

ANNUAL REPORT: BLACKFRIARY (IRELAND) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

Director: Finola O'Carroll MA Member of the Institute of Archaeologist of Ireland
Member of the Register of Professional Archaeologists (USA), Irish
Archaeology Field School (Ireland)

Co-Directors: Dr. Stephen Mandal Member of the Institute of Archaeologist of Ireland,
Member of the Institute of Geologists of Ireland, Member of the European
Federation of Professional Geologists, , Irish Archaeology Field School (Ireland)
Dr. Rachel Scott, DePaul University (USA)



Students and staff working on the medieval church

GENERAL

A ten-week (two five week sessions) IFR Field School at the Black Friary, Trim, Co. Meath, Ireland, took place between June 9th and August 17th 2013. The first week consisted of a project orientation that included an introduction to the project background and community focus, a history of the site with an on-site orientation of the known archaeology, a brief introduction to excavation principles, and a safety briefing. Field trips were undertaken weekly and included sites in the region that best represented the depth of archaeology and history in the Boyne Valley; the iconic World Heritage Site at Brú na Bóinne, with its Neolithic passage tombs at Newgrange and Knowth, the seat of the medieval Irish kings at the Hill of Tara, and the medieval town of Carlingford in Co. Louth. This year students also attended a two-day conference, run by the host project, focusing late medieval ecclesiastical archaeology, architecture and history. This included papers from leading academics on the subjects of Gothic architecture and the transition from Gaelic to European ecclesiastical traditions in Ireland in the Late Medieval period.

The IFR students joined an international team that included students from Canada, the USA, Australia, Scotland and Norway as well as Ireland. The team, led by Principle Investigator Finola O'Carroll of the Irish Archaeology Field School, along with bioarchaeologist Dr. Rachel Scott (DePaul University) excavated within the church and cloister of the 13th century BCE (AD) Dominican friary at Blackfriary.

The friary, founded in 1263 BCE (AD), follows the conventional layout of a church and associated domestic buildings ranged around a cloister, with, in this case, the church to the south side. Surveys indicate that a second cloister and associated buildings are also present at the northern

end of the site. To date excavations have uncovered part of the nave of the church and of its north wall, three of the four corners of the main cloister, part of the cloister garth, and the line of the south wall of the church. The excavations are set out in cuttings, individual areas which are focused on specific areas of the buildings. Students were assigned to individual cuttings under the direction of a cutting supervisor, but were rotated to other areas in order to gain experience in specific tasks such as the excavation and recording of human remains, stone walls, or features such as foundations or grave cuts. To date 10 cuttings varying in size from 4 x 4 m squared to 6 x 16 m squared have been opened.

Students were shown how to set out a cutting (area) for excavation and to relate it to the site grid. When the students opened new cuttings they started with de-sodding, and then carried on excavating through the layers of rubble formed when the buildings were quarried for building stone in the 18th century. These rubble layers within the church itself also contain the remains of infants buried there from the 18th century on. These are presumed to be the remains of unbaptised infants, denied a burial in consecrated ground, and great care was needed at this stage of the excavation as the infant bones are small and fragile.

The day typically started at 9am with the first part of the morning dedicated to sorting out finds trays from the previous day. Students took turns in registering, under supervision, the finds and samples collected from the previous day's work, ensuring that they all got experience in this task. A tea break at 11.30am allowed for a break from digging. Work then continued until lunchtime at 1.30pm. After lunch, students on rota would take part in some post excavation processing including soil sieving and cleaning the bone excavated from the friary burials. Students took part in all the activities including excavation, on-site recording and planning (drawing), and onsite post excavation processing.

A number of technical workshops were scheduled to give students an introduction to specialist work including:

- Dr Stephen Mandal (Irish Archaeology Field School) – Soils & Geology
- Dr Fiona Beglane (Institute of Technology Sligo) – Archaeozoology
- Mr Ian Elliot (Irish Geophysical and Archaeological Surveys) - Geophysics

At weekends, students were free to travel and IFR students explored the length and breadth of Ireland visiting the Ring of Kerry, the Giant's Causeway, Belfast, Galway and the Aran Islands, as well as the Viking city of Dublin.

