

## Robert Hensey, *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange*

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Passage tombs belong to one of three classes of Neolithic chambered burial monuments distributed across the island of Ireland. A fourth class, represented by Bronze Age wedge tombs, is chronologically later in the megalithic tomb-building sequence and, accordingly, is thought not to be linked to its antecedents in terms of any cultural overlap. The number of extant Irish Neolithic tombs is currently estimated as 843 (National Monument Service of Ireland 2015). This figure includes 18 belonging to an additional minor group known as “Single Neolithic Burials”. Proportionately, passage tombs represent 26% of this total. Why Robert Hensey should produce a book dedicated to just one type of tomb, and which is heavily weighted to one particular monument, has been partially answered by one eminent archaeologist in a treatise on the very same type of monument:

In their form and ornamentation the passage graves of Atlantic and northern Europe form the most clearly defined class of megalithic tombs in the whole area. The distinctiveness of the class is reinforced by other features of distribution and siting and, at least in Ireland, by a unique assemblage of finds. It seems reasonable to regard these features as indicating that the passage grave builders were a distinct cultural group. (Herity 1974, 8)

Hensey justifies his focus on Newgrange by stating:

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. (p. 5)

By concentrating exclusively on passage tombs, Hensey avoids the complex issue and challenge of attempting to explain any relationship(s) between the three monument-building traditions as expressed by their differing architectural styles. This might be

perceived as weakening the overall thesis of the book, especially given the known spatial and chronological overlap between court, portal and passage tomb types during the Neolithic. Since the 1960s in particular, debate on any cultural homogeneity pertaining to these different traditions has occupied archaeological thinking, with a variety of explanatory models proposed and argued (e.g. de Valera 1960, Cooney 1990, Cooney and Grogan 1999). A cautionary comment by Shee Twohig (2004, 9) highlights the difficulties and dangers of attempting to classify and analyse all megalithic tombs in such a partitioned or bounded system and advises that “we should not assume that the builders of these thought of them in such neat categories”. Notwithstanding such uncertainties, Hensey has compiled a book which skilfully achieves depth as well as breadth in the approaches to its subject matter. It offers new thinking and new data on the cultural developments which began with the building of modest-sized simple passage tombs and culminated in the realisation of gigantic and architecturally sophisticated temples of the dead in the case of some.

This review commences at the mid-point of the book for several reasons. In Chapter 4, entitled “Waiting for the Sun”, the author draws extensively on the findings of recent archaeoastronomical research undertaken by others (on passage tombs) to underpin one of the most important sections in the book. As such, its narrative and conclusions will be of great interest to the readers of this journal. This is particularly so because Hensey is one of a growing number of archaeologists willing to contextualise astronomical alignment and symbolism in the narrative of prehistoric constructs. His interpretative approaches are cogently argued, measured and holistic. He notes how archaeology is “especially good at investigating certain aspects of the past” (p. 79) and how other aspects of life in the prehistoric past “leave little trace, in particular myths and beliefs and some ritual practices”. His recognition of the value of archaeoastronomical techniques and findings to archaeology is therefore noteworthy. His assertion that “accounts of passage tomb orientations tend to focus on technicalities of the phenomenon rather than trying to understand why people were aligning monuments towards the sun and what it meant to them” (p. 75) does not reflect an awareness of the recent/current rise in interpretative archaeoastronomy. Readers of this journal will be conscious of its *raison d'être*, namely, concern with the role and importance of the sky in the interpretation of the material record. The three-volume publication by Ruggles (2015) of research papers by scholars of archaeoastronomy, ethnoastronomy and historians of science on current theory and method is another significant example of the richness of this cross-disciplinary field. Significantly, a keyword search of that publication for *light* yields numerous papers in which the topic is analysed and considered for its cultural meaning. Hensey’s comment that “solar-orientated passage tombs may have been concerned with much more than a straightforward demonstration of engineering ability or astronomical expertise” (p. 75) is apt. However, while the engineering skills of the tomb builders is beyond question, it is now the prevalent view that the crudity of most megalithic monuments is incompatible with their use for precise astronomical observance of the Sun or for time-keeping. This is not to exclude the possibility of their intentional astronomical/calendrical use to predict approaching dates/events of a festive or ritual nature. This reviewer would

also argue that the reckoning of time by pre-literate farming societies in the prehistoric past was innate and not dependent on any technological aids or built structures. Rather, seasonal time could have been simply determined using the cyclical motions of celestial bodies tracked against recognisable and remembered natural topographical patterns or features on the horizon. Such nuances apart, Hensey's thoughts on the experience and likely meaning of light and solar orientations is penetrating, and a significant contribution to archaeoastronomy.

