

Tradition and Modernity on Great Blasket Island, Ireland

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This interdisciplinary project in archaeology, history, and landscape analysis seeks to examine the lifeways of residents of the Great Blasket Island (Blascaod Mór in the Irish language) off the southwest coast of County Kerry of the Republic of Ireland in the period of 1500 CE through the early 1900s. The lifeways of the residents on the Great Blasket Island were the focus of concerted, nationalist mythology construction by proponents of the new Republic of Ireland in the early 1900s. Those lifeways, supported by maritime and agrarian subsistence, were hailed by nationalist advocates as representing an authentic Irish cultural identity uncorrupted by the impacts of British colonialism, modernity, or new consumer markets. The islanders' sense of social identities and history likely also embraced perceptions of the prehistoric and medieval features of their cultural landscape. The Blasket Islands are part of the Gaeltacht areas of communities that continue to teach and speak in Gaelic language dialects (Figure 1).

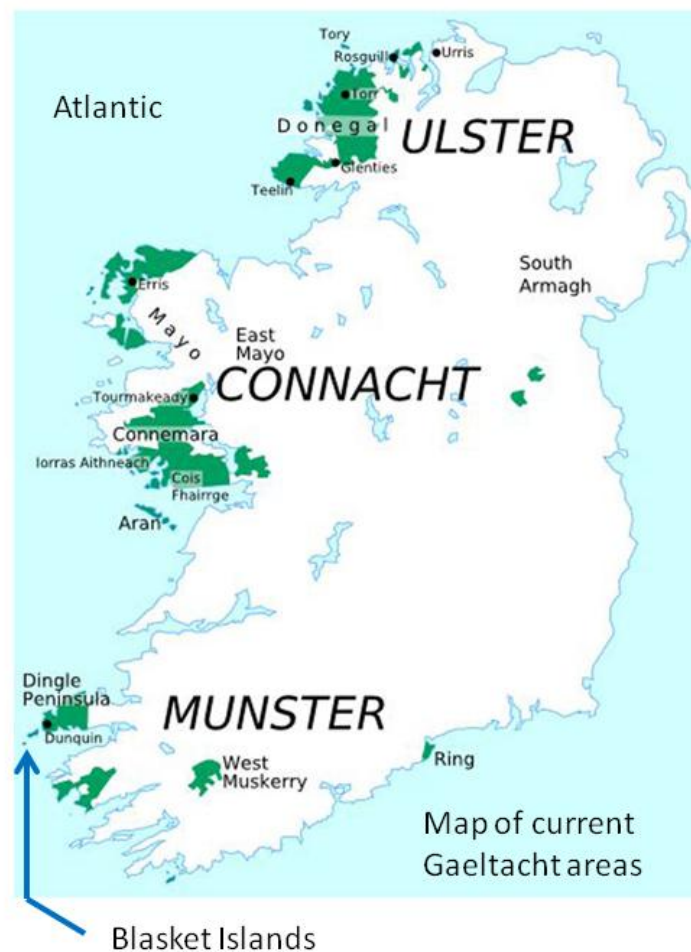


Figure 1. Image courtesy Wikimedia commons.

Historical Contexts

Great Blasket is estimated to have reached a peak population of approximately 170 to 200 people in the early 1900s. The island's population decreased during the following decades, as emigration to America or to the mainland towns of the new Republic of Ireland drew families away. The few remaining residents departed the island in 1953. New research has begun to examine the cultural landscape and archaeological record of their lifeways from 1500 through the early 1900s (Figures 2, 3) (Coyne 2010; DAHG 2009). In this project, I have first worked to analyze what was known about the lifeways of the islanders from ethnographic and historical descriptions. I am interested in the likely ways in which those accounts were shaped by nationalist sentiments in the early 1900s. We can later compare and contrast those accounts with data from archaeological investigations and cultural landscape studies on the Great Blasket Island in collaboration with representatives of the county council and scholars based in Ireland (e.g., Coyne 2010; de Mórdha and de Mórdha 2013).



