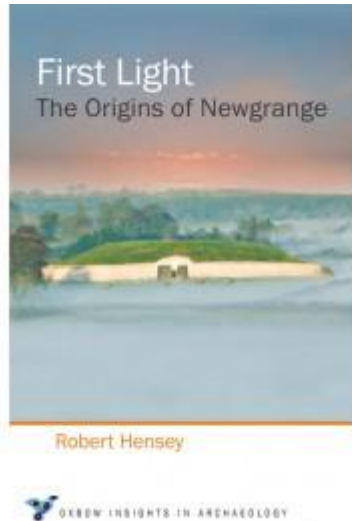


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FIRST LIGHT: THE ORIGINS OF NEWGRANGE

Robert Hensey, Oxbow Books, Oxford & Philadelphia, 2015. £15.99 \$26

This review is an essay in three sections.

Section 1 contains two extracts from unpublished Memoirs, describing my visits to the unrestored Newgrange in 1962, and to the restored Newgrange in 1992. In between these extracts is a poem written some years after the first visit.

Section 2 discusses the book under review.

Section 3 sets out some of my own thoughts on the origins of Newgrange, or as it was called earlier, Brú na Bóinne.

1

October 1962

On one of our drives in County Down, E and I had visited the Audleystown horned cairn, a long, narrow tunnel of large stones under a mound, originally a burial chamber, with a crescent of stones as a forecourt. Such 'court cairns', dating from about 2,500 B.C., are quite common in Ulster, but E had never seen one. She knew nothing of prehistoric Ireland. So we decided to spend a whole day, just before my departure for my second year at Oxford, on a trip down to the Boyne

valley.

At Drogheda from a rusty, girdered bridge we saw the filthy waters of the river which the ancient Irish had described as a silver arm, now dark brown and scummy as it swept past the grimy wharves of the town. We did not bother with Drogheda Cathedral, where the head of the Blessed Oliver Plunkett, preserved and shrunken by the smoke of the fire where Cromwell's soldiers are supposed to have tossed it, is kept in a glass case. We headed inland along the north bank of the Boyne – 'Bovinda' on a map by Ptolemy, probably meaning the river of the white cow goddess. (The Lagan, at Belfast, is the river of the calf.) Ripe elderberries hung in black clusters from bushes along the hedges on the way to Newgrange. In Irish myth it is Brú na Bóinne, the hostel of the Boyne, sacred to Aengus, the love god of the Tuatha De Danann (the people of the goddess Danu). Perhaps the cliffs at Dun Aengus, on the Aran Islands, had also been named after him.

The enormous mound rose in the middle of a field, covered with grass and bushes, collapsed at the top. We rang for the guide at his cottage and I slipped him a few shillings. Rambling on about everything from the shaft graves at Mycenae to the necessity of keeping the place locked up because certain visitors had carved their initials on the walls, he unlocked the little iron gate above the threshold of huge carved stones, and switched on the lighting system, a series of bare bulbs on a wire, although he was carrying a large torch. The passage was over sixty feet long and we had to bend double most of the way. The chamber was in the form of a cross: there were alcoves at each side. In one alcove on the ground was a shallow stone dish about four feet long. At one end of the dish were two depressions in the stone, as if places for the knees of a victim. 'The sacrificial bowl!', said the guide. He said that on the shortest day of the year the sun sent a single ray up the passage which lit up the upright stone behind the bowl.

He shone a torch beam up where the lighting did not reach, to a corbel-vaulted roof. We were standing in a hollow pyramid, about twenty feet high, of converging stone slabs. The guide then went through his dramatic routine of shining his torch at the carvings on various stones. These must have been connected with whatever rituals used to take place. Perhaps there was sacrifice, perhaps rebirth. On one stone was a triple spiral. There was a carving which the guide announced sonorously as 'the herringbone or fern leaf.' It could have been either, or even a stylized tree. The carvings were in odd places – hence the guide's drama – up high, or to one side.

Outside again, we walked along the edge of the mound, looking at the stones which lined its base, carved with spirals, lozenges, cup and ring designs, and what might have been geometric versions of faces or figures.

