

## Newgrange

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On my recent trip to Ireland I asked a cousin of mine what would you like me to tell the AOH about Ireland? His response was mention Newgrange.

### **Newgrange**



Newgrange was constructed over 5,000 years ago (about 3,200 B.C.), making it older than Stonehenge in England and the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. Newgrange was built during the Neolithic or New Stone Age by a farming community that prospered on the rich lands of the Boyne Valley. Knowth and Dowth are similar mounds that together with Newgrange have been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Archaeologists classified Newgrange as a passage tomb, however Newgrange is now recognized to be much more than a passage tomb. *Ancient Temple* is a more fitting classification, a place of astrological, spiritual, religious and ceremonial importance, much as present day cathedrals are places of prestige and worship where dignitaries may be laid to rest.

Newgrange is a large kidney shaped mound covering an area of over one acre, retained at the base by 97 kerbstones, some of which are richly decorated with megalithic art. The 19-meter-long inner passage leads to a chamber with a corbelled roof. The amount of time and labor invested in construction of Newgrange suggests a well-organized society with specialized groups responsible for different aspects of construction.

Newgrange is part of a complex of monuments built along a bend of the River Boyne. The other two principal monuments are Knowth (the largest) and Dowth, but throughout the region there are as many as 35 smaller mounds.

## **Winter Solstice**



Newgrange is best known for the illumination of its passage and chamber by the winter solstice sun. Above the entrance to the passage at Newgrange there is an opening called a roof-box. This baffling orifice held a great surprise for those who unearthed it. Its purpose is to allow sunlight to penetrate the chamber on the shortest days of the year, around December 21, the winter solstice. At dawn, from December 19th to 23rd, a narrow beam of light penetrates the roof-box and reaches the floor of the chamber, gradually extending to the rear of the chamber. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens within the chamber so that the whole room becomes dramatically illuminated. This event lasts for 17 minutes, beginning around 9am.

The accuracy of Newgrange as a time-telling device is remarkable when one considers that it was built 500 years before the Great Pyramids and more than 1,000 years before Stonehenge. The intent of its builders was to mark the beginning of the new year. In addition, it may have served as a powerful symbol of the victory of life over death.

Each year the winter solstice event attracts much attention at Newgrange. Many gather at the ancient tomb to wait for dawn, as people did 5,000 years ago. So great is the demand to be one of the few inside the chamber during the solstice that there is a free annual lottery. Unfortunately, as with many Irish events that depend upon sunshine, if the skies are overcast, there is not much to be seen. Yet all agree that it is an extraordinary feeling to wait in the darkness, as people did so long ago, for the longest night of the year to end.