Robert Hensey. *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015, 210pp., 8 colour plates, 32 b/w figs, 1 table, pbk, ISBN 978-17-82979-51-7)

This is the first volume to be published in the new 'Oxbow Insights in Archaeology' series, which aims to give authors the chance to freely present their own narratives in a small and accessible volume, while keeping high academic standards of referencing and comprehensive peer-review. Certainly the compact format of the book means that it is an ideal travel companion; combined with good quality illustrations and an engaging style, it is a pleasure to read.

The book brings to a wider audience the key elements of Robert Hensey's PhD thesis on ritual and belief in the passage tomb tradition of Ireland (Hensey, 2010). There are two key aims: firstly, to provide the story of the development of the monumental traditions that led to the construction of Newgrange in the Boyne Valley, and, secondly, to delve deeply into the role and religious use of this iconic site, and in so doing, to challenge orthodox archaeological assumptions.

After an introduction that outlines older theories that sought a continental origin for passage tombs, and a brief overview of the site type in Ireland, Hensey begins to chart a biography of Newgrange as part of a distinctly Irish tradition. Tracing the family tree backwards and westwards, Chapter 1 starts with the Carrowmore complex in Co. Sligo, where the tombs are much simpler and smaller. Recent radiocarbon dating of twenty-five bone and antler pins from Carrowmore in a project coordinated by Hensey with Stefan Bergh, has given crucial new evidence for the Early Neolithic use of these tombs, with the pins dating from 3775–3520 cal BC to 3305–2950 cal BC (95 per cent probability) (Bergh & Hensey, 2013).

The simple tombs of Carrowmore and elsewhere are classed as Type 1 sites, in a three-fold classification used throughout the book. Chapter 2 goes on to explore the larger Type 2 sites, the most numerous and yet, as so few have been excavated, the least understood. Unlike the Type 1 tombs, these tombs have a roofed tunnel that provides access to the central chamber, and include new features such as megalithic art and solar orientations. Type 3 tombs are those famous large tombs, 'the cathedrals of the megalithic religion' (O'Kelly, 1982: 122): Newgrange, Knowth, and Dowth in the Boyne Valley, and a few others, constructed towards the end of the passage tomb tradition. While the categorization of sites in this manner can be useful, and leads to some perceptive insights from Hensey about the changing nature of access and ritual use of the different types, it does risk categorizing monuments only by their final form. Newgrange itself is the product of several different stages with the present structure covering at least one earlier mound as well as much later activity taking place on the site. Many other tombs could have complex phases of development or blur the boundaries between types.

By the beginning of Chapter 3, the book has established itself as a useful and interesting overview of Irish passage graves. But then Hensey makes a radical proposal, a theoretical jolt of the kind that one hopes to regularly receive in order to shake one's pre-conceived assumptions, but rarely actually finds in the archaeological literature. He proposes that people were regularly entering passage tombs not only to place new burials within, but also to stay for prolonged periods, secluded from the rest of society as part of ritual training. The argument develops out of a careful consideration of the architecture of the chambers and of megalithic art,

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together with a review of the ethnographic literature for such 'ritual separation' practices in other communities. For example, the Kogi people from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria in Colombia practice this method, with someone in religious training expected to spend an amazing nine years in darkness and seclusion (Ereira, 2009). Hensey suggests that certain individuals may have been selected to engage with spiritual powers inside passage tombs on behalf of their communities; perhaps we shouldn't be calling these sites tombs after all.

In this shift away from the traditional focus on only the dead and the ancestors, Hensey goes on to draw upon Whitehouse's two core modes of religiosity: doctrinal and imagistic religion (Whitehouse, 2004). Whereas doctrinal religions have rituals that tend to be repetitive, steady, and with low levels of emotion, imagistic religions involve rare but very intense and highly stimulating events. Hensey relates the experience of entering and dwelling within Type 2 passage tombs to the imagistic belief systems (p. 64) whereas activities at the larger Type 3 tombs appear to be more doctrinal in nature (p. 116). It might have been equally interesting to compare evidence for ritual events at these sites with, for example, Descola's four ontological regimes (Descola, 2013). Descola contrasts the modern Western approach of categorizing nature as something other than human, and as an opposite to culture, with alternative ways of relating to non-human animals, plants, objects, and other beings in non-Western societies. He divides these different modes of relations into animism, totemism, and analogism, each useful for thinking through the way in which Neolithic people may have related to non-human beings such as geological materials or astronomical bodies.

Chapter 4 opens with an evocative personal account of witnessing the winter solstice at Newgrange, followed by a wider discussion on the astronomical alignments of passage tombs. Hensey has written more on the interesting theme of darkness and light in prehistory in two other papers (Hensey, 2016, forthcoming). In the following chapter, wider seasonal elements are brought in, such as: the salmon runs of the Boyne; the geographic origins of the stones and materials used to construct Newgrange; and the preponderance of sea shells and whale bone finds at several passage tombs. These serve to highlight the wide-ranging complex connections and associations of Irish passage tombs.

The political and social implications of the changing nature of passage tombs is explored in Chapter 6, with platforms, new forms of art, and elaborate equipment all pointing to the existence of a ritual elite in existence by the middle Neolithic, when the Type 3 tombs were being constructed. Features such as stone basins suggest that ritual seclusion was no longer taking place, and that ceremonies had shifted to public display rather than secretive ritual. There is some discussion of linear monuments leading to some passage tombs; cursus-like sites, timber-lined avenues, and possible routeways. Although largely unexcavated, more detailed contextual information about the form and geography of these complexes of monuments beyond the passage tombs themselves would have been welcome, and is certainly an area for future research.

There is careful and nuanced discussion of the notions of elites, competitive display, authority, and ritual beliefs, again turning to Whitehouse's definitions of doctrinal and imagistic religions to account for the changing function of passage tombs. In Chapter 7, these ideas are explored in relation to megalithic art, with a detailed discussion of how carvings could be hidden, erased, changed, or sanctioned, and of the remodelling of the monuments themselves. In a final chapter,

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Hensey re-emphasizes the importance of discussing prehistoric religious beliefs, of being brave enough, as he has done, to think about the way in which Neolithic people may have perceived their world, particularly the otherworld and the past. Inspired perhaps by Edmonds (1999), a hint of this is given throughout, each chapter starting with a few interpretative lines through which we glimpse a scene from the past.

It is a shame that the new radiocarbon dates from the Carrowkeel tombs, which give a rough estimate for their use of 3346–3019 cal BC (95 per cent probability) (Kador et al., 2015), could not be included in the book before it went to press. Nevertheless this does reflect the fact that a wave of continuing new and innovative research is currently focused on the Irish Neolithic, represented by this book and others, such as Smyth's (2014) volume on Early Neolithic settlement, and new publications on the key sites of the Mound of Hostages at Tara (O'Sullivan et al., 2013) and Knowth in the Boyne Valley (Eogan & Cleary, forthcoming).

Drawing on a wide range of material from anthropology, environmental archaeology, and religious theory, the book challenges and informs in equal measure, and sets a high standard for future volumes in this series. Whether it is to be an introduction for the novice or student, or a stimulating read for the seasoned academic, *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange* comes highly recommended.

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