'Can you imagine how cruel these people must have been?' I asked, thinking of the sacrificial bowl in the mound chamber. E replied, 'Yes, but they were like children, they were innocently cruel.'

AT BRÚ NA BÓINNE (NEWGRANGE)

*I, the sun, shone over the spiraled threshold,
Probed my way along the narrow floor
Into the inmost corbelled vault,
And spilled my warm drops in a granite bowl.
I am that man, daubed in red,
And she, with flint knife, pale, eyes like stone,
The always chilly, mirroring, menstrual moon.*

August 1992

I liked the new, sod-stripped, white, quartz-faced Newgrange. I had a piece of the quartz, at home in Canada, which Pa had picked up for me years ago as the excavations began. (And I had read O'Kelly's book about the restoration.) My family liked it too. As we stood in front of the entrance listening to the young, red-haired guide with his nice soft accent, I had one world outside and one inside my mind. Outside, the gleaming white quartz and the smoothed, flat, grassy top of the mound. Inside, the grass and bushes and half-collapsed top and edges of the mound of thirty years before.

We went along the passage whose floor had been dropped so it was not necessary to stoop so much as then, and stood with twenty or so other tourists – Spaniards, French, Dutch – in the inner cruciform chamber, under the corbelled vaulting, as the guide switched the lighting effect on and off. I remembered the old guide from the cottage down the road, with his pocket torch. Thirty years of archaeology had reconstructed the mound, but the people who had built it were still a mystery: they might as well have been the 'little people', the Sidhe.

The red-haired guide was telling us we each had to interpret in our own way the spirals and cup marks and squiggles carved in the kerbstones. Some New Age mystics see them as the movement of the life force – what Wilhelm Reich called circle-waves and Hindus call vitality-globules: the swirling points of light you see after a while in total darkness, and which you are told are inside your eyes, although if you move your eyes, the points of light stay spinning in place. Some markings look like a sperm piercing an egg – but of course the carvers had no microscopes.... The archaeologist Marja Gimbutas thinks the spirals are the eyes of the Goddess. In her meticulous studies of the carved or incised symbols of 'Old Europe', Robert Graves's 'crazy theory' of the White Goddess is finding scientific support.

The spirals, according to Robert, were wheels of eternal life and rebirth, the continuous line going in and out, and the huge triple spirals on the entrance kerb-stone, now fully exposed, also represented the 'triple goddess'. 'Like the shamrock,' as my ten-year-old daughter pointed out. (On the drive I had told the story of St Patrick demonstrating the Trinity with reference to the shamrock which, in Robert's view, had originally been sacred to the Goddess). What would Robert have thought of Avalon Books in Victoria, British Columbia, where flaky West Coast neo-hippies shop for magic crystals and replicas of the Venus of Willendorf, to the accompaniment of music so monotonous that it might be a tape loop, a chorus of Californian women singing again and again, 'We are children of the Goddess, and to her we all return'?

But here with G and our girls and the European tourists, all packed tight, I was happy. It was the same after all. I reached out and took G's hand as we looked together up at the corbelled vault.

2

A quick count on Amazon UK shows about 20 books with Newgrange in the title, ranging from archaeological studies to mystical theories. I have read or scanned a few of these books across the years, but here I shall review only Hensey's which is the most recent and about which the publisher states: 'Challenging both orthodox archaeological and popular opinion, this will be an

important book for anyone interested in Neolithic archaeology.’

It is a small and attractive book, with some 45 black and white photographs, diagrams and maps, and with 8 colour plates. Of its 194 pages, 34 consist of notes and a bibliography. Hensey has 160 pages to summarise the archaeology and to make his case for several key ideas. Surprisingly, in such a well-designed book, there are occasional spelling slips and confused grammar, suggesting slack proof-reading. This *would* bother me and it did. In compensation, the structure of the book is clear. Its themes are explored in 8 chapters, and summarised in the final *Conclusion: An Archaeology of the Otherworld*.

