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Dig into
Ancient Ireland

How did Neolithic people view death and burial?



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Neolithic death and burial

Neolithic communities had a strong belief in the **afterlife**, which was expressed in the construction of **burial monuments**. These are known today as **megalithic tombs** (megalith = large stone).

Though archaeologists don't know for sure how the monuments were built, we do know that it must have involved the community at large, all working together as a highly-organised team. This gives us some idea about society at the time.

There tended to be multiple burials in the same tomb. Where the bones of the body are reasonably intact this is usually referred to as an inhumation as opposed to cremation when the body is burnt and subsequently buried. Growing evidence suggests that passage tombs in particular were used only for the elite members of the community, similar to the Egyptian pharaohs being buried in a pyramid.

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Preparing to bury the dead.

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Collections in focus

A number of stone beads found in megalithic tombs can be seen at the museum. These and other objects, including pots and flint tools, are known as grave goods.



These disc-shaped stone beads were recovered from inside Creggandevesky court tomb, Co. Tyrone and they are believed to have originally been threaded together forming a necklace. This is likely to have been deposited within the burial chamber to accompany its owner into the afterlife.



Grave goods from Ballyrenan portal tomb, Co. Tyrone, include stone beads, flint tools and shards of pottery. The beads are much larger than the Creggandevesky examples. All have polished surfaces and are made from grey-green or grey-black schists. They may have been suspended on strings and worn as necklaces or bracelets, or possibly adorned clothes.



Moving large stones without modern engineering methods such as cranes must have been incredibly difficult. They may have been mounted on sleds, which could then be slid across the landscape on rollers. They may also have been moved through river networks on rafts.

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Court tombs

The earliest type of megalithic monument known from Ireland is the court tomb. These have a roofless, semi-circular court, which led into the burial chambers. The whole structure could be covered by a mound or cairn of stones.

Neolithic people may have practised excarnation. This process involves the removal of the body tissues, so that only the bones remain. This might have happened on platforms in the open air. The bones were then either buried in a tomb, or cremated and then transferred to a tomb.



Model of court tomb. Two people are represented standing in the court. The cairn of stones has been removed for the purpose of showing the burial chambers.



Grave goods including pots and flints from Audleystown court tomb, Co. Down.

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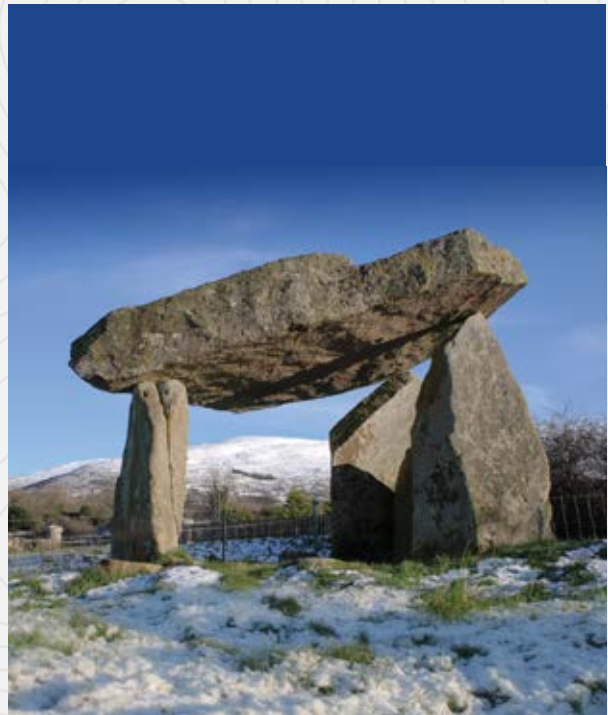
Portal tombs

Chronologically, portal tombs follow court tombs. Characteristic of portal tombs is the very large capstone, supported by upright stones (portals). This usually involves a pair of tall stones at the front, a low back stone, as well as other stones which close the sides and form a chamber. It is not clear how the capstones were set in place, as they are incredibly heavy – up to 100 tonnes! It is likely that ramps, rollers and leverage would have been used.

