



## Uncovering the Monastic Midlands – Snap Program County Offaly, Ireland

**Course ID: ARCH 365BO**

**Academic Credits: 3 Semester Credit Units (Equivalent to 4.5 Quarter Units)**

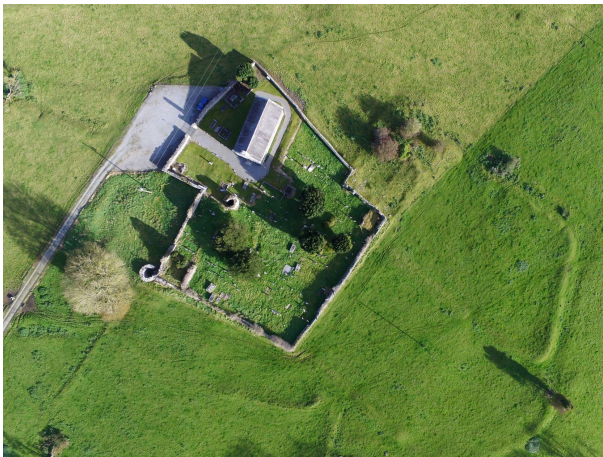
**School of Record: Connecticut College**

**January 4<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> 2024**

### FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR(S)

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### OVERVIEW

This short winter school is an important part of the major research project, the *Monastic Midlands Project*. It takes a holistic landscape scale approach to community based archaeological research, assessing several monasteries in the midlands region of Ireland.

Described as a ‘flowering garden of monasteries’, County Offaly, in the heart of the Irish Monastic Midlands, is best known archaeologically for the number and scale of the early medieval monasteries, which to this day continue to dominate the landscape. Between the fifth and seventh centuries AD evangelist monks arrived in what is now County Offaly, attracted by the region’s centrality and its proximity to four of the five medieval provincial boundaries.

The landscape they entered was formed through eons of geological processes and is now dominated by the River Shannon (Ireland's longest river), flowing northeast to southwest through the region, and a series of winding glacial ridges, known as eskers, which provided natural east to west routeways through the low-lying wetland landscape. These natural routeways became focal point for major monasteries, such as Clonmacnoise, which later developed into one of the largest cities in medieval Ireland. Of course, people had lived in the midlands for millennia before these missionaries arrived, so the archaeological landscape the missionaries entered is also of critical importance to understanding their placement. Equally, the early medieval monasteries were subjected to Viking attacks and were frequently surpassed by, or added to, by Anglo-Norman foundations, who typically added new chapters to the monasteries' histories in the later medieval period. Indeed, whilst many of the monasteries fell out of use several continue as places of veneration and worship into the present day.

As such, this field school offers an holistic approach to investigating the *Monastic Midlands* of Ireland, studying the landscape, earthworks, buildings, folklore, spirituality, artefacts and the buried human remains of these spectacular sites. Considering the longstanding, and sometimes still continuing, role several of these monasteries play in the landscape the people and archaeological sites that came before and after the monasteries are an integral part of the story, with project seeking insight and understanding of midlands life and society through time.

The field school is based in the heritage town of Birr, a handsome and charming town, which was the location at which St Brendan founded his c. sixth century monastery. Our campus in Birr serves as a base for all our course teaching and lab-work, but also acts as a launching pad to investigate several regional monastic and later medieval sites.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Monastic Midlands Research Project is inspired by, and arises from, our long-standing relationships with Offaly County Council (the local statutory authority) and several local communities in the midlands. To date we have supported or directly undertaken archaeological and conservation projects with a range of groups including at Birr Castle, Clonoghill Castle, Rosomroe Medieval Church, Kilcomin Medieval Church, Killeigh Friary, Maigh Leana Fort and, in particular, Seir Kieran, Lemanaghan and St Brendan's monasteries to name only a few sites and communities we work with!). Whilst the names of these sites will become more familiar to students attending our program the recurring theme is the facilitation of local community groups with both professional archaeological advice and fieldwork, at no cost to the community itself. This program is a crucial addition to our wider *Monastic Midlands* research as students will actively contribute to a range of projects and allow us to expand our community-based research.

