

Commemoration & Memorials

LESSON 2

10,000 Years of Burial



ARCHAEOLOGY
time in transition

IT'S ABOUT TIME 2

**Aim(s)**

To examine the variety of burial monuments that survive in Ireland from the past ten thousand years.

**Objective(s)**

To give the students an understanding of how changing burial practices reflect the different social and ethical beliefs of society over time.

**Time Period**

Stone Age to the 19th Century (7,000 BC to 1900 AD)

**KEY INFORMATION****Lesson**

- Burial practice in Mesolithic and Neolithic Ireland.
- New types of burial arrive into Ireland in the Bronze Age.
- The 5th century AD sees the introduction of Christian burial, which continues to the present day.

Context

- Ireland's first burial dates to around 7,400 BC.
- Megalithic tombs were built in the Neolithic.
- Cist and pit burials became common in the Bronze Age.
- Christian burial arrives in the 5th century AD.
- Burial monuments change over time reflecting the changing nature of society.

**METHODOLOGY & MEDIUM**

- Instruction
- Visual–PowerPoint
- **Student Handout** Burial Throughout the Ages

**SECTIONS**

- Section 1** The Mesolithic
- Section 2** The Neolithic
- Section 3** Poul nabrone Portal Tomb
- Section 4** The Bronze Age
- Section 5** The Arrival of Christianity

**Key Question(s)**

How did people in the Mesolithic period bury their dead?
What is Ireland's oldest known burial?

Slide 1 Ten Thousand Years of Burial

We are going to examine the way our ancestors honoured their dead by looking at the variety of burial monuments that survive in Ireland from the past ten thousand years. We will look at how archaeologists study these monuments to find out more about the people who built them.

- Ever since our species first appeared on earth around 200,000 years ago we have been treating the dead with respect and care.
- The earliest human burials were sprinkled with red ochre powder which, it was believed, had a sacred power.
- Humans are the only animals to bury and memorialise their dead. Burial usually takes the form of a sacred ritual.

Slide 2 Stone Age Hunter-Gathers

- The first people arrived in Ireland about 10,000 years ago, as the country warmed up after the last Ice Age.
- These Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) Hunter-Gatherers were dependant on hunting, fishing and collecting wild plants and fruits for their food.
- They lived in round huts in seasonal camps.
- How did they bury their dead?

Slide 3 Mesolithic Burial

- Ireland's oldest known burial was discovered in 2001 during the archaeological monitor of the construction of a water scheme in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick.
- A small pit (60cm diameter and 30cm deep) was discovered filled with loose dark soil which contained the cremated bones of an adult male. With the bones were a stone axe, and two microliths (small flint points).
- On one side of the pit was a post hole (20cm in diameter). This suggests that there was an upright timber post marking the burial.
- Radiocarbon dates place the burial around 7,400 BC.

What conclusions can we draw from this discovery?

- This burial shows that Mesolithic people cremated their dead—or at least some of their dead.
- They also placed grave goods with the burial. Placing valuable items, like a stone axe, in the grave suggests a belief in a life after death when the weapon would be useful.
- The presence of an upright timber post shows that the burial was important enough to be marked out as a special place.



Key Question(s) What are Megalithic Tombs?

Slide 4 The First Farmers

- Farming was introduced into Ireland around 4,000 BC. This is the beginning of the Neolithic period (New Stone Age).
- Farming enabled these Stone Age people to form permanent settlements, to grow in population, and to develop a greater social complexity in their lives. This is all possible because farming created an ample food supply all year round.
- This more complex social organisation is clearly reflected in the way Neolithic people buried their **dead**. The most striking example of this is the Megalithic Tomb.

Slide 5 Megalithic Tombs

Stone Age farming communities had a strong belief in the afterlife. We know this because of the great effort they made in building tombs for the dead, now known as **Megalithic Tombs**.

- **Megalithic** Tombs were erected by Neolithic communities along the Atlantic coast of Europe from Portugal to Denmark, including Britain and Ireland.
- **Megalithic** tombs are over-ground tombs built of large stones (*mega*—large; *lithic*—stone).
- **They** consist of a burial chamber with a definite entrance or entrance passage. The stone structure was covered by a cairn of stones or mound of earth.
- **They** were built according to strict rules, so that nearly all the Megalithic Tombs in Ireland belong to one of four distinct types:
 - Portal Tomb (180 examples)
 - Court Tomb (410)
 - Passage Tomb (235)
 - Wedge Tomb (530)

Slide 6 Passage Tombs

One of the best know Megalithic Tombs in Europe **is** Newgrange, Co. Meath (Newgrange is a passage tomb).