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Model of portal tomb. The cairn of stones has been removed for the purpose of showing the burial chamber.



Ballykeel portal tomb, Co. Armagh.

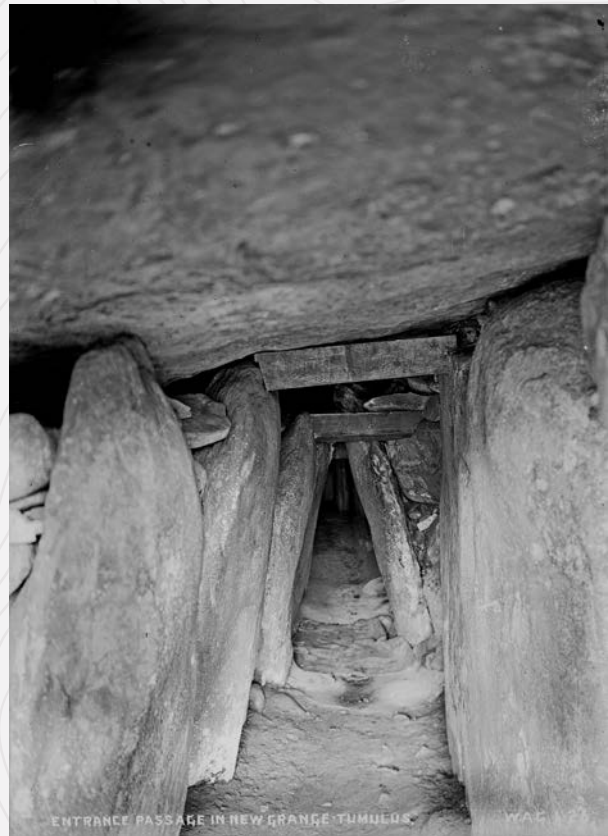
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Passage tombs

Passage tombs are the most impressive form of Irish megalithic tombs. They are situated on hilltops or ridges, and tend to be clustered together in cemeteries. They consist of one or more burial chambers covered in a cairn of earth and stone, which is accessed by a narrow passage. Abstract rock art has been identified at many passage tombs and some were built to have special astronomical alignments, with the sunrise on the winter solstice (as at Slieve Gullion, Co. Armagh).



Model of passage tomb. The narrow passage at the front led to the main burial chamber. The cairn of stones has been removed for the purpose of showing the burial chamber.



This older black and white photograph from the collection shows the passage leading to the main burial chamber at Newgrange, Co. Meath.

Wedge tombs

Wedge tombs are the youngest of the megalithic tombs, appearing at the very end of the Neolithic Period and continuing into the Bronze Age. These tombs consist of a main chamber constructed from upright megaliths and roofed by flat slabs of stone. As with the other Irish megalithic tombs, wedge tombs were used for communal burial, with multiple cremations and inhumations within a single tomb.

