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SOLAR ALIGNMENT AND THE IRISH PASSAGE TOMB TRADITION

Archaeology Ireland Heritage Guide No. 82

Frank Prendergast

Introduction

In terms of architectural form and alignment, the gigantic passage tomb at Newgrange, Brú na Bóinne, is arguably the finest example of its type in Northwest Europe. The monument was built in c. 3,300 BC to house the cremated and inhumed remains of the dead. It was additionally designed to capture direct sunlight at winter solstice sunrise and channel this into the burial chamber via the roof-box located above the entrance door—an accomplishment unparalleled anywhere else in the Neolithic world of that time.

Megalithic tomb traditions

For context, burial tombs built in Ireland during the Neolithic mainly fall into three distinct categories. The court tombs (414) broadly date to 3,700–3570 BC and are trapezoidal in plan with an un-roofed forecourt at the broader end of a long barrow. The roofed segmented burial gallery on the tomb's long axis contained the inhumed and cremated remains of the dead. Portal tombs (191) have a short chamber formed by two portal stones, two side stones and a back stone. The characteristic roof stone slopes from the front towards the rear of the monument. The available evidence indicates that these monuments had repeated episodes of inhumed burials c. 3,800–3,200 BC. Passage tombs (221) have their burial chambers set at the end of an access passage within a round covering cairn delimited by an enclosing earth-fast kerb of contiguous stones. The predominant burial rite was cremation but the presence of unburnt bone (including from children) and the skulls and long bones from adults is also evident. While the earliest passage tombs date back to at least 3,600 BC, the developed examples mostly date to 3,300–2,900 BC and are later in the Neolithic tomb building sequence. Tantalisingly, some unopened hilltop cairns may yet prove to be passage tombs, thereby increasing the above total.

Developed passage tombs are architecturally elaborate, exhibit extraordinary embellishment with engraved or picked art in many cases, and have a general preference for elevated siting, especially on the summits of some prominent hills and mountains. Where there is spatial overlap between the three types, passage tombs dominate the other types in terms of their elevation. Archaeologists are in general agreement that the passage tombs also demonstrate the emergence of a more complex cosmology.

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