As the project is both landscape based, assessing an entire county and beyond, and also extends across a significant time period, it is appropriate to given an example of how our community-based research works with students at a single site. A perfect example of is the monastic site of Seir Kieran (Saoighir Kieran or the 'fountain of Kieran'). Seir Kieran is a remarkable site, not only due to its prominence as an Early Christian monastery founded by St Kieran, but due to its longevity which continues possibly from pre-historic times through the early medieval and Anglo-Norman Period and onward to the present day. The site provides a unique opportunity to study, in a single location, an early monastic site, a twelfth century monastery, a multi-period burial site, an Anglo-Norman castle and a medieval borough/town! Based on documentary sources, it is thought that St Kieran's monastery was originally founded in the fifth century AD/CE, making it one of the earlier monasteries in Ireland. The site was active throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods and remains an active place of worship to this day, which is very much 'alive' within the local community.

The Irish Heritage School (IHS), in partnership with the county Heritage Office and the local community, has undertaken significant research around Seir Kieran to date, including:

- Geophysical survey of all state lands surrounding the current graveyard, amounting to some 28 acres; this survey revealed the site is significantly more complex than hitherto understood.
- LiDAR Laser Scanning of the entirety of the known monastery (some 320m across) which can be adapted for monitoring and conservation purposes as well as for remote touring etc;
- Graveyard survey of the extant memorials in the site which identified memorials from the sixteenth century to modern day, as well as much earlier ninth century 'cross-slabs';
- Historical research on the site which has already resulted in publications;
- Regular community engagement projects including site tours, lectures series, vlogging, blogging, children's workshops etc.

Possibly the most important outcome of the above research is that it facilitated the community in achieving one of their key goals, successfully securing state funding to undertake a major program of conservation of the extant medieval walls of the site.

In our winter program in 2024 we will be continuing research like that outlined at Seir Kieran at a number of other sites, such as St Brendan's and Ballyboy.

## PROJECT AIMS

The key aim of the overall project is to facilitate and guide community aspirations for their monuments. Whilst research is at an advanced stage at Seir Kieran, such that we can progress to keyhole excavations at this site and a number of others close to Birr (such as Clonohill or Maigh Leana) in summer 2024/2025, work on this program will be more survey oriented or adopt a more social focus, such as the capturing of oral testimonies, building recording, geophysical survey etc. Regardless of the scope of work in individual seasons the overall *Monastic Midlands* Project aims to conduct a decade long plus body of research, which will result in a much better understanding of this crucial archaeological landscape through the generation of publications, archives, online resources etc. As importantly the project will also engender a better appreciation and understanding of the midland's fabulous heritage amongst several local communities, helping to safeguard its sites into the future. An ancillary benefit of the project is also the encouragement of additional tourism in the midlands, built on slower, immersive and intimate cultural experiences of its monastic heritage.

## ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

**Credit Units:** Attending students will be awarded 3 semester credit units (equivalent to 4.5 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 135 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

There are no academic prerequisites. This program is hands-on, experiential learning and students will learn how to conduct archaeological research in a live field environment. What is required is enthusiasm, an open mind and a readiness to 'give it a go'.

### 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](http://insuremytrip.com) or [Travelguard.com](http://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.

You should be aware that conditions in the field are different than those you experience in your home, dorms or college town. Archaeological fieldwork in Ireland is carried out in all weather conditions – including rain. You are required to provide suitable waterproof and weatherproof clothing and footwear as well as wind protection. However, in bad weather you will also be provided with shelter. Archaeological investigation will include moderately strenuous physical work. Students must be in good physical condition and able to walk three miles, over sometimes undulating terrain, a day comfortably.