What is so special about Newgrange?

- It was built around 3,000 BC.
- It may have taken as many as 30 years to build.
- The tomb is contained within a circular mound (diam. 85m).
- It has a central cruciform chamber accessed by a long narrow passage.
- Excavated by Prof. M.J. O'Kelly between 1962 and 1975.

Slide 7 Mid-Winter Solstice

Newgrange is a sophisticated construction and shows that the Neolithic people who built it had a strong belief in the afterlife closely related to sun worship. This is proven by the effort they made to align the tomb onto the mid-winter solstice sunrise (see *The Magic Ring*, T1,U1,L1).

How is Newgrange orientated onto the mid-winter sunrise?

- A rectangular opening, known as the light-box, over the entrance allows the rays of the rising sun to creep along the long passage until eventually the central burial chamber is lit up.

Megalithic Art: another remarkable feature of Newgrange are the carvings on its large stones. This art consists of spirals, triangles, zig-zags and other similar patterns. Whatever meaning this art had for the people of Newgrange we can only guess at today. But whatever its meaning it must, in some way, have been connected with their ideas about death and burial.

What does Newgrange tell us about the people who built it?

- Sophisticated society.
- Large well-organised population.
- Belief in afterlife.
- Important people buried in special places.
- Artistic ability.
- Beliefs connected to changing seasons.
- Capable engineers.

Slide 8 Court Tombs

- There are 410 known examples in Ireland.
- The majority are located in the northern half of the country. What does this tell us? A different tribal area? Different religious beliefs? Different burial tradition?
- The main feature is an open court area in front of the entrance to the tomb.
- Cremation is the predominant burial rite practiced at Court Tombs.
- Grave goods: pottery; flint and stone tools; axes and stone beads.

**Teacher Instruction**

Ask the students what they think the open court area was used for. Describe the scene.

- The court area shows that some form of ritual was carried out in front of the tomb.
- It is also likely that this ceremony was performed more than once—why build such an elaborate front to the tomb unless used frequently?
- This connection between ritual and burial shows that the dead were not forgotten but played an important part in the lives of these people.

Slide 9 Portal Tombs

- There are 180 known examples in Ireland.
- They occur mainly in the northern half of the country but there is also a group along the south-east coast.
- Main feature is a single short chamber formed by two tall portal stones, two side stones and a back stone all covered by a large capstone.
- The capstone is often of great size and slopes down from front to rear.

SECTION 3 Poul nabrone Portal Tomb**Key Question(s)**

What did the archaeological excavations at Poul nabrone reveal about the people who built it?

Slide 10 Poul nabrone Portal Tomb

Perhaps the best known Portal Tomb in Ireland is Poul nabrone, in the Burren, Co. Clare.

- The tomb was archaeologically excavated 1986-88 in advance of its conservation as a National Monument.
- The excavation discovered the remains of a minimum of 21 persons buried in the tomb.
- The remains were adult and children, male and female.
- The bones were disarticulated when placed in the tomb—this means that the bodies had decomposed before being placed in the tomb.

Slide 11 Flint Arrowhead

- One of the most dramatic finds was a human pelvic bone with a flint arrowhead embedded in it.

**Teacher Instruction**

Discuss with the students what this find suggests.

Was it an accidental death or the result of warfare? If warfare, what might these Stone Age farmers have been fighting about? (land? cattle stealing? tribal rivalry?)

Slide 12 Grave Goods

Grave goods recovered at Poul nabrone include

- Polished stone axe (illustrated)
- Two stone beads
- Decorated bone pendant
- Bone pin (illustrated)
- Stone disc (illustrated)
- Pottery
- Flint arrowheads (see *Artefacts of Living*, T2,U4,L2).

Slide 13 What Has Been Learnt From the Poul nabrone Excavation?

- Men, women and children buried in tomb = NO DISCRIMINATION.
- Only one adult over 40, most died before they reached 30= LIFE SHORT.
- Skeletal remains shows sign of arthritis = WORKED HARD.
- Dental wear on teeth showed evidence of stone-ground cereals = FARMERS.
- One adult male had arrowhead embedded in hip = DIED VIOLENTLY.

**Teacher Instruction**

Based on this evidence ask the students if they would have liked to live in Ireland during the Neolithic period?

Slide 14 Burial in Neolithic Ireland

What have we learnt from our survey of Neolithic burials?

