



RITUAL PILGRIM LANDSCAPE OF DISERT, IRELAND

Course ID: ARCH 365AW

June 18 - July 16, 2022

Academic Credit Units: 8 semester credit units (equivalent to 12 quarter credit units)

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTORS:

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

OVERVIEW

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. 2021 was the second season of excavation, run as a community excavation, and focused on key features identified in 2019. The ditch surrounding the early medieval ecclesiastical enclosure was partly excavated, yielding evidence for a number of hearths and craftworking activity. Partial excavation of a cairn adjacent to the holy well revealed that it originally consisted of two separate cairns – one circular and one rectangular in form.

In 2022 we aim to complete the excavation of the cairn and holy well that form part of the pilgrimage ritual, 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. 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.

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 highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see assessment, below). This field school provides a minimum of 360 hours of experiential education. 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's 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 and programming prior to approval. Once a program is accepted, the IFR reviews each program annually to make sure it still complies with all our standards and policies, including those pertaining to 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 Travelguard.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.

We do our best to follow a schedule of activities, methods training, and programming as outlined in this syllabus. However, this schedule can be easily disrupted by any number of unforeseen circumstances, including revised decisions by local permitting agencies, political unrest, and changes in the weather. While this schedule represents the best of the director(s) intentions, we—students and staff alike—need to be adaptable and tolerant of necessary alterations. This adaptability is an intrinsic part of all field research.

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.

COVID-19 travel regulations are constantly evolving and we recommend prospective students consult the following websites for up-to-date information on travel requirements:

<https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa/news-and-events/covid19-updates/>

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/77952-government-advice-on-international-travel/>

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.

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. In the evenings and at weekends students will be introduced to Irish food, music, society and hospitality. All activities will fully conform to Covid-19 public health requirements.

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

ASSESSMENT

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, ROOM & BOARD, & SAFETY LOGISTICS

COVID Disclaimer. The logistics outlined below for this IFR field school were written according to the most current and accurate information available to IFR. We recognize that the best practices for preventing the transmission of the coronavirus may change in the coming months. The IFR will be revisiting program-specific plans periodically throughout the enrollment period and will update program details according to new developments, new travel protocols, and updates to local policies.

An IFR field school is designed to provide positive, constructive experiences for communities, students, and researchers. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the following protocols have been developed based on the assumption that any participant in an IFR field school may be an asymptomatic carrier of SARS COVID-19 and any of its variants. Our goal, with these protocols, is to reduce the possibility for COVID-19 transmission among participants, staff, and local community members. IFR depends on the complete and sustained commitment of all students to stay healthy and to help others stay healthy. On enrollment, students commit to comply with all aspects of the IFR COVID-19 avoidance policy as well as any/all policies specific to their respective IFR field school.

PRIOR TO TRAVEL

We ask that all students participating in IFR programs be **fully vaccinated** prior to travel. Furthermore, all eligible vaccinated students are **required to have received a vaccination booster**.

Students must arrange a test for current infection for COVID-19 through a RT-PCR test for themselves in their home location within 72 hours prior to the start of the program and upload proof of a negative result to their IFR application portal.

After demonstrating they tested negative, students must take all precautions possible to ensure they remain COVID-19 free prior to and during travel to the field school. Students should plan to travel in the safest manner that they are able (e.g., avoid flights with long layovers and multiple connections). In addition, we require the following from all students: use of a face mask during travel to, from, and on airlines, ferries, trains, buses, and the like; regular washing of hands; and, in so far as possible, maintain social distancing of 6 feet / 2 meters in airports and other spaces.

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.

TRAVEL (TO AND DURING THE PROGRAM)

Due to ongoing uncertainties regarding the travel regulations related to COVID-19, IFR will assess the local conditions closer to the travel date (5–6 weeks prior to the program beginning) and will make Go/No Go decisions then. You are required to participate in the mandatory orientation meeting when we will discuss the latest travel information and regulations. We also suggest you consider postponing the purchase of your airline ticket until *after* the program orientation.

As people will arrive at different times, we will all meet at the [Abbey Hotel](#) on the Diamond in Donegal Town at 5pm on Saturday 18 June 2022. 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.

Amid the COVID pandemic, any leisure travel during the program and entailing use of buses, trains, and/or airplanes must be approved by the program director(s) prior to booking and departure.

LOCAL PROTOCOLS, REGULATIONS, & EXPECTATIONS

In Ireland, we follow the government guidelines and restrictions, which are published on the Health Service Executive (our equivalent of the CDC), which has a designated webpage for COVID-19 restrictions, information and advice (see <https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>).

Please also consult the following websites for up-to-date COVID-19 travel regulations and restrictions: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/77952-government-advice-on-international-travel/> <https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa/news-and-events/covid19-updates/>

Currently (January 2022), travelers from overseas to Ireland must:

- [Fill out a Passenger Locator Form \(PLF\) before departure.](#)
- Passengers without proof of vaccination, or proof of recovery from COVID-19 in the prior 6 months, must show evidence of a negative ('not detected') RT-PCR test result taken within 72 hours prior to arriving in Ireland.

Our *current* policies dictate that all participants in the field school will wear masks while indoors, (i.e. during lectures, during labs, in shared residential spaces, etc.). Masks will not be required within household 'pods'. Regular hand washing will be a part of the project's daily schedule. Our policies, and those of the IFR, will also be explained in full to you in your onsite orientation.

Donegal Town is a very small, close-knit but friendly community and local people have been very open and welcoming of previous IFR students and are keen for your stay to be safe and enjoyable. Students should respect local sensitivities and understand that the presence of such a large team of outsiders in town does not entitle participants to any special treatment or privileges. The project is closely integrated

with the community, via the Desert Heritage Group, and local volunteers will also be taking part in the excavation. Interaction with the local community must be limited to situations where everyone is masked when indoors and/or can ideally be outside.

