Newgrange

Newgrange is the best known Irish passage tomb and dates to c.3,200BC. The large mound is approximately 80m in diameter and is surrounded at its base by a kerb of 97 stones. The most impressive of these stones is the highly decorated Entrance Stone.

**Cairn**

The flat-topped cairn is almost 0.5 hectares in extent. It is roughly circular and is estimated to weigh 200,000 tonnes in total. It is made up of water-rolled stones from the terraces of the River Boyne. Excavations showed that white quartz stones from quartz veins in Co Wicklow and round granite boulders from the Mourne and Carlingford areas were used to build the revetment wall above the kerb along the front or south side of the mound.

## Tomb

The mound covers a single tomb, which consists of a long passage and a cross-shaped chamber. The passage points to the southeast and is just less than 19 m long. It leads in to a chamber with three recesses. A corbelled roof covers the chamber. To construct the roof, the builders overlapped layers of large rocks until the roof could be sealed with a capstone, 6 metres above the floor. After 5000 years, the roof at Newgrange is still water proof.

## Basin stones

These basins which are on the floor of each of the recesses held the remains of the dead. The remains of at least five people were recovered during excavation, although originally much more bone may have been placed there.   Most of the bones found were cremated, although small amounts were unburned. Grave goods of chalk and bone beads and pendants as well as some polished stone balls were placed with the dead.

## Art

The entrance stone at Newgrange and Kerbstone 52 at the back of the mound are highly accomplished pieces of sculpture, regarded as some of the finest achievements of European Neolithic art. Many more of the kerbstones are also carved, some of them with carving on the side facing inwards.   
In the passage, some of the stones are beautifully carved particularly the 19th stone on the left, has a design which some visitors say reminds them of a stylised face. In the chamber in the back recess on the right hand side is the world famous tri-spiral design.

## Winter Solstice

Of the many notable features at Newgrange, the most famous is the small opening or ‘roof box’ situated above the passage entrance. At dawn on the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year (December 21st) and for a number of days before and after, a shaft of sunlight enters the chamber through an opening in the roof box.   
  
To the Neolithic culture of the Boyne Valley, the winter solstice marked the start of the New Year-- a sign of nature’s rebirth and promising renewed life to crops, animals and humans. It may also have served as a powerful symbol of the inevitable victory of life over death, perhaps promising new life to the spirits of the dead.

## Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age Beaker People

Around 2000 BC, new people or new ideas reached Ireland. Called the Beaker period because of the distinctive pottery type associated with it, this time coincides with the rise of metal working even though stone tools continued to be used. Beaker people constructed a huge enclosure, which served as a religious centre as important in its day as the passage tomb had been. Archaeological excavations by David Sweetman revealed it to be a large double circle of wooden posts (c100m in diameter) within which portions of animals were cremated and buried in pits. It is called the Pit Circle.

## Stone Circle

A circle of standing stones also surrounds Newgrange. Its purpose is unclear, although recent research indicates that it could have had an astronomical function. The Stone Circle was erected sometime after 2000BC since excavation have shown that one of the stones of the circle lies directly on top of the Early Bronze Age Pit Circle. Originally there may have been more stones in the circle. Possibly some were broken up over the years.  
This was the final phase of building at Newgrange.

The Rock of Cashel

The Rock of Cashel is one of Ireland's most spectacular historic sites: a prominent green hill, banded with limestone outcrops, rising from a grassy plain and bristling with ancient fortifications. Sturdy walls circle an enclosure containing a complete round tower, a 13th-century Gothic cathedral and the finest 12th-century Romanesque chapel in Ireland, home to some of the land's oldest frescoes.

It's a five-minute stroll from the town centre up to the Rock, from where fantastic views range over the Tipperary countryside.

The word 'cashel' is an Anglicised version of the Irish word caiseal, meaning 'fortress' (related to the English 'castle', from the Latin castellum). In the 4th century the Rock of Cashel was chosen as a base by the Eóghanachta clan from Wales, who went on to conquer much of Munster and become kings of the region. For some 400 years it rivalled Tara as a centre of power in Ireland. The clan was associated with St Patrick, hence the Rock's alternative name of St Patrick's Rock. In the 10th century the Eóghanachta lost possession of the rock to the O'Brien (Dál gCais) tribe under Brian Ború's leadership. In 1101 King Muircheartach O'Brien presented the Rock to the Church to curry favour with the powerful bishops and to end secular rivalry over possession of the Rock with the Eóghanachta, by now known as the MacCarthys.

Numerous buildings must have occupied the cold and exposed Rock over the years, but it is the ecclesiastical relics that have survived even the depredations of the Cromwellian army in 1647. The vast medieval **cathedral** was used for worship until the mid-1700s. Among the graves are a 19th-century high cross and mausoleum for local landowners, the Scully family; the top of the Scully Cross was razed by lightning in 1976.

But the undoubted highlight of the Rock is the early 12th-century **Cormac's Chapel**, an exquisite gem of Romanesque architecture with beautifully carved doorways and the precious remains of colourful wall paintings. Call ahead for details of the 45-minute guided tours (included in the admission fee).

The Hill of Tara