

Lar Dooley

out of the  
☀  
darkness

A sacred journey into the origins of  
Indigenous Irish Spirituality





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darkness

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Indigenous Irish Spirituality**

**Lar Dooley**

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This book is dedicated to

**Pai Kaho Horehe Rawiri Haeremoana Anihana Tamihana Pokaitara  
Whikiriwhi,**

“Tohunga Taitai Aorangi Himne Wairua Matakite Kaumatua”,

Ngati Paoa Iwi, Maori nation.

He gifted me a life's journey, as thanks for my advice. He, in turn, asked me to bring my own indigenous spirituality back to life.

My gracious thanks also, in memory of my wairua aroha marenatanga,

**Ani Ruihi Tapeka Kahukura Taitai Te Anihana Tamihana Pokaitara  
Whikiriwhi.**

“Tohunga Ahurewa Himne Wairua Kuia Kaitiaka”,

Ngati Paoa Iwi, Maori nation.

This book is the story of my journey to seek out much that is hidden in plain view. That journey owes its origins to my wairua connection and the beautiful interaction with people true to their proud whakapapa of Tainui.

**Ma Te whakapono.**

*“Ma Te whakapono*

*Ma Te tumanako*

*Ma Te titiro*

*Ma Te whakarongo*

*Ma Te mahitahi*

*Ma Te manawanui*

*Ma Te aroha*

*Ka taea e au”*



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## PROLOGUE



This is a personal view of indigenous Irish spirituality. It is taken from the viewpoint of over 50 years of individual exploration of our ancient Irish indigenous culture. I am not a historian, or an archaeologist; but my own personal journey has led me to try to make sense of how the ancients lived and how they died. Putting together the story of what drove them to create so many hilltop cairns which dot the landscape of Loughcrew, County Meath, Ireland. These solar temples shield within their protective shell the basis for indigenous Irish spirituality.

Many people will know Irish Neolithic culture, based on visits to Brú na Bóinne, and the ancient temples of Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange. How many people, however, delve into the real meaning of these ancient sites, or even explore the basis and the origins of these fantastic cathedrals of Irish indigenous spirituality? The book is an individual view, written from an individual viewpoint, about the journey from Loughcrew to Brú na Bóinne. I have been given a life's journey to undertake, and this is the story of that journey. It has one target: to bring our ancient indigenous spirituality back to life, and that is the purpose of this book.

It is a mortal journey, but also a spiritual one. I have had the benefit of my spirit guides, and was given a life's journey by them. I thank them for the lessons learned, in the light of day and in the brightness of night. My journey has been blessed by meeting many people, and many spirits. All are welcome in my life, for my journey has been a very hard one, but looking back, it has been a very blessed one too. I am at peace with the many phases of life, and this life is just one phase. My spirit knows no bounds, and while I have learned much from teachers in the mortal world, the essence of my understanding has come from Spirit.

My teachers sit firmly in the spirit world; they are at peace with me, as much as I am at peace with them. By that I mean I have never studied Shamanism, or Druidic practice, or paid anyone to 'enlighten' me. From that stance, this book is highly individual and will not simply be the regurgitating of the viewpoints of others. This book is my story, but also the story of the beautiful culture which spawned our indigenous Irish culture. This culture which, through the gene pool of our

## Prologue

ancestors, through the diaspora of so many people who describe themselves as 'Irish' or 'Celtic', sits well within their psyche.

Most people, however, simply do not understand the ancient origins of those perceived categories.

My journey has many homes, in Ireland, or far abroad. I have had many experiences, and undertaken many journeys, alone, or in the company of others. I am at peace with Spirit and I have become a balanced being, from being at peace. I owe much of that peace to lessons learned in a very sacred and ancient space, a place full of wonder and energy. This I would love to share with you. I invite you to join me, and I will bring you to places never seen before.

Many books have been written about this place. Many photos have been taken in this place. Many discoveries have emerged about this place. But few people have journeyed here, in the dark of night. Few people come here to bless themselves in the ancient tradition, to walk barefoot in the dark. Few people invite the ancestors to journey with them and welcome them into their lives. This is the story of Loughcrew, as never told before. It does not replace other stories or other books, for these are also part of the story.

My story starts at a well. It begins with a sacred cleansing ceremony. It welcomes the spirits of the land to join me. It welcomes the spirits of the ancestors to walk with me. We enter a sacred space barefoot, and give thanks to those who have gone before. We acknowledge the spirits of the land and the land of the spirits. From then on, we are never alone. There is no fear, no trepidation, no looking back.

For when we look back, we are joined by those who have come through the generations to meet us. They accompany us on our journey. This is my story, but also theirs. It is also the story of Loughcrew. It is the story of six thousand years of spiritual history, shadows on the land, opaque figures dancing through the night. It is the story of many moons, and many suns. It brings us into the darkness, but then we emerge into the light. In this story you will come, literally, out of the Darkness, and into the Light.

Enjoy the journey.

## INTRODUCTION



A *Teambair*, in ancient Gaelige (the indigenous language of Ireland), is defined as ‘a sanctuary or sacred space, cut off for ceremony’. These are the very basic structures of indigenous Irish spirituality. In this treatise, we are limiting ourselves to the Boyne Valley Culture, with its hugely expansive rock (and, specifically, passage chamber) art. The passage chamber art is specific to the internal and external stone structures of what we call passage chambers. In less enlightened times they were called ‘passage *tombs*’, due to their later use as depositories for the remains of those who passed from this life. This was done out of respect for those who had gone before and recognised the huge spiritual intensity of the little cairns dotted throughout the landscape. By their use as interment spaces for the later generations of the indigenous Irish people who passed from this earth, we recognise the continuation of their use for a significant period of time. They were used for their original purpose, but then their spiritual status was again recognised. Generations after their construction, after their being discontinued for their original purpose and design, they became depositories for the remains of others.



*The ‘Mound of the Hostages’, Hill of Tara, Co. Meath.*

## Introduction

*Dumba na nGiall*, or the ‘Mound of the Hostages’ on the Hill of Tara, is a very good example. This is a passage chamber which was used over a considerable period of time as a spiritual monument. The Hill of Tara, or more commonly simply ‘Tara’, is a sacred sanctuary in the Boyne Valley culture whose anglicised (vocally translated) name derives from the Gaelic ‘*Teambhair*’. The Mound of the Hostages remained sacrosanct during all the political upheavals of Tara. It was untouched during the generations of building various different protected structures. These were erected by generations of Kings of Tara and High Kings of Ireland.