If you have any medical concerns, please consult with your doctor. For all other concerns, please consult with the program director and staff.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

The program is extremely holistic in nature and will introduce students to a wide range of techniques used by modern archaeologists in survey – such as landscape assessment, architectural recording, digital recording, line drawing etc. Students will learn the typical progression of archaeological research from learning to read the physical landscape, to non-invasive survey to ultimately progressing to excavation. Student learning will be complemented by active research at a range of heritage sites, as well as a series of archaeological lectures and skills workshops. On completion of the program, students will:

- Have a broad understanding of how to interpret the landscape from the bedrock up – focusing on geological and glacial processes – and how, ultimately, these dictate the patterns of human settlement;
- Understand the key strands of archaeological enquiry and their application in an archaeological research context;
- Have developed the critical skills needed to interrogate historical records and, especially, archaeological survey data, as part of an overall research project design;
- Have learned a wide range of site survey skills, including the principals of baseline survey (tape survey), total station survey, graveyard recording, GPS survey etc.; ^
- Have obtained a baseline knowledge and understanding of how archaeological research and survey progresses to excavation;\*
- Have an understanding of the early medieval history of Ireland, the Monastic Midlands, County Offaly and many of its leading sites;
- Understand how heritage can be explained and presented in an engaging manner to local communities;
- Understand how best to work with local communities to build more sustainable and rewarding archaeological projects, where community desires are actively built into the research objectives.

Please Note: As this program forms part of a major research project, working in partnership with local communities and local and national authorities, each program will vary slightly and the focus will change based on the research aims and community needs of each season.

^ Survey skills may include several or all of the following depending on the season: archaeological landscape survey, building recording, geophysical survey, folklore recording, photogrammetry and LiDAR recording etc.

\* Time permitting the basics of the single context recording system are taught to students, to supplement their overall learnings. However, this program is not an excavation-based course. If you are solely seeking archaeological excavation experience, we recommend you talk to us first or apply to our summer programs. However, we strongly believe that the holistic nature of this field-school is one of its greatest strengths as it directly contributes to the objectives of local host communities and teaches students to look at archaeological sites in a regional landscape setting. It also teaches a wide range of skills that are directly applicable in academic research and Cultural Resource Management (CRM) settings, with most of the archaeological process not directly concerned with excavation.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The archaeological learning outcomes are clearly outlined in the course objectives above. However, students will also learn several soft and transferable skills which can be applied in other settings. On this program students will:

- Help the local community reach their objectives for leading regional heritage sites such as St Brendans;
- Gain hands on experience and learning through the exchange of time, skills and knowledge;
- Immerse themselves in the culture of a provincial Irish town;
- Learn to work in a different professional environment, different to anything they could experience at home, in devising and delivering research focused projects;
- Develop skills in problem solving critical thinking, and cognitive development;
- Attain a unique cultural experience in Ireland, which focuses on the immense heritage of the midland Region – a frequently overlooked hidden gem within the island.

Students will also gain practical archaeological skills which can be applied in a Cultural Resource Management (CRM) setting or indeed in several cognate disciplines. These skills include:

- Understanding multiple techniques in archaeological survey;
- Archaeological planning and photography;
- Learning how to complete a field notebook;
- Geological recording (bedrock and glacial landforms);
- Based introduction to the Single Context recording system;

## ASSESSMENT

**Field school Participation (60%):** Students are required to participate in all field school activities, including research, archaeological survey etc. Assessment will be undertaken by the supervisory team and will be based on attendance, willingness to work and to try diverse tasks, attention to detail and accuracy, participation in teamwork and contribution to discussions.

**Field Journal/Paperwork (30%):** Students are expected to complete a field school journal (and occasional other course paperwork) and present it for evaluation during their final week on site. Project staff will instruct students on the expectations for journal entries and will provide mid-program feedback on journals, to allow students time to rectify any shortcomings.

**Ted Talk (10%):** At the end of Week 2, students will be required to give a 3-minute presentation on a research topic of their choice, but which must be related to the program. The presentation will be given to the group in the form of a ‘Ted Talk’ and may use power point or other visual aids – for example talking through a completed survey or photogrammetry model.

