First Light

The Origins of Newgrange

Robert Hensey

OXBOW INSIGHTS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape … Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.

Andrew Wyeth (1965)

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work … toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

T. S. Eliot (1921)

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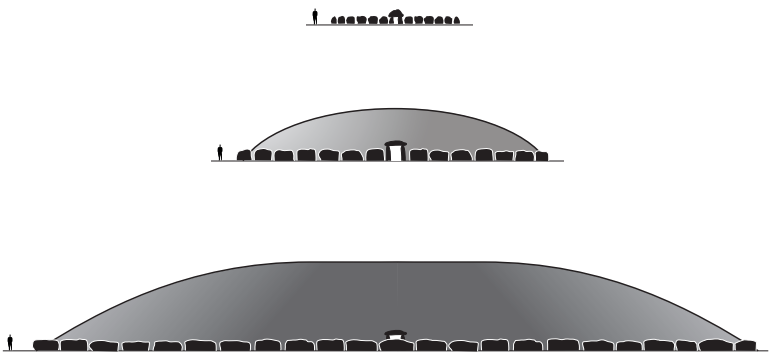

Schematic illustration of three types of passage tomb (to scale).

Preface

I remember the first time I entered Newgrange. Taking in its great splendour and having no response but to laugh at the impossibility of it all. Two hundred thousand tonnes of stone all told, so ancient, and yet, science fiction-like, designed to allow the entry of a narrow beam of winter solstice light. What was it for? Where could such skill, such extraordinary ambition have come from?

I once had a Shakespeare lecturer, a well-known dramatist in his own right, who engaged his classes' attention by announcing he would impart the secrets to understanding King Lear. Pacing across the vast stage of the *Aula Maxima* he proclaimed in front of the four hundred eager students – pens alert on their first day to make sure any crucial information was not left unrecorded – that "To understand King Lear one has to" – *dramatic pause* – "first know Hamlet". He continued, "To understand Hamlet one has to" – *dramatic pause* – "know Richard III". And so it went, after each dramatic pause, he listed another famous Shakespearean play – until the students got the point.

Such is the case with archaeology, too. There is, I believe, a kind of knowledge that can be acquired through examining a great many related sites, seeing them at different times of year, in different weather conditions, from different perspectives. One can slowly take in subtle details of a monument or place, sometimes unconsciously. This 'soft knowledge' compliments and informs the hard knowledge that is the conventional goal and output of archaeological work. For instance, one could observe a slightly unusual tilt of a capstone not present at other sites and know, instinctively, it has been moved in the past, perhaps pushed aside in the course of antiquarian investigations and clumsily replaced. Observing poorly completed work and mistakes from the past can also be illuminating, sometimes allowing our

ancient ancestors, with all their human frailties, to be imagined; one might sense the frustration of the Neolithic artist who could not quite fashion a successful double-spiral that another carver made so perfectly on a nearby kerbstone. Conversely, observing a clever architectural improvement or structural addition to a monument can allow a glimpse into the mind and working processes of the monument builders, an insight into their aims and successes. For instance, the way in which the cleverly designed roof-box at Newgrange offsets the rise of the hill on which the monument was built by directing the winter solstice sunlight through the elevated roof-box two metres above the floor of the passage entrance and so directly into the chamber (Plate 5).

At the time of that first visit to Newgrange I was only dimly aware of similar sites in the west of Ireland, less sophisticated equivalents, but few or no information or publications on those monuments were readily available in the public sphere. Then in mid-1990s as the Internet was becoming more utilised, discoveries from the second campaign of excavations at the Carrowmore passage tomb complex, County Sligo (and intriguingly early dates) were placed online. The speed at which information from those excavations was released seemed almost instantaneous compared with the usual pace of archaeological publication. The excitement around the Carrowmore work and findings encouraged me to visit the site, and subsequently similar monuments in the west of Ireland and nationally. As I became familiar with greater numbers of passage tombs, I came to believe that the monuments outside of the Boyne Valley possessed valuable pieces of the Newgrange puzzle. Each new site studied changed and deepened ones understanding. Not that one needs personal experience of every passage tomb on the island, but after many years considering these monuments I came to the conclusion that Newgrange cannot be comprehended without an in-depth knowledge of at least all four major passage tomb complexes (which between them contain approximately half of all Irish passage tombs).