Figure 2. Great Blasket Island is 6.1 km (3.79 miles) long, 1 km (.62 miles) at its widest point, running northeast to southwest in orientation, with a ridgeback mountain and highest peak of 290 meters (951 ft.) above sea level. The image above looks west from the Dingle Peninsula to the east end of Great Blasket. The east end of the Island lies 3.5 km (2.17 miles) from the mainland. **Figure 3** shows an aerial view of the village located within the white oval on this image. Image courtesy Wikimedia commons.

An extensive body of literature exists in which a number of island residents wrote in great detail about their lifeways. These residents were prompted to do so by scholars from universities in Ireland, Britain, and Norway who visited the island to learn and study the form of West Kerry Irish that was spoken on the Great Blasket Island. These visiting scholars requested a number of residents to write down details about their lives in their Irish dialect. In part, those linguistic and Celtic studies scholars desired to learn from the residents' written forms of language expressions. Yet, these written accounts also produced a rich record of recollections

and commentary on the history of the Great Blasket Island communities, residents, and their cultural beliefs and practices (Doan 2001; Flower 1978; Kanigel 2012).



Figure 3. Lower village and upper village remains and part of the “White strand” beach on east end of Great Blasket Island (Satellite image 2014, courtesy Google Earth). Most of the thirty houses are now in ruins (Figure 4).

For example, Tomás Ó Criomhthainn, whose name was anglicized as Tomás O’Crohan, was born on the Island in 1856 and died in 1937. He wrote extensive accounts in the Irish language of the lifeways of residents of the Great Blasket with details reaching back to his childhood. The level of detail he provided is astounding, including descriptions of house construction, household goods, clothing, culinary practices, dietary patterns, methods of agrarian and maritime subsistence, and social and church networks extending from the Island to small towns on the nearby Dingle Peninsula. For example, he reports that the Islanders first encountered tea in the flotsam of a wrecked ship, and, not knowing its intended purpose, used it to dye their clothes. Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, whose name was anglicized as Maurice O’Sullivan, was born in 1904 and died in 1950. He too wrote extensive accounts of his knowledge of the history of the Great Blasket communities and their lifeways. Similarly, resident author Peig Sayers was born in 1873 and provided extensive accounts of daily life and story-telling traditions.

Yet, these accounts need to be read with a critical eye. Analysts typically view all authored documents from a critical perspective, inquiring into the biases and motivations of the author that may have shaped the account and contributed to choices of what was included, omitted, elided, exaggerated, or minimized. Such critical readings are particularly needed for the accounts of the Great Blasket, because those accounts were written by authors who had been encouraged by outside scholars of the early 1900s. Once produced, those accounts also became a focus of commentators who lauded the Great Blasket communities as representing an authentic and uncorrupted Irish identity and traditional way of living (Eastlake 2009; Kanigel 2012;

Kiberd 1996). For example, E. M. Forster provided an introductory note for Maurice O'Sullivan's *Twenty Years A-Growing* (1933), in which Forster told the readers they were about to encounter "an account of a Neolithic civilization from the inside." Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe, an early editor for Tomás O'Crohan's *Island Cross-talk* (1928), declared "Tomás is of the Gaeltacht. He knows nothing else in the wide world. . . . He has known nothing of a life of ease or of wealth from the day he was born, only of hard work and of few possessions."

These accounts of Great Blasket were romanticized by the nationalist movement of the new Republic of Ireland in the early 1900s (Eastlake 2009; Kanigel 2012; Kiberd 1996). Such characterizations of Irish Catholic populations were also a central theme in virulent racist arguments by the British against the Irish in the 1700s and 1800s. They were characterized as an ignorant, backward peasantry, poorly adapted for industry or urban settings, and resistant to modernity. As such, British commentators unleashed a bitter rhetoric characterizing the Irish Catholics as a surplus population awaiting a Malthusian crash. Landowners and capitalists in Ireland thus took little concern for their plight in the famine of the 1840s. Most Irish Catholic citizens on the mainland had lost their lands over the centuries and were forced onto small provisioning grounds and a focus on the potato as a crop that yielded high calories per parcel. This colonial impact laid the foundations for the potato blight disaster of the 1840s. In contrast,



