The tombs of our ancestors

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce Farmers Journal readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.

During the Neolithic period (New Stone Age, circa 4000-2000BC), farmers had a strong belief in the afterlife. They invested a huge amount of time in the design and construction of their burial monuments. They buried some of their dead in very large stone structures which are today identified as megalithic tombs. These burial places would have stood out as spectacular monuments in the landscape and would have been in sharp contrast to the simple timber houses occupied by the living.

**TYPES OF TOMBS**

There are four distinct types of megalithic tombs in Ireland: passage tombs, court tombs, portal tombs and wedge tombs. Ireland’s most famous megalithic tomb is the passage tomb in Newgrange. A passage tomb consists of a round mound or cairn of stones with a passage leading from the edge to a chamber inside.

Some of the stone tools used in the construction of these tombs were decorated by the farmers using a technique called ‘fluting’. Evidence from excavated passage tombs tells us that Stone Age farmers did not bury their dead in individual graves like we do today. Instead, they cremated the body and the burnt bones were mixed back in with those of other members of their community who had gone before them.

Some of the tombs clearly referenced significant events in the calendar. For example, Newgrange was designed to allow the sun to light up the inside of the tomb on the shortest day of the year – the winter solstice – suggesting that, perhaps, we had more sunshine in Stone Age times! Recognising the seasonal cycle was, of course, just as important to Stone Age farmers as it is to farming communities today.

Court tombs have a semi-circular shaped forecourt at the entrance, which usually faces east. This forecourt leads into a passage which narrows and declines in height as it originally had an even more imposing entrance or portal to a single chamber behind. Large cap-stones rest on these upright stones. Originally they may also have been covered in a large cairn of loose stones.

Like the court tombs, these tombs are found mainly in the northern part of the country with small concentrations in south Leinster and Waterford.

One of the best-known portal tombs is Poulnabrone in the Burren, Co Clare. An archaeological excavation undertaken at this national monument uncovered the remains of at least 22 individuals along with objects including polished stone, flint tools and pottery. These burials are all over 5,000 years old.

Passage, court and portal tombs were all constructed during the Neolithic period when all tools were made of stone. However, just before the introduction of bronze (about 2350BC) and during the early Bronze Age itself, a slightly different type of tomb – known as a wedge tomb – was constructed. The wedge tomb consists of a rectangular chamber of large stones which usually narrows and declines in height towards the back and is roofed with large slabs.

Like the other megalithic tombs, it would originally have been covered with a cairn of loose stones. This type of tomb is found all over the country with large concentrations in the south and west. A fine example of a wedge tomb in State ownership is located in the townland of Altar in West Cork.

HIGHLY ORGANISED

All of these tombs indicate that farmers during the Neolithic period were very advanced architecturally and that communities must have been highly organised. There are remains of over 1,000 known megalithic tombs in Ireland but they are not unique to this country. Stone Age farmers in Portugal, France, Denmark and Britain also built similar structures for their dead.

While the Stone Age farmers may have constructed these monuments over 4,000 years ago it is the 21st century farmer who is now their custodian, preserving them for future generations and providing the dead with the respect they deserve.

NEXT WEEK

IRELAND’S FIRST GOLDEN AGE

Please remember that all recorded archaeological monuments are protected under the National Monuments Acts 1930-2004. Visitors to archaeological monuments on lands in private ownership should request permission from the landowner. If you would like to know more about the archaeological monuments on your land or in your locality, please visit www.archaeology.ie. Any questions or feedback can be forwarded to nationalmonuments@ahg.gov.ie