

# Achill Island



Achill Island has the distinction of being the largest and the most westerly of the Irish Islands, with an area of some 57 sq. miles (148 sq. km) that includes the two smaller islands of Achill Beg and Inishbiggile.

Achill like most of the west coast offshore islands, provides a major challenge to its inhabitants in terms of human geography such as settlement, population and economy.

Achill is quite mountainous with Slievemore and Croaghan rising to 672m and 664m respectively and is the location of the tallest and most spectacular sea cliffs in northwestern Europe.

Over 35% of the land surface occurs above an altitude of 150m and is dominated by Atlantic blanket bog. Other habitats include agricultural pasture, machair, sea cliffs, sand dunes and salt marsh.

Achill Island's Atlantic location - 'a periphery at the edge of a periphery' ensures that it receives sufficient rainfall, with rain falling on about 250 days per year. Mean temperatures range between 5-6C and 11 - 13C. The prevailing winds are south-westerly and gale force winds occur frequently throughout the year.

## Slievemore



The Deserted Village Project commenced in 1991 under the auspices of the Achill Archaeological Field School. The site consists of some 84 houses and field walls, out of an original 135, divided into three distinct groups, spread over an area of c.2km<sup>2</sup> along the 200 ft contour on the southern slopes of Slievemore and represents the latest phase of settlement on the mountain.



## Roundhouse



A group of roundhouses are situated some 300m NW of House 23 at an elevation of 150m OD. Two of them are separated by a gap of 50m, with an undated curvilinear field wall running N/S between them. The western example, currently undergoing excavation measures 12.5m E/W by 11.1m N/S externally and 8.15m E/W by 7m internally, with construction of dry-stone walling. Surviving banks suggest a wall thickness of from 0.9m to 1.3m in breadth. The entrance doorway faces E-S-E, is relatively complex and includes three to four surviving upright portal stones, one pair on the exterior and one on the interior; the distance apart being some 2m. Charcoal recovered from the floor of the house produced a C14 date in the Middle Bronze Age (95.4% 1411-1210 cal BC). As few stone Bronze Age houses are known from Ireland, only two of which are circular, the importance of this structure and the associated platforms cannot be overstated.



## Shell Middens



The absence of metal artefacts from some of the now denuded Achill shell middens has prompted speculation that they may have been of Mesolithic origin.



A glass bead from a midden on Achill Beg Island is a relatively unusual and large example of a dark blue glass with light yellow trails and off-white decorative 'eyes' of glass, 2.4 cms in diameter and with a maximum of 1.5 cms in thickness. Beads of this form and with similar decoration have both Late Iron Age or Early Historic period parallels.

## Megalithic tombs



'Megalithic remains on the island of Achill are most interesting and present every variety of ancient sepulchre' (Otway, 1839).

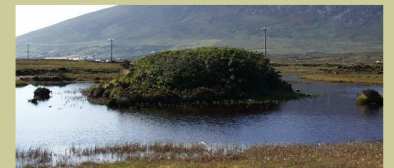


A group of megalithic tombs (Court & Portal), situated at various elevations on the southern slopes of Slievemore Mountain were constructed ca.6000 cal.yr BP when large areas of Achill Island were already covered by blanket bog. Palaeoecological investigations on Achill Island suggest the occurrence of a severe climatic event occurring ca. 5200-5100 cal.yr BP that appears to have led to dislocation and abandonment of settlement during the late Neolithic period (Caseldine et al (2005)). Out of eleven sites recorded at Slievemore in the late nineteenth century, only six survive. Two of the sites appear to be linked by a prehistoric field wall, locally called the 'Danish Ditch'!

## Crannóg



Loughannaderriga crannóg, measures 18 metres in diameter and is situated in the centre of a small lake surrounded by blanket bog in the townland of Dookinella Cahy.



A substantial palisade noted during the exceptionally dry summer of 1984 would suggest a much larger crannóg than that currently visible.

## Late Medieval settlement



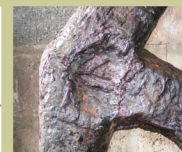
At Carau Point, the village of Tóin an tSean Bhaile 'the bottom of the old town', now covered by sand dunes has produced a thirteenth century coin of Edward I, the top half of a decorated rotary quern, a seventeenth century grave marker and pottery sherds.



## Maritime



Achill Island has a rich maritime history with numerous shipwrecks dating from the Armada to the nineteenth century located in Achill waters.



## Annagh Booley Village



Extant remains of five transhumance (booley) sites are located in the uplands at the western end of the island, although this practice was widespread throughout the entire civil parish of Achill in the nineteenth century and beyond. Structures associated with these sites range from very low, roughly constructed corbelled huts to larger sub-rectangular houses with internal architectural divisions and features such as shelves/cupboards. They vary in size from less than 2m to 5m in maximum external dimension.



## Promontory Forts



Achill Beg Island contains the remains of five promontory forts, most notably Dun Kilmore ('fort of the big church'), with its associated earthworks, Early Medieval enclosure containing figure-of-eight cells, altars and cross slabs and a probable ring barrow incorporated into the embankment.



## The Old Graveyard at Slievemore



In the Old Graveyard at Slievemore are a number of equal-armed stone crosses, a keyhole-shaped stone and the remains of the 'Old Church', sited on an oval platform, orientated east-west with an apse added in the 13th or 14th century A.D.



## Kildavnet



Restoration work at Kildavnet Church has obliterated much of the original architectural detail but the east/west orientation, the presence of equal-armed stone cross slabs in the graveyard and the associated holy well suggest that the site had its origins in the Early Medieval period. A musket-loop stone inserted in one of the aumbries in the church seems to have come from the nearby early fifteenth century tower house.



## The Achill Mission



The Achill Mission whose aim was to convert Catholics to the Protestant faith was established at Dugort in 1834. The initial success of the Mission was gradually eroded after the great Irish famine, by a counter-reformation initiated by Dr. John McHale, Catholic Archbishop of Tuam



## The Achill Archaeological Field School

The Achill Archaeological Field School was founded in 1991 as a Training School for students of archaeology and anthropology. The Field School is based at the Achill Archaeology Centre and at the Deserted Village of Slievemore.

Academic Credit for overseas students is provided by the National University of Ireland at Galway with whom the school has formal linkage

