



Book Reviews

THE PASSAGE TOMB ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE GREAT MOUND AT KNOWTH, BY GEORGE EOGAN AND KERRI CLEARY (EXCAVATIONS AT KNOWTH, VOLUME 6)

Royal Irish Academy 2017. 838pp, 409 col and black and white figs and plates, 106 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-908996-76-3, £45.00

Fieldwork in Ireland and Britain has changed its character radically over the last few decades. Excavations and surveys precipitated by commercial development have largely supplanted research excavations conducted over many seasons. Now the work must be completed rapidly and to a strict timetable. As a result there have been both gains and losses. The findings of short but intensive field projects are more likely to enter the public domain before they lose their impact, while the results of some long-running campaigns (all too many examples come to mind) may never see the light of day. On the other hand, longer projects afford much more time for reflection and reassessment.

George Eogan's excavation at Knowth in the Boyne Valley is remarkable for many reasons. It was sustained over forty field seasons and with the appearance of this lavishly produced volume, co-authored with Kerri Cleary, almost all the results are in the public domain. Many had featured in earlier publications, but six volumes of the definitive report have also appeared and work on a final monograph documenting the megalithic art on the site is currently in progress. The scale of both undertakings is altogether remarkable and the authors have been successful in assembling so much valuable information and producing such a compelling synthesis out of such difficult material.

In itself that is a remarkable achievement, not least because what began as the investigation of a single Neolithic monument extended into so many other areas of research. Members of the Prehistoric Society may not be aware that Knowth was one of the most important early medieval sites in Ireland, and a previous volume documenting its historical archaeology is similar in scale and depth to Eogan's and Cleary's' account of the principal Neolithic structure; in fact it occupies no fewer than 900 pages. At the same time excavation showed

that the Great Mound – the original target of this research – formed only part of a cemetery containing at least 18 other passage tombs. The results of this investigation have already been published, but one outcome of such a lengthy project is that the authors are able to revisit the findings of previous work and provide additional information.

One of the most striking findings of the new study is that the Great Mound at Knowth was not the unitary structure that it had once appeared. It originated as a smaller monument with its own chambers and entrance passages. In time the covering earthwork was enlarged on a massive scale and both those passages were lengthened. Then the finished structure was provided with a decorated kerb. Still more striking, the later structure incorporated fragments of already decorated stone, suggesting that yet another megalithic tomb had once existed on the site. It must have been dismantled, but its position is not known. As the authors observe, its remains could well be masked by an unexcavated part of the mound.

The report also provides important details of the surviving contexts in both the excavated chambers, as well as the distinctive deposits that accumulated outside the entrances of the principal tomb. They featured enigmatic stone structures – almost miniature platforms – as well as quantities of quartz which are compared with similar features at Newgrange. One especially important issue concerns the sources of the small stones incorporated in these features, as well as the raw material for building the monuments themselves. In a sense the Great Mound and the structures around its perimeter provide a microcosm of the wider landscape, extending from the Boyne Valley along the Irish coast towards the north and south. At a local level the monograph provides useful information on the surrounding environment too.

The artefacts from the excavation are catalogued and discussed in detail in the report. There is much of interest in this account. Two examples are worth highlighting here as they have wider implications for Neolithic archaeology. There were two (or even three) maceheads, one of gabbro and another of flint; the latter is decorated in a style that recalls the megalithic art and open air rock art found in western Britain. There were also ‘six knobbed beads’ of a distinctive form that recalls the carved stone balls of northeast Scotland. Their association with such a well dated monument as the Great Mound at Knowth sheds new light on the closeness of links across the Irish Sea.

Other observations are specific to Ireland itself. The report contains an account of the human remains from Knowth, supplemented by an excellent chapter by Gabriel Cooney discussing the treatment of the dead in relation to the evidence from other Irish monuments. Just as important is Rick Schulting’s detailed review of the radiocarbon dates associated with the monument which provides vital new information on the age of passage tombs. Both will be

widely quoted, and their impact will be all the greater because they are so closely related to the excavated evidence from this project.

Despite its size, this volume is easy to use and the authors have made the wise decision to separate the main contents of each chapter from a series of appendices documenting points of detail. As a result the report is clearly structured and very readable. The figure drawings are lucid and informative and the same applies to most of the photographs, although a few which must have started life as colour slides have deteriorated since they were taken. It is instructive to compare this book, and its five predecessors, with the reports on the excavation of the neighbouring monument at Newgrange which are much briefer and are difficult to use together. Both the sites were excavated in parallel for 13 years, but the longer gestation of the Knowth report has allowed more time for reflection and for approaches to the evidence that were not available in the 1970s. Perhaps it is time to return to O'Kelly's excavation archive and for a new series of radiocarbon dates to be obtained from that amazing site. Until it happens it is difficult to compare the results of such important and accomplished projects.

One of the strongest chapters in the present volume considers the sources of the stones employed at Knowth. The most plausible candidates include Nobber in County Meath. By a curious coincidence that is where the excavator of this extraordinary monument was born. And it is where in 2016 the President of Ireland opened the George Eogan Heritage and Community Centre – a fitting tribute to a scholar whose achievement is documented in this book.

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Editor