## TRAVEL, ROOM & BOARD, & SAFETY LOGISTICS

### PRIOR TO TRAVEL

An IFR field school is designed to provide safe, positive, and constructive experiences for participating communities, students, and researchers. We are committed to protocols and practices that support the health and well-being of all involved in our field school projects, including the members of the community in which these projects take place. The IFR COVID-19 Policies have been developed with Dr. Kurt Eifling, the IFR Medical Director. Dr Eifling is a Fellow of the Academy of Wilderness Medicine and a practicing physician (<https://ifrglobal.org/about/staff/>).

We recommend that students adopt best-practices for arriving in a good state of health to protect themselves and their peers’ readiness to set about the work of the field school. A thriving field camp environment is a constant exchange of energy, patience, effort, respect, and service. Arriving healthy is every student’s first act of service — their first opportunity to behave in a way that respects the safety and wellness of one another. Students attending this program must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

## VISA REQUIREMENTS

Citizens of the US and Canada do not require visas to enter Ireland. You will need your passport to be valid for at least 90 days and will enter on a tourist visa. Citizens of other countries are asked to check the embassy website page at their home country for specific visa requirements.

No other vaccinations are required for entry to Ireland but anyone working in archaeology in Ireland should have an up-to-date tetanus shot.

## TRAVEL (TO AND DURING THE PROGRAM)

Under normal circumstances, we suggest you hold off purchasing your airline ticket until six (6) weeks prior to the departure date. Natural disasters, political changes, weather conditions and various other factors may force the cancellation of a field school. The IFR monitors local conditions 6–7 weeks prior to the beginning of each program and makes a decision accordingly. This approach allows sufficient time to still purchase deeply discounted airline tickets. We highly recommend that you fly in and out of Dublin airport.

You are required to participate in the mandatory orientation meeting when we will discuss the latest travel information and regulations.

Students will be met at Johns Hall, Birr, Co. Offaly. Since students will arrive on different flights at different times of the day, we will meet all students on Thursday, January 4<sup>th</sup>, at Johns Hall, our head office (eircode/zipcode R42Y927), at a designated time. Full details on reaching Birr will be provided in the online orientation once you are enrolled in the course. A travel sheet, with specific travel instructions, will also be issued.

If you missed your connection or your flight is delayed, please call, text or email the field school director immediately. A local emergency mobile phone number will be provided to all enrolled students.

## LOCAL PROTOCOLS, REGULATIONS, & EXPECTATIONS

**Birr:** Birr is a quintessentially classic, small, friendly and safe Irish town, [some 130km] west of Dublin. All the relevant local government agencies are aware of the students' presence, and they and all the people of the town are anxious to ensure that your stay is safe and enjoyable. Students are asked to respect local sensitivities and traditions and to understand that the presence of such a large team of outsiders in town does not entitle participants to any special treatment or privileges. Although everyone will speak English students should expect surprising cultural differences and exciting opportunities to learn about the lives of others as well. IFR students will be immersed in Irish culture through learning, language, food and music, and should be prepared for the rewards and challenges that life in a different culture will offer.

Please note: As the project is a public archaeology initiative students must also be prepared to engage with the local community in a professional and respectful manner both in an official capacity on site and unofficially when off duty.

## ACCOMMODATIONS

Students will stay in homestay accommodation, i.e. with local families. Students live with local families and as such are afforded an experience of true home life in provincial Ireland. Typically, students will either walk to or be brought to John's Hall daily, before availing of pre-arranged transport to sites where

appropriate. Students should understand that some host families may be in rural settings, requiring taxis (or a longer walk) to reach the town of Birr. Breakfast and dinner will be provided along with a packed lunch. Students may avail of their free time at weekends and explore Ireland.

As students are placed in homestay all students have access to safe, sanitary accommodation as well as laundry, showering facilities etc. As noted above, homestay accommodation will include meals, including a packed lunch. Our homestay network caters for all main dietary requirements (vegetarian, vegan, nongluten etcetera); they provide a well-balanced diet of Irish cuisine, but students should anticipate trying new cuisine and not having all the items they might expect at home.

