p.73.

Cormac says the Irish controlled is 'Glasimpere' (Glastonbury).[19] However, as Frances posits, Cormac making reference to Glastonbury may simply be because he was familiar with it, rather than because of an existing connection between the Irish and the abbey.[20] This reference by Cormac to Glastonbury is intriguing, not just because of the abbey's connection to St Patrick but also because of the reputed connection to another pre-eminent Irish saint, St Bridget. The cult of St Bridget was comparatively weak in Britain during the medieval period and was mostly present in places which had Irish connections either through immigration or pilgrimage. However, Glastonbury Abbey claimed to possess Bridget's relics and nurtured stories of associations with her.[21]

Bridget is the only female saint reputed to have direct connections with Glastonbury. William of Malmesbury writes that from 488CE Bridget 'tarried for some time at Beckery', and that when she moved on she left behind her bag, necklace, small bell and weaving implements, which are still preserved [at the abbey] in memory of her.'[22] Beckery is an area of slightly raised land approximately a mile to the south-west of Glastonbury Abbey and is the site of an early chapel dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, which was replaced in the tenth century, during the time of St Dunstan, with a larger church dedicated to St Bridget.[23] Today the area is known as 'Bride's Mound'. Although, as Ronald Hutton argues, no Irish *Life* of St Bridget refers to her making a visit to Britain,[24] there was clearly some early veneration of Bridget at Glastonbury as her name appears on 1 February in two tenth-century liturgical calendars that are associated with Glastonbury Abbey.[25] The tower, which is the only remaining part of the fourteenth-century chapel dedicated to St Michael on the summit of

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[19] Beth Frances, *Did Saint Bridget Visit Glastonbury?* (Glastonbury: Private Printing, 2008), p. 30.

[20] Frances, *Did Saint Bridget Visit Glastonbury?*, p.31.

[21] Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.136.

[22] Scott, *Early History*, p.61.

[23] Marion Bowman, 'Christianity, Plurality and Vernacular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century Glastonbury: A Sign of Things To Come?', in *Christianity and Religious Plurality: Studies in Church History, Vol. 51,* ed. Charlotte Methuen et al (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2015), p. 307.

[24] Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, p.73.

[25] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p.109.

Glastonbury Tor, has a carving of a woman milking a cow, an image that has long been attributed as being of St Bridget.[26] As well as being the only female saint said to have had a direct connection with Glastonbury, it is arguably Bridget who has the most enduring legacy in the town. Within contemporary Druidry, there is an argument that 'Celtic' Christians paved the way for the 'new' religion of Christianity by incorporating insights from Druidry and other pre-Christian practices. Therefore, the Goddess Bride / Bridie, goddess of the hearth, is seen as a bridge-builder between ancient and Christian practices. [27] Today, Bridget / Bride continues to be widely revered by pilgrims to Glastonbury, and is commemorated in the Bridget Chapel in the Glastonbury Experience where the Glastonbury Goddess movement feel that she has been restored to her rightful, pre-Christian eminence within the town.

The final trio of saints who could be loosely attributed to the Celtic regions, who had cults centred on Glastonbury Abbey are Gildas, Indracht and Benignus. There is evidence that Gildas, an eminent historian of the early medieval period and author of *De Excidio Et Conquestu Britanniae,* was venerated as a major British saint with a cult centre at Glastonbury Abbey. In his twelfth-century *Life of Gildas*, Caradog of Llancarfan recounts how Gildas spent seven years as a hermit on Steep Holme, a small island in the Bristol Channel. Later on, Gildas received permission to again take up the life of a hermit, which he did near Glastonbury and he loved the place so much that he asked the abbot of Glastonbury to bury him at the abbey, a wish that was granted.[28] Caradoc wrote that Gildas was buried in front of the altar in the wattle church, the original abbey church at Glastonbury.[29] There is further evidence for a medieval cult of Gildas at Glastonbury, as his feast was celebrated there on 29 January,[30] and William Greswell says that Gildas' book, *De*

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[26] Bowman, 'Christianity, Plurality and Vernacular Religion', p. 307.

[27] Bowman, 'Christianity, Plurality and Vernacular Religion', p. 320.

[28] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, pp.94-96.

[29] Antonia Gransden, 'The Growth of Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* 27 4 (1976), pp. 337-358, p.347.

[30] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p.94.

Excidio, lay open in the monastery's library for all to read.[31] Greswell's history of Glastonbury Abbey does need to be approached with caution for its sometimes 'eccentric' historical claims, but it would be logical to suggest that the monks of Glastonbury Abbey did have access to Gildas' work considering that it was such a key text in British history, and that the saint was venerated in their abbey church. There is also the contrasting claim that Gildas rests at St Gildas de Rhuys, the monastery that he founded in Brittany, and which was named after him. Whatever the truth, it would appear that during the medieval period Glastonbury Abbey was the focal centre of Gildas' cult in Britain.

John Leland recorded in the sixteenth century that William of Malmesbury had written *Lives* of Indract and Benignus. Leland noted that the library at Glastonbury Abbey contained a *Vita Indractii* and *Vita Benigni – Autore Gulielmo Malmesbinensi*, but these *Lives* have subsequently been lost in their original form although the extant record of these works that we have today is drawn from John of Glastonbury's *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* .[32] As Finberg states, there are conflicting stories as to who St Indract actually was; however, all the stories agree that Indract was an 'eminent Irishman who met his death at the hands of the wicked English'.[33] In the *Digby passio 112* dating from the late tenth or eleventh centuries, and cited by Michael Lapidge, Indract was the son of an Irish king who went to Rome in the company of nine companions during the time of King Ine. They decided to visit the shrine of St Patrick at Glastonbury on their return journey. During an overnight stay at Huish Episcopi near Glastonbury, Huna, one of the king's thegns, murdered the ten Irish pilgrims, on the assumption that they were carrying gold. Ine ordered that the remains of the Indract and his companions be translated to St Mary's Abbey Church, Glastonbury.[34] The alternative story is that Indract was an abbot of Iona, Indrechtach,

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[31] Revd. William H.P. Greswell, *Chapters on the Early History of Glastonbury Abbey* (Taunton: Barnicott and Pearce, 1909), p. 108.

[32] M. Winterbottom and R.M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Saints' Lives. Lives of Ss. Wulfstan, Dunstan, Patrick, Benignus and Indract* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 307.

[33] Finberg, *West-Country Historical Studies*, p.84.

[34] Michael Lapidge, 'The Cult of St. Indract at Glastonbury', in Whitelock, McKitterick, and Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 179-212, (p. 186).

named in the *Annals Of Ulster*, who transported the relics of St Columba from Iona to Ireland in 849CE. The *Annals* record that Indrechtach was martyred amongst the English in 854CE.[35] The feast days for these two individuals do vary, as Irish accounts give the feast of Indrechtach of Iona as 12 March, and the English account of the deacon, Indract, murdered during the reign of Ine as 8 May.[36] It is impossible to unravel which particular individual the Glastonbury cult commemorated, but he was commemorated by a monument on the opposite side of the High Altar to that of St Patrick in the old abbey church.[37] Lapidge again posits a convincing argument that, later on, a monk at Glastonbury was asked to compile a *Life* of this unknown saint whose shrine was in such a prominent position, and in the absence of any written sources he was obliged to invent a *Life* and context for this unknown individual. Lapidge states that this was not unknown in the pre-conquest era.[38]

William of Malmesbury gives the date of 460CE as the time when Benignus came to Glastonbury. We are told that he is a disciple of Patrick and the third to succeed Patrick in his see.[39] Trehearne states that Benignus was Patrick's favourite disciple, who gave up his episcopal see to travel to Glastonbury in order to succeed Patrick as Abbot of Glastonbury.[40] William gives us a slightly different interpretation, writing that Benignus undertook a voluntary pilgrimage from Ireland which led him to Glastonbury, where he found St Patrick.[41] The original cult centre for St Benignus was at Meare, a village three miles to the north-west of Glastonbury, and in 1091 his remains were translated to Glastonbury. There were reputedly a variety of miracles that occurred during the translation of Benignus' relics from Meare to Glastonbury Abbey, at a point now marked by St Benedict's Church. Within thirty years, when William was writing *De Antiquitate*, there was, as James Carley writes, a

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[35] Lapidge, 'The Cult of St. Indract at Glastonbury', p. 187.

[36] Lapidge, 'The Cult of St. Indract at Glastonbury', p. 191.

[37] Finberg, *West-Country Historical Studies*, p.84.

[38] Lapidge, 'The Cult of St. Indract at Glastonbury', p. 192.

[39] Scott, *Early History*, p.63.

[40] R.F. Trehearne, *The Glastonbury Legends: Joseph of Arimathea, the Holy Grail and King Arthur* (London: Cresset Press, 1967), pp. 32-33.

