

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

At the roots of the phenomenon of monasticism is the monks' desire to withdraw to places that are far from the world where they could devote themselves to the contemplation and meditation which enabled them to draw closer to God. In Eastern Mediterranean lands, where the Christian monastic tradition began, this need for isolation was met by heading to the vast, extensive desert where the monks, either alone or in communities, found the environment for which they were searching. When the monastic movement spread and reached the West, the deliberate quest for isolation sought other unpopulated places, especially in forests and mountains, called 'green deserts'. These landscapes offered the ideal ingredients for the contemplation which their spirituality required of them.

In the Pyrenees, the phenomenon of monasticism penetrated the Pyrenees in the first half of the sixth century, given that the first known reference to a monastic community mentions Saint Martin (later called Saint Victorian of Asan), which is documented in 551 already in full swing. It was founded by Saint Victorian, a hermit from across the Pyrenees; therefore, it was originally a hermit community founded in El Pueyo de Araguás, near Lainsa (Huesca), which gradually transitioned towards communal life. Located in a mountainous region in the Pre-Pyrenees of Huesca, initially probably taking advantage of natural shelters or caves, this community's influence spread with the creation of similar communities.

The archaeological research we have been undertaking in the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees since 2004 has enabled us to excavate, identify and interpret one of these monasteries in the site known as Els Altimiris. The founding level dates back to the first half of the sixth century, and we have detected a peak between the late sixth and late seventh centuries. The site is located on the northern face of the Montsec range, mid-mountain perched on a rocky spur surrounded by thick forests which make it difficult to reach. In short, the site perfectly meets the stringent conditions imposed by these monks' spirituality; the austerity, solitude and isolation, along with the harshness of the environment around it, were likely some of the reasons it was chosen.

Yet despite this deliberate isolation, products from the East also reached Santa Cecília dels Altimiris, and some of the archaeological finds indicate that they were also capable of crafting products that may have been in demand within their exchange network.