## EQUIPMENT LIST

Students are required to bring a basic tool kit. This includes but is not limited to:

- Work gloves: gardening glove suitable for work in wet weather (textile glove with a rubberised palm);
- Work shoes or boots: closed toe-footwear, waterproof that will be comfortable for both walking and kneeling: a hiking style shoe or boot would be suitable. Gumboots/wellingtons are also suitable some site work; however if you choose to wear these you may need pair of trail shoes or similar for field trips etc.;
- Waterproof outdoorwear: a jacket (with a hood if possible) and pants – gore-tex is best (but expensive). You will need something sturdy that will stand up to wear and tear of everyday use in excavation. You can buy waterproof gear locally in Ireland (if you choose to do this, budget to spend about €60-€70);
- Warm layers – wool, fleece, thermal layers – you should bring and wear lots of layers rather than one warm/heavy layer. Bring things that are suitable for outdoor work;
- Sunscreen: students should wear an SPF daily to protect against UV exposure and windburn;
- Hat: something to keep your head warm. A peaked hat can be useful for shade;
- Laptop/tablet: you will require a device on which you can prepare your Ted-Talk and learn impact assessment skills. A smart phone is not suitable for this.

## FIELD PROGRAM

The field program includes instruction in archaeological survey, landscape assessment, architectural recording etc. The program is primarily based in Birr, although students will also be brought to several regional heritage sites. Site and project orientations will be conducted at the start of week one.

**Week 1 – Orientation, Fieldtrips and Site-Based Learning:** Following project orientation and induction students will be introduced to the wider research area and period through a series of lectures and visits to regional heritage sites, such as Clonmacnoise, Knockbarron/Drumcullen, Kinnity etc. These fieldtrips will help demonstrate the different physical, archaeological and cultural landscapes in the Monastic Midlands. The field trips are designed to help place the monastic sites within their broader historical and geographic context. The key purpose of these field visits is to teach field-based recording skills, with each site having been carefully chosen to learn a different recording technique. An emphasis will also be placed on understanding the physical landscape the monasteries were built upon, and how this dictated their placement, growth and scale. A visit will also be paid to the National Museum to study the material culture of Irish early medieval monasteries.

**Week 2 –Survey and Excavation Skills:** Following from week one students will assist with the documentation and survey of regional monastic sites, such as at Seir Kieran, St Brendan’s Monastery, Clonohill and Lemanaghan. Students will be instructed in a range of archaeological survey and recording



techniques – including architectural recording, digital survey devices, line drawings, graveyard documentation, photogrammetry etc. Where appropriate this work will be covered (as appropriate) to permit activities in wetter weather conditions. Students will also receive an introduction to the single context recording system.

\* The rotation of students through tasks including survey, architectural recording, landscape assessment, folklore recording, etc is dependent on weather conditions, confirmed student numbers and the **desires of the local community from season to season**; students may be split into smaller groups and rotated through different tasks simultaneously, while changes in the schedule are likely to be made to accommodate weather and other external factors. Not every activity will be delivered in each individual season, but each season will contribute to the overall goals of both the host community and the wider *Monastic Midlands* program at large.

**As the program contents change from season to season a more detailed schedule and outline of the field season aims will be discussed with students in both their online and in-county orientations.**

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

All IFR field school begins 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 the IFR harassment and discrimination policies and review of the student Code of Conduct.

In addition to working on site, students will be introduced to archaeological field methods, Irish archaeology, and bioarchaeology through a series of lectures/workshops (as outlined below). Students will also be given dedicated research during their time on site, to prepare their assignments and access local readings.

The normal working day is from 9:00am to 5:00pm with a morning tea break from c. 11:00-11:30am and lunch from c. 1:30-2:15pm. Students will have weekends free to explore the area and other parts of the country. During the winter program the working hours may need to be curtailed slightly to allow for poor light conditions at that time of the year.

