

# The Stone Age | H1 Notes

## The People

The first settlers of Ireland came across from Europe in dugout canoes, during the **Mesolithic** era, or Middle Stone Age. They hunted for some of their food, (fish, wild boar, birds etc.) and gathered fruits, nuts, berries and roots. Hence they were known as the **Hunter Gatherers**. They used stone spears and arrows (these small stones were known as **microliths**). They lived in tribes, and were **nomads**, as they moved around, following their prey.

However, by the Neolithic Era, (New Stone Age), the people of Ireland lived differently. They were the first farmers, or the **Neolithic People**. They settled in one place, raised domesticated sheep, goats and oxen and grew crops such as cereals e.g. wheat and barley. They cleared areas of Ireland's dense forest using **Stone Axes**. It was the Neolithic Farmers who built **Megalithic** (Mega- great or big, -lithic stone) **Tombs** like Newgrange.

## The Tombs

The tombs came in three forms; (**Portal**) **Dolmens**, **Court Cairns**, and **Passage Graves**. Each tomb took a huge amount of effort to build. Some say they played a role in rituals for fertility and good fortune, while others say that their only role was to celebrate and honour the dead.

### Dolmens, (aka Portal Dolmens)

A Dolmen consists of several upright or **Standing Stones**, and a **Capstone**. Each huge stone was manoeuvred into place using a technique called **log-rolling**. Sometimes the stone would have come from very far away. Barges would have been used for transport. (Above, Brownshill Dolmen, Co. Carlow)



## Court Cairns

Court Cairns consists of two chambers, the **entrance chamber** or **court**, and the burial chamber. The two chambers were then covered with a **cairn** or pile of stones. However, most of these cairns have been worn down, leaving only the footprint of the structure, as in Creevykeel, Co. Sligo.



## Passage Graves

Passage Graves consist of a large mound of earth covering the burial chamber, and the passage which leads to it. Newgrange is a world famous passage grave in the Boyne Valley in Meath. Brú na Bóinne has two other Passage Graves, Knowth and Dowth. The area is of such historical value that it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## NEWGRANGE – Important Things to Mention

- **Amazing;** HUGE. Time Consuming. Logistics (Stone from all over; Greywacke (Donegal), Quartz (Wicklow), would have taken much time and effort to transport. Most agree that the stone would have been transported overland by log rolling, then carried along the coast by barges, and up the Boyne River to the Boyne Valley)
- **Alignment;** On the morning of the **Winter Solstice** (21<sup>st</sup> December, shortest day of the year in terms of sunlight) the sun lights up the burial chamber. Above the doorway of the tomb, is the roof box, an opening that lets in this light. (The planning/skills/expertise

involved is incredible, especially considering this was the Stone Age. Therefore their culture must have attributed a lot of significance to the sun. Celestial bodies as gods? Reincarnation? Many, many theories on the topic)



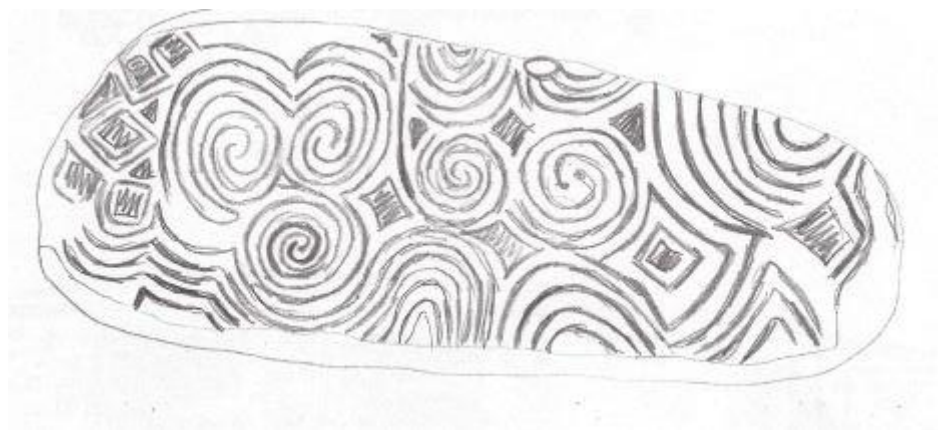
- **Construction; Corbelled Roof**, each stone carved with run off channels. (chamber still waterproof after 5,000 years). **Cruciform passage**, cross shaped passage (as in Passage Tombs), leading to the Burial Chamber.
- **The Chamber**; Three carved stone basins hold the cremated remains of five individuals
- **Megalithic Art**;

- The Passage - the stones that make up the walls of the passage have **Chip Carved** designs. As with other **Megalithic** or **Rock Art**, these designs were **carved in situ**.



- The **Kerbstones** - (The stones surrounding the mound) some are of special interest to archaeologists, e.g. **Kerbstone 52**, featuring elaborate **Curvilinear** (Curved Lines e.g. Spirals, Circles etc.) and **Rectilinear** (Straight Lines e.g. Lozenges etc.) designs.
- Also the **Entrance Stone** - Features elaborate **Curvilinear** and **Rectilinear** Designs.

Some say that the vertical line points specifically towards the Roof box or Light box.



- **Techniques;** Firstly, the stone was **dressed** (roughly smoothed). Then the design was **picked** onto the rock (Light guidelines). Finally the design was **chip carved** into the surface. The stones were carved in place. (Once archaeologists excavated below the soil, the designs stopped). The process was extremely labour intensive and time consuming.



## Writing Your Answer

The question usually asks for information on more than one type of Tomb, so don't just learn one major one. Having background on all three is important, even if it's just a short paragraph like above. If you can, try put in as many **quick sketches** as you have time for. I'm not talking about fully shaded, perfectly proportioned works of art, just a quick drawing in the margin. They don't have to be elaborate to show off your "in depth" knowledge. These are the small things that can bring you up a grade. But the most important thing in Art History is **LABELS**. Label the capstone, label the standing stones, the handle of the Neolithic Axe, the kerbstones, the cruciform passage... A sketch is nothing without labels, they're what get you the marks. And most importantly never forget the sneaky "**and**" part. For this Topic, it's usually to describe the life of the Neolithic people who built the tombs. Depending on the marking scheme, that sucker can be worth a quarter of the marks. Even a passing attempt will probably get you most of the marks

## Sources

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownshill\\_dolmen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownshill_dolmen)
- <https://www.archaeology.ie/monument-of-the-month/archive/creevykeel-court-tomb-co-sligo>
- <https://arthistoryleavingcert.com/pre-christian-ireland-2/newgrange/>