

‘St Peter’s and St Paul’s was one of the world’s greatest international cultural centres’

In its day the monastery of St Peter’s and St Paul’s was one of the world’s greatest international cultural centres. From its foundation until its destruction by Scandinavian raiders in the ninth century, it operated as a centre of learning, hosting travellers, pilgrims and royalty from across Europe. The monastery housed one of the foremost libraries in the world at the time and was renowned as a centre of culture and learning across the western European world. Both sites are thus remarkable as survivals of a distant age, when after the reintroduction of Christianity, monastic communities provided gateways to the cosmopolitan and highly learned monastic cultures of Europe and the Byzantine world.

Extensive excavations by Professor Rosemary Cramp have provided an almost unique insight into this distant early medieval monastic world. Evidence of large scale, lead-roofed structures, painted and sculptured wall decoration and stone sculptures have been discovered, alongside evidence for coloured window glass. The excavations revealed something too of the communities served by this monastic foundation and the lives of the monks. The diet of the monks included fowl, wild birds, shellfish and riverine fish. In the late Anglo-Saxon period there is some evidence for the consumption of horse meat. Although the cemeteries at both sites contained a majority of male burials, both men and women were buried at both sites, some in coffins and others wrapped in shrouds. This suggests these cemeteries also served the local community or lay population that worked on the monastic lands.



Illuminated page from the Lindisfarne gospels



Excavations at Hallgarth Square 1961



sculpture from Jarrow (copyright G. Lynch, Newcastle University)