The opening chapters of Hensey's book are innovative in terms of how the greatest and most splendid example of the passage tomb tradition in Ireland is used to ask the simple question: where did Newgrange come from? He sets out to "chart the back-history" (p. 2) of the monument and to "discern why it was constructed, what was its role". To achieve this, he embarks on a forensic-like investigative journey that draws on a repertoire of approaches and evidences, helpfully synthesised in a single volume, and much of it new. "It is the religion of the monuments, the journey to Newgrange, which is considered in this book", writes Hensey (p. 4). Comparisons with their European passage tomb counterparts are clearly drawn (p. 18) using recent advances in chronological modelling and the findings of recent and current research agendas on this topic (Cooney *et al.* 2011; Bergh and Hensey 2013). This data shows that passage tomb construction had ended in continental Europe several centuries prior to the commencement of a similar tradition in Ireland. That finding precipitates considerable discussion by the author on the origins, influences and contacts between culturally similar groups, such as between Ireland and mainland Europe, and Ireland and Britain. The so-called Irish style of passage tomb is characterised by Hensey using, *inter alia*, landscape siting, architectural features, burial tradition, grave goods and megalithic art. The ritual role of quartz, as used to embellish some tomb façades, and the creation of platforms where assembly is thought to have taken place outside the tombs, is meaningfully explored. Importantly, a new sub-typology of the tombs is created – *viz.* Types I, II and III – and used as an explanatory framework to dissect the curious differences and apparent progression in tomb architecture and elaboration. Perhaps for the first time, the reader is given a cogent model to explain the distribution and development of such sub-types.

Two themes which run like a thread throughout the book are solar orientation and megalithic art. The latter is introduced in Chapter 2, "Constructing New Realities", with a description of the nature of this form of tomb embellishment and its classification. The term "plastic" is borrowed to describe a style of application that permeates much of this art form, that is where ornament is applied to the whole surface of the artefact (in this case a structural stone) in order to achieve a full integration of both. This idea of "plastic" expression in the context of artistic embellishment was first used by Jacobsthal (1944). In Chapter 5, "Where the River Meets the Sea", the author ventures to interpret one particular motif found in the western tomb of Knowth Site 1 as zoomorphic and thus representational rather than abstract or geometrical. This possibly depicts a humpback whale (illustrated in his fig. 5.3). Whalebone objects recovered elsewhere (Carrowmore) are used to give weight to the hypothesis that Neolithic societies were never far from the sea, and such sights and encounters could have been common and influential on those

who inscribed some of the art on the tombs. Chapter 6, entitled “Going Public”, reflects the author’s strengths and expertise in prehistoric religion. He describes the likely social factors and stratification which collectively result in the building of the most impressive Type III tombs, of which Newgrange is arguably the premier example. Collectively, these demonstrate significant change and advancement over time in terms of the cairn size, greater interior space and roof style/height, more complex façades and entrance styles, the grander use of quartz, the emergence of platforms and the astounding proliferation of art which is the greatest such concentration in Europe. For Hensey, these developments are resonant of a “doctrinal religiosity” consistent with previously unmatched levels of societal ambition and success (pp. 60, 62, 116). The “art” theme is continued but in greater detail in Chapter 7, “A Secret History”. Here, the parietal nature of megalithic art and its likely role and meaning are explored in depth. For Hensey, “aesthetic considerations – harmonious composition, visual effect, size of the art – appear to take precedence over time” (p. 131).

As to why passage tombs were built is a question that has universal relevance and intrigue. Hensey concludes:

Newgrange was conceived and erected towards the end of a long tradition of monuments dedicated to the religious needs of Neolithic communities: an archaeological odyssey, from small-scale sites built by early farming groups to potent otherworld centres where ritual training took place at the edge of society. (p. 155)

This book brings clarity and authority to the topic of passage tombs and their place in Irish and wider European prehistory. The content, based on an exemplary research paradigm, will make essential reading for the broad range of disciplines and practitioners which contribute to the science of cultural astronomy in the broadest meaning of the term.

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