

History Revision – Ancient & Early Christian Ireland

THE REMAINS OF NEOLITHIC IRELAND;

Neolithic means “**New Stone Age**”. The first settlers arrived from Scotland about 6.000 B.C. They were **Hunter-Gatherers** and used stone weapons and tools. Ireland was heavily forested at the time and they used the rivers to travel in small boats.

The first farmers arrived around 3.500 B.C. They began to clear the forests to grow crops and to raise animals such as sheep, goats, pigs and cattle. They also brought the skills of pottery and weaving with them. Axe factories have been discovered in Co. Antrim, which tell us they traded as well. They lived in large comfortable timber dwellings, such as have been found at Lough Gur in Co. Limerick.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEOLITHIC;

- The development of **farming**.
- The development of **woven cloth**.
- The development of **pottery**.
- The development of **polished stone axe heads**.
- The development of **more permanent houses** with stone foundations.

NEOLITHIC BURIAL CUSTOMS;

Tombs made from very large stones are called “**Megalithic Tombs**”. Three main types have been found in Ireland;

(i) COURT CAIRNS – These are the earliest type found. They have one or two rectangular chambers, covered by a stone mound. An open, unroofed circular court lies at the entrance. An example has been found at Lough Gur in Co Limerick.

(ii) PORTAL DOLMENS – A single burial chamber with two large upright stones at the entrance. A huge capstone or Dolmen was placed on top of these uprights. An example has been found at Pol Na Brun in Co. Clare.

(iii) PASSAGE TOMBS – A large circular mound, with a passage leading from the edge of the mound to a burial chamber within. The burial chamber had a Corbelled Roof (large slabs of stone overlapping each other topped by a capstone). Decorated kerb stones were often placed around the edge of the mound. Examples have been found at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in Co. Meath.

THE BRONZE AGE;

Around 2.000 B.C. new settlers arrived in Ireland. They brought with them skills in metal. At first they used **Copper**, however, gradually they added **Tin** to the mix and eventually they began to work **Bronze**. Bronze was better than stone because it was harder wearing, it was easier to shape and it had a sharper edge. Copper was mined in Ireland at **Mt Gabriel** in West Cork.

Bronze Age people lived near rivers; they laid out fields, built houses and sheds. They buried their dead in **Cist Graves** and **Wedge Tombs**. They were also known as the “**Beaker People**” because of the style of pottery they used. Gold works reached a high point during the Bronze Age for example **the Broighter Hoard** from Co, Derry.

THE CELTS;

They were a farming and warlike people from **Central Europe**, who discovered **Iron**. This was stronger than Bronze and gave them an advantage over their enemies in battle. Much of our information about the Celts comes from archaeological remains found in Central Europe and Ireland.

- **HALLSTATT, AUSTRIA** – A cemetery and mine workings were discovered. Clothing made of leather, wool or linen was found. The Celts lived in rows of wooden huts, which were found to contain imported goods from Greece and Rome. The dead were buried with personal possessions and food, which tells us that they believed in an afterlife.
- **LA TENE, SWITZERLAND** – A lakeside settlement, only revealed after a dry summer in the 19 C. Huge amounts of decorated metalwork was discovered, giving its name to a new style “La Tene”.

THE CELTS IN IRELAND;

They arrived about **600B.C**. They spoke Gaelic and worshipped Celtic gods. The **RI** was the most important person in Celtic society and had a number of important duties;

- To lead cattle raids against the neighbours.
- To protect his Tuath from attack.
- To enforce Brehon law.

The **Derbfine** were a group of rich warriors, who chose both the RI and his deputy the **Tanaiste**

The **Aos Dana** were a group of wise men and women who helped the RI govern the Tuath. They included Brehons, Druids, Fili, Doctors and Craftsmen

Brehons oversaw **Brehon Law** and settled disputes between people. This law allowed divorce and more than one wife. It treated men and women as equals and allowed women to own property.