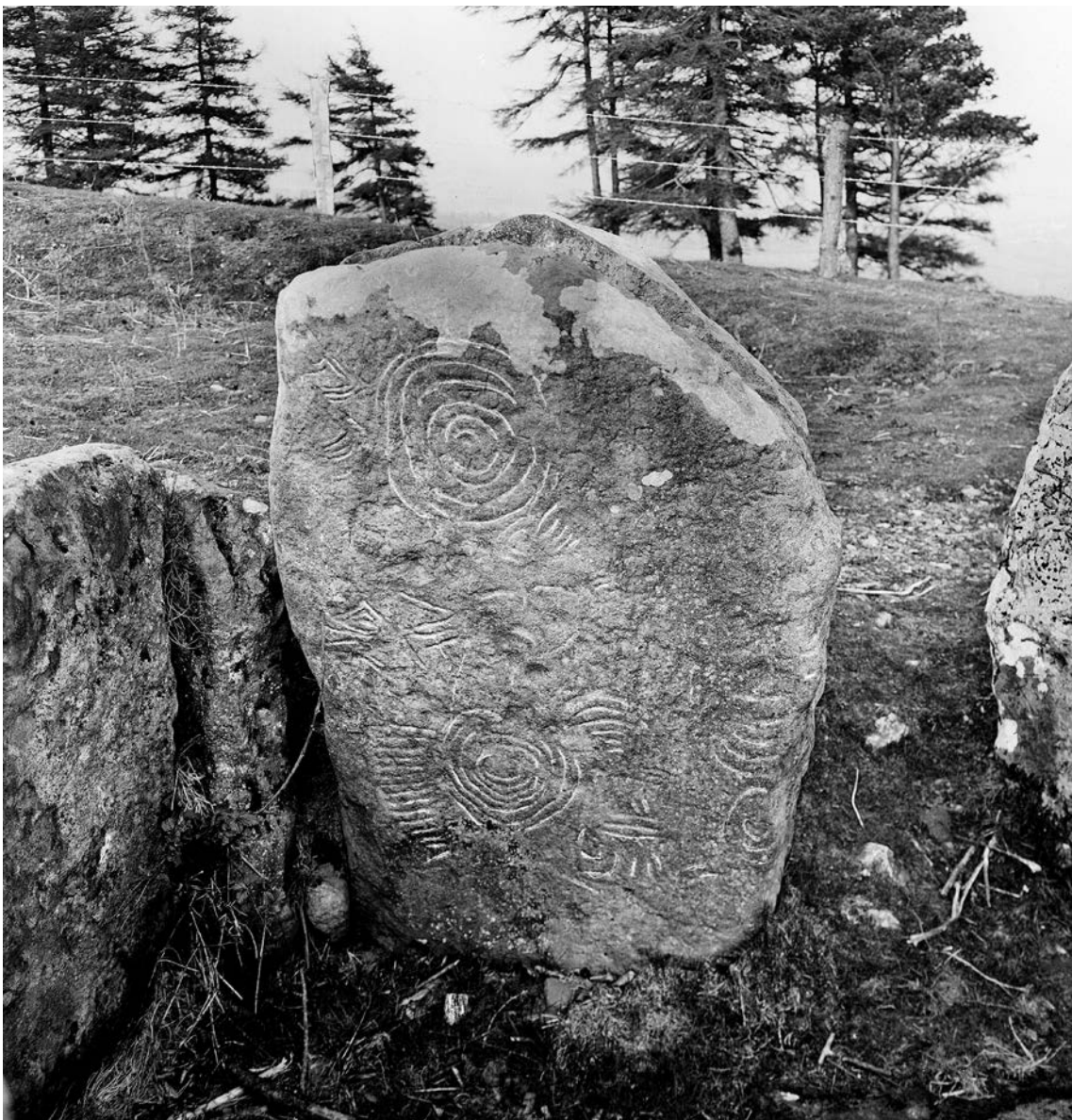


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There is a replica of one of the stones forming the chamber at Knockmany passage tomb, Co. Tyrone on display in the Ulster Museum. The stone is covered in decorations which have been carved into the rock's surface. This was done by making a series of peck marks in the shape of the design using stone tools – these were then joined together to form grooves.

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This older black and white photograph from the collection shows the actual carved stone at Knockmany passage tomb.

Megalith patterns

The huge stone buildings - Megaliths, that groups of Neolithic people built together to bury members of their community can still be seen today in our countryside. Find out if there is one near you! Some of the huge stones used to build the megalithic tombs were beautifully decorated with carved patterns.



Make a mega Megalith

- Use a bar of soap (roughly rectangular in shape) to carve a selection of patterns on. A clay working tool or blunt stick could be used for carving with.
- In groups pupils can then design and try to construct their own megalithic tomb. Will the decorated stone be seen from the outside or only by those who enter the tomb?
- When the groups have finished their tombs they can discuss with the other groups why they chose their particular design and how they solved any problems they may have encountered.

Further discussion

- What else do they think could have happened around the tombs – singing, dancing, feasting, praying?

