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The Neolithic (New Stone Age) in Ireland lasted from about 4000 to 2500 BC. In this long period there was a major change in society from the hunter-gatherer traditions of the Mesolithic to a new economy based on farming. Some of these farmers may have been descendants of the hunter-gatherer people, and some could have been new settlers arriving from Britain and Continental Europe. The appearance of new technologies for working stone, a more complex social organisation and the introduction of domesticated animals, like cattle and sheep, all tend to support the view that some degree of migration of new people into Ireland occurred at this time.

In contrast to the hunter-gatherers, the Neolithic farmers had a more settled way of life, working their plots of land and tending their stock. The production of food on the farm meant that they were not dependent on the natural resources of the countryside, although fishing, hunting and the gathering of wild plants and fruit probably supplemented their diet. Their basic farming techniques (planting and harvesting), their plants (wheat and barley) and their animals (cattle, sheep and goats) are still to be found on farms to this day, though methods and breeds have obviously changed greatly.

Our information about the people is largely based on the human remains recovered from their tombs (known as 'megaliths' from large stones used in their construction). The greater certainty of food supply and a settled pattern of life allowed communities to expend effort and resources on the construction of stone burial monuments, probably as expressions of their religious and social beliefs. While it seems that

only a selection of individuals were buried in these monuments, those remains which have been examined suggest that the majority of the population were dead by the age of 30 to 35. There was a high death rate among the very young and diseases like arthritis were common.

Excavation has uncovered Neolithic houses at a small number of sites in Northern Ireland, including Ballynagilly, Co Tyrone, and Ballyharry and Ballygally both in Co Antrim. Other examples have been discovered elsewhere in Ireland. These houses were built of timber and were rectangular, with pitched, thatched roofs and open hearths. The buildings could have housed a family of up to a dozen individuals. In size they were probably not unlike the thatched houses occupied in rural Ireland into the present century. Other settlement sites, perhaps camp-sites, have been found in coastal areas like the sand-dunes near Dundrum, Co Down and White Park Bay, Co Antrim. At Lyles Hill and Donegore Hill, both in south Antrim, two large enclosed hilltop settlements have been identified and partly excavated.

Just as farmhouses today are only a part of a greater rural network of fields and roads, so too were the Neolithic farmhouses. In north Mayo extensive field systems have been found beneath peat bogs and similar field systems may exist in the peat-shrouded landscapes of Ulster, such as the uplands of Antrim and Tyrone.

Flint and sometimes other stones were used for making tools and weapons, the stone either being collected as nodules on the Antrim coast or mined from open-cast workings like the one on Ballygalley Head, Co Antrim. At Tievebulliagh, Co Antrim and Brockley on Rathlin Island, a tough rock associated with volcanic activity called porcellanite was collected for the manufacture of polished stone axes, ideal for use in forest clearance. Since this rock is very rare, it is probably true to say that any examples of porcellanite polished stone axes found outside the north-east of Ireland have

been transported through trade or exchange. Contacts between different communities throughout the British Isles seem likely since porcellanite axes have been found in places as far apart as Aberdeenshire and southern England.

For most Neolithic people life may have been short and harsh, judged by our modern standards, but we must not think of them as 'primitive' or unintelligent. They lived to as high a standard as their technology allowed. They were superbly skilled in working and handling stone, for example, and probably also bone and leather. Doubtless they had the same human fears, affections and foibles as modern people. The time, effort and resources spent on building magnificent tombs suggests that these dispersed farming communities may have grouped together for building projects, unity being demonstrated in the presence of death. The reverence shown to ancestors may also have been a way of underlining rights to the farmland which they had inherited and which provided their livelihood. The tombs may contain the bones of the leaders of those distant societies.

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