As I have attempted to show in this book, especially in the opening chapters, the most westerly cluster at Carrowmore has a particularly important role in understanding the history of the Irish

passage tomb tradition in Ireland, but so too do the monuments at the other major complexes, and not least the other monuments which neighbour Newgrange within the Brú na Bóinne complex. When considered as a group, the passage tombs of Ireland can also provide unexpected insights into the beliefs, concerns and religious activities of communities in the Neolithic not apparent when a single monument is examined in isolation. Ultimately, Newgrange is a materialisation of a lengthy evolution of the beliefs and thought-worlds of the communities which constructed passage tombs through time.

As is the case for many authors, in hindsight I realise I have written the book I wanted to read at the beginning of this journey, after that first visit to Newgrange, one that could begin to address where Newgrange came from, why it is there at all.

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped me to bring this book to fruition. I am especially grateful to those individuals who read all or parts of it. Elizabeth Shee Twohig was brave enough to read a very rough draft of the manuscript and provided many useful suggestions. Conor Brady read the text through on more than one occasion; his encouragement and detailed comments were immensely valuable at an important stage in the process. Frank Prendergast kindly fact-checked Chapter Four. Clare Tuffy suggested some useful corrections to my account of the winter solstice event at Newgrange, and generally reassured me that my memory has not completely gone (yet). William Roche fact-checked information about the life cycle of the salmon and the salmon runs on the Boyne for Chapter Five. Dave Wall examined the Knowth carving and provided information on humpback whale prevalence in the past. A few kind souls with no connection to the world of archaeology were patient enough to proofread the text – thanks especially to Susan and Lauren. Finally, Padraig Meehan and Marion Dowd read and re-read drafts of this work in its various incarnations; I cannot be completely sure it would exist without their support over several years.

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thankful. I would particularly like to thank Ann Lynch for making available to me unpublished information from her important excavations at Newgrange. Some of the material in this book has been published previously in the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, *Time and Mind*, *Préhistoires Méditerranéenes* and the *Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers, Volume 13*.

Clare Tuffy, manager of the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre, has always been tremendously supportive. For many of us Newgrange would not be quite the place or experience it is today without Clare's warmth and enthusiasm. The Office of Public Works was very accommodating in granting me access to the chambers at Knowth in the course of my PhD. The National Museum of Ireland has been extremely helpful in facilitating visits to their collection for all research and projects undertaken there in the last ten years, not least the Carrowmore Pins Project with Stefan Bergh. Stefan has provided stalwart advice through several stages of my academic career, not least through my doctoral work, and our subsequent work together has always been a pleasure. Thanks are owed to William Roche and Paddy Gargan senior research officers with Inland Fisheries Ireland, and Robert Bergin, bailiff on the Boyne River, for information about the life cycle of the Atlantic salmon and the Boyne River salmon runs.

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I could not use those images in the end. Guillaume Robin helped create the generic image of three types of passage tomb, and gave permission to use several of the illustrations from his superb PhD and book on passage tomb art. Elizabeth Shee Twohig kindly sourced an original photograph from the O'Kelly excavations. Paul O'Conner did preliminary work on the Knowth West graphic. Padraig Meehan fired-up his monster computers for assistance with graphic work. Many writers permitted me to reproduce their published illustrations. I would like to thank Gabriel Cooney, George Eogan, Guillaume Robin and Harvey Whitehouse. The Tate Modern and Olafur Eliasson kindly granted permission to reproduce a photograph of 'The weather Project' from the stunning 2003 exhibition in the Turbine Hall. Finally, special thanks to Eve O'Kelly and family for allowing use of images by M. J. and Claire O'Kelly.

