

Newgrange

About one hour's drive northwest of Dublin in County Meath is Newgrange, one of the most spectacular prehistoric monuments in Europe. This passage grave site, a few miles from the [Hill of Tara](#), is the royal burial ground of Neolithic and Bronze Age Ireland. Over 5000 years ago, it was built by people who had only a stone and wood technology. An extraordinary feat of architecture and engineering, Newgrange is the world's oldest existing building.

Built on a hill overlooking the Boyne River, this startling example of ancient engineering is 45 feet high with a diameter of 100 yards. Its corbelled roof has remained intact since its construction; no water has ever penetrated its layering of river gravel and clay sods, a claim few newer roofs can make. A sixty foot passageway connects the entrance of Newgrange with a burial chamber. At the winter solstice, a roof box over the entrance permits a 15 to 20 minute bathing of the burial chamber with a golden light. People from all over Ireland and Europe gather at Newgrange to witness this singular event.



Each December 21, the rays of the rising sun shine into the furthest recesses of the great mound. A burial chamber at the center brightens as the sun's rays penetrate horizontally to the back of the tomb. Those gathered there as the light penetrates the darkness feel a sense of communion with those who watched and waited 5000 years ago to observe the same phenomenon. It is easy to imagine a time when our Stone Age ancestors celebrated at Newgrange nature's annual miracle of rebirth and perhaps renewed their faith in a rebirth for the dead.

The discovery of the entrance to the mound passageway was made accidentally by road builders about the year 1700. There is evidence to show that Newgrange was plundered by Danish raiders about the year 860. Graffiti in the tomb dates back to the 7th century, a subject of great interest to historians. Immediately in front of the entrance is a huge decorated curbstone which bears a carved pattern of double spirals flanked by lozenges. The passageway and interior chamber bear different examples of

megalithic art. Archeologists infer that the stone basins in the chamber once contained the cremated remains of early kings.

Ancient tales relate that the kings of Tara were buried at Newgrange. One tale is that Cormac mac Airt, one of the most famous kings of Tara, did not wish to be buried there because it was a cemetery of idolators. Kinsmen, however, resolved to take Cormac's body across the Boyne to Newgrange, but the river "swelled up thrice" and the pious Cormac was buried in consecrated ground. Tara and Newgrange-- two of the great symbols of ancient Ireland, but Newgrange was already several thousands of years old when the kings of Tara ruled.

No name can be given to the people who built Newgrange, but the engineering and architectural skill, in addition to the evidence of artistic sensibility, bear testimony to the high degree of culture attained by the Irish community that built Newgrange.

(Written by Jack McCormack & originally printed in 1988)

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