*Orthostat covered in carved rock art in the mound's entrance*

Despite the huge political, social and habitational upset of this small space of land, and its attachment to the politically different dynasties of Kings and High Kings, this one mound suffered little disruption. Its passage and inner core remained sacrosanct, other than having mortal remains interred here throughout the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age periods of our ancient history. The last known interment here was barely 1200 years ago, although the monument is over 5300 years old, meaning it had a subsequent use as a ‘burial chamber’ for in excess of 4000 years.

In this treatise, we will stick to what these structures were originally designed for, as solar, and possibly lunar, ‘observatories’. They are spaces where light comes into a passage at certain times of the year. The light enters the passages in a planned and

structured manner. The entrance to the passages was orientated in a certain direction, so that the sun, or the moon, was aligned with it. In spiritual terms, this alignment performed a set of sacred and spiritual rituals. The light was manipulated to highlight the movement of the sun on specific, highly carved stones within the passage. This action, where the light 'magically' performs set patterns, was not designed for man to glorify their 'control' of the sun. It was designed to highlight their respect for and their devotion to the Sun as a life giving force.

In the Neolithic, the first generations of farmers came onto the landscape and cleared vast ranges of primeval forest. They did this in order to grow their crops. They needed to get a Mediterranean crop to adapt to a very different climate and range of temperatures. In order to do this, they did something that their predecessors, the hunter-gatherer nomadic culture before them, never did. They planned, meticulously, to grow their own crops. They had to adapt to the new climate in order for their crops to grow, flourish and be harvested. To facilitate this they created ancient 'clocks'; not to tell the time, but to organise the year into defined divisions. Being farmers, they worked from dawn to dusk, so 'time' as we know it had no significance. They simply needed to know when to cater for the planting of seed. To facilitate this they reasoned that the longest day and the shortest day were known. These days are the Winter Solstice, the shortest day; and Summer Solstice, the longest day. These two dates had midpoints where night and day were equal. These are called the Equinoxes, Spring and Autumn. They are roughly half way between the Solstices. None of these dates were of any real benefit for planting crops, or managing herds of cattle, or flocks of sheep. So, this is when the fire festivals evolved.

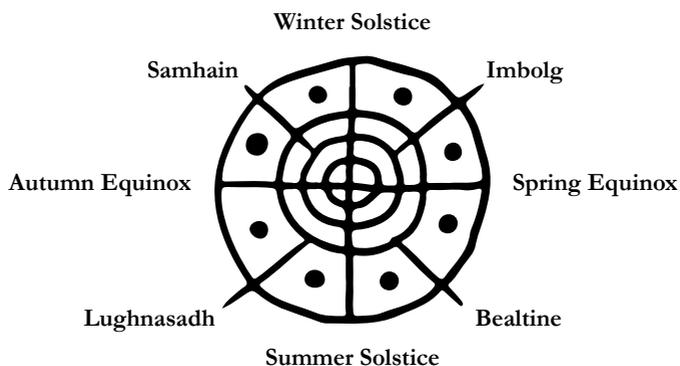
By bisecting the existing 4 'Quarter Days' they knew (2 Solstices and 2 Equinoxes) and which divided the solar year into four equal parts, the Fire Festivals were created. These new four dates are known as the 'Cross Quarter' days. This moved the germination phase of their spelt wheat from Spring Equinox to Bealtine, one of the four new festivals created to better suit the farming year within a new inclement and erratic weather pattern.

These cross quarter days are still aligned with their original roots, the passage chambers of the Boyne Valley culture. Its links to the celebration of the sunrise or sunset, as a means of giving thanks to the Cailleach (the Irish version of Mother Earth) still exists. The Fire Festivals were created to give thanks for the bounty of food gifted to those who farmed the land and foraged for fungi, roots, berries and leaves, for food or medicinal purposes.

Creating the 'cross quarter' days allowed for the adaption of the planting season to cope with the extremes of temperature not experienced in their old Mediterranean

## Introduction

climate. The four cross quarter days still retain their ancient Gaelic names: *Imbolg*, (midway through Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox), *Bealtine* (midway through Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice), *Lughnasadh* (midway through Summer Solstice and Autumn Equinox) and finally *Samhain* (midway through Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice). In order to be aware of the divisions of the year, these farmers planned to erect structures in the landscape. These would be specifically aligned with the eight-period Neolithic year. In chronological order, the Neolithic year is: Winter Solstice, Imbolg, Spring Equinox, Bealtine, Summer Solstice, Lughnasadh, Autumn Equinox, Samhain, and back to Winter Solstice.



*These are the corner stones of indigenous Irish spirituality. They are sometimes referred to as the 'Wheel of the Year'.*

Now, they needed to know when these dates would occur. They needed to 'time' these dates, and they needed some way of telling these days. So they created man made passages, covered with loose stones, contained within roughly round circles of very large stones. By meticulous planning, measuring and building, they developed the first functioning Irish solar calendar we know of. An alignment system where the light of the rising or setting Sun (and in some cases, also the Moon), on specific Quarter or Cross-Quarter days, would enter the chambers through a narrow passage at the entrance of the structure. Furthermore, these monuments were painstakingly and heavily decorated with a deep system of carved symbology, nowadays called "rock art", which leaves modern visitors perplexed at their complexity, meaning and function.

These passage chambered cairns exist all over Ireland. While some are on quite low ground and some are on river plains, mostly they exist on hilltops, and mostly in groups of three. Three is a significant 'sacred' number in ancient indigenous Irish spirituality. As we investigate the Boyne Valley culture in a specific attribution to indigenous Irish spirituality, one set of three 'sacred spaces' stands out as the perfect example of how these spaces work.

## Out of the Darkness

The origins of these sanctuaries of the Boyne Valley was undoubtedly the many hilltop cairns which exist on a certain strip of hills, the highest in the Boyne Valley region. These are called historically ‘*Sliabh na Caillaigh*’ (from Irish, “Hill of the Veiled One”) or, in modern terms, Loughcrew. This stunning collection of small cairns, or spiritual temples, are devoted to the seminal goddess of ancient indigenous Irish spirituality, ‘*an Cailleach*’, or ‘the Cailleach’. With the sacred hilltops devoted to her, this is a specifically intense collection of some thirty cairns spread over four hilltops. Three of them have intense clusters of cairns on their hilltops, visible from vast distances. The spiritual intensity here draws people from around the world, to come and investigate the ancient spiritual focus of this small region in the greater Boyne Valley. In later years, as the area becomes more noted, several groups of elders from indigenous nations across the globe came here to perform ancestral respect ceremonies and to remember the ancestral element of indigenous Irish spirituality.