[41] Scott, *Early History*, p.63.

fully-fledged cult of St Benignus at Glastonbury.[42] When considering the respective cults of Indract and Benignus (or Beona as he is sometimes named), Islwyn Thomas argues that the fact that the remains of both saints were translated from nearby churches to Glastonbury Abbey indicates that these nearby parish churches were under the patronage, and were the property, of the abbey in these early years post-conquest.[43]

As we move forward in time to the tenth century, monastic life in England underwent a period of reform and revival under the patronage of King Eadgar.[44] This reform was largely led by Eadgar in conjunction with three monks who were familiar with the reforms already taking place within continental monasticism, especially in houses such as Fleury and Ghent.[45] One of these reformers appointed by Eadgar was Dunstan, born in a village just outside of Glastonbury around 910. Dunstan was Abbot of Glastonbury between 940 and 956, before becoming, somewhat reluctantly, Archbishop of Canterbury. It was under Dunstan's rule that Glastonbury Abbey rose to prominence, so that by 1086 it was the wealthiest monastic house in the country.[46] One of the most famous stories concerning St Dunstan is from his time as a young monk in Glastonbury, when he was working in the abbey's forge. The devil appeared to Dunstan to try to tempt him away from his efforts to lead a holy life, in response to which Dunstan pinched the devil by the nose with the pincers that he was working with! Dunstan is often portrayed in stained glass pinching the nose of the devil. There is also a local, unattributed story in Glastonbury that Dunstan was an alchemist. At least two *Lives* of Dunstan were written, one by B., an anonymous Anglo-Saxon scholar around 995 – 1005,[47] and another by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century, and it is claimed that the monks of Glastonbury were dissatisfied with William's *Life*

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[42] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, pp. 105-6.

[43] Islwyn Geoffrey Thomas, *The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1974). <http://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/28969> [Accessed: 24 June 2020], p. 332.

[44] John Blair, *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

[45] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 3.

[46] Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain*, p. 10.

[47] Lapidge, 'The Cult of St. Indract at Glastonbury', p. 182.

of St. Dunstan.[48] The reason for the monks' dissatisfaction gives us an insight into the cult of Dunstan and its flourishing at Glastonbury by the twelfth century. The monks claimed that they held Dunstan's remains and William did not accept this claim as it was widely known that Dunstan had been interred at Canterbury as Archbishop. It was a major prestige for Glastonbury to be able to claim Dunstan's relics, as John of Glastonbury wrote some two hundred years later:

> Let the church of Glastonbury rejoice, since it is fortified by the presence of such a
> patron, by whose intercessions and merits God does not cease to perform great
> works there, constantly restoring health to those with all sorts of infirmities.[49]

This is indicative of a powerful cult around St Dunstan during the high medieval period, despite a dispute with Canterbury who also claimed his relics, which was already contested by 1100, and which as Webb states, entered its final rounds as late as 1508. Glastonbury Abbey claimed that when Canterbury was sacked by the Danes in 1101, Dunstan's remains were 'rescued' by monks from Glastonbury.[50] The story, as chronicled by Adam of Damerham, goes that the remains were hidden underground in the abbey church at Glastonbury and that scarcely anyone knew where they were for fear of the authorities at Canterbury.[51] At a later point the bones were uncovered and formed part of the veneration of Dunstan. There is further evidence of a cult of Dunstan at Glastonbury, as well as at Canterbury, from the eleventh century, as referred to by both Eadmer, a monk of Canterbury and Osbern, also a monk at Canterbury who authored a *Life* of Archbishop Dunstan. Osbern records that he had been to Glastonbury and his own 'ecstatic reactions' to the site of Dunstan's tiny cell at the abbey. However, as Webb argues, Osbern does 'seem not have heard of the claim that Dunstan was bodily present at Glastonbury.'[52] Eadmer however, did know of this claim and wrote a letter to the monks of Glastonbury around 1120 to dismiss their claims, and rebuke them by writing in rather refreshing idiom: 'For God's sake, is there anyone who can help but laugh at such nonsense' and he ends by

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[48] Scott, *Early History*, p. 5.

[49] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 181.

[50] Diana Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 23-4.

[51] Stokes, *Glastonbury Abbey During the Crusades,* p. 21.

[52] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, pp. 23-4.

exhorting the Glastonbury monks to 'love St. Dunstan as your father and patron and speak the truth about him, then truly you will deserve his love.'[53] A later interpolation to *De Antiquitate Glastonie Ecclesie* says that Dunstan's remains were kept hidden at Glastonbury for one hundred and seventy two years, and were only discovered after the fire of 1184,[54] a statement which is immediately put into contention by the date that Eadmer wrote his letter, which implies that the remains of Dunstan were already being venerated at Glastonbury then. The last known reference to Dunstan's cult at Glastonbury dates from 1508, when Abbot Beere tried to set up a shrine to Dunstan and was condemned by the Archbishop of Canterbury for promulgating a false cult.[55]

Having reviewed the saintly cults which flourished at Glastonbury in the period before the Norman Conquest, which primarily focussed on saints from the Celtic regions, and St Dunstan in the early part of the high medieval period, we now move forward to the middle of the fourteenth century and consider the saint who was considered to be the founder of the Christian community or monastery at Glastonbury, Joseph of Arimathea. Again, the modern myths that circulate about Glastonbury give us a wonderful story about how Joseph of Arimathea, who is said to have given his own tomb for Jesus' burial after the crucifixion, came to Glastonbury and, how when he came ashore, he climbed Wearyall Hill and planted his staff, which grew into the Holy Thorn, the descendants of which can still be seen around the town today, 'sanctifying forever this holy place', as we are told in an early twentieth century pilgrim guide.[56] In the mid-fourteenth century, John of Glastonbury opened his *Cronica* with the words:

> Anno post passionem Domini tricesimo primo duodecim ex discipulis Sancti Philippi
> apostoli ex quibus Ioseph ab Arimathia primus erat in terram istam uenerunt, qui

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[53] Richard Sharpe, 'Eadmer's Letter to the Monks of Glastonbury Concerning St. Dunstan's Disputed Remains', in Lesley Abrams and James P. Carley (eds.), *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey: Essays in Honour of the Ninetieth Birthday of C.A. Ralegh Radford* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 205-215, (pp. 213-14).

[54] Sharpe, 'Eadmer's Letter to the Monks of Glastonbury', p. 205.

[55] Sharpe, 'Eadmer's Letter to the Monks of Glastonbury', p. 208.

[56] Boulter, *The Pilgrim Shrines of England*, p. 18.

regi Arvirago renuenti Christianitatem optulent.[57]

Tim Hopkinson-Ball argues that the middle of the fourteenth century saw awareness of Joseph of Arimathea as Glastonbury's founder move outside the confines of the abbey for the time.[58] This does coincide with the compilation of John's *Cronica,* although William Lyons argues that the tradition was known earlier, around 1247, as Joseph is recorded in what is accepted by scholars as a revision introduced by a copyist into William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate.[59]* This revision reads:

> St. Philip, desiring to spread the word of Christ further, he sent twelve of his disciples into Britain to teach the word of Life. It is said that he appointed as leader his very dear friend, Joseph of Arimathea, who had buried the Lord. They came to Britain in 63AD, and confidently began to preach the faith of Christ….and settled in Yniswitrin [later believed to refer to Glastonbury].[60]

The similarity of this account with that written by John of Glastonbury around a century later does indicate that John was aware of the copyist's addition to *De Antiquitate,* and drew on this for his own work. Nicholas Orme posits that John of Glastonbury was aware of the controversial nature of his abbey's claims regarding Joseph of Arimathea and certain other saints and tried to defend them in his work.[61] James Carley dates a liturgical calendar, found in a fifteenth century manuscript, MS98 at Upholland College, as being pre-1191 as it contains no reference to either Joseph of Arimathea or King Arthur but it does give a high grading to the Celtic saints, previously mentioned.[62] The evidence does point towards the cult of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury not being earlier than the thirteenth century.

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[57] 'In the thirty-first year after the Lord's Passion, twelve of the disciples of St. Philip the apostle, among whom Joseph of Arimathea was chief, came into this land and brought Christianity to King Arviragus, although he refused it.' Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 3.

[58] T.F. Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred* (Bristol: Antioch Press, 2012), p. 56.

[59] William J. Lyons, *Joseph of Arimathea: A Study in Reception History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 73.

[60] Scott, *Early History*, p. 43.

[61] Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Pilgrimage: With a Survey of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Bristol* (Exeter: Impress Books Ltd., 2018), p. 161.

[62] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. xlv.