<b>Day/Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Event</b>
Thursday January 4	Afternoon	Student's arrival and welcome meeting
Friday 5	Morning Afternoon	Lecture/Project Orientation Field trip 1: Birr Castle
Saturday 6	All day	Free Day
Sunday 7	All day	Free Day
Monday 8	Morning Afternoon	Lecture/Workshop: Archaeology of Monastic Midlands Field trip: Birr Town, examining the archaeological story of Birr; survey training at St Brendan's medieval church.
Tuesday 9	Morning Afternoon	Lecture/Workshop: The Physical Landscape of the Monasteries Field trip 2: Tour of Knockbarron, Silver River and Killaun; geological recording at Knockbaronw
Wednesday 10	All day	Field trip 3: Clonmacnoise, Drumcullen and Kinnity; survey training, including architectural recording at Knockbarron.
Thursday 11	All day	Field trip 4: National Museum of Ireland to study medieval exhibit, manuscripts, early medieval metalwork and bog bodies Self-guided learning in Dublin
Friday 12	All day	Survey level 1 – including conducting Desktop Assessment, photography and/or photogrammetry
Saturday 13	All day	Free Day
Sunday 14	All day	Free Day
Monday 15	All day	Survey level 1 – including conducting Desktop Assessment, photography and/or photogrammetry
Tuesday 16	All day	Introduction to archaeological survey and excavation skills
Wednesday 17	All day	Introduction to archaeological survey and excavation skills
Thursday 18	All day	Depart Program

## REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students via a shared Dropbox folder. Students are encouraged to download and/or print readings prior to traveling. Course participants are expected to be prepared to engage the discussions led by facilitators, all of whom will be looking for compelling evidence that students have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the scheduled day on which they are first discussed.

Dowling, G. 2021. *Geophysical Report, Seir Kieran, County Offaly (22R0008)*. Unpublished Technical Report prepared for Offaly County Council the Irish Archaeology Field School.

Dowling, G. 2023. *Geophysical Report, Clonoghill, County Offaly (23R0024)*. Unpublished Technical Report prepared for Offaly County Council the Irish Archaeology Field School.

- O' Brien, C. 2006. *Stories from a Sacred Landscape: Croghan Hill to Clonmacnoise*. Offaly County Council. Pay particular attention to Chapters 1, 5 and 9.
- O' Sullivan, M. 1997. *The Illustrated Guide to Seir Kieran*. Offaly. Brosna Press: Offaly.
- O' Sullivan, M., Shine, D, Rodgers, M. and Mandal, S. 2018. *Seir Kieran. Place, pilgrimage, and tradition in the monastic midlands*. *Offaly Heritage 10*, 21-42.
- Shine, D. 2021. *Seir Kieran (OF039-003), Co. Offaly: Archaeological and Natural Heritage Impact Assessment*. Unpublished Technical Report prepared for Offaly County Council.
- Callaghan, S. and O' Brien, C. *Heart and Soul: a History of Saint Brendan's Graveyard in Birr*. Walsh Printers: Roscrea. Pay particular attention to Chapters 1 and 2.

### **RECOMMENDED READING/REFERENCE GUIDES**

- Feehan, J. 2013. *The Geology of Laois and Offaly*. Offaly County Council, in association with Laois County Council and the Geological Survey of Ireland.
- Feehan, J. and Rosse, A. 2005. *An Atlas of Birr*. Department of Environmental Resource Management at University College Dublin in association with Offaly County Council.
- Feehan, John (1979). *The Landscape of Slieve Bloom: a study of its natural and human heritage*. Blackwater Press, Dublin (revised edition 2009).
- FitzPatrick, E. and O' Brien, C. 1998. *The Medieval Churches of County Offaly*. Betaprint: Government of Ireland.
- King, H.A. (ed.). 1998. *Clonmacnoise Studies Volume 1: Seminar Papers 1994*. Stationary Office: Dublin (revised edition 2007).
- King, H.A. (ed.). 2003. *Clonmacnoise Studies Volume 2: Seminar Papers 1998*. Stationary Office: Dublin (revised edition 2007).