



Book Reviews

FIRST LIGHT – THE ORIGINS OF NEWGRANGE BY R HENSEY 2015

Oxbow Insights in Archaeology, Oxbow Books, 194pp, 32 illus with 33 b/w and 4 col pls, 1 table, ISBN 978-1-782979517, pb, £15.99

First Light has the self-stated (and somewhat daunting) aim of telling the untold story of Newgrange, of putting it in context for a more general readership. In so doing, the author hopes to produce the type of book that he himself would have valued when first pulled in by that great Neolithic monument. The book's easy conversational style combined with the absence of in-text citation, as well as its compact, pocket-friendly size (and wallet-friendly price), all show that this commitment to accessibility has been carefully planned and executed. This is to be welcomed; like many iconic archaeological sites, Newgrange has attracted its fair share of less-than-reliable accounts and the book provides a valuable counterpoint to many of the 'alternative facts' currently loose in the media (e.g. Siggins 2016).

First Light is arranged into eight chapters, bookended by an additional short introduction and conclusion. There is useful scene-setting in the opening chapters, including the continental background to passage tombs (Introduction) and how archaeologists from the 19th century to the present day have developed the 'simple to complex' sequential model for Irish passage tomb construction (Chapter 1). Here, 'for convenience' (p.22), Hensey first introduces his own tripartite version of this model (further outlined in Chapters 2 and 6), which combines both the dating evidence and the functional/design aspects of the monuments. Three broad categories of passage tombs are identified: the earliest and simplest Type 1 or 'Carrowmore-type' monuments used for ancestral burial rites by the first farming groups; the later and larger Type 2 passage tombs suitable for human entry and with a focus on internal ritual; the latest and most complex Type 3 passage tombs that incorporate design features intended for public consumption. Hensey is very clear that these are crude categories, serving as a tool or temporary scaffolding to explore the monuments afresh and to pick out patterns in the development of the passage tomb tradition. However, this exposition comes late in the book, in Chapter 8. Whilst perhaps done so as not to interrupt the narrative flow, it does come at a cost, with earlier sections sometimes emphasising the linear and chronological, at other times the functional, aspects of the classification scheme. This may flow over a more general readership, but I found myself flicking back and forth between chapters trying to locate the underlying structure or anchor points for the three-part model. A significant part of the problem, as the author readily admits, is the lack of chronological precision for passage tomb construction, both in Ireland and elsewhere. This leaves Hensey the difficult task of expanding and enlivening an existing archaeological narrative whilst remaining true to the (sometimes very sparse) data.

From the start, *First Light* attempts a delicate balancing act of description and interpretation, between morphology and cosmology. Thus, in Chapter 1 the features of Type 1 passage tombs are described, with their relationship to similar 'simple' monuments in Britain and France discussed. In a similar fashion, Chapter 2 outlines the 'veritable explosion' (p.49) of new features characterising Type 2 tombs, the most typical of the Irish passage tombs. Dramatic changes include a new concern with the covering cairn and an internal passage, as well as an increase in chamber complexity with the appearance of corbelled roofs. These are tombs constructed on a larger scale than before and frequently at a geographical remove from wider society. In terms of function they are spaces that could facilitate an 'interior ritual world' (p.36), featuring megalithic art, solar orientations and perhaps the harnessing of sound and structured use of colour. Chapter 3 moves away from description to provide some possible reasons for the construction of passage tombs. While this is understandably shakier ground, the argument that Type 2 tombs were the creation of indigenous (Mesolithic?)

converts to farming expiating the guilt of domestication (pp.52–4) is hard to accept, not least because it seems to imply a disconnect with the earlier Type 1 monuments and their architects – presumably descendants of farming communities in Britain and/or France. With something of the ‘why’ broached, the final part of the chapter deals with ‘how’ Type 2 tombs may have been used. Here it is argued that Type 2 tombs, as the ‘home of otherworldly powers’ (p.55), were designed for prolonged rituals of separation and confinement, undertaken by specialists that accessed and interceded with these powers. The intense trance-like experiences produced by these Type 2 rituals are considered to fit well with the first (and more archaic) of Harvey Whitehouse’s two core modes of religiosity – imagistic and doctrinal, with the later form of religiosity argued to be evident in ritual practice associated with Type 3 passage tombs.