There are suggestions in *Cronica Sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie* that Joseph of Arimathea had been buried in the Glastonbury area[63] and MS.0.9.38, which is part of a miscellany of manuscripts from Glastonbury Abbey held at Trinity College, Cambridge contains an undated poem, f.28b *Epitaphium D. Joseph*, which features the line 'Hic iacet (excultus) Joseph pater ille sepulltus.' In his commentary on this poem, A.G. Rigg states that on the whole, the monks of Glastonbury believed that Joseph was buried there in Glastonbury, and that an East Anglian chronicle refers to the bodies of Joseph and his companions being found at the abbey in 1367.[64] No other reference to Joseph's body being discovered at Glastonbury can be traced, nor can any further source material about the Joseph tradition from before the thirteenth century.

Valerie Lagorio states that the cult of Joseph of Arimathea suffered from 'sporadic and even lethargic canonisation at the hands of the abbey's myth-makers', an assertation that she bases on the argument that if the abbey had possessed a genuine account of Joseph of Arimathea, then it is unlikely that the monks would have waited as long as they did to establish their claim.[65] After the initial references to Joseph's connections to Glastonbury were made in the mid-thirteenth century, his cult was largely left dormant at the abbey until the time of in the late fourteenth century, when the cult was once again redeveloped under Abbot Chinnock with the dedication of a new crypt chapel to Ss Michael and Joseph.[66]

In *De Antiquitate*, the copyist who interpolated the story of Joseph of Arimathea founding the monastery in 63CE also writes that the disciples of Philip, Joseph and his companions, after living in that wilderness (Glastonbury) for a short time…were incited by a vision of the archangel Gabriel to build a church in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the holy mother of

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[63] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, pp. 122.

[64] A.G. Rigg, *A Glastonbury Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century: A Descriptive Index of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS.0.9.38* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 117.

[65] Valerie M. Lagorio, 'The Evolving Legend of St. Joseph of Glastonbury', *Speculum*, 46.2 (1971), pp. 209 -231, p. 212 & 216.

[66] Antonia Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), p. 293.

God, in a place that was pointed out from heaven.[67] A little later, we are told that the site lapsed for many years 'until it pleased the Virgin that her oratory should again become a memorial for the faithful.'[68] The contemporary visitor guide for Glastonbury Abbey states that it has been suggested that following the fire of 1184, which destroyed the old abbey church, the 'veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary eclipsed devotion to the panoply of saints at Glastonbury.'[69] The principal proponent of this argument is Hopkinson-Ball, who eloquently argues that the cult of the Virgin has been ignored in the histories of Glastonbury Abbey in favour of other saints, such as Dunstan, and that this omission occurred because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence for a cult of the Virgin at the abbey.[70]

As will be explored elsewhere in this paper, Hopkinson-Ball argues that the Lady Chapel of the abbey church was marked out as especially holy from the time of the rebuilding of the abbey church after the fire. There is one specific story, recounted by John of Glastonbury, which took place during the abbacy of Adam of Sodbury (1324-34). John recounts how during the chanting of the *Salve Regina*, a statue of the Virgin which stood at the altar began to move like a living lady, whilst the monks and congregation looked on. It is said that the statue clapped for the child held on her lap, put her hand to his face and that the statue continued to move until the end of the antiphon.[71] In the wake of this, Abbot Sodbury set aside monks specifically to serve the pilgrims visiting the Lady Chapel, possibly because of an increase in pilgrim traffic following the miracle of the moving statue.[72] It is not clear if this is the same statue that is referred to by William of Malmesbury, who wrote that there 'is an image of the Blessed Mary which was not touched – not even the veil that hung from its head – by the great fire surrounding the altar.'[73] The sixteenth century chronicler, John

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[67] Scott, *Early History*, p. 45.

[68] Scott, *Early History*, p. 47.

[69] Roberta Gilchrist et al, *Glastonbury Abbey* (Wellington: Reef Publishing, 2016), p. 63.

[70] Timothy Hopkinson-Ball, 'The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey: 1184 – 1539', *Downside Review*, 130 (2012), pp. 3-52, p. 3.

[71] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, pp. 44-5.

[72] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 47.

[73] Scott, *Early History*, p. 81.

Leland, wrote of a 'chapelle of our Lady de Loretta, joining to the north side of the body of the chirch.' Leland says that this was built by Abbot Beere who had served as an ambassador in Italy and had seen the Holy House of Loretto there.[74] Hopkinson-Ball argues that the house may have been constructed so that the monastery could boast 'a holy house', like that at Walsingham, but that there is no evidence that the Loretto replaced the Lady Chapel as the primary site of the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary.[75]

The evidence for a principal cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Glastonbury is fragmentary and scant. There is no firm contemporary evidence for a cult of the Virgin being the principal focus within the abbey. A large number of ecclesiastical buildings and monasteries, indeed all the abbey churches of the Cistercian Order, were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary during the high medieval period. A good deal of the Marian material from Glastonbury is actually contemporaneous with a revival in interest in the Blessed Virgin Mary amongst the Benedictine Order, with many abbots from the 1120's onwards promoting the idea that Mary had been conceived without sin (the doctrine of the immaculate conception). In the neighbouring diocese of Exeter in 1287, the Bishop ordered every church to ensure that they displayed an image of the Virgin in addition to that of the church's patron saint, and this move was uncontroversial.[76] Today, many churches still contain 'Lady' chapels and altars dedicated to Mary with statues and votive candles. The presence of such devotional items within an abbey church are likely to be representative of an aspect of standard Christian devotion rather than indicative of a special cult related to that location.

In popular terms today, Glastonbury Abbey is probably most famous for being the reputed burial place of King Arthur. It is purported that the bodies of Arthur, and his queen, Guinevere, were discovered by the monks in 1191, following the disastrous fire a few years earlier. Although William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate* predates the purported discovery

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[74] Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535 – 1543: Parts I To III, Volume One* (London: Centaur Press, 1964), p. 290.

[75] Hopkinson-Ball, 'The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey', pp. 13-4.

[76] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 394-5.

of Arthur's tomb, it is of note that there is no later interpolation of the story into the text. However, the story of the discovery is well documented by both Adam of Damerham and John of Glastonbury; the latter cites Gerald of Wales, when he writes that Abbot Henry (of Sully) was frequently admonished to bury Arthur in a more fitting place, as he had rested for six hundred and forty eight years between two stone pyramids beside the Old Church.[77] John recounts how the diggers found a wooden sarcophagus containing bones of an incredible size, and it bore the inscription 'Here lies buried the glorious King Arthur in the Island of Avalon.'[78] It has been frequently suggested that the discovery of Arthur's bones was a hoax, designed to help increase the abbey's fortunes at a time when these were at a low ebb following the fire. Hutton argues that the abbey had lost the funds promised by King Henry II after his death, when his successor diverted the money to fund a crusade instead. The political circumstances, Hutton argues: 'were exceptionally propitious for such a find', given the Plantagenet royal family's struggles to consolidate their empire across most of Britain and France, and that their claim these lands would be strengthened if they claimed to be the natural heirs of Arthur.'[79]

There is little evidence for popular devotion to a cult of King Arthur during the high medieval period, although Antonia Gransden argues that the monks searched for his body so that Arthur could become the centre of a cult at the abbey, although it is not immediately obvious why they would do this. Gransden does make connections, however, between the fame of the figure of King Arthur amongst the Welsh.[80] Could this have been an attempt to bolster pilgrimage to Glastonbury, a site that was already familiar in the Celtic regions because of its reputed connections with saints such as David? Conversely, although the cult of Arthur does not seem to have been widely developed in the years after the discovery of his body, he again rose to prominence in 1278, when King Edward I visited Glastonbury, after campaigning against the Welsh, and during this visit the bones of Arthur and Guinevere were entombed with considerable ceremony in a new tomb in front of the high

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[77] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 181.

[78] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 183.

[79] Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, p. 68.

[80] Gransden, 'The Growth of Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', p. 352.

altar of the abbey church.[81] Arthur's remains having earlier been used as a symbol of the Plantagenet empire, Gransden argues that Edward I had a political motive in having demonstrable proof that Arthur was dead and would not return, as was believed by some, to lead the Britons to victory against the English, which she argued would have strengthened his hand against the Welsh.[82] The tomb of Arthur and Guinevere was also the centrepiece in the creation of a royal Saxon mausoleum in the abbey church, as the remains of Edmund the Elder and Edmund Ironside were placed either side of Arthur's tomb. This would have helped to reinforce Glastonbury's connection with reigning monarchs and emphasised the abbey's long-standing royal connections.[83] The evidence does strongly suggest that any cult of Arthur at Glastonbury Abbey during the high and late medieval periods had a political motivation and focus, and that there was limited popular devotion to Arthur more widely.

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[81] Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 80.

[82] Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England*, p. 294.

[83] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology: Research,* undated

<research.reading.ac.uk/glastonburyabbeyarchaeology/research/> [Accessed: 10 January 2021].