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Introduction

Newgrange is one of an elite group of monuments around the world which could be considered archaeological celebrities: sites such as Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, the Great Pyramids of Giza, for instance. Monuments of that order were not only of immense importance in the past, but continue to resonate in the present, and presumably will into the future too; they seem to insist on holding a place in our consciousness.

Professor Colin Renfrew once noted that Newgrange is "unhesitatingly regarded … as the great national monument of Ireland".[1] Newgrange takes pride of place in documentaries about Ireland, in countless academic and popular books, national tourism campaigns, and so on. Yet even though fêted in the media and in academic works, somewhat surprisingly, there is something of an absence when it comes to knowledge of its origins. One might be forgiven for concluding that Newgrange and its sister sites Knowth and Dowth arrived fully formed, out of the blue. In most accounts, when the question of its origins are broached, similar tombs in mainland Europe, especially older passage tombs in Brittany and Iberia, are referenced. Yet, as discussed below, continental passage tombs cannot quite account for the unique expression of passage tomb construction and ritual found in Ireland and at Newgrange.

A close examination of the passage tombs of Ireland, however, reveals that the *je ne sais quoi* of Newgrange may in fact lie hidden in plain sight. Across this island, one can observe increases in the scale and sophistication of passage tomb construction, developments in the styles of megalithic art, advancements in the scale and craftsmanship of the artefacts associated with the monuments, *etc*., which, taken together, indicate a lengthy process of development. In short, there is

an untold history at Newgrange – an island-wide story of incremental changes over hundreds of years, of a society in evolution, perhaps *in extremis*, which left behind such an enigmatic, rich and patterned legacy.

In this book, I will present those developments, that unfolding, examining the factors which ultimately gave rise to Newgrange. Yet, unlike the tourist with limited time who hurries into Newgrange soon after parting with their ticket fee, our journey to Newgrange will be more considered. Like the famed river which surrounds the Boyne complex, we will approach the monument slowly, weaving a path from a distance. We begin with recent evidence regarding the earliest known Irish passage tombs. A series of new dates from the monuments at Carrowmore, Co. Sligo and other evidence demonstrate that some passage tombs in Ireland were in use long before Newgrange was built. This new chronological context creates a platform from which we can cast our eyes over the developmental history of passage tombs on this island, and thus begin to piece together the deep history of Newgrange for the first time.

However, the origins of Newgrange are not just about dates and older sites, the kind of discussions beloved by archaeologists, but about what motivated people. Our purpose will not only be to chart the back-history of Newgrange, but to attempt to discern why it was constructed, what was its role. An answer to this question might also be contained in the developmental history of the passage tomb tradition. In the Boyne Valley, through Newgrange, we have evidence not only of extraordinary physical accomplishments but of tremendous acts of imagination, a testament to rich and developed inner worlds. An interest in an otherworld, which could be embodied by and accessed through passage tombs, may have been a central motivator in passage tomb construction from its earliest beginnings. The limited scale of the first passage tombs – simple monuments with chambers of only five or six stones covered with a large boulder – suggests they were primarily constructed for the deposition of human bones (rather than for internal ritual). Their coastal location may hark back to real or mythic places of origin, over the sea, to the

world from which genealogical ancestors came, or perhaps to a land of the dead, a mystical otherworld over the horizon.

Later, larger more sophisticated passage tombs were constructed, with carefully constructed lintel-topped passages which led to sizeable inner chambers. These developments allowed engagement with other worlds to go one step further. Through occupying the same space as the bones of their forebears, select individuals could now physically enter the otherworld, the realm of the ancestors. There, they created and interacted with powerful abstract symbols carved into stone. The individuals who entered the darkened chamber may have been imagined as having been transformed by the experience. At some monuments, at significant points in the solar calendar, they shared the internal space with beams of sunlight. They were introduced to spiritual powers, and perhaps trained in ritual and spiritual techniques. Here it is proposed that this otherworld religion, centred on emotionally intense events experienced by individuals who spent time in passage tomb chambers, was at the very heart of the passage tomb tradition in Ireland.

