



Ollscoil
Teicneolaíochta
an Atlantaigh

Atlantic
Technological
University

**Disert: Early Monks to Modern Pilgrimage
Archaeological Excavation Field School
Co. Donegal, Ireland
Accredited courses from ATU Sligo
Dr Fiona Beglane, Dr Marion Dowd, Sam Moore**



The enigmatic arch at Disert: this area will be excavated in 2024 © Ken Williams

Disert

Disert is a ritual pilgrimage landscape in Co. Donegal, 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, however there is also evidence for prehistoric activity. Disert is still important today for religious devotion and for pilgrims seeking cures associated with the well water, soil and monuments. The site lies directly under Carnaween Mountain, another pilgrimage site, which has deep folkloric associations with the legendary *Fionn MacCumhaill* (Finn MacCool). In 1611 Niall O'Boyle, Bishop of Raphoe died at *Gleann Eidhnighe* (Glen Eany), most likely at Disert, suggesting occupation at that time. 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. Pilgrimage has been an aspect of Irish life from prehistoric to modern times and sites like Disert played a key role in this. With such a rich history, Disert is of great archaeological and historical importance.

The Irish word *Dísert* derives from the Latin *desertum*, usually translated as 'hermitage', 'isolated place' or 'a place apart' and occurs in about 84 locations around Ireland, 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. 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, organisation and evolution of the site in particular, and more generally on the development of the early church in the northwest of Ireland. This fascinating topic has generated considerable historical research, but little archaeological excavation, a lack that this project seeks to address.

Course Summary

For 2024 ATU Sligo are delighted to offer fully accredited certificates focused on practical archaeological excavation and post-excavation skills, based at the early medieval ecclesiastical complex of Disert, Co. Donegal, and at our Archaeology Laboratory at Atlantic Technological University Sligo in the Northwest of Ireland.

Online classes (2 hours per week) commence from late February 2024. By completing the theoretical aspects of the course online, and in advance of the field school, students gain the maximum benefit from their time in the field. Students then attend practical sessions in Sligo and Donegal in May-June 2024 - see below for details. By the end of the programme, students will have gained hands-on experience excavating on this wonderful medieval and post-medieval site and will understand what is involved in post-excavation analysis and how these fit into a larger research project. Students will also have a knowledge of Irish archaeology and history, with a particular focus on the landscapes of NW Ireland.

The ***Certificate in Archaeological Field Studies (International)*** and ***Certificate in Archaeological Excavation and Post-Excavation (International)*** are targeted particularly at overseas students of archaeology and/or anthropology, who require transferable academic credit to complete degrees at their home institution. The ***Certificate in Archaeological Excavation and Post-Excavation*** is targeted at those based in Ireland/Europe. No prior experience or qualifications are required.

Detailed advice on travel, accommodation, equipment, and clothing will be provided during the online sessions.



The Study Tour visits spectacular archaeological monuments such as Carrowkeel, which is on the 'tentative' list for World Heritage Site status



Excavating at Disert in 2021 © Ken Williams

Location and travel

The study tour will consist of daily fieldtrips departing from ATU Sligo. During the excavation a bus will bring students between Donegal Town and Disert daily. Post-excavation analysis will take place at ATU Sligo. Students are responsible for their own transfer at the start/end of the course and for transfer between Sligo and Donegal. Bus Eireann Expressway buses run frequently and directly between Donegal and Sligo, and also between Dublin Airport and both Donegal and Sligo. Advice will be provided to students at the online sessions.

Accommodation and food

Accommodation and food are not included but suitable facilities will be recommended at the online sessions. This allows students to suit their own budget and needs, and to share accommodation if they wish to do so. Those without their own transport will need to stay within walking distance of the daily pick-up points.

Fitness and safety

Note that both the study tour and the excavation require a reasonable level of physical fitness. Students will need to be able to walk over rough ground for 500m or more without difficulty, while excavation is a physical activity that requires a similar level of fitness to gardening. You should be aware that you may be outside in all weathers for extended periods.