*Carrickbrack and Carnbawn, 2 of the 4 hilltops which make up the Loughcrew Megalithic Complex, as seen from Sliabh na Caillaigh.*

Who is the Cailleach? Did or does she exist and can we define the meaning of the word ‘cailleach’. It is associated with the word ‘*caille*’, meaning a ‘veil’. In strictly spiritual terms, it is common for spiritual entities of the feminine variety to be ‘veiled’. The purpose of the veil is for shading, or covering, the upper part of the face. This is so we don’t look directly into their eyes. As such the literal meaning of

## Introduction

*'cailleach'* is 'Veiled One' and not 'witch', or 'hag' (as the hill is occasionally referred as 'Hill of the Hag'). The goddess of Winter, who, when she strikes the land with her staff, can cause it to freeze over. In modern times, however, we very much misunderstand what Winter meant in the Neolithic. It was a time of gentle care and rest, keeping inside by a warm fire, a time of great pregnancy on the land, when the animals, and a lot of the women, would have been 'with child'. The Cailleach was the goddess who sheltered us, protected us, and guided us through the short days and cold nights of Winter.

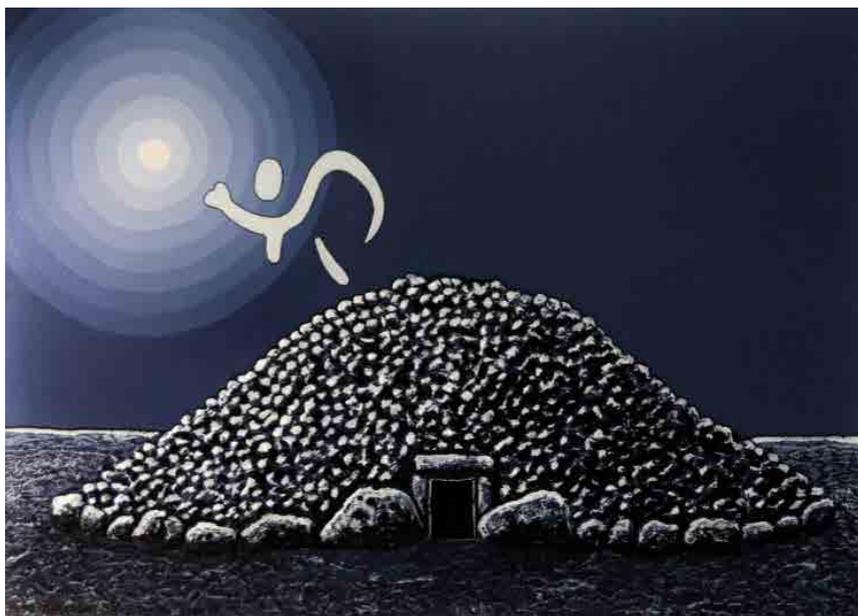
Indigenous Irish spirituality was, and is, about respect for the sacred feminine. That is not limited to the female, neither is it limited to the human species, but to all plant and animal life. We have to return to a vision of life where the land was in full equilibrium, and the birds, insects and animals were free to roam. The grasses, bushes and trees and the cleanliness of our wells and rivers play their part in the greater scheme of life. Without being balanced in our thought, in our beliefs, in our wisdom, in our humility and in our respect for each and every individual spiritual being, we can never assume the mantle of 'wisdom'. Wisdom, in the indigenous sense, is worldly understanding. That means you are instantly understood to be as much a beneficial energy as you can possibly be, whether you are male or female. We all need understanding of every mortal and spiritual issue which confronts us, which is why the elders, both male and female, were and are the wisdom holders of indigenous spirituality. That indeed is a huge failing in modern religion and in mortal life, where the alpha male has assumed control of every facet of life, including the religious viewpoint of spirituality. This diminishes the role of the female, and the role of the feminine energy within all of the species.

A similar kind of damage is evident in how Loughcrew has been decimated by the legal need in the early 19th century to enclose fields in permanent boundaries. This left the passage chambers denuded of the protective cairns and left significant monuments totally destroyed, so we can just imagine and lament how much precious art has been destroyed. Some more art is probably lying undiscovered and abandoned in field boundaries. More is certainly buried in ruined cairns and the bushy growth around the Loughcrew hills. This is particularly true in reference to the almost totally destroyed Patrickstown Hill (the fourth of Loughcrew's hilltops), and her four completely obliterated cairns. The disrespect shown by State Agencies (and I have no problem naming the National Monuments Service and the Office of Public Works in this regard) to the precious Neolithic artwork on the Loughcrew Hills, is nothing short of disgraceful. The neglect shown negates and abandons their stated mission of protecting our ancient heritage.

Loughcrew, the probable origins of indigenous Irish spirituality with regard to the Brú na Bóinne culture, has been treated with so much disrespect. This disrespect has

## Out of the Darkness

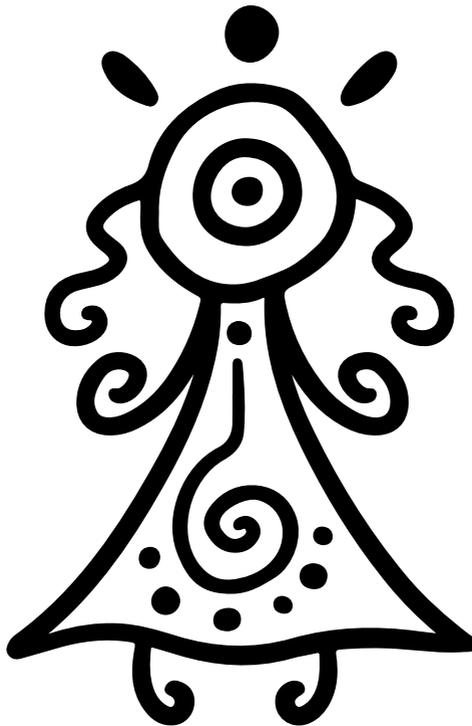
been carried on by generations of modern Irish people and by the need of registering legal debt. It is the preserve of indigenous Irish spirituality, and that spirit drives the local population in their desire to protect what is left of our heritage and to keep it safe for posterity. In that we must give due thanks, and indeed our support, for the pride and respect given to the Loughcrew Hills by local residents, and by the people who are reawakening to the magic of indigenous Irish spirituality; be they from the immediate locality, from within the shores of this beautiful home of ours, or from within the Irish Diaspora, so widely spread throughout the world. We must also acknowledge other spiritual beings, called or calling here, to pay their respect to the incredible resources left to us by our ancients. We need to treasure what is left of our heritage and we need to awaken to our indigenous Irish spirituality. We need to come out of the Darkness and into the Light.