Figure 4. Nineteenth century house ruins in the Lower Village section of Great Blasket Island. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

residents on the Blasket Islands were able to retain a diverse subsistence economy. Such a success of avoiding the dire impacts of colonial rule did not result simply from the far-west location of the Blaskets. For example, Forsythe (2013) provides a fascinating, recent study of the dramatic impacts of British and Anglo-Irish colonialism on residents of the Rosses and Inishfree Islands off the northwest coast of County Donegal in the same time periods. Ian Kuijt and his colleagues continue similar studies on Inishark Island off the coast of County Galway.

In 1989, Great Blasket Island was declared a National Historic Park by the Irish government and has since been managed by Ireland's Office of Public Works. In-depth archaeological investigation of the house sites and other activity areas on the Great Blasket can reveal data concerning the actual, and non-romanticized lifeways of the island residents over centuries of time. The historical and ethnographic accounts speak of a self-sufficient and isolated community. The archaeological record may testify to a cohesive community that was nonetheless taking full advantages of modern markets of goods and selectively reaping the benefits of commodity chains and exchange opportunities impacting their region.

Documentary Evidence

A first step in such research involves “document stripping” of the published literature. In this work, a researcher extracts information from the many publications to provide details on the built environment, material culture, and daily lifeways.

The University of Illinois provided funding for a graduate student to work with me in identifying, compiling, and analyzing documentary data related to the history of the Great Blasket Island and the people who lived there in the period of 1500 through the early 1900s. Kathryn Fay, a doctoral candidate with specialization in historical and archaeological research, undertook this work in the summer of 2013.

Ms. Fay and I collected, compiled, and analyzed existing documentary evidence, such as data available from several historical and ethnographic accounts written by island residents in the early twentieth century. I am continuing work to identify any available reports of archaeological surveys and excavations conducted in the vicinity of the Dingle Peninsula or on similar islands off the coasts of Ireland that date to comparable time periods. Such reports can provide comparative data for future use in continuing archaeological studies of the Great Blasket Island communities (Coyne 2010).

The published texts analyzed included those listed below. We reviewed these texts to excerpt, extract, and analyze the reports of details concerning the facets of material culture, built environments, landscape uses, house designs and layouts, furnishings, subsistence practices and related implements, household and culinary goods, and dietary trends, among other elements.

Island Cross-Talk: Pages from a Blasket Island Diary, by Tomás O’Crohan, translated from the Irish by Tim Enright. London: Oxford University Press, 1986. First published in Irish language in 1928.

The Islandman, by Tomás O’Crohan, translated from the Irish by Robin Flower. London: Oxford University Press, 1977. First published in Irish language in 1929.

The Western Island or the Great Blasket, by Robin Flower. London: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Twenty Years A-Growing, by Maurice O’Sullivan, translated from the Irish by Moya Llewelyn Davies and George Thomson, with an Introductory Note by E. M. Forster. London: Oxford University Press, 1983. First published in Irish language in 1933.

An Old Woman’s Reflections, by Peig Sayers, translated from the Irish by Seamus Ennis, with an Introduction by W. R. Rodgers. London: Oxford University Press, 1977. First published in Irish language in 1936.

A Pity Youth Does Not Last: Reminiscences of the Last of the Great Blasket Island’s Poets and Storytellers, by Micheál O’Guiheen, translated from the Irish by Tim Enright. London: Oxford University Press, 1982.

A Day in Our Life, by Sean O’Crohan, translated from the Irish by Tim Enright. London: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Future work will focus on additional archives available in online, digital frameworks to search for, compile, and analyze documentary data sources related to the Great Blasket Island communities, such as the following: census records; health records, including any reports of impacts of the famine of the mid-1800s; education statistics and school allocation records; land ownership records or summaries; economic reports; digitized newspaper articles; and genealogical data available online from descendants of immigrants from the Great Blasket Island, many of whom emigrated to Springfield, Massachusetts in the early 1900s.

