

# History



*Newgrange, County Meath*

## The Unrecognized Wonder of the Ancient World

In the Boyne Valley of County Meath stands one of the greatest archeological finds and wonders of the ancient world: the megalithic passage tomb of Newgrange referred to as Brú na Bóinne, “The Palace of the Boyne”, by the ancient Irish. Though there was always a long Irish Folk tradition hinting at a tomb at Newgrange, it wasn’t until 1699, when workmen removing stone from the site to make a road discovered the entrance.

Constructed of stone and without the use of mortar, the burial mound is some 250ft across and 40ft high. Within the tomb is a passage and chamber complex 79ft long. The central chamber has a “corbelled” or arched roof that is some 20 feet high which is considered one of the finest examples in Europe. Despite its great age, the roof is both intact and waterproof. The tomb is decorated throughout in spiral and lozenge patterns that are considered some of the finest examples of megalithic art in the world. It is estimated that Newgrange is comprised of 200,000 tons of materials and it would have taken a workforce of 300 men some 30 years to build.

In the central chamber is a small window that leads to a structure called a roofbox. The roofbox is precisely

aligned so that on the shortest day of the year, the Winter Solstice, a beam of light will flood the usually dark center chamber with light, focusing on an area where cremated remains have been found. At the time of its construction, the chamber would have been filled with light at the precise moment of the sunrise on the Winter Solstice. Astronomers and Archeologist agree the alignment is too precise to be an accident; it is by design of the builders and was part of the original design of the structure.

All of this is impressive, but there is one fact that makes Newgrange unique: carbon dating shows that Newgrange was built in approximately 3500 BC. This makes Newgrange the oldest known intact man made structure on earth. It predates the pyramid of Djoser in Egypt by at least 500 years. It was recording the Winter Solstice for a thousand years before Stonehenge. While one can find considerable material on the impressive Egyptian pyramids, the ancient observatory at Stonehenge or the Mayan Calendar, Newgrange sits in relative anonymity, eclipsed in books, TV specials and curricula by these late arrivals. The question we should ask ourselves is why.

### Did you Know that....

- One of the greatest archeological treasures of Ireland is the Ardagh Chalice. Thought to have been made in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, it is a large two handled silver cup decorated with gold, bronze, and enamel. It is considered one of the finest examples of Celtic metal work. The Chalice was found in 1868 in the village of Ardagh, Co. Limerick by two small boys digging potatoes. The Sam Maguire Cup, the trophy awarded to the All-Ireland Senior Football Champion, is modeled on the Ardagh Chalice.

- Ireland is also home to more than 40 “bog bodies” discovered by archeologists. These human remains have been preserved as natural occurring mummies due to their burial in Irish bogs where the airless and acidic condition have preserved them. The level of preservation is so high that it can be determined what the individuals ate, how they dressed their hair and what their clothing looked like even though they died over 2300 years ago.

- In 1840, William Parsons built the “Leviathan of Parsonstown”, a 72 inch telescope, in Birr, County Offaly. It was, for nearly 75 years the largest telescope in the world. Parson is credited with several discoveries, the most famous of which is the “Crab Nebula” which he named.

- The Irish fascination with space and the stars continues to this day, where Irish American women have particularly distinguished themselves. The first woman to command a Space Shuttle Mission was Eileen Collins, the first American Woman to walk in space was Kathleen Sullivan and the first teacher in space and one of the victims of the Challenger disaster was the late Christa McAuliffe.