EXCAVATIONS

Season 4 excavations at Blackfriary built on the work of previous years. Work is currently focusing on the nave of the church, the south and west walls, and the north-west corner of the cloister and its adjoining buildings.

Part of the north wall of the church, reduced to foundation level, had already been uncovered, as had part of the chancel arch. A wall tomb, re-used as an ossuary in the medieval period was set into the north wall to the west of the chancel, within the nave. A series of burials within the nave had begun to be explored and work on these continued in this season. It was found that there was significant inter-cutting of graves within this area, but in a manner which suggests that burials were tightly controlled and managed, and not haphazard in any way. To date the remains of 62 individuals have been excavated. Several of these individuals display evidence of weapon trauma in the form of readily identifiable blade cuts and also blunt force trauma, indicating that they may have been involved in warfare or at the very least, armed combat.

A principal focus of this year's work was the location of the west and south walls of the church, and this gave mixed results. A cutting was extended to give a complete transect through the church. The line of the south wall was uncovered, and this proved to have been supported by buttresses set at regular intervals. Equally importantly, the original floor level within the church was established and some residual flagstones, probably representing the original flagged floor of the nave, were uncovered. However, the west wall as located, was robbed out to foundation level, but what survives may – in fact – represent a phase in the expansion or indeed contraction of the church. The destruction phase of the church also included a fascinating insight into the attitude to human remains of those carrying out the demolition of a known friary and graveyard. Between two of the buttresses of the south wall of the church and lying on slates and rubble deriving from the breaking down of the walls were five human skulls, set in a row and facing south, and a considerable quantity of human bone, mostly long-bones laid alongside. It is probable that this bone had previously been contained within wall tombs set into the south aisle of the church. The destruction of the tombs would have exposed the bone, and it appears to have been deliberately collected up and deposited in this way.

Season 4 also saw work progress in other areas of the site, including the exploration of the junction of the north and west ranges of the friary complex. These buildings are set around the cloister and a cloister pathway or ambulatory separates the cloister wall from the buildings themselves. A pebbled or metalled surface representing the original ambulatory surface was uncovered in two of the cuttings, and although the walls of the buildings have been almost entirely robbed out sections with intact plastered surfaces were found. Fragments of plaster with painted patterns on them were frequently found indicating that the interior of the buildings were well finished and decorated.

A considerable quantity of stained glass fragments was uncovered. This suggests that the windows were systematically broken in order to procure the lead from them, which would have had a value for builders of the day.

ON SITE POST EXCAVATION PROCESSING

In the course of working with disarticulated burials, burials that had been damaged in the past, and fragile child and infant burials, small bones, bone fragments, small finds or ecofacts may be displaced or otherwise difficult to identify. To address this, soil samples were taken from the areas around skulls, hands, feet and the abdomen of burials (or the whole burial in the case of small children or infants). This was then dry sieved using sieves with varying gauges, leaving behind a fine dust. Any bones or finds identified could then be moved on in the post excavation process.

Bones were carefully washed, dried, bagged and tagged. Stained glass was carefully boxed in airtight containers in a moist soil matrix; the medieval glass can be friable and is liable to crumble if it dries out. Those few fragments of timber recovered were treated similarly, and will be sent to a wood specialist for identification. Any metal finds, window lead, shroud pins or coffin nails, were bagged with moisture absorbing materials to prevent corrosion. Clay and ceramic finds were washed, and dried, bagged and tagged.

Work was carried out on a rota basis, with all students spending time on post ex processes and first aid for finds. The relevant paper work was completed and stored in the site archive, waiting for data inputting on the site databases; some of this work was done during the season, but with exceptionally fine weather this season, the emphasis was on outdoor tasks and there will be some work left to keep us busy over the winter.

It was a very exciting season this year; the students put in tremendous effort and were rewarded with some of the most exciting developments on the site since the project began, it was equally rewarding and enjoyable for all involved.