

Irish Stone Age Carvings | Sample Answer

'The Megalithic tombs in the Boyne Valley are evidence of a well-organised society in Ireland at the time they were constructed.'

Discuss this statement in relation to one tomb in particular, referring in your answer to its structure, decoration and functions.

I agree with the above statement and from my study of the megalithic tombs of Newgrange in the Boyne Valley, County Meath, I've learned that archaeologists believe this tomb was built by the Neolithic people in approx. 3,200 B.C. (the Neolithic period). The word megalithic came about after the huge stones they used to build the tombs. They came from Eastern Europe through Britain, before settling into highly organised and social groups here in Ireland. From what I have learned, they brought with them new farming methods such as harvesting crops and breeding cattle, while the people settled before them were mainly hunter-gatherers. They divided land into fields and cleared forests, set up communities, created tools and built houses and tombs. The building of these great and impressive tombs leads me to believe that these were very spiritual race who had great respect for the dead and loved their families a lot. Although this was pre-Christian time, they may have been pagan people and used the solar cycle to follow time and seasons, which shows in a lot of their artwork and decorations of their tombs and stones. Their love for their friends and families shows in their buildings and is more than likely what motivated them also.

In my opinion the most impressive of the three tombs located in the Boyne Valley is Newgrange. The main feature visible in this tomb that was used is the corbel technique used for the roof and at the end of the passage. This is done by placing one stone on top of another but sticking it out further than the one below until they create a dome shape and are finished off with a capstone. The outer edges of the corbels slope downwards so that rainwater drains off into the cairn. It has remained dry for more than 5,000 years. The highest point in the chamber is 6 metres. The passage is 29 metres long, and the total length of the passage including the chamber at the back is 24 metres. The total of the passage is less than a third of the mound. 22 standing stones can

be seen lining the left of the passage with 21 to the right and three large slabs roof the first part of the passage while the rest of the passage is corbelled.

The mound itself measures about 85 metres in diameter. From my own knowledge, passage mounds are so called because the structure consists of a narrow passage ending in a small chamber where human remains were found. The passage and chamber were then covered in cairn which is then enclosed and supported at the base by a series of large slabs known as kerbstones; the most elaborate, in my opinion, being Kerbstone 52. 97 slabs in total surround the mound at a distance of 15 metres though it's estimated there were originally 35.

In my opinion, Kerbstone 52 is the most elaborate kerbstone at Newgrange. There is a clear division of design as two vertical lines and one horizontal line divide the kerbstone into 3 parts. A large double spiral with smaller spirals surrounding it occupy the upper left corner, while the lower left is decorated with lozenges. The right hand side is filled with radiating circular indentations. The meaning of these motifs is unclear on this kerbstone but there are many theories. They may have had a spiritual or religious meaning as they were pre-Christian times. It may also have been an early form of writing, and some could represent human faces and bodies. In my opinion, the theory of them relating to the solar and lunar cycles is most likely. These communities observed seasonal changes, so weather and the natural elements would have impacted their daily lives. The designs were created using sharp flint or quartz stone and stone hammers. The shallow linear lines were scratched and scraped onto the rock's surface.

I also believe the entrance stone to Newgrange is the most impressive example of Stone Age Art at the Boyne Valley. A vertical line divides the stone and runs down to the middle of the stone. To the right there are two double spirals and to the left a triskele. On both sides lozenges can be seen. The entire stone is dressed in concentric half circles and serpentine flowing lines. I can't say with certainty what the meanings of these designs are, but the stone's location is a clue. It's situated directly opposite the entrance to the tomb below the roof box. There's room to walk around it but it still represents a slight physical barrier. The patterns may be automorphic and represent human faces to scare off intruders, letting it be known as a 'guardian stone' of this sacred place. Before being carved, this stone would have been dressed by hammering away any rough parts on the surface and then sanded smooth so it would be ready for carving.

I find it fascinating to consider the functions of these Megalithic tombs, in a way that they were not just built to be graves but much more than that. These tombs were built, in my opinion, by the