In the final part of this book we see how, over time, this religious movement which had been growing and changing over the Neolithic began to take a central place in society. It is from this tradition that Newgrange and similarly ambitious monuments eventually arose. That most spectacular flowering of passage tomb construction saw the erection of a small number of massive structures with a peculiarly public focus, together with a distinct change in the role of the monuments. At Newgrange, celebrations connected to the return of the sun at the winter solstice may have been mirrored in the outer landscape by the return of spawning salmon to the Boyne River and other potent indicators of the revitalisation of the natural world. Concerns about the harvest, worsening climate, the need to construct ever greater monuments to venerate the ancestors, and the ability of spiritual and political leaders to negotiate with otherworld powers may have become crucial at this time.

This otherworld-focused religion became central to Boyne Valley communities, transcending its creators, arguably surpassing and

outliving their many other achievements. It is extraordinary that this population could invest so much energy and imagination into their creative vision. By the end of the fourth millennium BC, so much of this society's efforts were being poured into ever greater monuments that, between the gathering of materials from the wider landscape, construction, and ceremony, these sites must have consumed much of peoples' day-to-day lives. It is this religion of the monuments, the journey to Newgrange, which is considered in this book.

Newgrange before Newgrange

Rome was not built in a day, and neither was Newgrange; it is the product of accumulated experience gained through the construction of many similar monuments over a considerable time-frame. Even if one were to look at the evidence from the site in isolation, it would be apparent that these communities drew on great experience in its construction. M. J. O'Kelly and his fellow excavators were particularly impressed when they discovered that the builders had cut deep grooves into the roofstones at Newgrange to channel rain-water away from the chamber (Fig. 0.1; Plate 8, lower), and made putty from burnt soil and sea-sand to use at interstices in the passage roof to further ensure the structure's water-tightness, thus solving what may have been a long-standing problem with this type of architecture.[2] These were not *post hoc* additions to the monument, but knowledgeable responses to recognised strengths and weaknesses of these buildings, conceived by communities with great experience of passage tomb construction. Where could this detailed knowledge and experience have come from?

A partial answer to this question is found hidden within Newgrange. Various strands of evidence indicate that some stones at Newgrange (and Knowth) were drawn from older structures and recycled for these 'new' monuments (See Chapter Seven).[3] In some cases, stones with older styles of art were intentionally turned away from the viewer's gaze, deliberately hidden from view. Alternatively, designs were carefully erased using a technique known as pick-dressing,

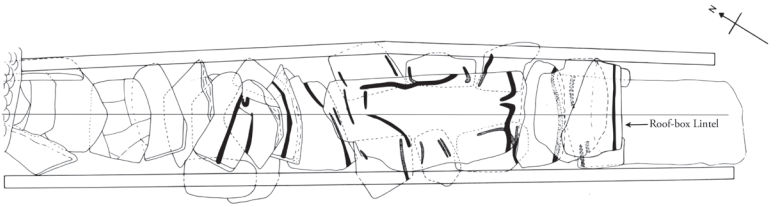

Figure 0.1. Grooves cut into the upper faces of roofstones to channel water away from the structure (after O'Kelly 1982, fig. 18b).

which removed the layer of stone on which the art was carved. It appears that attempts were made to disguise this more ancient history. Through excavation and recording, however, it is becoming apparent that Newgrange houses within itself a more ancient history.

Perhaps even more dramatically, it would appear older, more obscure 'Newgranges' once stood on the current site. Evidence of earlier monuments, or earlier versions of the current monument, can be found deep within its cairn. Of particular interest is an unusual turf mound discovered inside the tumulus during excavations, potentially covering an earlier monument. Additionally, aspects of the monument's design and the apparent reuse of some materials in its construction indicate potential phases of reconstruction. In short, it seems that Newgrange had several incarnations. And it carries within it the marks of those former lives. It is not only one of the greatest works of the Neolithic communities in Ireland, it actually houses some of that history within itself in the form of earlier structures, materials from more ancient sites, older styles of art, and so on. In an odd way, Newgrange is a museum of itself.