Entry Requirements

This course is open to anyone who has an interest in archaeology. This course will be of particular interest to those contemplating further study in archaeology or work in the heritage sector.

For more information: fiona.beglane@atu.ie

Book now to secure your place!

The Study Tour (20 – 31 May 2024)

This module involves touring the spectacular landscapes of the northwest of Ireland for ten days to examine a full range of Irish archaeological field monuments and a number of visitor centres. Students will learn first-hand about Irish archaeological field monuments and their contexts in the wider landscape and build their knowledge of Irish culture through this study tour.

The Excavation (3 -14 June 2024)

Survey work at Disert started in 2016, and a series of excavations took place between 2019 and 2022. These yielded considerable evidence for nineteenth and early twentieth century lazy-bed agriculture and dairying in and around this formerly sacred land. They shed light on population growth and the need for land at this time, which led to the expansion of settlement into marginal areas. Intriguingly, prehistoric stone tools were found, providing the first evidence for pre-Christian activity at Disert. Excavation of the main ditch surrounding the early medieval ecclesiastical enclosure shows that it was dated to the early seventh century. This was later reused with evidence for a number of hearths and craftworking activity dating to the tenth century. Excavation of three cairns on the site showed that two of these supported upright slabs, possibly reused early medieval cross slabs, and that these cairns originated in the late medieval/post-medieval periods.

In 2024 the excavation will examine the enigmatic ‘arch’ enclosure. This previously unexcavated feature, abutting the main ecclesiastical enclosure, has been variously suggested to be the remains of a megalithic tomb, a hermit’s retreat, or a sheep pen. The aim will be to determine the dating and nature of the enclosure. Students will contribute to this overall aim through their input to the survey, excavation and recording work on site. Disert is visited regularly by tourists, and students will also have the opportunity to develop skills in explaining heritage to members of the public.

The Post-excavation Analysis (17-21 June 2024)

Post-excavation analysis will take place in the Archaeology Lab at ATU Sligo. Students will undertake essential tasks such as washing artefacts and ecofacts; processing soils for specialist analysis; preparing stratigraphic matrices and reports; illustrating and photographing artefacts. They will gain an awareness of the component parts of the post excavation process and the roles played by various specialists. They will contribute material for creation of the final excavation report and ultimately work towards bringing an excavation to full publication, and the preparation of the archive for final deposition in the National Museum of Ireland.



Disert Post-excavation analysis in 2022



Excavating at Disert 2022

Course options

	Certificate in Archaeological Excavation and Post-Excavation	Certificate in Archaeological Excavation and Post-Excavation (International)	Certificate in Archaeological Field Studies (International)
Course Code	SG_SARCH_S06	SG_SARCI_S06	SG_SARCJ_S06
Credits	ECTS 10	ECTS 12 (equivalent to 6 semester credits)	ECTS 18 (equivalent to 9 semester credits)
Total fieldwork time	3 weeks	3 weeks	5 weeks
Online classes	Feb-May 2024 2 hours per week	Feb-May 2024 2 hours per week	Feb-May 2024 2 hours per week
Archaeology of Ireland Study Tour - NW Ireland	n/a	n/a	ATU Sligo Daily fieldtrips 20 – 31 May 2024
Excavation and post-excavation module 1	Disert Co. Donegal Excavation 3 -14 June 2024	Disert Co. Donegal Excavation 3 -14 June 2024	Disert Co. Donegal Excavation 3 -14 June 2024
Excavation and post-excavation module 2	ATU Sligo Post-excavation analysis 17-21 June 2024	ATU Sligo Post-excavation analysis 17-21 June 2024	ATU Sligo Post-excavation analysis 17-21 June 2024
Assessments	Continuous assessment	Continuous assessment	Continuous assessment
Transport Donegal Town to Disert daily	Included	Included	Included
Accommodation and food	Not included but suitable facilities will be recommended	Not included but suitable facilities will be recommended	Not included but suitable facilities will be recommended
Weblink	Information/Apply here	Information/Apply here	Information/Apply here
Fees	€3000	€3000	€4500