

# THE NEW GRANGE SPIRALS

*Photos and Text by Rev. Kirk Thomas*

On a low ridge above a bend in the river Boyne stand the three most famous prehistoric monuments in Ireland: New Grange, Knowth and Dowth. New Grange and Knowth have been successfully dated to around 3300-3200 BCE.<sup>1</sup>



New Grange is a passage grave, where a cruciform passage with a chamber at the end was built, supported by 60 upright stones, and with all mounded over with soil, creating a large mound 340 feet across and 40 feet high. All three of these tombs are also well known for the impressive art carved within their passages and outside the entrances.<sup>2</sup>

In front of the entrance to the New Grange tomb is a large, lozenge shaped stone that is carved with spirals all over its face. Indeed, spirals are one of the more common forms of British Neolithic art, found all over Leinster and in Wales. But what was their purpose? Are they sacred or just attractive art?

First of all it should be said that we really don't know. There are no supporting tales from this early period, and the spirals went out of use by the early Bronze Age. But there has been some interesting conjecture.

Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, associate professor of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin, is convinced that the circles and spirals from this area represent the sun. Some of the circles even have lines resembling rays coming out of them. He also feels that the sense of movement coming from them indicate a numinous sense as well as ritual.<sup>3</sup>

That the sun was involved somehow with these three tombs is undisputed. The passageway in the Knowth tomb is aligned in such a way that the sun rises and sets in an exact line with it during the spring and autumn equinoxes. And at New Grange, the rising sun of the winter solstice illuminates a stone in the chamber at the far end of the passageway. How this is accomplished is quite ingenious. There is a slit in the roof-box that was built over the doorway to the tomb (the roof box is used to remove weight from the top of the lintel stone over the doorway to prevent it from breaking). On the few days surrounding the winter solstice, the rising sun appears through that crack, creeping up the passageway and up the face of the stone in the chamber until it finally illuminates a triple spiral

carved into the stone.<sup>4</sup> This sunlight from the year's shortest day could indicate the end of the darkening nights and the return of the sun.

The fact that the builders felt compelled to create the slit in the roof box rather than just making the door higher might indicate that the main door was blocked at that time and the only ones to witness the arrival of the sun were the dead inside. If this is the case, then the triple spiral might conceivably be connected with death and rebirth. However, if this is so, why didn't the other tombs have the same alignment? There are, alas, more questions than there are answers.



I believe that we can assume that the triple spiral had some sort of religious significance. The fact that the sunlight ends up illuminating it during the winter solstice is highly suggestive of religious importance.

Some people think that the spiral form might indicate a labyrinth. There are labyrinths and mazes cut into rocks or dug into turf on the ground so people can walk them, but these labyrinths are impossible to date and there is no evidence that any of them come from the Neolithic or indeed, even the Bronze Age.<sup>5</sup>



The triple spiral, however, has resonated in modern ADF Paganism. The fact that we don't know exactly what it meant has not stopped us from using our own inspiration to give it meaning. Some of us see it as a symbol of the pathway to the Otherworlds (like a labyrinth), others as a symbol of rebirth, but in any case, many of us have imbued it with sacredness.

In the artwork of Ian Corrigan, the triple spiral appears. He placed it in the center of the Druid Sigil on the cover of the new booklet for the Dedicant Program. He also uses it in the design of ADF's Kindreds t-shirts. Two granite pillars that have triple spirals carved into them flank the entry to the sacred precinct of the Sonoran Sunrise Grove's stone circle. And I have adopted the triple spiral as my personal symbol, having one placed on my Dedicant ring.

In the absence of specific knowledge to the contrary, I suggest that re-sacralizing a symbol from the distant past is a perfectly acceptable thing to do. The odds are good that it was sacred then, and that it had something to do with either the sun

or rebirth or even the ways to the Otherworlds. But all we can do is listen to our hearts and spirits and allow this ancient design to work deeply within us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991, 1993), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Hutton, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland*, (Cork, The Collins Press, 1999), pp. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Hutton, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Hutton, p. 107.