



RITUAL PILGRIM LANDSCAPE OF DISERT, IRELAND

Course ID: ARCH 365AW

June 28-July 25, 2020

Academic Credits: 8 Semester Credit Units (Equivalent to 12 Quarter Units)

School of Record: Connecticut College

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTORS:

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Figure 1: St Colmcille blessed all the land that he could see through the quern stone at Disert ©Tony Geoghegan

INTRODUCTION

Disert is a ritual pilgrim landscape in Co. Donegal, Ireland that includes a series of early ecclesiastical enclosures, penitential cairns, a holy well dedicated to St Colmcille (also known as St Columba), a post-medieval altar and a *cillín* (children's graveyard). It may date to as early as the sixth century AD when it was reputedly founded by St Colmcille or may even extend back into prehistory. Disert is still important today for religious devotion and for pilgrims seeking miracles and medical cures associated with the well water, soil and monuments. Disert lies directly under Carnaween Mountain, another pilgrimage site, which has deep folkloric traditions around Fionn MacCumhaill (Finn MacCool). In 1611 Niall O'Boyle, Bishop of Raphoe died at *Gleann Eidhnighe* (Glen Eany), most likely at Disert, suggesting continued occupation to that time and records show that Disert was church-owned land until the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in the nineteenth century. Although owned by the Church of Ireland, this isolated place was used for secret Roman Catholic worship during Penal times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and an outdoor altar still remains. With such a rich history, Disert is of great archaeological and historical importance. Pilgrimage has been an aspect of Irish life from prehistoric to modern times and local sites like Disert played a key role in this.

The Irish word *Disert* derives from the Latin *desertum*, usually translated as ‘hermitage’, ‘isolated place’ or ‘a place apart’. The name occurs in c.84 locations around Ireland and can be traced from the sixth century, but by the eighth and ninth centuries it had become associated with the ascetic *Céli Dé* movement. Interestingly, this particular Disert is associated with St Colmcille rather than with his more-local contemporary, St Náile, who reputedly founded the nearby church at Inver, which became the parish church. There are at least 822 recorded ecclesiastical enclosures and sites in Ireland, including a minimum of 19 in Co. Donegal, however very few have been the subject of study. Due to its isolated location, Disert did not become a parish church or the site of an abbey or friary of the later medieval period. Furthermore, the disused, but extant graveyard appears to have been limited to a defined area, bounded by a stone revetment and wall, and without modern headstones. As such, Disert provides a unique opportunity to examine a site with little later- and post-medieval construction activity, allowing the project to shed light on the chronology, organization and evolution of the site in particular, and more generally on the development of the early church in the northwest of Ireland. This is a topic that has generated considerable historical research, but little archaeological excavation, thereby limiting our understanding of the relationship between the material evidence, the upstanding monuments, and documented individuals and sites.

Between 2016 and 2018 much of the background work was done to prepare the site for excavation. This included:

- A drone survey to create orthorectified photographs and digital surface models of the site
- A geological and geomorphological survey
- A natural heritage survey
- A geophysical survey
- An upstanding monuments survey
- 3-d laser scanning of artefacts from the site
- Conservation and access measures for the site
- Publication of a book in conjunction with the community. *Disert in the Blue Stacks* (Beglane et. al. 2018) includes archaeology and history as well as local poetry, songs, music and folklore.

2019 was the first year of excavation and yielded considerable evidence for nineteenth and early twentieth century lazy-bed agriculture and dairying in and around this formerly sacred land. This shed light on population growth and the need for land at this time, which led to the expansion of settlement into marginal areas. Intriguingly, the excavation also yielded prehistoric stone tools, providing the first evidence for pre-Christian activity at Disert.

In 2020 the aim of the excavation will be to delve deeper into the ground to gain an insight into the early medieval origin of the site and to further investigate the nature of the prehistoric activity. We anticipate that this work will include the excavation of the holy well and cairns that form part of the pilgrimage ritual. Students will contribute to this overall aim through their input to the survey, excavation and recording work. The site is regularly visited by tourists and students will also have the opportunity to develop skills in explaining heritage to members of the public.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

One of the main objectives of the field school is to develop the archaeological skills and understanding of the participants and their ability to communicate their knowledge. This will be achieved using a balance of formal lectures, fieldtrips and readings as well as solid practical experience of excavating, recording and surveying archaeological features and in explaining heritage to members of the public. Additionally, students will experience another culture as they will be working closely with members of the local community and with Irish students, and in the evenings will be introduced to Irish food, music, society and hospitality.

ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

Credit Units: Attending students will be awarded 8 semester credit units (equivalent to 12 quarter credit units) through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a private, highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see grading assessment and matrix). This field school provides a minimum of 160 direct instructional hours. Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institution prior to attending this field school.

Transcripts: An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One more transcript may be sent to the student home institution at no cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the National Student Clearinghouse: <http://bit.ly/2hvurkl>.

PREREQUISITES

None. This field school will give you the opportunity to develop a range of skills, and for those with prior archaeological experience, to build upon those skills and develop them further.

DISCLAIMER – PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

Our primary concern is with education. Traveling and conducting field research involve risk. Students interested in participating in IFR programs must weigh whether the potential risk is worth the value of education provided. While risk is inherent in everything we do, we do not take risk lightly. The IFR engages in intensive review of each field school location prior to approval. Once a program is accepted, the IFR reviews each program annually to make sure it complies with all our standards and policies, including student safety.

The IFR does not provide trip or travel cancellation insurance. We encourage students to explore such insurance on their own as it may be purchased at affordable prices. insuremytrip.com or Travelgurad.com are possible sites where field school participants may explore travel cancellation insurance quotes and policies. If you do purchase such insurance, make sure the policy covers the cost of both airfare and tuition. See this [Wall Street Journal article about travel insurance](#) that may help you with to help to decide whether to purchase such insurance.

We do our best to follow schedule and activities as outlined in this syllabus. Yet local permitting agencies, political, environmental, personal, or weather conditions may force changes. This syllabus, therefore, is only a general commitment. Students should allow flexibility and adaptability as research work is frequently subject to change.

Field work involves physical work in the outdoors. You should be aware that conditions in the field are different than those you experience in your home, dorms, or college town. You will need to come prepared for hard physical work in the outdoors in all weathers, additionally the site is approximately 500m across fields from the nearest point on the road so be prepared for the walk. Believe it or not it can be hugely satisfying to come back cold and wet or hot and sweaty but having achieved your objectives.

No vaccinations are required for entry to Ireland but an up-to-date tetanus shot is recommended for archaeological work.

If you have any medical concerns, please consult your doctor. For all other concerns, please consult

the project director or IFR staff, as appropriate.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completion of the field school students will:

- Understand and be able to explain how an archaeological excavation is conducted and the way in which this fits into a larger research project
- Have a knowledge of Irish archaeology and history
- Appreciate the different ways in which communities and outside visitors engage with the past
- Be able to excavate archaeological features
- Be able to record excavated and unexcavated features using standard methodologies
- Be able to undertake preliminary recording and analysis of artifacts and samples recovered

GRADING MATRIX

Participation 50%

Attendance at all lectures, fieldtrips, survey, laboratory and excavation sessions is required. Students will be graded based on their enthusiasm, willingness to participate, attention to detail, teamwork and overall contribution to the project.

Journal 30%

Students will be required to keep a journal of their experiences and to submit this for assessment in the final week of the field school. Staff will provide guidance on the type and style of entries required.

Quiz 20%

A quiz will take place in Week 2 to assess the student's understanding of the required readings and of the lectures, practical training and field trips undertaken in Week 1.

TRAVEL & MEETING POINT

Hold purchasing your airline ticket until six (6) weeks prior to departure date. Natural disasters, political changes, weather conditions and a range of other factors may require the cancellation of a field school. The IFR typically takes a close look at local conditions 6-7 weeks prior to program beginning and make Go/No Go decisions by then. This time frame still allows the purchase of discounted airline tickets while protecting students from potential loss of airline ticket costs if we decide to cancel a program.

As students will arrive at different times we will all meet at the [Abbey Hotel](#) on the Diamond in Donegal Town at 5pm on Sunday 28 June, 2020. A meeting room will be available to us. However, if you arrive early then ask if you can leave luggage at Reception. After the welcome meeting we will share an evening meal before transferring to the accommodation.

It is strongly recommended that you fly into Dublin rather than Shannon airport as transport links are direct. From Dublin Airport or from Dublin Busáras (Main Bus Station) take Bus Eireann Service 30 or X30 which runs every 90 minutes to Donegal Town. The bus drops off directly outside the Abbey Hotel. See <http://buseireann.ie> for details. There is no train to Donegal, however bus services are available from all major towns, see <http://buseireann.ie> and <http://busfeda.ie> for details. If you miss your connection or your flight is delayed, please call, text or email the project director immediately. A local emergency cell phone number will be provided to all enrolled students.