The information available from the sources listed above provides an impressive set of data on the reported lifeways on Great Blasket. The following discussion summarizes these observations from the literature we reviewed.

The residents enjoyed a very diverse subsistence economy up through the mid-1900s (Figure 5). Marine resources included seals, porpoises, sea otters, lobster, crab, crayfish, mackerel, whiting, Pollock, herring, rockfish, eel, bass, seaweed, mussels, and shellfish. Crops included oats, rye, potatoes, cabbage, onions, turnips, parsnips, wheat, corn, hay, flax, and carrots. Livestock and domesticated animals included cattle, dairy cows, pigs, sheep, donkeys, chickens, and dogs. Some horses were used on the island in the mid-1800s, but the use of donkeys became more prominent in later periods. A few wheeled carts were used, but islanders usually placed panniers across a donkey’s back to carry turf, furze (heather grasses), or other supplies. Game included rabbits, seals, otters, geese, sea fowl (puffins, razorbills, guillemots), and ducks.

There were no trees on the islands. Most materials were obtained from driftwood and cargo flotsam from shipwrecks. Cargo from shipwrecks occasionally provided a variety of

goods, such as timber, copper, tin and brass items, casks of oil, crates of tea, wine, clothing, cotton bales, packaged foods and fruits. Fabric was woven from sheep's wool and linen from flax plants. Peat turf was used for fuel. A limited number of oil lamps were used, while most relied on peat fires for evening light. Oil from seal livers could be distilled into candle or lamp oil. Drinking water was obtained from wells, springs, and rain catchments.