Chapter Two: Relics and Pilgrimage

Relics

When considering the role of Glastonbury Abbey in the landscape of medieval Britain, there has always been a sense of exceptionalism attached to the abbey and its vast relic collection. Tim Hopkinson-Ball summarises Glastonbury Abbey at its peak as not simply 'one monastery or pilgrimage destination amongst many; it was a spiritual powerhouse and a place of wonder.'[84] Conversely, Diana Webb argues, when considering the draw that Glastonbury held for medieval pilgrims that, 'its claims to David and Patrick, as to Dunstan, were very far from universally convincing and many of the relics it did possess were of limited interest.'[85] These claims and cults of particular saints at Glastonbury were explored in the previous chapter, and attention now focuses on the relic collection claimed by Glastonbury Abbey prior to the Suppression, and the nature and extent of pilgrimage to the abbey in medieval times.

Relics usually consisted of either part of, or the whole of, the physical remains of a saint or venerated person, or could be items associated with them or objects, such as pieces of cloth that had touched them or their remains. Writing in the mid-thirteenth century, the Dominican theologian and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, summarised that relics should be venerated for three reasons: as physical reminders of the saints; as bodily relics which have a certain intrinsic merit because of their connections with the soul of the saint; and that by working miracles at the tombs of the saints, God has shown that he wishes them to be venerated.[86] By the twelfth century, in some regions, the relics of saints were greatly esteemed; Gerald of Wales writes that people in Ireland, Scotland and Wales were more afraid of breaking oaths taken on the crosiers, bells and such like that had reputedly belonged to saints than they were of breaking oaths sworn on the gospel books.[87]

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[84] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 1.

[85] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 60.

[86] Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 23.

[87] MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity,* p. 332.

Both William of Malmesbury and John of Glastonbury refer to the sanctity of the abbey at Glastonbury brought about by its extensive collection of relics. William writes that Glastonbury was the place where 'the corporeal remains of many saints are preserved, nor is there a spot in that whole temple where one does not tread on the ashes of saints.'[88] John very closely echoes these words and further elaborates: 'the stone pavement, the sides of the altar, and the altar itself are so loaded, above and below, with relics packed together that there is no path through the church.'[89] Their claims extend to referring to Glastonbury as a 'second Rome' because of the sheer volume of relics held by the abbey.

There is no question that the abbey actively promoted the relics that it held, as did other abbeys during the medieval period. It is an oft-repeated statement by historians that in the wake of the disastrous fire of 1184 the purported discovery of the bones of King Arthur fitted the bill perfectly, as John Scott argued, for the monks of Glastonbury who 'desperately needed an unimpeachable attraction for pilgrims, relics whose possession would be unchallenged and whose appeal would be widespread.'[90]

It was common practice for medieval abbeys to keep inventories or lists of the relics that they held and, as Michael Carter writes, it was not unusual for these relic lists to be found in monastic chronicles as they contributed to the construction of a self-identity for a religious community; but only around thirty or so of these lists originating from English monasteries survive today.[91] Four relic lists from Glastonbury have survived, two of which are found within the chronicles by William of Malmesbury and John of Glastonbury. Two further relic lists survive, R.5.33 (724) held at Trinity College, Cambridge and Cotton Titus D.vii held at the British Library. In his work on the Cambridge Trinity document, Martin Howley warns that the four relic lists from Glastonbury are not trustworthy sources as it was difficult for their compilers to establish the provenance of relics, particularly the older items within the

[88] Frank Lomax (Trans.), *The Antiquities of Glastonbury by William of Malmesbury* (Burnham-on-Sea, Llanerch Press, 1908), p. 31.

[89] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 17.

[90] Scott, *Early History*, p. 29.

[91] Carter, 'The Relics of Battle Abbey', pp. 309-11.

abbey's collections, and Glastonbury was not unusual in laying claim to relics that 'strain credulity.'[92] The Glastonbury relic lists broadly follow the hierarchical pattern noted by Michael Carter as common to most relic lists of the period, beginning with relics of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, Mary, archangels, John the Baptist, apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins.[93] The Glastonbury relic lists contain carefully noted descriptions of the contents of each feretory within the abbey church. James Carley describes how the abbey church would have contained a great variety of feretories, no description of which survives. However, Carley does highlight how a precious, small feretory containing the relics of Christ would have been carried by the monks during their processions on Rogation Days.[94]

The relic lists reveal how Glastonbury Abbey did indeed lay claim to a seemingly extraordinary number of relics, and there is not capacity within this paper to cite them all or to debate their relative veracity. However, there are interesting points that emerge from the relic lists. It is clear from the lists that by the fourteenth century, Glastonbury was giving particular prominence to early British saints,[95] which corresponds to the development of the cults of saints at the abbey as explored previously, with saints such as Patrick, Bridget and Dunstan achieving early pre-eminence. The Cambridge Trinity relic list does include a number of early British saints not referred to Chapter 1, including Bede, Aidan, Ceolfrid, Guthlac, Hild and so forth. There is one surprising point about the relics at Glastonbury, as Howley cites; given that the abbey church was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is of note that the abbey possessed so few Marian relics and that she did not have a feretory of her own; indeed, some Marian relics were kept in the feretories dedicated to King Edgar and St. Wenta.[96] However, the paucity of Marian relics could be attributed to the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception during the high medieval period, with its

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[92] Martin Howley, 'Relics at Glastonbury Abbey in the Thirteenth Century: The Relic Lists in Cambridge Trinity College R.5.33 (724), Fols. 104R-105V', *Medieval Studies*, 71 (2009), pp. 197-234, p. 198.

[93] Carter, 'The Relics of Battle Abbey', p. 312.

[94] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, pp. 121.

[95] Roberta Gilchrist and Cheryl Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979* (London: Society of Antiquaries, 2015), p. 62.

[96] Howley, 'Relics at Glastonbury Abbey in the Thirteenth Century', p. 217.

accompanying devotional belief that Mary's flesh should not see the corruption of death, leading to a significant absence within Christianity of traditions relating to Mary's tomb or bodily relics.[97] In common with most religious houses of the period, the lists also show that Glastonbury held relics of Christ, although its collection is thought to have been more extensive than might be expected.[98]

At Glastonbury Abbey, in common with other religious houses, relics would have been procured in order to enhance sanctity and devotion not just within the community but to encourage pilgrimage to their monastery. The devotion to early British saints was in part cultivated by moving the remains of saints such as Indract and Benignus, who were honoured in churches in the local area, and enclosing them within the more prestigious surroundings of the abbey church.[99] Relics of early Welsh saints could also have been procured from those travelling on early pilgrimage routes from Wales to Rome, as William of Malmesbury recorded Welshmen leaving relics behind at Glastonbury. John and Rees posit that these relics may have been left as propitiatory offerings for the journey.[100] It would seem logical that the relics that they left were those of their early Christian compatriots. There is also evidence that the abbey purchased relics from individuals, such as those purchased from a knight who had taken part in the Fourth Crusade.[101] John of Glastonbury referred to a sacristan at the abbey, Eustace, obtaining a spectacular collection of relics eight years earlier from a monastery in Constantinople which included, amongst many other items, apostolic relics such as fragments of the arm of St. Thomas, a bone of St. Barnabas and the rather predictable fragments of the true cross.[102] Various sources, including *De Antiquitate,* claim that Glastonbury received relics as gifts from kings, princes, bishops and the nobility, as well as harbouring relics for safekeeping in the time of the

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[97] MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, p. 394.

[98] Howley, 'Relics at Glastonbury Abbey in the Thirteenth Century', p. 216.

[99] Gilbert H. Doble, *The Celtic Saints in the Glastonbury Relic Lists* (Sl: s.n., 1944), p. 21.

[100] John and Rees, *Pilgrimage: A Welsh Perspective*, p. 30.

[101] Thomas, *The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England*, p. 324.

[102] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, pp. 202-203.

Danish invasions.[103] Patronage was an important factor in the donation of relics; as Thomas argues, the identity of the donor could be as important as that of the relic itself in proving the abbey's greatness, and where a house could be strongly identified with a powerful secular patron, it gave the relics they housed a wider significance.[104] Thomas cites a possible example of this in Glastonbury's claim to the relics of St David, which may have shown the hegemony exercised over the Welsh princes by King Edgar of Wessex. It could be argued that Glastonbury basked in the reflected glory of having powerful patrons who enlarged their prestigious relic collection.[105]

Hopkinson-Ball argues that by the time Eustace acquired the relic collection from Constantinople, Glastonbury's relic collection easily eclipsed those of most other churches in the south-west of England.[106] With relatively few contemporary relic lists surviving today, it is difficult to confirm this statement, but if the inventory of relics at Battle Abbey can be taken as a typical example from a Benedictine house of the period,[107] then Glastonbury's collection, even with the discrepancies in evidence found between the four relic lists, can be viewed as very extensive and certainly larger than that held at Battle Abbey.

