

The key invention that ushered in the Neolithic Age was farming. This invention fundamentally changed the fabric of Mesolithic society because people no longer had to spend all their time hunting, and they were less likely to go hungry when game was hard to find. Additionally, they could build much larger, more permanent dwellings and, perhaps most importantly, this was the first period that people had enough 'spare time' in which to innovate.

It would be a mistake to think that the Mesolithic people of Ireland suddenly invented farming and became Neolithic. Rather, Ireland's Mesolithic hunters were displaced or assimilated by Neolithic settlers who gradually arrived in Ireland from Britain and brought the technology with them.

The Neolithic settlers set about clearing upland forest (which was thinner and easier to clear than lowland forest) with stone axes, or by burning it, in order to build their permanent farms. As Ireland did not have many native cereal crops, and wild pigs were the only farm animals native to Ireland, the settlers brought with them cows, goats, sheep, wheat and barley which they planted in their farms.

Another piece of new technology introduced to Ireland by the Neolithic settlers was the use of porcellanite. This is a rock that is tougher than the flint used by the Mesolithic Irish. It can be used more effectively for making axes, digging tools etc. Porcellanite was mined almost exclusively in county Antrim.

One final technology that the Neolithic settlers brought to Ireland was pottery. Enough fragments of Neolithic pots have been found in Ireland for it to be reasonably certain how they were made. They were usually made by coiling clay round and round to build up a simple pot shape. These were then smoothed down. Some pots have been decorated by pressing stones, sticks or even fingers into the wet clay. The pot is then hardened by placing it in a hot fire. The pots were used for many things; as well as for storing food, a pot filled with a small amount of fat and set alight was a simple but effective lamp.

A Neolithic farmer would have lived in a wattle-and-daub house made from wood and thatched with reeds. There would have been several such houses in a community, with perhaps 20 or 30 people living together. They would generally have confined themselves to the higher lands of Ireland, by clearing the upland forests by axe or by burning it.

Field boundaries were created by laying out stone walls. Each Neolithic community may have belonged to a wider group of communities that formed a tribe. These tribes may have traded with each other.

On their farms they grew wheat and other grains, and kept cattle, pigs, goats and sheep. Unlike their Mesolithic predecessors, these people cooked indoors, by lighting a fire in the centre of their house. Meat was cooked on a spit over the fire or, for smaller cuts, by placing it on a stone and placing it directly in the fire.

They cut their wheat using a sickle made from a branch with sharpened porcellanite embedded along it. This wheat was ground by hand using a rounded stone on top of a larger grindstone. This was then used to make bread which was baked on top of a flat stone placed in the fire.

There is some uncertainty as to how Neolithic people buried their dead. Archaeologists have found a great many human ashes in megalithic tombs, implying that cremation was common. In places where human bones have been found, these are often disjointed, raising the possibility that they were placed in the tomb some considerable time after death.

They may not have remained in the tomb indefinitely, as they may have been removed to make way for later burials. There is evidence that land pressure was increasing in Neolithic Ireland as the population rose and the cleared upland areas became more populated. Some researchers have proposed that the megaliths were constructed partly as 'status symbols' to claim ownership over land.

The Neolithic Age left a great mark on Ireland. The upland forests had been cleared for farmland, and by the end of the age they were starting to clear the lower forests. Sheep, goats and cows had been imported into Ireland for the first time. Megalithic tombs peppered the landscape. By the time Bronze was introduced to Ireland around 2000BC, Neolithic culture was evident across Ireland.

One of the most important legacies left by the Neolithic farmers was their megaliths, or large earthen constructions, used primarily as burial places. The emphasis placed on these megaliths in literature is mainly due to the fact that they are the only things to have survived largely intact from the Neolithic era.

Portal tombs, or dolmens, are found mainly in the northern half of Ireland. They consist of three or more vertical stones on top of which is perched one or two huge capstones. The capstones always lean down towards one side, leaving a large opening at the high end. Many have collapsed in the intervening millennia. Originally, human remains would have been interred inside the tomb and the entrance sealed with smaller stones, most of which have disappeared in the time since.





Passage Tombs are found mainly in eastern and northern Ireland and were built by later Neolithic settlers. They consist of a roughly circular earthen mound under which is a central chamber and a passage leading into it. The passage is made from large vertical stones with flat stones laid across them and then covered in soil. The most celebrated example is Newgrange, county Meath. Perhaps the most interesting feature of passage tombs is their art. Stones both inside and outside them are decorated with swirls, chevrons, eye-motifs etc. The sun shines directly down the main passage at dawn on the winter solstice around December 21st. At the end of the main passage are three smaller chambers off the main passageway that may have been used for burying the dead.