*“Cairn T” by Lar Dooley.*

# Out of the Darkness

## Book I



**MAIDEN**

*(Maighdean)*



## CHAPTER ONE:

### Calling



### The Light and the Dark

*Any journey begins with a calling, a beeding of Spirit that invites you to throw yourself into something new, dare to go into the Sacred Wilds, and see if you can discover something new and worthwhile, for yourself and for your tribe. As a curious young Maiden striving to understand her role in this World, you hear the call of the Unknown. Something inside you has stirred, and deep down you know. You'll answer the call.*

We don't really know where the ancients, who started the Boyne Valley Culture, came from, because Loughcrew has never been fully excavated. That is, not in modern times, in the way other ancient sites have been excavated using modern dating techniques. We know Carrowkeel and Carrowmore in Co. Sligo are linked, because there is a distinct familial lineage established between bones excavated from both sacred spaces. However, Loughcrew is an enigma, a hugely spiritual area that maintains its sacred core. Even though large parts of it were destroyed over the centuries, it still holds its peaceful seclusion and spiritual energy. Many of the cairns were destroyed in the hugely mortal need to comply with the Land Enclosure Act, which was designed to enforce full mapping of the island of Ireland. Ireland was, by all accounts, the first country to have its fully integrated area, farm by farm, mapped in its entirety.

The monuments were stripped of their stone to form permanent boundaries, so that taxes could be raised, based on the acreage of land enclosed within a property. The many stone walls on the foothills of Loughcrew contain stone taken from the fields in Neolithic field clearances. This very stone was then used to construct the many passaged chambered cairns on the hilltops above. When the Land Enclosure Act came into force the process was simply reversed, and the stone was taken back downhill to enclose fields as required by the law. Many of the beautiful cairns of Loughcrew were ultimately obliterated in this fashion. This causes problems in completing the tale of a spiritual sanctuary which spans the highest hilltop in Meath, and her two adjoining hilltops and the hillocks contained within this sacred space.

Whereas the Hill of Tara is identifiable as '*Teambair na Midbe*', Loughcrew is probably in the more northern kingdom of Brega. It can thus be described as '*Teambair in Brega*', the modern form of *Temair Breig* written about in mythology, the sacred sanctuary of the kingdom of Brega.



*'Cairn T', the most impressive structure of Loughcrew at the top of Sliabh na Caillaigh.*

*Teambair* exist all over Ireland, the cairns appearing as little bumps on top of hilltops. In many ways denoting the profile of Mother Earth, lying prostrate on the land, with her breasts visible on the horizon. The ancient names of these sacred sanctuaries, along with their ancient spirituality defamed as pagan and aligned with human sacrifice and immoral behaviour, have long been lost. It is, however, well established that the names of these *teambair* were the most common place names in our ancient folklore and mythology. The most famous *teambair* of all is, of course, the Brú na Bóinne complex, where the ancient spiritual focus came to its final fruition. Whether the focus of spirituality changed or disappeared in an influx of probable invasions is unknown. However, as the success of the first Neolithic farmers became known, they undoubtedly became a target for other would be settlers. Their well tended and productive field systems may have led to the indigenous first settlers becoming assimilated into the greater population.

Why hilltop sanctuaries? What drove these intrepid explorers to come here, and build these beautiful solar temples? We must remember the great Biblical flood, which is supported up by scientific evidence. Some 6000 years ago, when Neolithic men and women abandoned their homeland in the Mediterranean and came here, they sought high ground. In searching for new lands to farm and propagate with their crops, their animals and their progeny, what was their spiritual focus? The highly decorated stones of Loughcrew may hold some clues within their solar, lunar and planetary depictions.



*Entrance passage to 'Cairn T' (above) and detail of its decorated 'Equinox Stone' (below).*

The Equinox Stone has been decoded as the first written history of Ireland, written in symbolic text, some 5500 years ago. It is found within the central recess of Cairn T, facing directly towards the passage entrance. These ancient carvings were made using a process known as 'picking and pocking'. They were rigorously carved using a pointed lump of flint held in one hand as a chisel, and tipping this 'chisel' with a rounded river rock held in the opposite hand. This decorated stone tells the story of two different cultures. First, the Mesolithic (Old Stone Age) hunter-gatherer culture with its 'unattached' and unplanned focus, who arrived in empty boats.



## Out of the Darkness

The first people in this 'invasion' hoped to survive by hunting fish and game, and by eating the edible plants and fruits of the new land. They were nomadic and simply followed the deer and other land animals, hoping for a fresh kill each time period.



*Carving on the Equinox Stone believed to depict the simple boats of the first settlers.*

The newer arrivals, on the other hand, landed in the Neolithic (New Stone Age) in bigger boats. These boats had sails and cabins on board, and possibly had stocks of seed and live animals below decks. When they arrived on these shores they carried with them domesticated animals and precious seeds of spelt wheat and barley. These people came from a culture where everything was meticulously planned, a society which formed the basis for the early Irish cultural identity.



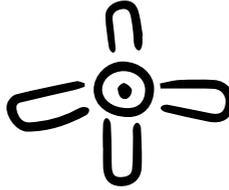
*On the other hand, this carving could be depicting the more technologically complex boats of the second wave of settlers.*

They were the first real settlers of this land, the people who opened up spaces to live in while developing an actual, active relationship of exchange between Tribe and Land, and they brought indigenous society and identity to it.

In order to propagate their crops, they needed to speedily identify the periods of the year and when these crops would grow. They needed to figure out when their crops would germinate, propagate, grow, mature and could be harvested. They soon discovered that Winter Solstice, Summer Solstice, Spring Equinox and Autumn Equinox had little use in the cold and damp of their new home. So they developed the new four Fire Festivals marking the midway point between each Solstice and Equinox.

But how did they come to know when these dates were approaching, or even had arrived? The simple answer was to align passage chambers with these Solar and Fire festivals. So the sun became even more important in the early spirituality. *Grian*, the

sun God, joined the Cailleach, the great protector Goddess. They were probably the primeval gods and goddesses of the ancient spirituality, the ancient Irish version of Mother Earth and Father Sky. We know from Loughcrew that their monuments had solar, and possibly lunar, alignments. The quarter and cross quarter days of the ancient yearly division, with their ancient solar alignments, still function, as do their aligned structures.



*This carving from the Equinox Stone is theorized to depict a fire pit with four male figures sitting in council.*

### **The Wheel of the Year**

When the ancestors first arrived here, they were sure of very few facts. They knew they were in a new home, where new lessons had to be learnt. They knew they had a very powerful protector goddess, who had brought them safely here. They knew the nights were long, and the days were cold. That a brief summer would happen every year. That was about the extent of the positives here.

They knew they had crops which would sustain life, give them materials to roof their houses, make their beds, feed their cattle and make bread (the staple food of their diet); but only if they could get them to grow in this cold, damp Atlantic climate. They knew there was an abundance of wood for building and for fuel. Those were the ponderables.