The use of relics in the making of myths attached to Glastonbury Abbey is indisputable, with one example being the relics of St David as described by William of Malmesbury, who wrote that David's relics were reputedly moved to Glastonbury in 962CE, over four hundred years after his death, as David had revered the sanctity of Glastonbury church.[108] A certain air of scepticism penetrates William's account of events, as he relates the story that he has been told by the monks of the abbey. There are numerous parallels from other religious houses that illustrate what can only be described as a certain ingenuity in developing stories attached to relics to aid in attracting pilgrims. One particular example of this phenomenon

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[103] Howley, 'Relics at Glastonbury Abbey in the Thirteenth Century', p. 204.

[104] Thomas, *The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England*, p. 332.

[105] Thomas, *The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England*, pp. 332-3.

[106] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 36.

[107] Carter, 'The Relics of Battle Abbey', pp. 309-11.

[108] Scott, *Early History*, p. 65.

is the story of St Ivo. In the late eleventh century, the chronicler Goscelin wrote an account of a legend from the fifth or sixth centuries, in which Slepe, a small settlement by Ouse, received a visitation from a tall, dignified man carrying a bishop's crosier, who announced to the startled villagers that his name was Ivo and that he was a Persian bishop who had been ordered by God to travel to Slepe where he was to make his home and preach the gospel in the surrounding area. Goscelin then relates how, around 1001CE, a peasant discovered a stone coffin at Slepe. A local smith then had a dream in which he heard a man saying 'I am Bishop Ivo who was buried here and have lain hidden with my beloved companions until now.'[109] The abbot of nearby Ramsey Abbey was summoned, who declared that these were indeed the bones of Ivo and his companions. The monks of Ramsey went on to promote Ivo as a wonder-working saint not just at his new burial site at Ramsey Abbey, but with a new priory close to the site of the discovery at Slepe, now the town of St Ives.[110]

Pilgrimage

A contemporary rationale for the three essential aspects of pilgrimage argued by Hugh McLeod is cited by Tiina Sepp in her work on pilgrimage to Glastonbury today:

> a concept of the sacred; a belief that the sacred is to be most readily encountered in certain places, of the place of birth, death or burial of exemplary individuals; and the journey to these places.

McLeod also distinguishes between 'pilgrimages where the destination is all important and the journey and travel are of minor significance and those where this priority is reversed.'[111] This definition is not radically different to the rationale for pilgrimage in the medieval period given by Sumption who argued that:

> in an age of religious sensitivity, pilgrimage fulfilled a real spiritual need.... By showing [the pilgrim] places associated with Christ and the saints, it gave him a more personal and literal understanding of his faith.[112]

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[109] Noel Hudson, *St. Ives: Slepe by the Ouse* (Cambridge: Black Bear Press, 1989), p. 2.

[110] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 25.

[111] Tiina Sepp, 'Pilgrimage and Pilgrim Hierarchies in Vernacular Discourse: Comparative Notes from the Camino De Santiago and Glastonbury', *Journal of Ethnology and Folkoristics,* 8.1 (2014), pp. 23-52, p. 27.

[112] Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion*, p. 114.

Hutton writes an eloquent description of what was likely to have greeted the pilgrim arriving at Glastonbury Abbey Church in 1520, in what was probably the longest ecclesiastical building in England at the time. Hutton paints a picture of an interior which would have a been full of carved stonework, illuminated by stained glass and candlelight and rich with incense, the black marble tomb just past the chancel crossing with an effigy of a king at its foot - the tomb of King Arthur and Guinevere. In front of the high altar were three shrines containing relics of saints, the most splendid of which, that of St Patrick, was covered in gold and silver, with the relics of Indract and Benignus in the other two reliquaries.[113]

Although very little contemporary textual evidence survives relating to medieval pilgrimage to Glastonbury Abbey, the archaeology of the site does potentially provide evidence for a flourishing pilgrimage industry at the abbey. The extent of the popularity of Glastonbury as a pilgrimage site is found in a persuasive argument by Roberta Gilchrist and Cheryl Green who write that, due to its popularity as a cult centre, the abbey may have required flexibility in accommodating large numbers of secular pilgrims. They posit that it is possible that the outer court area may have been used as 'soft space' for seasonal pilgrimage camps for large numbers of pilgrims, a model which has also been suggested at Bromholm Priory in Norfolk.[114] They also identify the development of distinctive zones within the precinct, such as an area between the north and west gates dedicated to hospitality and charity. This area, to the north and west of the abbey church and abbot's hall, would have served as a reception point for pilgrims and guests. It is likely to have been a commercial zone, with shops selling souvenirs and catering, similar to those zones which Gilchrist has identified at Ely and Norwich amongst others.[115] There is evidence, clearly visible today, for a large structure along one side of the north precinct wall, ninety metres in length, with twenty-six bays. Gilchrist and Green posit that this area could have included a hospice for sick pilgrims.[116]

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[113] Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, p. 60.

[114] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, p. 72.

[115] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, pp. 63 & 73.

[116] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, p. 74.

It is likely that the path from the north gatehouse was the main point of access for laity visiting the abbey church and Lady Chapel. Pilgrims would have entered the Lady Chapel from the northern precinct enclosure, through the north door with its richly carved doorway showing scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The south door of the Lady Chapel is much less richly carved and remained unfinished on the death in 1189 of Henry II, who was the patron funding the rebuilding of the abbey church after the fire.[117] Gilchrist and Green argue that pilgrims could have begun or ended their tour by visiting the Lady Chapel, where they would have seen the miraculous statue of the Virgin draped in jewels and gold.[118] The most probable route for the pilgrim would have been to enter the Lady Chapel through the north door, move up through the Galilee and through into the west end of the great abbey church and progress around the abbey church with its large number of feretories containing the relics of the saints. Pilgrims could then return through the Galilee and back into the Lady Chapel which, as Hopkinson-Ball states, would be preserved in the memory of the viewer through its small scale, lavish decoration and visual distinctiveness, and where they would again be brought into intimate contact with the object of their devotion, the mother of God.[119] An obvious conclusion to the pilgrim's tour would then be to descend the steps from the Lady Chapel down into the crypt chapel dedicated to Joseph of Arimathea and its associated well.

The crypt chapel dedicated to Joseph of Arimathea was the brainchild of Abbot Richard Beere in late fifteenth century. The creation of the chapel was a huge undertaking which involved digging out the ground underneath the existing Lady Chapel without causing the building to collapse, but it is said that Beere wanted to establish the chapel on the site of the Old Church, the very ground where Joseph was said to have walked.[120] In developing the cult of Joseph of Arimathea, Beere developed the chapel as a space where pilgrims could seek divine favour or healing. Pilgrims left mementoes of thanksgiving at the chapel,

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[117] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology*: *Research*

[118] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, p. 309.

[119] Hopkinson-Ball, 'The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey', p. 8.

[120] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology*: *Research*

and these tokens such as discarded crutches would be hung from hooks in the ceiling and around the arch in front of the altar. The holes for some of these hooks are still visible today.[121] To the south side of the chapel there was a lobby which contained a well, which archaeologists believe may have been of Roman origin; this well became a place for pilgrims to pay their respects and became associated with the cult of Joseph of Arimathea. This well became so popular that a stair was later inserted into the south-east corner of the Lady Chapel, making it possible for pilgrims to access the well from both chapels.[122] William Good, who was born in Glastonbury in 1527, writes that he was an altar boy at St Joseph's altar at the age of eight and that the chapel contained a stone image of Joseph at which many miracles were wrought.[123] Good's words provide a very rare first-hand glimpse into what greeted pilgrims at Glastonbury Abbey in the years immediately prior to the Suppression, and gives credence to a lively cult of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury in the late medieval period. With the development of the Joseph Chapel, building on the legends of his associations with Glastonbury, it is possible to discern a move towards what Adam Stout describes as 'legendary history being grounded [at Glastonbury Abbey] and inscribed into the fabric of the building.[124]

Just as there is today, there was signage and 'tourist information' to aid pilgrims as they moved around the abbey and crucially to impart the story of the abbey and its relics. There are two known items of this type from Glastonbury Abbey. The *Magna Tabula* (Great Tablet) is held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.[125] It consists of six vellum sheets mounted on four wooden frames, which hinge and can be opened like a book and contain almost six hundred lines of text and dates to the late fourteenth century. Much of the text, which tells the story of the abbey from its reputed foundation in 63CE up to its refurbishment under

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[121] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology*: *Research*

[122] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology*: *Research*

[123] J. Armitage Robinson, *Two Glastonbury Legends: King Arthur and Joseph of Arimathea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 47.

[124] Adam Stout, 'Grounding Faith at Glastonbury: Episodes in the Early History of Alternative Archaeology', *Numen,* 59 2/3 (2012), pp. 249-269, p. 252.