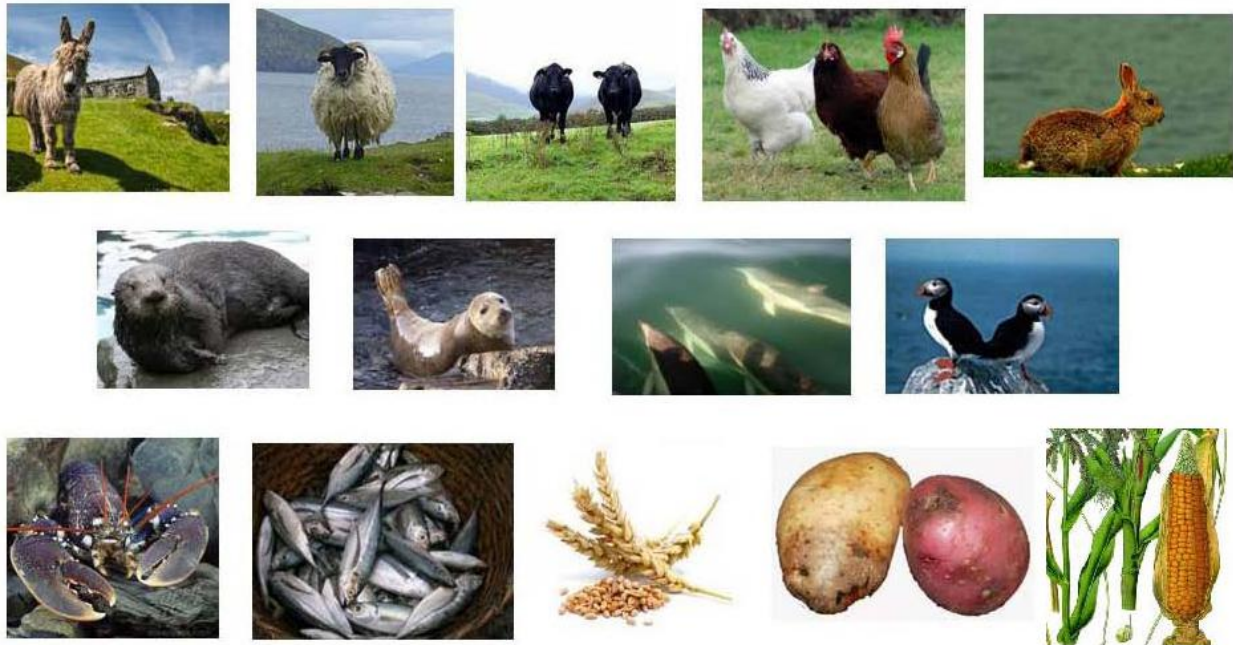


Figure 5. Residents of the Blasket Islands utilized a diversity of resources, as they did not narrow their foodways under colonialism. Some mainland families moved to the islands during the 1840s famine. Resources included (left to right, from top) donkeys, sheep, cattle, hens, rabbits, sea otters, grey seals, porpoise, sea birds, lobster, mackerel, wheat, oats, potatoes, and corn. Images courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Tomás O’Crohan and other resident writers reported that early vernacular houses were constructed with attached byres. Early roofs were a rough thatch mix of rush fronds, furze, and other grasses, all held in place with nets and stones. The islands lacked long grasses better suited to refined forms of thatching. By the late 1800s, most byres were detached and roof material was thick felt sealed with tar (Figures 6-8). The naomhóg boats (large currachs) were similarly constructed of wood frame with thick felt layers sealed with tar (Figure 9). House floors were packed clay, with flag stones around the hearth. Sand was often spread on the floors and houses were swept regularly. Walls in some later houses were constructed of mortared stone, and chimneys of brick.

The roof space of houses held various loft platforms above the single, main level of the two or three room house (Figure 8). Windows were small and deep-set to protect the interiors from strong winds and rain in winter (Figure 6). There was no indoor plumbing. The literature does not report the construction of privy outhouses, and instead indicates people used the nearby manure areas to dispose of waste. Manure was transported to crop fields for fertilizer.

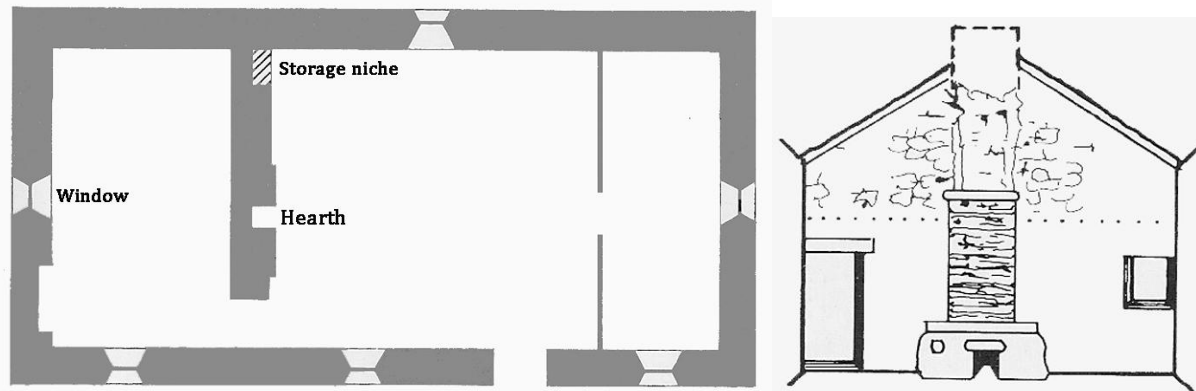


Figure 6. Plan view and interior hearth elevation sketches of “a typical island cottage” from Joan and Ray Stables, *The Blasket Islands: Next Parish America* (Dublin: O’Brien Press, 1980, p. 66).