- Huge amount of resources and time were used to build Megalithic Tombs.
- The people who built them were a very well organised social group.
- Megalithic Tombs were sacred places.
- The belief in an afterlife was central to Neolithic life.



Key Question(s) What type of burial took place in the Bronze Age?

Slide 15 The Bronze Age

- By 2,000 BC the knowledge of metal work had arrived in Ireland and this marks a profound change in society.
- This is reflected in the burial practice. Though Megalithic Tombs continue to be built—Wedge Tombs belong to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age period. But now the tombs are getting smaller in scale—there are no more tombs being built on the scale of Newgrange. New forms of burial monument are being introduced.

Slide 16 Burial in The Bronze Age

- In the Bronze Age we see a shift from the collective tombs of the Neolithic to a single burial tradition.
- People are now being buried in individual graves.
- Another major change is the way these burials are marked above ground.
- Some Bronze Age burials are marked by circular earthworks (barrows) and cairns of stone but many do not seem to have had any above-ground marker.

There are two main burial traditions in the Bronze Age

- **Cist Burial:** the earlier tradition a cist (box) of stone slabs is constructed in a pit. The body is then placed in the cist on its side in a crouched position (knees drawn up to chin). Accompanying the body is a small earthenware pot and one or two grave goods like a flint knife or an arrowhead for a man and a bracelet or necklace for a woman.
- **Pit Burial:** in the later tradition the body is cremated. The bones are then wrapped up and placed in an unlined pit. A large earthenware pot (known as a Cinerary Urn) is then placed over the cremated remains.

Slide 17 Ring Barrows and Cairns

Ring Barrows

- When a Bronze Age burial was marked above ground the monument took the form of a low fosse or ditch dug in a circle around the burial (diam. c. 8m). These are sometimes very indistinct monuments. These monuments are now termed ring barrows (*barrow* is derived from an Old English (Anglo-Saxon) word for mound).

Cairns

- Another type of Bronze Age burial is the hill-top cairn. Although large mounds covering burials date back to Neolithic times (e.g. Meadhbh's Cairn, Co. Sligo) the tradition continues into the Bronze Age. It seems that hilltops were venerated places throughout pre-history, especially in the Bronze Age.



Key Question(s) What new tradition of burial was introduced by Christianity?

Slide 18 Arrival of Christianity

The arrival of Christianity into Ireland in the 5th century also brought with it a new tradition of burial which we still have in Ireland today.



Teacher Instruction

Discuss with the students how we bury our dead today

- Body is laid out in coffin.
- Coffin placed in a grave in a graveyard.
- Grave is marked by a headstone.
- Burial takes place after mass/service in a church.

Slide 19 Early Christian Burial

- **Inhumation** not **cremation**.
- Body wrapped in a shroud and placed full length in a shallow **grave**.
- Grave is symbolically aligned East-West with the head at the western **end**.
- Individual graves were not **marked**.
- Burial is in a consecrated graveyard.

Slide 20 Early Christian Grave

- The graveyards that surrounded early churches were communal burial grounds where the dead were kept in anonymity until the second coming.
- The absence of grave markers meant that there were no plots reserved for individual families.
- Once the body was placed in consecrated ground its exact location was of little concern to the relatives.

Slide 21 Medieval Burial

- **In** medieval times the rich and powerful had special tombs built for themselves inside churches and abbeys. These tombs have full-length effigies of the dead person carved on the lid of the **tomb**.
- This tradition was brought to Ireland by the **Normans**.
- One of the finest effigies of this kind in Ireland is the 'Fear Fáda' in Kilfane, Co. Kilkenny. Though now standing against a wall of the ruined medieval church, the effigy was originally placed over the tomb of this Cantwell knight (the arms of the Cantwell family are on his shield but his exact name is not known).
- The realistic details of the knight's armour and sword are an invaluable source of information about the type of armour and clothes worn by Norman knights.
- This effigy dates to the late 13th century.

Slide 22 Tuam Pilgrim Burial

- The remains **are** of a man from the thirteenth **century**.
- He was found in an unmarked shallow **grave**.
- There was no evidence for the use of a **coffin**.
- He was in the usual east-west orientation, the head to the **west**.
- The emblem of St. James the Apostle, a natural scallop shell, was found in situ on the left **hip**.
- This shows that the man had been on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in NW Spain, **where** the shell was purchased as a 'pilgrimage badge' (see *All the way from Tuam*, T1,U3,L2).

