

ANNUAL REPORT: Disert, Ireland 2019 FIELD SCHOOL

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2019 Students excavating, sketching plans, and drawing profiles in Trench 1, Disert, Co. Donegal, Ireland.

Over the summer we had our inaugural field season at Disert, a ritual pilgrim landscape in Co. Donegal, Ireland. The site had never been excavated, and so the anticipation of field work was very high and almost palpable from the moment we all met for the first time in the Donegal Town Center last June. Students from the US and Ireland, community members, and visitors from around the world embarked on a successful first year that saw media coverage in the local newspapers, including one-on-one student interviews with an embedded reporter; two live in-the-field radio interviews with the directors; and a short in-focus expose that was broadcast on national primetime TV news in both English and Irish. As some of the students hailed from southern California, we were beginning to feel a bit like movie stars! You see Disert is a living site that continues to be used today. Disert remains important to the local community and partly because of its famous founder, St. Colmcille, an indelible part of the ancient Irish landscape. People still gather, pray, and use Disert for a variety of spiritual and religious activities, including as part of an annual late spring pilgrimage on St. Colmcille's (also known as St. Columba) feast day.

Apart from the media attention and overwhelmingly positive support from the community (they brought us biscuits and homemade scones!), we accomplished the field work goals that we set out to do, including test excavations, mapping and drawing of site features, archaeological plans and stratigraphic profiles, on-site photography and drone aerial surveys, and cataloging and conserving all artifacts, samples, and other finds. From troweling and sieving soil to recording every detail with low and high tech equipment, students were involved in all aspects of field work. It was just as exciting to be part of the team of discovery as it was to find the discoveries themselves. Each field day we had the incredible opportunity to work among early ecclesiastical enclosures, penitential cairns, a holy well dedicated to St. Colmcille, a post-medieval altar, and a *cillín* or children's graveyard. To top it off, the site may date to even earlier than the sixth century AD when it was reputedly founded by St. Colmcille himself!

Students got the opportunity to learn by using cutting-edge tools in an important sacred pilgrimage site – it doesn't get much better than that! To boot, each student learned valuable lessons and marketable skills, preparing them for careers in archaeology and other natural and social sciences. The 2019 excavations yielded considerable evidence for nineteenth and early twentieth century lazy-bed agriculture and dairying, shedding light on population growth and the need for land at this time, which led to expansion and settlement of marginal areas. Our excavations also yielded prehistoric stone tools, providing the first evidence for pre-Christian activity at Disert and further testimony to the importance of this place in the past.

For 2020, we will delve even deeper into the ground to gain an insight into the early medieval origin of the site. We will also investigate further the nature of prehistoric activity and land use at the site. And although we can never relive the experience of the first year of excavation, we look forward to exciting new discoveries with a great new team next year at Disert.