They had lost their attachment to their Mediterranean home. They had lost the steady growing season which they had grown accustomed. They had lost the warm, dry Mediterranean climate and the possibility of two crops per year, and flat sun blessed days, where watering crops was not a chore, but a necessity. They had lost the ability to germinate their crops in their usual growing seasons. Those were the negatives.

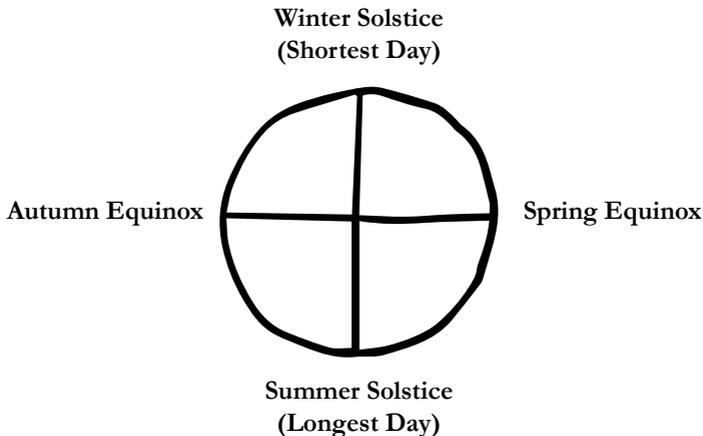
Counsel was called, and actions were planned. This was a new development on these shores, certainly in the Boyne Valley region. From now on, people would sit in counsel and plan in advance. The days of following the deer, and moving with the herds and the seasons were gone. Sustained living was being planned here, a foothold had been achieved, and that foothold would never be obliterated, despite the efforts of many.

## Out of the Darkness

Over the next six millennia, many people would try and eradicate this ancient indigenous spirituality, but fail. These people were builders in stone, and stone is a material of lasting properties. For a farming community there are certainties, hard work, long hours, fresh food and more long hours. They had lost ground to invaders in their homeland. They had lost spiritual attachment to their temples due to flood and they had lost their ancient spiritual focus. New land, new rules, new focus, same battle to survive. Planning was a benefit, a sign of long term commitment and a desire to move with the times. First necessity was to source food.

They had two crops, a survival crop and a sustainable, sacred crop. They had access to berries and fruits from the native trees, and plenty of herbs growing wild in the landscape. They also had deer and boar aplenty in the forested areas. However, their society was based on a crop which had become the staple foodstuff in the eastern Mediterranean area since two to three thousand years before they came here, a crop most suited to the warm climate of the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin.

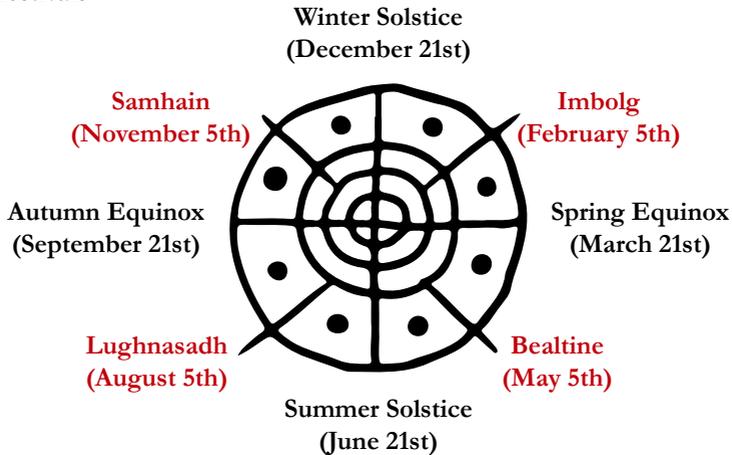
They simply had to adapt that crop, either to the conditions, or to the timing of the year. Adapting a crop means the development of new varieties which naturally occur over a period of time. Time, however, was their enemy, not their friend. Thus, in order to succeed, they had to change their focus on time. They had to forget the lessons of a Mediterranean type climate, and change the period of the year when the crops would grow. Moreover, the more we study our ancient passage chambers, the more we realise that one crop was sacred, the 'food of the goddesses', the staple food which would drive humanity forward: Spelt Wheat.



*The 4 'Sun Festivals' or 'Quarter Days'.  
The Equinoxes being the times of equal amounts of light and darkness.*

Organised panic ensued. Organised, in that they sought to break the year into manageable portions, where they could plan and forecast the correct time to grow and reap their precious staple food. Obviously everyone knew the concept of Winter versus Summer. Everyone knew the shortest day was in the coldest time of the year, when nights were long and days were short (Winter Solstice). Conversely, they also knew the longest day of the year, when nights were short and days were long and warmer (Summer Solstice). So the first equation of the division of the year was to find the day when there was exactly equal daylight and night, which occurs twice a year, March and September (Spring and Autumn Equinoxes – from latin, “equal night”). In indigenous spirituality, they are the **‘Sun festivals’**.

These are what are still known as the ‘Quarter Days’, where the solar year, solstice to solstice, was divided into four equal parts. Spring Equinox was too cold to reliably grow the crop, and Summer Solstice did not give enough maturing time to the crop, before the onset of Winter. So it was back to the drawing board. There needed to be more periods of time in the year, with shorter periods between them. So, the 4 periods were again subdivided, using the days which divided the original quarter days. These new dates, midway points between each Quarter Day, were labelled as the ‘Cross Quarter Days’, or, in ancient paganism and indigenous spirituality, the **‘Fire festivals’**.



*The new 4 ‘Fire Festivals’ (in red) between every Solstice and Equinox. Dates are standard, though every year the actual “astronomical” date is moved slightly before or after the given dates.*

The Fire festivals occur half way between any Solstice and any Equinox and half way between any Equinox and any Solstice. They were supplemented by another sub division of the year, dividing the year into sixteen, but there is no evidence these later divisions were necessary, though planning was obviously an important part of their structured life pattern. Did the eight divisions of the year work? There is ample

evidence in the way that the small hilltop cairns flourished and became commonplace, to say that it did. Further, In the Boyne Valley culture, they went from building small hilltop cairns, to building bigger ones, to eventually coming down from the hills onto the plains, and building the Neolithic equivalent of a Cathedral, a structure known as a Tumulus. A cairn has a simple covering of stone on its single passage. A “tumulus” is a much bigger affair, commonly holding at least one passage, probably more. The stone infill is combined with sand and clay, in the covering of these enormous passage chambered cairns.