Chapter 4 continues the experiential theme, providing a first-hand account of the winter solstice event at Newgrange and a wider discussion of archaeoastronomy, both valuable inclusions. In providing a detailed, thoughtful account of the sun’s movement in the chamber and its effects on the select group of lottery winners gathered there to witness it, Hensey is acknowledging his privilege and opening up this experience to a wider public. Balancing this subjectivity are statements of archaeoastronomical fact, e.g., that only 17% of Irish passage tombs are oriented on ‘a significant solar declination’ (p.70). As solstice lore has come to dominate the public perception of Newgrange, it is important that research such as this finds a wider audience. Also useful is a meditation on the sensory aspects of light, something easily taken for granted in an artificially illuminated world. While passage tombs were very likely not the *only* spaces that captured, or provided resistance to, light in the Neolithic, this aspect of the prehistoric lived environment certainly deserves more attention.

Having examined the role of the sun and light at Newgrange, the following chapter seeks to explore the relationship with the River Boyne and, at a wider scale, the Irish Sea. Some of this material is already well-documented: the east coast sources of stone used in the Boyne tombs, and the frequent occurrence of marine shell within passage tombs. Hensey builds a case for the winter run of salmon from the sea upriver to Newgrange being symbolically significant for Neolithic communities, influencing the nature of ceremony and ritual at Brú na Bóinne. While the image of a river “thick with salmon” (p.82) is certainly compelling, the sea level data used to estimate the tidal limit of the Boyne seems dated (from 1984 and 1995) and out of step with the otherwise up-to-the-minute nature of the book. Undeniably, the palaeogeography of the Boyne area is woefully under-researched and this frustrates any attempt to expand the archaeological narrative of Newgrange. Nevertheless, on the evidence presented here, the call to imagine Newgrange as a ‘hugely evocative religious centre’ (p.94) feels a little forced.

Chapter 6 brings us back to the tripartite model and discussion of Type 3 passage tombs, which it is argued incorporate design features intended for public consumption (p.95). As in Chapters 1 and 2, there is good synthesis here and clear description of these later monuments, interwoven with important caveats and nuance, e.g. not all Type 3 tombs are very large (p.96). The difficulties of reconciling a linear, chronological model with one highlighting function are perhaps most apparent in this chapter. Acknowledging that Type 2 passage tombs were still erected after Type 3 tombs, Hensey suggests that both types could have been utilised at the same time, each fulfilling a different function in society (p.105). This sits uneasily with other statements about a ‘fault-line’ in society ushering in a ‘temple-like’ use of passage tombs, with people taking centre stage (p.112). Additional discussion of the organising power behind sites like Newgrange is not given the space it needs (and is probably too big of an undertaking in a book of this size). As a result, some arguments appear simplistic, e.g. equating the extent of the sources of stone used in Newgrange with a later Neolithic political region (p.113). This contrasts with the space given in the following chapter to the sequences of megalithic art at Newgrange and to the traces still discernible of earlier monuments. While familiar to many archaeologists, these ‘other Newgranges’ are almost certainly a little-appreciated aspect of the tomb for the wider public and Chapter 7 contains a very worthwhile working through of the evidence, including as yet unpublished data from the State excavations there in the 1980s.

The penultimate Chapter 8 sums up the three-stage model of passage tomb development in Ireland, stressing the complex nature of the phenomenon. There was very likely not a simple west to east/earlier to later sequence, and Hensey suggests instead a 'mushrooming' of hubs of passage tombs through time (p.139). This is reinforced with a series of short sections on the four main passage tomb 'hubs' – Carrowmore, Carrowkeel, Loughcrew, the Boyne – outlining how the three different tomb types appeared in each area. Final concluding comments serve to remind the reader of the extent of social investment in monuments like Newgrange, how this has enabled them to transcend their original context and continue to dazzle us today. While period specialists may take issue with some of the arguments presented, *First Light* ultimately succeeds in delivering an intelligent, accessible and up-to-date account of the context to Newgrange, arguably Ireland's most iconic ancient monument.

References

Siggins, L. 2016. 'Newgrange sun trap may be only 50 years old, says archaeologist'. *Irish Times*, 21 December.

Available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/newgrange-sun-trap-may-be-only-50-years-old-says-archaeologist-1.2913483> (Accessed 12 April 2017)

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