

LIGHTS FROM THE PAST

By Mike McCormack, National Historian

There are more than just Christmas lights illuminating the darkness as the sun rises on the Winter Solstice in Ireland. On December 21, a marvelous event occurs at Bru na Boinne. On a hill in the Boyne Valley of Co. Meath stands a complex of three monuments to the early settlers of Ireland, and their civilization: Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange. Built more than 5000 years ago, they are among the oldest man-made, still-standing structures on the planet. Newgrange, in particular, is surrounded by enormous standing stones. A magnificently carved kerbstone lies before the entrance to its 65-foot passage which runs to the center of the mound where three chambers are formed of interlacing stones. The passage is the most interesting part of the structure for it is inclined at precisely the proper angle to align astronomically with the rays of the rising sun on the winter solstice. At dawn on December 21, the shortest day of the year and the point at which the power of the sun begins its annual return, the rising sun's rays shine through a portal above the entrance, travel along the inclined passage and illuminate a symbol on the rear wall. This only happens on December 21 and partially on the few days before and after. And it has been happening precisely at that time for the past 5000 years or more. At other times of the year, the rising sun casts shadows on the kerbstone from the standing stones indicating the times for planting, harvesting and other events.

Ancient Irish manuscripts say it was built by the Tuatha De Danann, early inhabitants of Ireland who were such an advanced civilization that the Celtic settlers who came after them considered them magical and guided by the heavens. Today, we know that part of their 'guidance' came in the form of their advanced knowledge of astronomy – knowledge unsurpassed in the known world at the time. To the Celts, Bru na Boinne was a domain of the gods, a palace of the otherworld, and a burial place of Chieftains. Knowth and Dowth are also astronomically aligned with celestial events. Knowth, the oldest mound of the three was built some 500 years before Newgrange and is astronomically aligned with the setting sun on the winter solstice.

In spite of the amount of verifiable information available on this historic site, some still stand with their backs to Newgrange, and stare in awe at Stonehenge, marveling at the antiquity of a site constructed 1,000 years later. Or they wonder at the pyramids which were only started hundreds of years after Boyne Valley monuments were completed. Finally, in 1989, the New York Times, which is ever slow to credit Irish accomplishments, noted that a British journal had announced that the astrological alignment of Newgrange appeared to be *by design rather than by accident*. Welcome aboard! Now that we've got their attention, it might be time to tell them about the other sites!

The Bru na Boinne complex is only one of four major passage tomb sites in Ireland. The others are Lough Crew, Carrowkeel and Carrowmore. They all date from before 3000 BC; all consist of cruciform (three) chambers at the end of a passage and are covered in most instances by a mound. A unique style of stone carvings are found on all, including lozenge shapes, leaf shapes, and circles, some surrounded by radiating lines. At Lough Crew, Co. Meath there are also three parts on hilltops – Carnbane East and West and the third, less well preserved, is at Patrickstown. The cairn in Carnbane East is directed to receive the beams of the rising sun on the spring and autumnal equinox - the light shining down the passage and illuminating art on the back wall.

Carrowkeel in Co. Roscommon is a beautifully situated megalithic hill top passage tomb cemetery, consisting of 14 passage cairns, all are round in shape except one, which is a long oval shape consisting of a forecourt and cruciform passage grave. This is a classic Irish passage tomb, consisting of a passage leading to a central chamber with three equally spaced side chambers. The most interesting feature of this tomb is a portal above the entrance, just like the one at Newgrange, but unlike Newgrange this one is aligned to the midsummer sunset.

Carrowmore in Co. Sligo is the largest and one of the most important megalithic sites in Europe. Over 60 tombs have been located and the oldest pre-dates Newgrange by 700 years. This Bronze Age cemetery holds the largest collection of megaliths in Ireland – a mixture of passage graves and dolmens – and is the second largest cemetery of megalithic tombs in Europe. Researchers place the bulk of the megaliths in Carrowmore at between 4300 and 3500 BC, more in keeping with Neolithic dating but still unusually early. The whole scene is overlooked by Listoghil and Queen Maeve's tomb on Knocknarea – the largest tomb in Ireland.

December 21st is coming and Bru na Boinne will again receive its annual message from the sun telling man that the days will now get longer and the long night of winter is coming to an end. Hopefully the long night of ignorance about Irish accomplishments is ending as well.