[125] Digitised images of MS.Lat.hist.a.2 are available at <medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_6421>

the aegis of Abbot Chinnock in 1382, is drawn from the early chronicles of the abbey, *De Antiquitate* and *Cronica Sive Antiquitates*, and as can be expected tells the stories of King Arthur, St Patrick and his charter, the translation of the remains of St David, and interestingly makes a deliberate attempt to publicise Joseph of Arimathea's role in the abbey's history.[126] Of immediate concern to the pilgrim, the *Magna Tabula* also includes a list of indulgences that they could gain from visiting the abbey, which totalled sixty-four years and one hundred and ninety-seven days.[127] The second item, a brass plaque, was recorded in earlier sources but is now lost. This plaque was likely fixed to a pillar or column and is said to have dated from the late fourteenth or fifteenth century. Like the *Magna Tabula,* the plaque recorded the abbey history from the time of Joseph of Arimathea onwards, but was sited to provide dimensions for and a guide to where the Old Church was situated.[128] This plaque will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

As previously stated, very little information survives which give an indication of who came to Glastonbury Abbey as pilgrims or where they were from. It is known that the abbey received royal visitors, with King Edward II and Queen Philippa visiting in 1331.[129] There is a convincing argument, as Hopkinson-Ball states, that Glastonbury would have received pilgrims of all ranks from across the country and not just from the south-west region, due to its ecclesiastical prominence nationally and the appeal of the many shrines contained within the church.[130] William of Malmesbury describes, as Gilchrist and Green cite, that by the early twelfth century there were streams of people flowing along the roads that led to Glastonbury.[131] It is of note, however, that on Matthew Paris' *Map of Britain* (c.1250), Glastonbury does not appear to be given particular prominence, and is featured in standard-sized script alongside other abbey towns such as Wells and Dunstable. The central

[126] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 58 & Scott, *The Early History of Glastonbury*, p. 31.

[127] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 58.

[128] Philip Rahtz and Lorna Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology (3rd Edition)* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), p. 43.

[129] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 132.

[130] Hopkinson-Ball, 'The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey', p. 29.

[131] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, p. 63.

prominence given to Paris' own abbey at St Albans probably says more about his politics than the state of the pilgrimage trade at the time![132]

Pilgrimage in the medieval period was not just about long-distance travel, and a pilgrimage was also recognised if it was short in distance and duration, as long as what Webb identifies as the 'essential elements of self-abnegation and abandonment of familiar ties were present at least in miniature.'[133] There are two sources which may indicate a possible local or regional pilgrimage to Glastonbury. An inquest report states that twenty-four years earlier, in 1349, a group of Wiltshiremen visited the church at Box (near the Somerset border with Wiltshire) as pilgrims on the feast of the Assumption. Webb questions if these pilgrims may have been en-route to a larger pilgrimage centre, such as Glastonbury.[134] Webb also cites the will of a Somerset man, James Hadley, dated 1532, in which he wishes his negligence in making pilgrimages during his lifetime to be rectified by a series of offerings including one of 3d to St Jope. Webb argues that this is likely to be the local shrine of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury Abbey.[135]

James Carley describes Glastonbury Abbey as being one of the two sites, along with Canterbury, as being where those with specific needs, or who were sick, came in pilgrimage in the medieval period.[136] The construction of the imposing George & Pilgrim Inn, which still survives today on Glastonbury High Street, by Abbot Selwood around 1450 is evidence of a need to provide accommodation for pilgrims travelling to the town. It is thought that the George & Pilgrim provided accommodation for those visitors who needed to stay more than two nights (briefer visits could be accommodated within the abbey precincts), evidence

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[132] Matthew Paris, *Map of Britain c.1250 (BL Cotton MS Claudius D VI)* <bl.uk/collection-items/matthew-paris-map-of-britain> [Accessed: 22 January 2021].

[133] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. xiii.

[134] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. xvii.

[135] Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 199.

[136] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 129.

perhaps of a national pilgrim trade in the town. There is also evidence of a previous building on the site being owned by the abbey and in business by 1439.[137]

During the early sixteenth century miracles were being attributed to Joseph of Arimathea's shrine at Glastonbury which included two women from Doulting who were cured of the plague, a child from Wells who was raised from the dead, the Vicar of Wells who was cured of lameness and a John Gyldon of Milborne Port who was cured of total paralysis.[138] Again, these reported miracles only give evidence of local pilgrimage to Glastonbury rather than from further afield, as all places mentioned are within a short distance of Glastonbury, with Milborne Port being less than twenty-five miles away.

Today, only one of three slipper chapels in Glastonbury survives. The slipper chapels would have been built along the approach routes to Glastonbury Abbey, to provide a place for pilgrims to stop and wash their feet before continuing onto the abbey.[139] The surviving chapel was dedicated to St James, a saint primarily associated with pilgrimage, and is sited at what is today called Jacoby Cottage, 7 Bove Town.[140] In the *Victoria County History,* a chapel dedicated to St Catherine, is said to have stood on St Catherine's Hill and was said to have been 'in a ruinous condition by 1476, when an indulgence was granted for its repair'. By 1517 the chapel had been converted to a cottage, and stands in Bove Town on St Catherine's Hill.[141] Bove Town is on the south side of what is today known as 'Windmill Hill', so it is difficult to ascertain if this St Catherine's Chapel is the same building as St James' Chapel or if they were two distinct entities on different sites. Regardless of the nomenclature or siting of these slipper chapels, the known presence of three of them is

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[137] R.W. Dunning (ed.), *Victoria County History: Somerset Volume 9* (London, Victoria County History, 2006), <british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol9/pp.16-43> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

[138] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 124.

[139] Anon., *Slipper Chapel of St. James* <churches-uk-ireland.org/towns/g/Glastonbury.html> [Accessed: 13 November 2020].

[140] *Historic England Listing: Jacoby Cottage, 7 Bove Town, Glastonbury.* <www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/134531> [Accessed: 13 November 2020].

[141] Dunning, *Victoria County History: Somerset Volume 9.*

indicative of a substantial flow of pilgrims to Glastonbury who travelled in to the town from different directions.

During various archaeological excavations at Glastonbury Abbey, a number of devotional items and pilgrim souvenirs were discovered which date from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Specific items include a small terracotta medallion depicting Christ's hand with the sacred wound and abbreviated letters meaning 'Jesu Mercy', and a small copper alloy plaque engraved with symbols and biblical quotes associated with the Virgin.[142] The presence of these items does correspond with the abbey flourishing as a major pilgrimage destination. However, as Gilchrist and Green argue, it is relatively rare for archaeologists to recover pilgrim souvenirs at the sites of the abbeys with which the pilgrim souvenirs are directly associated. The items found at Glastonbury 'may represent the casual losses of pilgrims or guests visiting the abbey, rather than objects that were in institutional use at the abbey.'[143] Of the pilgrim badges that have been 'tentatively' ascribed to Glastonbury Abbey, Hopkinson-Ball notes that it is of interest that none of them contain Marian imagery.[144] There are two groups of badges which survive, recorded by Philip Rahtz, that portray known traditions associated with the abbey. One group depicts the hawthorn of St Joseph, and the second depicts a flowery shield and a sword, illustrating the juxtaposition of Joseph of Arimathea and King Arthur.[145]

There is another site in Glastonbury where there is evidence of pilgrimage during the medieval period, and that is the Tor. A small badge dedicated to the Virgin was found on the Tor, during an excavation which revealed that the surviving St Michael's church tower on the hilltop was actually part of an extensive complex by the late middle ages. The lead archaeologist on these excavations, Philip Rahtz, stated that the evidence pointed to the complex being a daughter-house of the abbey or a site which could minister to the needs of

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[142] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology: Research.*

[143] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979*, p. 309.

[144] Hopkinson-Ball, 'The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey', p. 28.

[145] Rahtz and Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology,* p. 64.

pilgrims honouring the cult of St Michael.[146] There was another chapel dedicated to St.

Michael, which was in the cemetery of Glastonbury Abbey, and Rahtz argued that the abbey

may have gained substantial pilgrim revenues by fostering the cult of St Michael both at the

abbey and at the church on the Tor, a link that is also suggested by the discovery of the

pilgrim's badge on the Tor which featured the Virgin, a principal cult at the abbey.[147] The

argument for the church of St Michael on Glastonbury Tor being a pilgrimage location in the

medieval period is a compelling one, and it is possible that pilgrims would visit both the Tor

and abbey during their pilgrimage as a combined package. Indeed, as Hopkinson-Ball states,

there is a suggestion that the Tor was being actively promoted as a pilgrimage site by the

early thirteenth century and that indulgences relating to it were anachronistically

incorporated into the Charter of St Patrick, as included in later revisions to *De Antiquitate*.[148]

A further reference to Glastonbury Tor can be found in a local website which guides the

modern-day walker past the slipper chapel of St James in Bove Town, where 'pilgrims left

their footwear to climb the Tor barefoot in penance.'[149] It can likely be assumed that this is

an erroneous reference which superimposes the concept of Glastonbury Tor as a popular

contemporary pilgrimage site onto the medieval concept of a slipper chapel as a stopping

point for medieval pilgrims to the abbey.