What were these festivals called, and can we date them? Firstly, the Solstices are called ‘*Grian-stad*’ (literally, “sun stop”), the time when the Sun “stands still”. These are common to all cultures, but also have a unique attachment to both the sunset on the ‘Eve of Solstice’ and the sunrise at the Morning of the Solstice, in the Boyne Valley culture, as shown by the alignments of the many monuments spread around the Boyne Valley area, specially Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.

The four Fire Festivals have separate names, being more aligned with indigenous Irish spirituality. Each festival has a unique focus, a unique name, and a unique ‘attachment’. In chronological sequence, from the beginning of the year, they are:

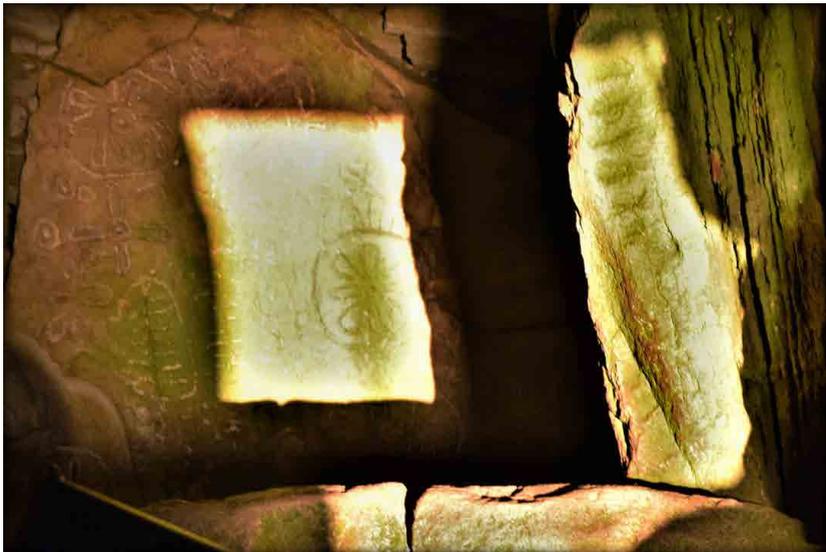
**Imbolg** (from the Irish ‘*i mo bolg*’ – literally, ‘in my belly’). This is a time of ‘new beginnings’, when the people in the Neolithic emerged from their winter slumber. Many of the women would be pregnant, especially the younger ones. The cattle, goat and sheep would also be pregnant, planned to arrive at a time when there would be new Spring growth, leading to a sustained period of blooming of the herbs, grasses and tender buds for the different animals to feed off.

**Bealtine** (from the Irish ‘*béal tine*’ - literally ‘mouth of the fire’). This is the time when crops were planted, and the livestock blessed, prior to going out onto the hilltops, or into the fields, for grazing. Two fires would be lit, a male one and a female one. The animals and fowl would be driven through the fires, to be ‘blessed’, following on from which the fires would be joined together, a feast would be celebrated, people of child rearing age would choose a partner ‘for a year and a day’ and hand fasting ceremonies would have happened. (the following year’s Imbolc time would be roughly nine months away).

**Lughnasadh** (from old Irish, ‘*Lug nasad*’ – literally “Lugh’s Festival”). A festival created by the mythical figure Lugh Lámfhada, in honour of his foster mother, Tailtiu, an ‘Earth Goddess’, credited with clearing the primeval forest of Choill Cuan, leaving the vast plains of Meath clear for the planting of spelt wheat. It is the time of the beginning of the harvest, where the first crops of barley were harvested and saved.

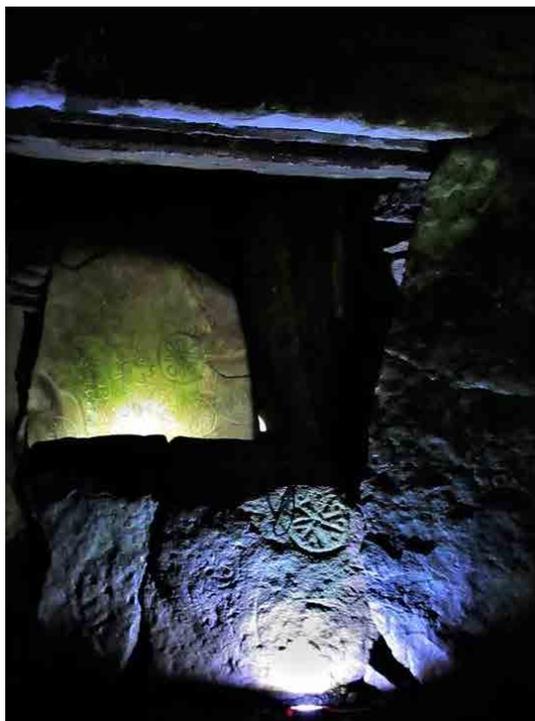
**Samhain** (possibly from the Proto-Celtic word *'samonios'*, “together, reunion, assembly”). The final harvest, the end of the farming year, a time of celebrating good crops, and feasting on any animals which had no further use or were injured. Farming was, and is, quite a difficult and very focussed activity. Foxes and wolves were the enemy, no quarter was given. The same applied to animals which had to be culled at year's end, especially when crops were not as good as hoped for, and animals would not be fed on crops necessary for the survival of the children, or the younger, more fertile, animals. The Final Harvest before the onset of the hard, dark months of Winter time.

When the Sun rises over the Patrickstown hill during both Equinoxes, it illuminates a small portion of the Equinox stone within 'Cairn T' in Loughcrew, hence its name. In a controlled fashion, this narrow beam of light moves diagonally across the symbols carved on the stone. The incredible detail of the carvings speaks loudly to those that listen to its voice. The beam of light moves from the top left hand corner to the bottom right hand corner in about forty minutes.



*The beam of light travelling across the Equinox Stone.*

It ends its journey on the top corner of the cill stone (the boundary stone between the passage and the inside recess), where another significant carving is placed. I recognize this stone as the first possible depiction of this solar year, depicted as the wheel of the year. This carving dates from the construction of the passage on this cairn, and is possibly 5500 years old, though it may be older. It certainly predates the great cathedrals of Brú na Bóinne, which are a minimum of 5200 years old.



*Inside of 'Cairn T'. The Equinox Stone and the cill stone in front of it at the entrance of the recess. The Wheel of the Year symbol can be seen on the upper right corner of the cill stone.*

This depiction denotes the eight divisions of the Neolithic year, the solar year as a circle, with its eight divisions carved in four diagonals, crossing in the centre. This cuts the circle detail in a pattern describable in the twenty-first century as a 'pizza cut in eight portions'. In the centre of each eight of the year is a small circular indentation, like a cherry tomato on each pizza slice. These are the 'indicator' periods of an approaching solar alignment.