Figure 7. Example of standing vernacular house style in Lower Village of Great Blasket Island, with tarred felt roof, and a corbelled-stone outbuilding to the right. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Furnishings typically included a post bed, dresser, cupboard, main table, chairs or stools of wood, chair seats made of rope from twisted hay and rush grass, baby cradle, spring bed, and bed mattresses stuffed with feathers from wild birds. For lighting, most relied on the light of the turf fire in evenings, and would leave the door open when possible in daytime. A mirror might be hung by the door to reflect the daylight. Lamps included candles made from fish or seal liver oil, paraffin or oil lamps, and a “cresset,” which consisted of a small pot of oil on two sticks inserted into a wall surface, with thick rush fronds for wicks.

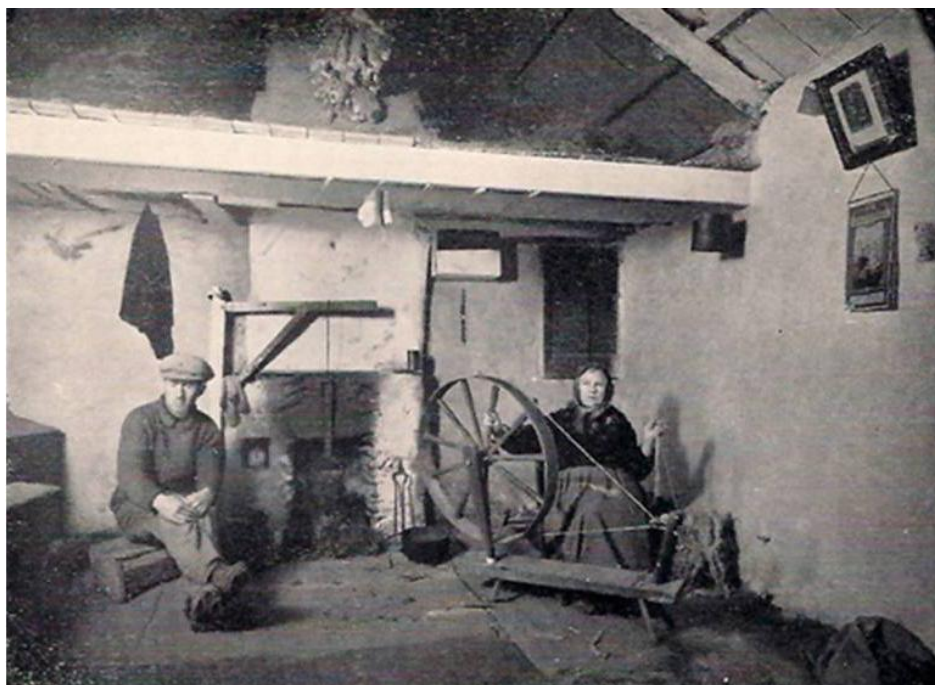


Figure 8. Interior of a kitchen and loft storage areas in Lower Village, Great Blasket, circa 1920s. From *The Islandman*, by Tomás O’Crohan, first published in Irish language in 1929.

The kitchen was the center of activity (Figure 8). It typically included a large iron cooking pot, barrels of salted fish, occasional delft dishware, bowls and plates, wooden mugs, cups and saucers, a tea pot, and small kettle. A small chicken coop might be located in the kitchen if the byre was unattached. Personal items in the homes included clay tobacco pipes, rosaries, wedding bands, religious images and postcards hung on walls, children’s dolls, rounded beach stones used as children’s game pieces, and slates and chalk for lessons. An island school



Figure 9. Residents transporting a cow (shown in the circle) in a naomhóg in the harbor area of Great Blasket Island, circa 1930s. Image courtesy of the University College of Dublin, Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, digital archives.

was located near the center of the Lower Village. Clothing was made locally and obtained from mainland stores. They used combs in carding wool, and spun thread on wheels (Figure 8). Popular items included hats for men and shawls and aprons for women. Local music was played on fiddles and melodeons, a type of accordion.

Residents hunted a variety of game and traded the pelts on the mainland, including rabbit, sea otters, and grey seals. Naomhóg boats were used for fishing and transporting livestock and goods between the island and mainland (Figure 9). Residents used large, barrel-like pots for catching lobster and long lines and nets for a variety of fish. They cut peat for fuel in the highlands of the island and dried the turf in clocháns and other shelters (Figure 10). Donkeys were used to haul turf and other supplies around the island.