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[146] Rahtz and Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology,* pp. 64, 82-83.

[147] Rahtz and Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology,* p. 83.

[148] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 39.

[149] Anon., *Walking Route at Wells* <u3asites.org.uk/wells/page/101697> [Accessed: 13 November 2020].

Chapter Three: The Sanctity of Antiquity

That Glastonbury Abbey had a rich history of association with the cults of various saints, an exceptional collection of relics and draw for pilgrims during the medieval era cannot be in any doubt. Despite the fragmented nature of and unreliability of the primary sources, it is possible to ascertain that Glastonbury was regarded as remarkable amongst its contemporaries for its venerability and perceived great antiquity, allegedly stretching back to the abbey's foundation by Joseph of Arimathea in 63CE. The fame of Glastonbury's antiquity long outlasted the suppression of the monastery, even being eulogised by the romantic poet, William Wordsworth, in his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets – The Dissolution of the Monasteries*:

> Proud Glastonbury can no more refuse
>
> to stoop her head before these desperate shocks
>
> she whose high pomp displaced, as story tells,
>
> Arimathean Joseph's wattled cells.[150]

This chapter will explore in greater depth Glastonbury Abbey's own perception of its antiquity and examine how this played a key role in the community's perception of itself, how it influenced the architecture of the abbey and how it contributed to the sanctity for which the abbey was revered.

Age and sanctity gained through an early foundation date are the themes that dominate Glastonbury Abbey's perception of itself from the early to late medieval period. Much contemporary scholarship has been focussed on the veracity of Glastonbury's legends, and in particular those relating to Joseph of Arimathea and King Arthur. However, frequent reference is made to the myths relating to Glastonbury's foundation, references that will quickly go on to dismiss the idea of an ancient foundation for Glastonbury and the fantasies 'created' by the monks. It will be argued that whilst many legends about the early origins of

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[150] William Wordsworth, *Ecclesiastical Sonnets – Part li-Xxi – The Dissolution of the Monasteries* <internetpoem.com/William-wordsworth/ecclesiastical-sonnets-part-ii-xxi-poem> [Accessed: 2 February 2021].

Glastonbury Abbey are just that, legends, there does seem to have a been an underlying perception of antiquity and the sanctity of certain areas of the abbey site. This perception continues today, as Glastonbury remains a place open to a variety of interpretations by pilgrims, with a long history of drawing people in a way which inspires speculation, myth and transformation.[151]

John of Glastonbury opened his fourteenth century chronicle, *Cronica sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie,* with the words:

> Glastoniensem eccclesiam non fecerunt aliorum hominum manus set discipuli Christi eam per doctrinam angelicam fundaerunt et edificauerent, ex deformi quidem scemate set Dei multipliciter adornatam uirtute[152]

These words clearly carry a great deal of bias on the part of John about the exceptionality of his own abbey, but they are symptomatic of the mindset of the community at Glastonbury in the middle ages, a community which, as Gransden argued, claimed to be one of the most hallowed spots in Britain because of its ancient tradition and the many relics that it housed.[153] By the early sixteenth century, in the years leading up to its suppression, the monks of Glastonbury were so assured of the sanctity of the abbey that, as Carley writes, the author of the *Lyfe Of St. Joseph Of Arimathea* could affirm that 'sothely glastenbury is the holyest erth of England.'[154]

By the time of the Norman Conquest, Glastonbury Abbey was already recognised, as Gransden states, as an 'ancient Christian site of outstanding holiness' that needed to give substance to its traditions and legends.[155] Early evidence of this need can be found in the

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[151] Marion Bowman, 'Going with the Flow: Contemporary Pilgrimage in Glastonbury', in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World,* ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008, pp. 241-280, (p. 241).

[152] 'No other human hands made the church of Glastonbury, but Christ's disciples founded and built it by angelic doctrine, an unattractive structure, certainly, but adorned by God with manifold virtue'
Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle Of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 8.

[153] Gransden, 'The Growth of Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', p. 337.

[154] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 87.

[155] Gransden, 'The Growth of Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', p. 338.

forged *Charter of St Patrick*, which was interpolated into William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate.* The charter tells how St. Philip desired to spread the word of Christ and sent twelve of his disciples to Britain, and that he appointed Joseph of Arimathea as leader of this group, which came to Britain in 63CE and preached the faith, settling in Yniswitrin (later identified as Glastonbury).[156] Stories around the sanctity of Glastonbury, as previously explored, also had a strong link to the startling number of relics of saints held by the abbey, of whom many, as Carley argues, had strong associations with the abbey during their lifetimes.[157]

There has been widespread scepticism within the academy over the past sixty years or so about the claims made by Glastonbury Abbey about its history and antiquity. A typical statement regarding Glastonbury's claims is made by Valerie Lagorio, who writes that 'following typical mediaeval practice, it didn't always discriminate between fact and fancy.' The obvious downside of this, is as Lagorio goes on to state, that this tendency towards fabrication has led historians and critics to dismiss the Glastonbury traditions as monastic propaganda and forgeries.[158] Most secondary accounts of aspects of Glastonbury's history will usually refer to the fabrication of the abbey's history to suit the financial and status requirements of the abbey's hierarchy at the time. Julia Crick succinctly sums up the argument of the majority when she writes that succeeding generations at Glastonbury Abbey were 'involved in creating a cult of venerability which was spurious in the extreme.'[159] This scepticism is in large part due to unreliability of the primary sources relating to the abbey's history, primarily the works of William of Malmesbury, Adam of Damerham and John of Glastonbury, which contain obvious indicators of contamination and interpolation.[160] In discussing the history written by Adam of Damerham, David Standen

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[156] Scott, *Early History*, p. 43.

[157] Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 87.

[158] Lagorio, 'The Evolving Legend of St. Joseph of Glastonbury', p. 210.

[159] Julia Crick, 'The Marshalling of Antiquity: Glastonbury's Historical Dossier', in *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey: Essays in Honour of the Ninetieth Birthday Of C.A. Ralegh Radford,* eds. Lesley Abrams and James P. Carley (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991), pp. 217-243, (p. 217).

[160] Gilchrist and Green, *Glastonbury Abbey: Archaeological Investigations 1904-1979,* p. 1.

argues that the monks of Glastonbury felt that the history written for them by William of Malmesbury did not suit their purposes, so they spent much of the next century filling in the gaps left by William to support their claims of antiquity.[161] There was also an imperative for the community to ensure the security of the abbey in times of difficulty, such as in the period following the death of its great abbot Henry of Blois in 1171, when its claims of antiquity helped to insure the abbey against depredations from others such as the Bishop of Wells.[162]

It is not sufficient, however, just to say that the history that the abbey constructed for itself was a deliberate act of falsification, as material was often included in the medieval accounts of the abbey's history by the authors in good faith, such as William of Malmesbury including the *'British Charter'* in *De Antiquitate* as he believed it to be representative of Glastonbury's antiquity. Martin Grimmer argues that it must have been an old foundation because even then it was referred to as the 'Old Church'.[163] The perils associated with the transmission of oral histories may also be a factor in the proliferation of legends at Glastonbury Abbey. Margaret Deanesly finds parallels between the development of legends at Glastonbury and the origins of the legends concerning saints in the early church in Ireland. [164] Deanesly cites the work of Kathleen Hughes, who found that such legends usually belonged to a period of rehabilitation of a monastery, after a raid or disaster had dispersed the original monks. When, after a period of years, some returned, the elder monks had died and very little was known about the founder of the monastery; nevertheless it was desirable to give an account of the foundation, through a combination of memories and interpolations from lives of other saints and miracle stories. Deanesly argues that at Glastonbury such legends were

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[161] David Charles Standen, *Libellus de rebus gestis Glastoniensibus: Attributed to Adam of Damerham, A Monk of Glastonbury, Edited with Introduction and Critical Notes* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 2000). <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.3122271> [Accessed: 4 July 2020], p. 11.

[162] Standen, *Libellus de rebus gestis Glastoniensibus*, p. 11.

[163] Martin Grimmer, 'The Early History of Glastonbury Abbey: A Hypothesis Regarding the "British Charter"', *Parergon*, 20 2 (2003), pp. 1-20, p. 6.

[164] Margaret Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), p. 18.

written and expanded, drawn from unreliable sources at a time of re-foundation, both under Dunstan and later after the disastrous fire.

