

Abbey body identified as gay lover of Edward II

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The identification has been a slow process, the body was uncovered in 1970.

Abbey body identified as gay lover of Edward II

By Laura Clout

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A mutilated body found in an abbey graveyard has been identified as that of a notorious medieval villain rumoured to have been the gay lover of Edward II.

The remains, which bear the hallmarks of having been hanged, drawn and quartered, are thought to be those of Sir Hugh Despenser the Younger, who was executed as a traitor in 1326.

Sir Hugh had been favourite of Edward II – who was widely believed to have been homosexual – but was brutally executed before a mob after the king was ousted from the throne.

The decapitated remains, buried at Hulton Abbey, Staffs, have intrigued experts since they were uncovered during the 1970s and now Mary Lewis, an anthropologist, says she has uncovered compelling evidence of their true identity.

The manner of execution, carbon-dating of the bones, and the absence of several parts of the body all point towards Sir Hugh being the victim, she said.

"If the remains are those of Sir Hugh Despenser the Younger, then this is the first time such an execution victim has been identified," she added.

Sir Hugh insinuated himself into the king's favour by backing him in his battles with the barons. Through a series of ruthless deals, he consolidated a huge fortune, winning himself a legion of enemies in

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the process, including Edward's wife, Queen Isabella.

His downfall came when the queen and her ally, Roger Mortimer, deposed the king in 1326.

Sir Hugh was judged a traitor and a thief. He was hanged and, still conscious, castrated, disembowelled and then quartered before his head was displayed on London Bridge.

Miss Lewis, a biological anthropologist at the University of Reading, found that the Staffordshire skeleton had been beheaded and chopped into several pieces with a sharp blade, suggesting a ritual killing.

There was also evidence of a stab wound to the stomach.

She said: "This form of public execution was high theatre that aimed to demonstrate the power of government to the masses. High treason dictated that the perpetrator should suffer more than one death."

Radiocarbon analysis dated the remains to between 1050 and 1385 and subsequent tests suggested that the male was over 34 years old. Sir Hugh was 40 when he was killed.

"Dating of the Hulton Abbey skeleton indicates that he died no later than 1385, when this brutal and very public form of execution was handed out only to the most notorious political prisoners. This suggests that the skeleton at Hulton Abbey was a well-known political figure," Miss Lewis added.

Sir Hugh's wife asked for his bones to be buried on his family's Gloucestershire estate but only the head, a thigh bone and a few vertebrae were returned to her. These are the bones that are missing from the Hulton Abbey skeleton.

In addition, the abbey formed part of the estate of Sir Hugh's brother-in-law, Hugh Audley, and it is thought the family may have chosen to bury what remained of their disgraced relative there.

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