Slide 23 Graveyards and Headstones

- The practice of reserving particular plots in a graveyard for a family only became established practice in the 18th century.
- The individual plot was marked by a headstone and sometimes enclosed by an iron railing.
- Graveyards were also being enclosed by boundary walls with entrance gates.
- Many graveyards included both Catholic and Protestant burials. This tradition dates back to their role as communal burial grounds before the Reformation.

Slide 24 Headstone

The study of an old graveyard can tell us a lot about the culture, social and religious beliefs of 18th/19th century Ireland.

Headstones can be studied as documents in stone, providing information on

- Average life expectancy.
- Where people lived/placenames.
- Mortality rates.
- Religious beliefs (see *In Celebration*, T1,U4,L1).

**Teacher Instruction**

Discuss with the students the information on this early 19th century headstone

- Name of person
- Where did he live
- Symbols
- Who erected the memorial?
- Why was it erected?

Christian Symbols

HOURGLASS	Swiftness of time; short life.
LADDER	Scale of perfection.
KEYS	Keys stand for spiritual knowledge or, if held in the hands of an angel or saint, the means to enter heaven.
SUN	Renewed life; resurrection
TRUMPETER	Herald of the resurrection.
WINGED FACE	Effigy of the soul of the deceased.
SUN SETTING/MOON	Death.
TRIANGLE	In Christianity, the equilateral triangle is the symbol of the Trinity.
IHS	Interpreted as an abbreviation of the Latin phrase Iesu Hominum Salvator (Jesus, Saviour of mankind)
ANGEL	The agent of God; guardians of the dead, symbolising spirituality.
CIRCLE	Universally known as the symbol of eternity and never-ending existence.
SCALES	Judgement of the dead.
DAISY	Innocence, hope, youth.
CROSS	Christianity or suffering.
HEART	Devotion.
CROWN	Reward and Glory.
ACANTHUS LEAF (design in vertical border)	Symbol of peace in the garden of Eden.
VINE	The sacraments, God's blood, God

Headstone Symbolism <http://www.prestigememorials.com/Headstones-Symbolism-information.php>

Slide 25 Summary

- Burial monuments show the effort people in the past went to honour their dead.
- Because they went to such effort burial monuments now form a rich heritage of archaeological remains.
- These monuments provide us with an invaluable window to the past.

See Projects section: Commemorating the Dead.

WEB LINKS

WWW.



National Monuments Service

www.archaeology.ie/

Tombs and Burials

www.ballybegvillage.com/tombs.html

Knowth

www.knowth.com/

Poulnabrone Artefacts

www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/claremuseum/projects/nmi_antiquities_collection.htm

Bronze Age and Iron Age in Ireland

www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/pre_norman_history/summary2.htm

History from Headstones

www.historyfromheadstones.com/index.php?id=951

Irish Graveyards

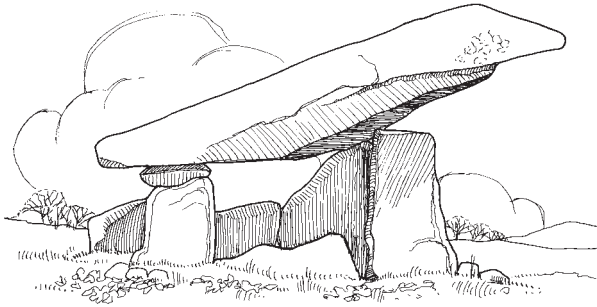
www.irishgraveyards.ie

Monument

Description

**Mesolithic 8,000 BC - 4,000 BC**

- Simple pit burial
- Cremation
- Grave goods: polished stone axe, flint and chert tools
- Possible timber memorial
- Only example to date
Castleconnell, Co. Limerick

**Neolithic 4,000 BC - 2,000 BC**

- Meglithic tombs
- Four main types: Passage, Portal, Court, and Wedge tombs
- Cremation and inhumation
- Grave goods: polished stone axes, jewellery, pottery, stone arrowheads and tools

**Bronze Age/Iron Age 2,000 BC - 300 AD**

- Burial in the ground
- Earth cut and stone lined pits (Cists)
- Covered with earth (Barrows)
- Covered with stone (Cairns)
- Inhumations and cremations
- Grave goods: tools, ornaments, pottery

**Early Christian burial 400 AD - 1700 AD**

- Shallow rectangular pit burials
- East-West orientation—head to West
- No grave markers or grave goods
- Burial in consecrated ground

**Christian burials 1700 to early 20th century**

- The practice of reserving particular plots in a graveyard for a family only became established in the 18th century.
- Close to the south side of the church/site of church.