Figure 10. Many clochán remains exist on Dingle peninsula, County Kerry. Dingle and the west coast islands were frequented by monastic pilgrimages in the medieval period. Today, farmers use them to pen livestock or store turf. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Archaeology, History, and Heritage

Frank Coyne of Aegis Archaeology undertook an extensive archaeological survey of Great Blasket Island starting in 2009 for the Office of Public Works (OPW) (Coyne 2010; DAHG 2009). As a result, surface surveys of house ruins and architectural remains have been completed, as have excavations of a number of house foundation walls. The archaeological survey was enhanced by three-dimensional laser scans of a number of the house ruins (Coyne 2010). The OPW also has unpublished reports of earlier historical and architectural assessments (Coyne 2010, citing MacCárthaigh and O'Reilly 1991; Paul Arnold Architects 2003, 2009).

The Island also possesses several sites with clochán remains from monastic pilgrimages in the medieval periods (8th and 9th centuries), and later fortification remains in the highlands (Figure 11). Residents in later times reused clocháns as storage structures for drying turf or corralling livestock. They also constructed their own outbuildings with a similar technique of corbel-stacked stones into a dome shaped structure (Figure 7, 10).

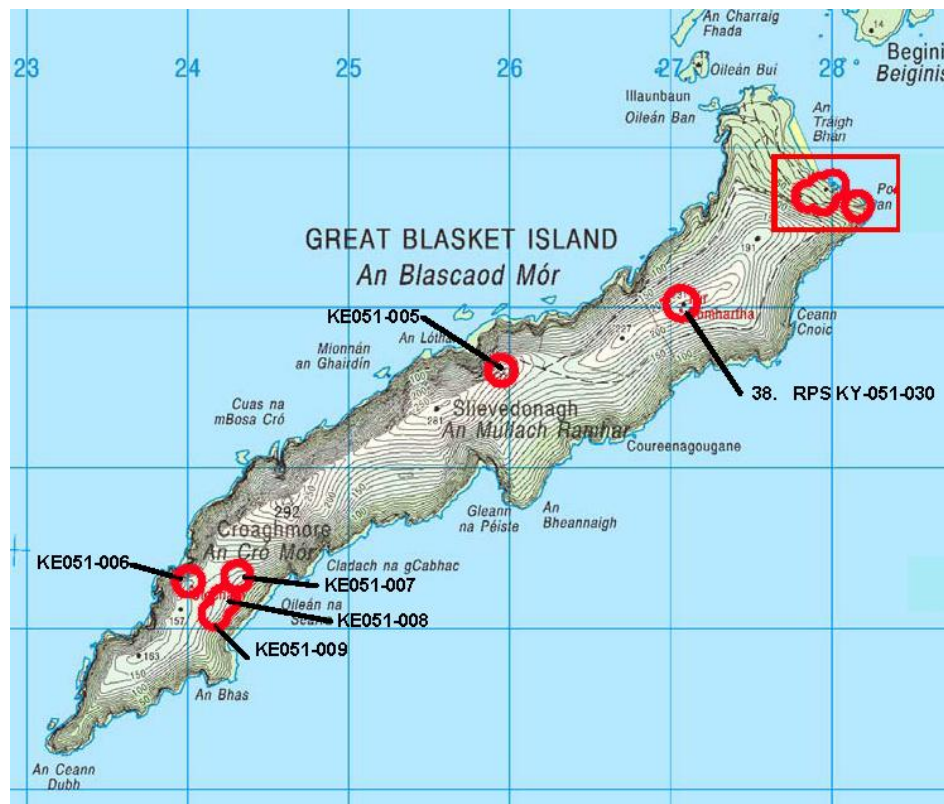


Figure 11. Map of Great Blasket Island with areas of medieval and post-medieval structural remains circled in red. The “Lower and Upper Villages” on the east end of the island are encompassed by the red rectangle. From a map image courtesy of the Kerry County Council, Dingle Functional Area, Local Area Plan, 2012-2018 (Tralee: Kerry County Council Planning Policy Unit, 2012, p. 167).