VISA REQUIREMENTS

Citizens of the US and Canada do not require visas to enter Ireland. Your passport should be valid for at least 90 days after the end of your trip. Citizens of other countries are asked to check the embassy website of their home country for specific visa requirements.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Students will be housed in purpose-built holiday homes in a mixture of single and twin-bedded rooms, which will be allocated using a random draw at the welcome meeting. Those sharing rooms will do so with others of the same gender. Fresh bed linen and regular cleaning of communal areas will be provided. Students should provide their own towels. There is a washing machine in each house.

The accommodation has a tennis court for the use of guests, there is a rocky shore approximately 10 minutes walk from the accommodation and a sandy beach 20 minutes walk away.

Three meals per day (breakfast/lunch/dinner) are included from Monday to Friday plus the welcome meal on the first Sunday evening. Tea, coffee, water and biscuits (cookies) will also be provided on site during the excavation. Students will need to prepare and bring their own packed lunch daily from groceries supplied by the project. A large tent will be provided on-site to store bags and for shelter at mealtimes if necessary. Evening meals will be prepared by a professional chef and will always include at least one option that contains meat, fish or poultry plus at least one vegetarian option. Students will be required to assist with washing dishes after meals. If you have any particular dietary needs or allergies then contact us in advance.

COURSE SCHEDULE

All IFR field schools begin with safety orientation. This orientation includes proper behavior at the field area, proper clothing, local cultural sensitivities and sensibilities, potential fauna and flora hazards, review of IFR harassment and discrimination policies, and review of the student Code of Conduct.

Day*	Activity*
Week 1 Field studies program	
Sunday 5pm	Welcome meeting Program safety orientation; review of IFR's policies and codes of conduct. Evening meal followed by transfer to the accommodation
Monday am	Introduction to Disert and the project (lectures). Disert site tour.
Monday pm	Fieldtrip to the later-medieval period Donegal Castle and Abbey and to the Plantation-period Donegal Town
Tuesday	The archaeology and history of Ireland, with specific reference to the north-west (lectures) Lectures and practical training in excavation and recording techniques
Wednesday	Full day fieldtrip to the archaeology of Co. Donegal including the Wild Atlantic Way
Thursday	Full day fieldtrip to the archaeology of Co. Sligo including the Wild Atlantic Way
Friday	Site set-up and survey equipment training
Week 2-4 Excavation program	
Mon-Fri	Depart accommodation 8:30; Excavation 9:00-5:00 and then return to the accommodation. There will be a morning break and a lunch break daily. In the event of sustained bad weather then indoor laboratory work will be undertaken
Evening event	Irish Culture Night hosted by the Disert Heritage Group and local community

Evening event	Guest speaker and social event with Disert Heritage Group and local community
Friday 24 July	Last-night party with Disert Heritage Group and local community
Saturday 25 July	Participants depart

*Note that schedules are subject to minor changes due to e.g. weather, availability of speakers etc.

Students are free at weekends and we strongly recommend that you take the opportunity to visit and experience other parts of Ireland. Buses to Sligo, Galway, Dublin and Derry/Londonderry depart regularly from Donegal Town. Derry/Londonderry is in Northern Ireland (UK) and US citizens can visit without a visa but should carry their passports with them.

EQUIPMENT LIST

Irish weather is unpredictable and is often described as 'four seasons in every day'. Summer temperatures can range between 40 degrees F and 75 degrees F. Rain showers are frequent and it is usual for excavation in Ireland to continue during these, however June and July are often the driest months and so we can be hopeful! For the excavation you should wear clothes that you don't mind getting wet/dirty. Several thin layers are better than one thick layer as they can be added/removed as needed.

You will need:

- Waterproof rain jacket and over-pants. These can be bought in camping/outdoors stores and larger sports stores. Typical brands are Arc'teryx, Patagonia, North Face, Berghaus and Gelert. If you plan to buy them on arrival then be aware that you will need to arrive in Ireland by Saturday as most shops are closed on Sunday.
- Steel toe-capped boots. Steel-toe capped wellingtons/gumboots are also acceptable but can be very hot to work in if the weather is good. For safety reasons you will not be permitted on site in cotton deck shoes, sandals etc.
- Two pairs of work pants - avoid jeans or e.g. cotton tracksuit bottoms as both hold moisture when wet and get very cold.
- Several tops e.g. 2 or 3 base layers, thin fleece, thick fleece, shell jacket. Remember that if you get wet or very dirty you will need to have spare clothes for the following morning.
- Both a sun hat with a brim and also a woolly hat so that you are covered for all of those inevitable four seasons.
- Thick socks for under your work boots. Bring several pairs so that you have spares if you get wet.
- A reusable water bottle
- A sealable 'Tupperware'-type lunchbox
- A four-inch archaeology/pointing trowel. Recommended brands are Marshalltown and WHS. You can purchase this from amazon.com or from building supply shops and websites.
- Gardening gloves with a textile glove and a rubberized palm as these can be used when wet.
- Sunglasses!
- Sunscreen!
- Insect repellent
- Liquid hand sanitizer or wipes
- Any essential medicine
- Allergy medicine for e.g. hay fever reaction to grass pollen
- Personal towel
- Personal toiletries

- Casual clothes for the evenings and weekends, including a clean jacket and sweater and clean shoes. Ireland has an informal social culture so jeans etc. are usually perfect but most nightclubs do not allow sneakers so bring a pair of 'proper' shoes if you want to go clubbing.
- Nightclothes to sleep in as most rooms are shared, bathrooms are not en-suite and houses may be mixed-gender
- Electrical adapters. Ireland uses 240 Volt 3-pin plugs that are the same as those used in the UK.
- Cell phone and charger. Check your plan for costs when used overseas. It is cheaper to buy an Irish pay-as-you-go SIM card (and unlock your cell phone) or to buy a cheap phone with a SIM card. If you want to buy a phone on arrival in Ireland then you will need to arrive in Ireland by Saturday as most shops are closed on Sunday.
- Laptop/tablet and charger

REQUIRED READINGS

Beglane, F, Bonsall, J, Moran, J, Nugent, L and Meehan, H. 2018. 'An oasis in the desert: the early ecclesiastical site of Disert, Co. Donegal'. *Journal of Irish Archaeology*, **27**, 57-79.

Lacey, B 2013, 'The political geography of Donegal, AD500-800', in McLaughlin, J & Beattie, S (eds) *An historical, environmental and cultural atlas of County Donegal*. Cork: Cork University Press, 107-112.

Margey, A 2013, 'From Gaelic outposts to colonial society: Donegal and the Plantation of Ulster', in McLaughlin, J & Beattie, S (eds) *An historical, environmental and cultural atlas of County Donegal*. Cork: Cork University Press, 155-162.

Ó Canann, T G 2013, 'Dynastic conflict in medieval Donegal, AD800-1400', in McLaughlin, J & Beattie, S (eds) *An historical, environmental and cultural atlas of County Donegal*. Cork: Cork University Press, 116-124.

O'Sullivan, A, McCormick, F, Kerr, T and Harney, L. 2014. *Early medieval Ireland AD400 - 1100: the evidence from archaeological excavations*. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 (pages 47-215)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Beglane, F, Burke, J, Meehan, G, Meehan H, Meehan R and Ward M. 2018. *Disert in the Blue Stacks*. Disert Heritage Group, Donegal.

Beglane, F, Meehan, H and Nugent, L 2016, Conservation Management Plan for the Ecclesiastical Enclosure and Pilgrim Landscape of Disert, Inver Parish, Co Donegal. Submitted to the Heritage Council. <https://disertheritage.com/conservation-management-plan/>

Doherty, C. 'Late medieval Donegal' in Nolan, W, Ronayne, L and Dunleavy, M (Eds.) 2004 *Donegal: History & Society*. Dublin: Geography Publications. 183-201.

Hunter, RJ. 'The plantation in Donegal' in Nolan, W, Ronayne, L and Dunleavy, M (Eds.) 2004 *Donegal: History & Society*. Dublin: Geography Publications. 283-324.

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Harbison, P 1991. *Pilgrimage in Ireland: the monuments and people*. Syracuse University Press, New York.

Nolan, W, Ronayne, L and Dunleavy, M (Eds.) 1995. *Donegal: History & Society*. Geography Publications, Dublin.

Ó Carragáin, T 2010. *Churches in early medieval Ireland*. Yale University Press, London and New Haven.

O'Sullivan, J and Ó Carragáin, T 2008. *Inishmurray: monks and pilgrims in an Atlantic landscape*. Collins Press, Cork.

Stout, M 1997. *The Irish Ringfort*. Paperback. Four Courts Press, Dublin.

Stout, M 2017. *Early Medieval Ireland 431-1169*. Wordwell, Dublin.