In many ways, the wheel of the year is now an internationally known symbol, it is the centre of any 'neo pagan' spirituality, but very few people try, or bother, to understand the roots of the symbol. It is most often referred to as the 'Celtic Wheel of the Year', but it was carved here, in the centre chamber of Cairn 'T' some 5,500 years ago, long before the rise of the Celts in Roman times (c.800 BCE).

What did it mean to those who, by necessity, had to forget all their philosophies of life, or farming nuances, or basic spirituality; and had to forge out a new one based around the small solar temples on the Loughcrew Hills? It meant survival.

It meant that their people prospered on fertile soil, that the forests which were cleared were replaced with fields of spelt wheat, grazing land for cattle, sheep and goats. That the small temples on the hilltops became huge temple like Cathedrals. It meant a new focus on this land, an intense spiritual energy which developed here based on humility, respect and belief. The belief in life after death, a belief that when young children lost their parents they knew they could simply walk to the hilltop, bring a gift of the earth, sit in peace and quiet in an intimate temple and talk to the spirits of their ancestors.



*Spring Equinox sunrise 2020. Thousands of years after the creation of these temples, people still climb the hills to witness and celebrate the rising of the Sun.*

This solar alignment ‘light show’, which took huge amounts of planning and the understanding of the effects of light, is astounding to witness. The ‘control’ of so many solar alignments with the carved stones within these cairns speaks volumes about their intent. The incredible number of carved stones, and the stunning detail of the carvings, lets you know this is sacred. There is no ‘chance’ element here, this is focused planning and execution in action. The effect of these controlled movements within the chambers is simply striking in its impact on your psyche. As the light enters, there is a palpable spiritual awakening present. The need to bear silent witness to the control and the spiritual energy inside the chambers is overpowering. It is like the spirits of the ancestors are communicating with you. Everyone present just sits in absolute awe. Silence falls. Nowadays, people come here in small groups to witness it and get about six minutes to experience the event. No one speaks, yet, when you emerge from the darkness into the bright light of the

Equinox morning. You remember those who bore witness in your company. You have shared an event which will be remembered forever. In many cases, you will become friends, and friends forever. The impact is immeasurable.

These alignments still work, and were (until recently, with the closure of both Cairn ‘T’ and Cairn ‘L’) still celebrated, when hundreds of people would climb these hills. They climbed Carnbane East to witness the alignment of the Equinox dawn sunrise within the chamber of Cairn ‘T’. On the next hilltop, Carnbane West, in a far more surreptitious celebration, small groupings would enter the chamber of Cairn ‘L’ at sunrise on Imbolg and Samhain, to celebrate probably the most sacred, and poignant, fire festivals of the ancient spiritual year.

So, what is the basis for the belief that Ancient Irish Spirituality existed, and where is the proof? In reality, it is right in front of our noses. Funnily enough this is probably the best place to hide something, if we neither understand, or accept it. However, we are left with huge monuments, huge energies on the land and sacred spaces with huge personae. The spiritual energy here is intense, if you have ever experienced such energies. People often come here, not knowing why. The **Loughcrew Megalithic Centre** is located at the bottom of the hill. Owned and run by the local Shortt family, which have been guardians of this land for generations, it is a wonderful base from which to explore the surrounding landscape. The Centre includes a hostel, a café, a typical old-style Irish cottage (where the family lived over 4 generations ago), camping and caravan sites and even a glamping village with yurts. Wellness events and workshops are often held in the events hall. The café is the “watering hole” where visitors can find information, mingle with the regulars, see art and be invited to walk up the Hill. Most don’t know anything about the hills, but walk anyway, for the peace and quiet. Two hours later they seek so many answers to so many questions. Many have found their spiritual home, and become frequent visitors, finding a family here which come for the same reasons. They follow a year which still speaks of ancient Solar events. The aligned structures on the hills still divide the year into manageable proportions. People return time and again, to be here for these ancient times and alignments.

Many people refer to the Neolithic time frame as being ‘Celtic’. However the Celts derived from the greater Germanic basin in the time period of c.800 BCE (Before the Common Era). We know from the very basic excavations made of Irish Passage Chambers that these date from at least 5500 years ago. Way before any ‘Celtic’ influence. These monuments are hugely ancient, and they were built by the first farmers who not only farmed this land but also cleared vast ancient forests. The land was stripped of roots and stone, and huge boulders were torn from the landscape. The first settlers moved hundreds of tons of stone and boulders up to the hilltops overlooking the greater Boyne Valley. There was a planning and a focus to moving



*"She Carries the Greening Within"*  
by Jane Brideson

so much material to the hilltops. They would use them to build a series of permanent structures on these very hilltops, temples to their spiritual ethos.

So, obviously, their first focus was on farming the land; and to facilitate this cyclical lifestyle, they became the first settlers on the land. They had plenty of raw materials to build with; strong timbers and heavy stone. They built round houses, with a fire pit in the centre. Their homes were built in small clusters, different in focus to the many bands of itinerant, moving, hunter-gatherers who had previously inhabited the landscape. These nomads had arrived first, after the great Ice Age first allowed the growth of the first primeval forests of the landscape. They lived in temporary, moveable structures made of light timbers and animal skins. The impenetrable forests in which the hunter-gatherers found their basic food were the home of their culture. Their diet was supplemented by shellfish, fish and wild game. This method of hunting required the first peoples of the land to be mobile.

In contrast, the second wave of settlers who first sailed up the Boyne and set foot on this land, planned to change that focus and resort to farming the land.

They began by clearing small patches of land to build their homesteads and surround them with timber palisades. These kept the predator animals away from the domesticated animals. Inside these timber enclosures, shelters were built for human and for beast. Their homes were built of timbers interspersed with woven panels of brambles, hazel and willow. These were flexible and easily formed together when green, but formed tough walls when they dried. They were covered in mud clay daubed in between the spaces, inside and out, which formed airtight insulated walls. The walls, in turn, were roofed with lighter timbers tightly woven together, and roofed with sods of earth, thatched with barley straw. The roofs overhung the walls, and the outside space below the overhanging roof was used for storage.

Fire pits in the centre of the round houses kept the inside warm, especially when the heavy animal hides were dropped over the window and door, ensuring the wind and rain of Winter was kept out. The floor was bare earth, kept dry and covered in more animal skins. Beds were simple frames of raw timber smoothed out and stacked with fresh straw. Sheepskins formed mattresses and provided warmth when thrown over the children. The fire was constantly lit, and the smoke not only kept bugs and bats away, but preserved meats hung up and dried over the fire. There was an ample supply of firewood stacked outside the door, kept dry under the overhanging roof. Families lived together. Closeness bred comfort on cold nights and ensured good health and safety for both young and old.