It would also be unfair to ascribe deliberate falsification of legends to Glastonbury alone. Lagorio describes how it was commonplace in the middle ages for religious communities to deploy fabrications to inspire the faith of the people or to serve the institutions interests, but this was not regarded as creating outright forgeries, as the motivation was ultimately pious by nature.[165] A parallel example of this can be found at Abingdon Abbey, where the monks developed a large number of foundation legends. The Abingdon legends have been described as 'wonderful, but quite baseless' and tell of the abbey having been founded by King Lucius and destroyed by the Emperor Diocletian, and the Emperor Constantine having been educated there. Like Glastonbury, Abingdon Abbey is credited with having been established as a religious community at an exceptionally early date.[166]

Glastonbury does have a generally accepted foundation date of around 673CE, with the earliest charter accepted as authentic being a grant of land from Baldred to the 'church of the blessed Mary and blessed Patrick' dated to 681, although, as Hopkinson-Ball states, the addition of Patrick may be later.[167] Archaeological sources do indicate, however, that there was earlier Christian religious activity around Glastonbury, but it still remains a very remote possibility, as Lagorio observes, that Joseph of Arimathea may have journeyed to the Glastonbury area of Britain to preach the Christian faith there. She attests to how modern archaeology has found evidence of Glastonbury's cultural and economic importance, and how the abbey site, in relation to the mouth of the Severn river at that time, was exactly the kind of place where a trade-borne Christianity could have arrived in the first or second centuries.[168] Writing at the turn of the millennium, Mick Aston states that Glastonbury, with its then location in remote marshlands, is at least a possibility for an early monastery

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[165] Lagorio, 'The Evolving Legend of St. Joseph of Glastonbury', p. 210.

[166] P.H. Ditchfield and William Page (eds.) *Victoria County History: Berkshire Volume 2* (London: Victoria County History, 1907), <british-history.ac.uk/vch/berks/vol2/pp.51-62> [Accessed: 18 September 2020].

[167] Hopkinson-Ball, *Glastonbury: Origins of the Sacred*, p. 9.

[168] Lagorio, 'The Evolving Legend of St. Joseph of Glastonbury', p. 230.

although there was then a lack of archaeological evidence.[169] Subsequently, archaeological evidence has emerged that shows that there was high-status occupation at Glastonbury in the fifth and sixth centuries, long before the monastic foundation was documented. Gilchrist argues that the evidence from Glastonbury, a timber-framed building, fits with the latest research at other monasteries such as Lyminge, Kent, where a high-status hall complex was the precursor to an Anglo-Saxon monastery.[170]

William of Malmesbury wrote of the Old Church at Glastonbury in *De Antiquitate*, that after arriving in Britain in 63CE the disciples of St. Philip, including Joseph of Arimathea, lived in the wilderness for a short time before the saints were incited by a vision of the archangel Gabriel to build a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in a place that was pointed out from heaven.[171] Whatever its origins, it is very clear that the Old Church on the abbey complex was the most sacred and revered part of the site. After the Old Church was destroyed in the fire of 1184, when presumably many of the relics it had contained were also destroyed, the ground it stood on was considered 'holy'. The archaeology reports tell us that the site of the Old Church was a 'natural site' on which to build the Lady Chapel of the new abbey church.[172] When one examines the broader picture of ground plans for monastic houses during the twelfth century, it can be seen that the location of the Lady Chapel at Glastonbury Abbey is not the 'natural site' for a Lady Chapel, sited as it is at the far west end of the abbey church beyond the Galilee. It could be expected that the Lady Chapel would be sited towards the east end of the church. It could be argued that the monastic community were deliberately enshrining the site of the Old Church, preserving this place of great sanctity, on the end of their new abbey church, in a place which would become the focal point for pilgrimage. A glance at the topography of the abbey site in Glastonbury shows that there was scope to build a Lady Chapel in a more conventional location in the church,

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[169] Mick Aston, *Monasteries in the Landscape* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2000), p. 31.

[170] Roberta Gilchrist, 'Glastonbury Abbey: The Archaeological Story', *Current Archaeology,* 320 (2016), pp. 18-27, pp. 24-25.

[171] Scott, *Early History*, p. 45.

[172] Anon., *Digital Glastonbury Abbey*, undated <research.reading.ac.uk/glastonburyabbeyarchaeology/digital/> [Accessed: 2 – 10 January 2021].

or to build a new church nearby, as happened at Winchester, but instead they chose to build the site of the Old Church into the new.

Philip Rahtz describes a brass plaque which is said to have been used to indicate to pilgrims where the east end of the Old Church had been, as well as the dimensions of the Old Church in relation to the plaque. He argues that the recorded inscription of the plaque and its possible location on a pillar to the north side of the Lady Chapel by its original east end, would have been an early 'tourist guide' to the abbey, placed at a point where pilgrims could stand and 'gaze on this most sacred spot, and to recall the amazing story of the past.'[173] The ruins of the Lady Chapel also display many conservative or retrospective architectural elements, comparative to the era in which building took place. Archaeologists have argued that this anachronism is likely to have been a deliberate tactic, in order to demonstrate the antiquity and pre-eminence of Glastonbury in monastic history.[174] Again, it is felt that it was very unlikely that the monks were trying to mislead people, but that they were trying to recreate what had been lost to fire. The Lady Chapel would have been a reminder that it replaced a much older church, which was in some way still enshrined within the building that replaced it.[175]

In his *Cronica*, John of Glastonbury wrote that it is often said to English pilgrims that if they knew the dignity and sanctity of that holy cemetery [at Glastonbury] they would not seek pilgrimage across the sea.[176] William of Malmesbury wrote in *De Antiquitate* that Glastonbury was regarded by nobles as particularly desirable for burial, 'that there under the protection of the Mother of God they might await the day of resurrection.'[177] These histories provide us with a clue for the second major anomaly in the layout of the precinct at Glastonbury Abbey, in comparison with other monastic houses at the time, and that is the site of the cemetery, which lies on the south-side of the Lady Chapel, rather than, as one

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[173] Rahtz and Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology*, pp. 91-92.

[174] Anon., *Glastonbury Abbey Archaeology: Research.*

[175] Anon., *Digital Glastonbury Abbey*.

[176] Carley and Townsend, *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, p. 33.

[177] Scott, *Early History*, p. 83.

might expect, to the east of the east range of the cloister with patrons burials possibly inside the nave. The siting of the cemetery is described by William of Malmesbury in his *Life of St Dunstan:*

> the monks' cemetery he [Dunstan] enclosed with walling that extended many
> feet from the south wall of the church, raising its whole area into a mound revetted
> with the squared stone. The impression given is of a delightful meadow, free of the
> noise of any footstep. Truly can it be said of those who rest here in their holiness:
> 'Their bodies are buried in peace.'[178]

This defining and laying out of the cemetery area by Dunstan, which is still evident today, is very interesting, as in doing so he explicitly sealed the graves of the 'saints'. This has been interpreted as a planned refocusing of the pilgrimage centre of the abbey, an arrangement with paths set within the raised area.[179] It is of significance that this area does lie to the immediate south of the Old Church site, and that Dunstan would want to enshrine the burials within this area as the burial ground of the saints. The enshrining of this original cemetery site and its preservation in later rebuilding and extension projects does, it could be argued, show how important it was for the abbey to venerate the bodies of those it believed to rest in this place, perhaps its early founders, as a demonstration of the abbey's antiquity and the sanctification of the resting place of those who had come to rest at this venerable site many centuries before.

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[178] Winterbottom and Thomson, *William of Malmesbury: Saint's Lives*, p. 205.

[179] Rahtz and Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology*, p. 110.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that throughout the medieval period that veneration and cults of various saints were developed at Glastonbury Abbey and, that these cults waxed and waned with time. Some relics of those saints, along with those of many other holy people, were enshrined at the abbey in a relic collection that could certainly be considered extensive compared with those at other religious houses. The cults of the saints along with their relics helped Glastonbury to develop a considerable pilgrimage industry, which is evidenced today by the archaeological remains of some pilgrim facilities both at the abbey and in the wider town. We do not know who these pilgrims were or where they travelled from as very little written record of them survives, other than a few records of bequests and specific healings from a relatively late date.

This does beg the question whether there was a principal cult at Glastonbury Abbey which gave the religious community its raison d'etre. It is not clear that there was. There is a convincing argument, however, that what was actually being venerated and enshrined at Glastonbury Abbey was not a specific saint, but that it was the antiquity and the sanctification of ground on which the abbey stood that was held in high regard – ground that had reputedly been trodden by, and become the resting place of, so many early saints.

The truth of the origins of Glastonbury Abbey will probably never be known, but it can be seen that, for reasons that have been lost to us, it was important for successive generations of monks to preserve the site of their original church and the relics of the saints that it contained. It can also be perceived that the site was regarded as of such great sanctity that, even by the time of Dunstan in the tenth century, it was a great honour to be buried in land adjacent to the Old Church, in ground that already contained numerous bodies of the saints. The appeal of medieval Glastonbury Abbey can be summarised as the enshrining and hallowing the sanctity of its antiquity.

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