Druids were the priests of the Celtic world and oversaw sacrifices, foretold the future and crowned every RI. They were respected and feared. The following were the main festivals of the Celtic calendar;

- Samhain – First November – In honour of the god Daghdha.
- Imbolc – First February – In honour of the goddess Brigit.
- Bealtaine – First May – In honour of the god Bel.
- Lughanasa – First August – In honour of the god Lugh.

The **File** composed songs and stories in praise of the RI and the Derbfine. They memorised the history of the tribe. Their poems of satire were greatly feared.

The rest of Celtic society was little more than slaves because they could not own property or carry weapons.

THE CELTIC WAY OF LIFE;

Cattle were important as they were a symbol of wealth and because all court fines imposed by the Brehons were paid in cattle. As farmers they grew wheat and barley. They did not live in towns but in family settlements. There were four types of settlement;

- **Ring fort** – A circular dwelling enclosed by a ditch and a mound of earth.
- **Crannog** – A lake dwelling built on an artificial island e.g. Lagore Co. Meath.
- **Hill fort** – Similar to Ring forts but using the hill for defence, and much larger e.g. Rathgall Co. Wicklow.
- **Promontory fort** – Built on a height, which had only one access, they were easy to defend e.g. Dun Aengus in the Aran Islands.

The Celts were a **warlike people** who went into battle naked to scare their enemies! Women also went into battle. They carried swords, shields, spears and slings. They collected the heads of their enemies and regarded them as trophies. They were great respecters of **single combat** e.g. the fight between Cuchulainn and Ferdia.

Celtic men wore their hair long and dyed it blond. They were very concerned with cleanliness and washed several times a day. Men wore light trousers and a short tunic while the women wore a long loose-sleeved dress.

People played music, especially the Harp and enjoyed games such as hunting, hurling and **Fidchell** (a form of chess).

They prepared their food on **Fulacht Fiaidh**, outdoor cooking sites. These were stone or timber – lined pits filled with water. Hot stones from a fire were dropped in to make the water boil then the meat, wrapped in straw was placed in the boiling water to cook.

The Celts buried their dead in **Cist Graves**. In Ireland shortly before the arrival of Christianity they started to mark the graves of important people with Ogham stones. **Ogham stones** were slabs of stone with the name of an important RI written on them, using horizontal lines to represent letters of the alphabet.

CHRISTIANITY IN IRELAND;

In 431 A.D. Pope Celestine sent a Bishop called **Palladius** to visit the Christians in Ireland. He died and the next year **Patrick** was sent to preach to the pagan Irish. Patrick spent his time travelling around the country, preaching and converting people. He organised the church into Dioceses ruled by a bishop.

In the 5-century Irish monks began to set up **Monasteries in remote places** e.g. **St Enda** on the **Aran Islands**, **St Kevin** in **Glendalough**, and **St Ciaran** in **Clonmacnoise**.

These monasteries resembled large ring forts, with the buildings inside made of wood including the monk's cells, the **Oratory** and the **Refectory**. They often attracted crowds and some monks went further away to seek the isolation necessary to contemplate their God.

SCELIG MHICIL was one of these places. It was situated on a rocky island 4 miles into the Atlantic.

The life of the Irish monks was very hard and strict. The monastery was self-sufficient. Many of these monasteries were great centres of learning, attracting students from all over Europe, for example Clonmacnoise.

Many Irish monks went abroad to preach the gospel to the pagan tribes, which had destroyed the Roman Empire, for example;

- St Columba – Iona, Scotland.
- St Aidan – Lindisfarne, England.
- St Columbanus – Bobbio, Italy.
- St Killian – Cologne, Germany.

THE ART AND WEALTH OF THE MONASTERIES;

Some of the monks were expert craftsmen, who produced works of art in stone, metal and manuscript which were the finest works of art produced anywhere in the world at that time.

- Metalwork – The Ardagh Chalice / the Derrynaflan Chalice / Tara Brooch.
- Stonework – The High Cross at Monasterboice / The Round Tower at Glendalough.
- Manuscripts – The Book of Kells / the Book of Durrow.