

Ireland's earliest farmhouses

In the history of mankind, one of the most profound changes that affected the development of civilisation was the adoption of what came to be known as the Neolithic Revolution – a lifestyle dependent on cereal-growing and animal husbandry, which spread from Mesopotamia and the Middle East.

In Ireland, the change from the hunter-gatherer economy of the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age, circa 7000-4000BC) to an economy based on agriculture would have implied a new way of looking at the landscape. The settled farming lifestyle would have been in stark contrast to the mobile existence of Ireland's Mesolithic inhabitants.

Typical monuments of the Neolithic period (the New Stone Age, circa 4000-2000BC) are the highly visible and intriguing megalithic tombs that dot the Irish landscape. Passage tombs like Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in the Brú na Bóinne complex in Co Meath indicate the high degree of organisation and social structure that formed the backbone of Neolithic society.

Less visible but equally as important for our understanding are the domestic arrangements of the people who occupied the landscape. Ancient remains originally constructed with organic materials leave no traces at surface level for the archaeologist to identify. It is no surprise, then, that houses that date from over five and a half thousand years ago are identified (and, indeed, are expected to be identified) during topsoil operations associated with modern infrastructural development works such as pipeline and motorway construction and quarrying.

RECENT FINDS

To date, around 80 Neolithic houses have been discovered at 50 sites.

Most have been discovered in recent years, leading Professor Gabriel Cooney of UCD to refer to "a housing boom in the Neolithic" in Ireland. The houses are found as individual structures and sometimes in groups of two or three. There are also larger clusters such as those at Thornhill in Co Derry, where at least five such structures were discovered surrounded by a series of palisades.

At Corbally in Co Kildare, seven structures in two distinct groups have been discovered. There is insufficient evidence to say for certain who would have built and used the houses but it is likely that they would have been built by individual families and that the clusters may have been used by extended family groups.

Typically, the remains of a Neolithic house appear as a dark-co-

This is the second in a series of 12 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.



Picture: © Claire Breen, National Monuments Service

Reconstruction of a Neolithic house at the Irish National Heritage Park, Ferrycarrig, Co Wexford.

loured band of soil forming a square or rectangular pattern against the lighter colour of exposed topsoil. The dark-coloured soil is the visible remains of the fill of the trenches that once held the wooden walls of the house.

HOUSE STRUCTURE

The trenches provide the outline of the houses, square to rectangular in plan, many measuring between six and eight metres long and four and seven metres wide. There are also a smaller number of houses in the larger range of nine to 11 metres long and six to eight metres wide. Some have end walls that are slightly curved. Curiously, such measurements are often reflected in the average rural bungalow of modern times.

In spite of their truncated nature, these buried slot-trenches contain enough information to allow the archaeologist to build a

speculative model of the building that originally stood at that location. The Neolithic house would have been a robust building and construction would have involved much of the expertise of the Stone Age carpenter. There is evidence for several different techniques of house construction. Some have timber frames, upright posts and walls constructed of vertical planks; others show evidence of wattle walls, sometimes combined with plank walls.

Excavated remains indicate that in many cases the walls carried the weight of the roof, while there are other examples of large posts providing additional support for the roof. Doorways or entrance gaps can be seen in a number of houses; at Ballyglass, Co Mayo, for example, the entrance was located at the northwest corner of the structure.

In many instances there is evidence for a hearth (sometimes

sited dangerously close to internal upright posts) and traces of internal divisions to create rooms.

In the days before the chimney, there is no doubt that ventilation would have been an issue. With regard to the roofing of such houses, the evidence is not easily recognised owing to the vulnerability of this part of the structure. It is likely, however, that thatch would have been commonly employed.

INFLUENCES

There is evidence of prehistoric ritual practices at a large number of houses, such as the deliberate deposition of broken pottery and stone objects (arrowheads, stone axe heads and quern fragments) in the foundation trenches and post-holes. Perhaps the builders were paying respect to the earth that sustained them.

The similarity of plans and construction techniques across

Neolithic Ireland has been highlighted by archaeologists Eoin Grogan and Jessica Smyth. Smyth states that "the island-wide similarities in materials and methods of construction, in size and date, and in associated features such as pits, suggest the existence on some level of a commonly held house 'template', or a common awareness of the 'correct' way to construct these buildings."

If this is the case, there is no doubt that knowledge of agricultural methods and techniques would have spread in a similar fashion.

To find the places where the people who tilled the land cooked, ate and slept is exciting for the archaeologist. Our understanding of Neolithic houses is just one aspect of early farming in Ireland. There is so much more to be discovered.

NEXT WEEK THE TOMBS OF OUR ANCESTORS