So where should we look to discover the origins of Newgrange? Where could this refined knowledge of construction have sprung from? How and where did the belief systems represented by the monuments in the Brú na Bóinne passage tomb complex develop? Where did the unique canon of artistic motifs originate, as well as the preoccupation with the sun? In short, where can the monuments on

which Newgrange was based be found, the sites which represent the inevitable trial and error leading up to its construction? Those who have looked into this question have traditionally turned to continental Europe for answers.

International relations

Newgrange is unique. But it is certainly not an orphan. It is part of an extended family of monuments spread over much of western Europe, from Sweden to southern Portugal, and even as far east as central Poland. Some of the passage tombs in other regions, especially on the Continent, are significantly older than the Irish examples. Consequently, when the origins of Newgrange have been sought – quite reasonably – those monuments have been turned to for answers, especially to Brittany in France where some of the oldest passage tombs in Europe are located, some a thousand years older than Newgrange.

The French/Breton colonisation hypothesis reached a high-point when cultural historical archaeology was at its peak, into the 1970s in an Irish context (though arguably lingering until the early 1980s). Archaeologists then considered Newgrange one of the earliest Irish passage tombs, built by colonists who had journeyed by boat from north-west France and up the Boyne River, and smaller less sophisticated passage tombs, such as those at the Carrowmore complex, Co. Sligo, as later constructions.[4] A variation on this model, but with an opposite developmental sequence, was proposed by Frances Lynch in the late 1970s and again by Alison Sheridan in the mid-1980s.[5] Sheridan in particular promoted north-west France as providing the impetus for the passage tomb construction in Ireland (and Britain), but with the simple passage tombs at Carrowmore and similar sites in the north-east of the island providing the evidence for the earliest wave of megalithic construction in Ireland. She proposed that a construction sequence of Irish passage tombs can be discerned from the simple monuments at Carrowmore, to ever greater passage tombs, and eventually to super-sites such as Newgrange.

The French transmission theory has much in its favour. The passage

tombs there are certainly older than those in Ireland. Agriculture was practised in France before it took hold in Britain or Ireland (and, in general terms, the developments associated with the Neolithic came from the east). Brittany is the closest part of mainland Europe to Ireland – the shortest route from northern Spain is almost twice as great. With respect to specific comparisons, many of the design features at Irish passage tombs are found in France, such as corbelled roofs and subdivided chambers, for instance. Additionally, some of the French sites have megalithic art similar to that found on Irish passage tombs, most notably perhaps Gavrinis in Brittany.

However, the Gallic hypothesis has weaknesses, too. In a number of ways, the traditions found in Ireland differ from those of France (and other passage tomb regions). As Muiris O'Sullivan has noted, the Irish monuments stand 'slightly aloof' from their European counterparts.[6] Notably, different funerary rituals are associated with the Irish and French sites. Cremation is most typical at Irish passage tombs, whereas in France, unburnt human bone more commonly occurs. This has considerable bearing on the question of how related these sites may or may not be; divergent funerary rituals may even be an indication of different religious beliefs in either region.

The morphology and design features of passage tombs can vary considerably too. An emphasis on circularity is a feature of almost all Irish passage tombs, but is not as pronounced in other regions. For instance, many of the Breton and Orcadian monuments are encased in long rectangular or sub-rectangular mounds. Stone kerbing along the perimeter of cairns is a typical feature at the Irish sites, unlike most other European passage tomb regions. Though corbelled roofs are a feature of passage tombs in Ireland, the Orkney Islands, and Brittany, they are constructed differently in each area. This, as Chris Scarre has observed, indicates that knowledge of corbelling was widespread, but local communities reacted and implemented the technique after their own fashion.[7] The monument's internal construction can differ also. Newgrange is famous for its three-recess design. A subdivided chamber is a common feature at Irish passage tombs: three-, five- and even seven-recess chambers are found. By contrast, only around 10%