The Kerry County Council adopted a conservation plan for the Blasket Islands for 2012 to 2018. The plan calls for fairly strict preservation of the cultural and natural landscapes of the Islands. Local authorities hope to nominate Great Blasket for listing as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. Currently, only two sites in the Republic are World Heritage sites, including Skellig Michael (Sceilig Mhichíl) (Figure 12), which lies just south of the Blasket Islands. Extensive evidence of the history and heritage of Great Blasket is available through the exhibitions, collections, and archives of the Great Blasket Centre, located in Dún Chaoin and directed by Mícheál de Mórdha. Dáithí de Mórdha and Director de Mórdha (2013) have also recently published selections from the Centre’s photographic collections to broad audiences. I hope to collaborate with such scholars, researchers, and stakeholders to undertake future field school programs and related research efforts.



Figure 12. Restored clochán dwellings on Skellig Michael, County Kerry, a World Heritage site. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Further archaeological investigations of the house sites and other activity areas on the Great Blasket can reveal data concerning the actual, and non-romanticized lifeways of the island residents over a century of time. We can learn a tremendous amount about such daily lifeways by, for example, locating and excavating the refuse pits into which households discarded their broken wares, worn-out possessions, and remains of foodways. The historical and ethnographic accounts spoke of a self-sufficient and isolated community. The archaeological record may testify to a cohesive community that was nonetheless taking full advantages of modern markets of goods and selectively reaping the benefits of commodity chains and exchange opportunities impacting their region. A program of multi-year archaeological field schools can serve to educate students, volunteers, and local residents in the methods of archaeology, while contributing to a greater understanding of the islanders' lives.

To learn more about our plans for a 2015 *Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Field School on Great Blasket Island*, please consult our project web site at <http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/Blasket/>.

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Some Resource Links

[Great Blasket Centre](#), Dún Chaoin, Dingle, Mícheál de Mórdha, Director;
Heritage Ireland profile

[Great Blasket Cultural Centre](#), Go Kerry, Ireland profile

[Interview with Dáithí De Mórdha](#), Great Blasket Cultural Center

[Aegis Archaeology](#), Frank Coyne and Tracy Collins, Co-Directors

[Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group](#)

[Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society](#)

[Kerry County Museum](#)

[West Kerry Museum](#)

[Kerry Council Local Area Plan for Dingle 2012-2018](#) (including the Blasket Islands)

[Blasket Islands Bird Species](#), National Parks & Wildlife Service

[Database of Irish Excavation Reports](#), Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

[The Last of the Blasket People](#), a documentary with comments by George Thomson, Dúchas, the Heritage Service, 2001, with support by Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE).

[The Last Islandman Returns to His Birthplace](#) 2013 (Film by Telegraph News)

[Return to the Great Blasket Island](#) 2013 (RTE News)

[Na Blascaodaí](#) (The Blasket Islands). An array of images inspired by the Blasket Islands. Footage of the Ó'Dálaigh brothers from circa 1973. Music by Iarla Ó Lionaird.

[Blasket Island Films and News](#) (YouTube collection)

[Blasket Islands Films and News](#) (World News, Inc.)

[Díseart Institute of Irish Spirituality and Culture](#)

[A Paradise Lost to Time](#), Wall Street Journal

[Inishark and Cultural Landscapes of the Irish Coasts](#), Ian Kuijt, U. Notre Dame

[Silent Stones of Inishark](#), County Galway, short film

[Sponge Decorated Ceramics from Inishark](#)

[Archaeology on Achill Island](#), County Mayo, Ireland

[Tsunamis in West Ireland Prehistory](#)

[National Monuments Service of Ireland](#)

[National Library of Ireland](#)

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