FACE MASKS / FACE COVERINGS

All students, faculty and staff are expected to wear face masks when in indoor spaces shared with others. Wearing face masks, combined with vaccination, are among the most effective ways of minimizing the spread of the coronavirus.

The objective of wearing a mask is to capture potentially infectious droplets from the wearer. Therefore:

- Masks or respirators that are equipped with an "exhalation valve" are not permitted, unless covered by another mask.
- Neck fleeces (gaiter masks) are considered the least effective form of face masks and are not permitted. (The material found in gaiters tend to break down larger droplets into smaller particles that are more easily carried away in the air.)
- Folded bandanas and knitted masks are ineffective and are not permitted.
- Masks must be worn so as to cover both the mouth and nose. If your mask becomes loose, it can be tightened by twisting the ear loops.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Students will be housed in a number of holiday homes, all within walking distance of Donegal Town centre. There will be in a mixture of single and shared 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. There will be an opportunity to move between houses, however given the circumstances of COVID-19, this decision would need to be made on the first day. Thereafter, households will form 'pods' that limit their non-distanced social contact to one another for the duration of the field program. Individuals can move between rooms within the household at any time during the project.

Fresh bed linen and a change of bed linen will be provided at the start of the project. Students should provide their own towels. There is a washing machine in each house and students are responsible for doing their own laundry, detergent will be supplied. Households will be responsible for daily cleaning and sanitation of their houses. Cleaning agents and equipment will be provided to each house.

A group 'Welcome' meal will be provided on the first Saturday evening and a Farewell meal at the end of the project. Groceries will be provided and are included in the cost of the project. Students will need to prepare and bring their own packed lunch to the site daily and prepare breakfast and evening meals within their households. A large tent will be provided on site to store bags and for shelter at mealtimes, if necessary. Other meals and refreshments may be provided at social events. Arrangements for mealtimes will be finalized subject to the public health requirements at the time. Vegetarian, vegan, lactose-free and gluten-free meals are widely available and will be offered as necessary at communal meals. Religion-based diets such as kosher and halal meals will be difficult to accommodate in this rural area. Students are required to indicate any potential dietary restrictions and/or food allergies on their application forms.

MANAGING COVID-19 CASES & OUTBREAKS

In the event of COVID-19 cases occurring within the project crew (directors, students, and/or staff), affected individuals will isolate within their household and will follow Irish government guidelines for managing the outbreak. If necessary, room allocations will be revised to isolate suspected or confirmed

cases. Individuals showing symptoms that will require quarantine past the end of the field season will be subject to whatever protocols may be in place at that time for both Ireland and the individual's home country.

The local General Practitioner (family doctor) is based at Donegal Town and will be the primary contact for any health issues. In the event of more serious illness, the closest major hospital is in Letterkenny, c. 45 km north of Donegal Town, a 35-minute trip by road.

Health and safety is of primary importance, and all government guidelines will be followed with regard to quarantine, contact tracing, etc. Please visit this website for up-to-date information on the public health measures in Ireland: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3361b-public-health-updates/>

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, public health hazards, review of IFR harassment and discrimination policies, and review of the student Code of Conduct.

Day*	Activity*
Weekend of arrival	
Saturday 18 June 5pm	Welcome meeting.
	Program safety orientation; review of IFR's policies and codes of conduct.
	Evening meal followed by transfer to the accommodation.
Sunday am	Introduction to Disert and the project (lectures).
	Disert site tour.
Sunday pm	Fieldtrip to the later-medieval period Donegal Castle and Abbey and to the Plantation-period Donegal Town.
Monday	Lectures and practical training in excavation and recording techniques, survey equipment training, site set up.
Weekdays	
Mon-Fri	Depart Donegal Town 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.
Weekend and evening events (subject to change depending on public health restrictions)	
Evening event	'Meet the Community' event hosted by the Disert Heritage Group and local community.
Evening event	'Irish Culture Night' hosted by the Disert Heritage Group and local community.
Saturday 25 June	The archaeology and history of Ireland, with specific reference to the north-west (lectures).
W/end of 1-4 July	'4 July' event.
Saturday 9 July	Full day fieldtrip to the archaeology of Co. Donegal including the Wild Atlantic Way.
Friday 15 July	Farewell event with Disert Heritage Group and local community.

Saturday 16 July	Participants depart
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*Note that schedules are subject to changes due to e.g. weather, availability of speakers, government travel and meeting restrictions, etc.

Students are free on Sundays.

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:

- 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.
- Waterproof rain jacket and over-pants. These can be bought in camping/outdoors stores and larger sports stores. Typical brands are Arctryx, 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.
- 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 ‘thermos’ flask and small reusable, sealable containers for milk, tea/coffee, sugar etc. as appropriate.
- 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.
- A supply of reusable cloth facemasks
- 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.
- Nightclothes to sleep in as 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 may be 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.
- Laptop/tablet and charger

REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students via a shared Dropbox folder.

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 outpost 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 2019, Preliminary report on excavation at Disert, Co. Donegal DG084-001. License No. 19E0150. Unpublished report submitted to the National Monuments Service.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YpKfYmh3M46sTLGUHgrGLZumnDjHs7Ko/view>

Beglane, F 2021, Preliminary report on excavation at Disert, Co. Donegal DG084-001. License No. 19E0150 (Extension). Unpublished report submitted to the National Monuments Service.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/12wTOXsuvVOQAU1RHYzJChZqscmhvNt2j/view?usp=sharing>

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

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

Lacey, B 2006. *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms AD500-800*. Four Courts Press, Dublin.

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.