The first field systems were small and compact; humble beginnings in a hostile

territory. The fires were set, time and again, to clear the wild, tangled, shrubby and clear small spaces, which were then expanded by felling the trees. Small clearings began to expand as they moved toward the hilltops. Here the land was less overgrown and less dense. It was, however, full of massive, earthbound glacial erratics left behind when glaciers scoured out the valleys and hills of their new home. Smaller boulders covered the lower slopes of the hills. Stone for these people caused no worries, they were experienced in all aspects of stone. They looked upon stone as a raw material, with which to build solar and lunar temples. However, why build so many hilltop sanctuaries, why invest so much labour and effort into doing so? On top of that the greater Boyne Valley culture invested a lot of time and energy in another venture, which marks this culture as unique, to many degrees.

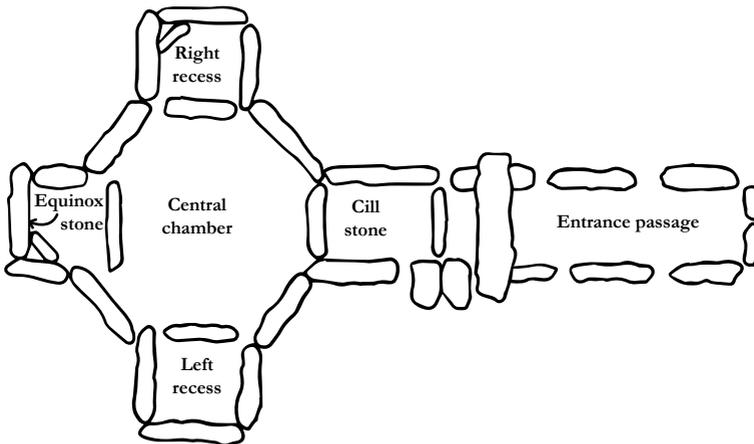


*Orthostat in the entrance to 'Cairn T' during Spring Equinox sunrise.*

As we climb these hills in the morning, we are called upon to give thanks to the ancestors. Those who understand the sacred nature and the sanctity climb early, and prepare for an event which is indelibly marked on their subconscious. They sit in peace, little bands of conscious awareness, facing toward the slowly lightening sky. Waiting. Soon the light show will begin, and the purpose of all these structures will become immediately apparent. The carving of so many stones with geometric and symbolic art marks this culture as hugely spiritual. Cairn "T" is a case in point here. The rising sun illuminates and highlights the art in a set procedure where 'capturing the sun' could aptly describe the manner of its arranged 'path'. By fashioning narrow walls and cill stones set in the ground, the sun was given a narrow channel

in which to travel. A lintel stone at the entrance to the central chamber controlled the light from above. This leaves a narrow ‘window’ of light, roughly A4 page size, which moves across the central recess, directly opposite the entrance.

The cairns themselves had different connotations. Most of these cairns had cruciform chambers, like the aforementioned ‘Cairn T’. These reflect the later shape of most churches. The modern church buildings are also cruciform in shape, with a right hand and left hand ‘recess’. A further ‘recess’ to the front, contains the main altar. There is a high central ceiling, as in the passage chambers. This is aligned with the rising sun which comes in through the church door at sunrise. Very few people will realise their church in which they pray is quite similar in shape, detail and intent to an ancient passage chamber built 5000 years earlier on the Loughcrew Hills. Some of the cairns had different set-ups, many had multiple chambers and both ‘Cairn L’ and ‘Cairn P’ in Loughcrew have seven chambers. Again, we have to allude to the ‘magical’ numbers in ancient spirituality, the numbers three and seven. Cruciform chambers have three recesses, and the number three becomes more significant as we move forward in our understanding of this blossoming culture.

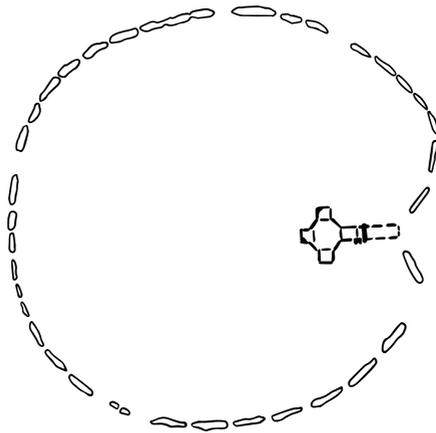


*Ground plan of the chamber within ‘Cairn T’ (based on Eugene A. Connell’s reports, 1873).*

Practically every surface in this incredibly powerful spiritual temple is intricately carved. If we were to look at Cairn ‘T’ from above, devoid of its protective cairn (heap of stones), the passage is cruciform, shaped like a crucifix. The small central chamber is round, with three recesses, one left hand, one central, one right hand, approached via a narrow passage. The passage and the recesses within are carved, so we have a cross, with a round core, a long shaft, and decorated along its entire inner surface. Some 4,500 years later, early Christian monks set up monasteries and to enable their congregation to understand the Biblical stories; they created a cross with a left, a central and a right ‘recess’, a round central core, and a long shaft.

The design of ‘Muireadeach’s Cross’ (a beautiful and highly carved Celtic Cross detailing the stories of the Bible, and set within the boundaries of Monasterboice Abbey in the greater Boyne Valley), possibly stems from this earlier passage chamber architecture. In many ways, modern religion and religious practice stems from and pays homage to more ancient forms of spiritual celebration. Today we have lost, in many ways, our attachment to this ancient spirituality, while Loughcrew is being allowed to deteriorate to the extent that much of its focus is disappearing, and being allowed to do so.

If you are going to build hilltop sanctuaries, then you must start with a plan, a focus, a reason and an end to all the effort. People did not simply move tons of rock and boulders from the valleys below to the hilltops above in order to allow harvesters to move unhindered over the soil 5500 years later. The purpose of building was complex and planned. It had intention, it had reasoning, it had design, it had architecture and it had knowledge of celestial movements. It also had some phenomenal engineering, mathematical and artistic understanding. It was not random, it was planned and executed, in a way the modern mind finds difficulty to really comprehend.



*The chamber of ‘Cairn T’ occupies but the smallest fraction of the whole cairn  
(based on Eugene A. Connell’s reports, 1873).*

For instance, all of these chambers resonate at the same frequency, but why? Sound is something we all hear and understand, but sound in the modern era, and sound for spiritual purpose and reasoning, are a completely different focus. Not only was light important, but so was darkness. Not only was sound important, but so was silence. Like our modern churches, these temples had a ritualistic focus, the use of illumination and sound to differentiate between Light and Dark. In many ways, a lot of people who come into these small little womb like structures experience some form of rebirth, they have moved out of the Darkness and into the Light.