I must admit that this title to the Conclusion in itself raises a red flag for me. The ‘Otherworld’ in Old Irish was often called the ‘bruiden’, an old word for a ‘hostel’ – meaning the hostel where the spirits of the dead found their home. And ‘Newgrange’ is a later English name for the Irish ‘Brú na Bóinne’, the ‘Hostel of the Boyne.’ But these are Celtic concepts. Current thinking (e.g. by James Mallory in *The Origins of the Irish*) is that the earliest possible date for the arrival of Celtic languages in Ireland was 2,500 BC, and it is much more likely to have arrived around 1,000 BC. Newgrange was constructed around 3,200 BC, by people whose language is unknown.

Hensey has a PhD in Archaeology from NUI Galway where he is a lecturer. He ‘specialises in religion and belief in the past with particular reference to the Irish Neolithic and Irish passage tombs.’ He concludes his *Preface* with:

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... one that could begin to address where Newgrange came from, why it is there at all.’

This is another red flag for me. Note the reversed priority: first the beliefs (which can only be hypothetical), then their ‘materialisation.’ The 19th century founders of archaeology in Ireland first studied the artefacts and remains, and only then speculated about religion and belief. Even so, earlier archaeologists and in particular one of the earliest investigators of Newgrange, RAS Macalister, were drubbed by the ferocious linguist T F O’Rahilly (*Early Irish History and Mythology, 1946*) for over-reaching their science. As O’Rahilly put it sarcastically: ‘Naturally we can learn nothing about language or dialect from an examination of skulls.’ Or, as the cliché has

it, 'Dead men's bones tell no tales.' (Mind you, there are not even many bones around in Newgrange).

The two red flags pop up for me because I expect that an archaeologist will deduce from his or her material findings what was happening in that remote time. But if he or she is exploring the 'thought-worlds' of that time there is the danger that his or her own thought-world will organise the findings to fit it. That is red flag number one. Number two is that if Hensey's 'thought-world' includes the concept of the 'Otherworld' so prominently that it figures in his Conclusion, he had better have some evidence that it existed in the thought-world of the builders of Newgrange. But since nobody knows what language they spoke, there can be no such evidence. Archaeologists cannot afford the sort of guesswork that O'Rahilly so mercilessly pilloried. In using the word 'Otherworld', Hensey is jumping the gun.

But there is always hope. If the builders of Newgrange spoke a pre-Celtic language, some of its ideas will have been passed on to their Celtic successors, and translated (just as fragments of Roman-Latin thinking survive in English law). If the Irish-speakers called Newgrange a 'brú', perhaps this was because it was seen by their predecessors too as an Otherworld for the spirits of the dead. Or were *they*, the predecessors, the dead? The mounds of passage graves are known in Irish as the 'Sidhe' (a word cognate with 'site'), meaning the places of 'the people of the dead', the fairies. So there are two possibilities (at least!). The spirits in the mounds are either a) the spirits which were assigned a place there when the mounds were built, or b) the spirits of the builders.

Taking the book chapter by chapter.

Ch.1

The Earliest Irish Passage Tombs

This is a succinct and thorough exploration of the distribution and building of passage tombs across the middle of Ireland from West to East, from Sligo Bay to the Boyne, in four clusters – Carrowmore, Carrowkeel, Loughcrew and Brú na Bóinne – the least complex and earliest (Type 1) being in the West (from about 3,800 BC), the most complex and latest (Type 3) being the Boyne tombs (about 3,200 BC), with Type 2 in between. Although it is supposed that early settlers to Ireland from Brittany or Spain arrived in the South-west (Cork/Kerry) there are almost no passage tombs South of the Sligo Boyne line, and not many North of it. (The Ulster horned cairns

mentioned earlier date from 500 years later).

The only thing that worried me in this chapter is the lack of a discussion of bones. They are stated to be present in most tombs, but no further description is offered beyond the fact that most had been cremated (unlike in prehistoric Britain). How many of them? Male or female? What size of people did they suggest? It seems there are not enough discovered bones to come to conclusions, but this is not stated. It is, however, a crucial point. It is assumed that these passage ‘tombs’ or passage ‘graves’ were just that. If so, why are there not heaps of bones? Or if there are such heaps, why is their composition not analysed? Hensey mentions the bones of ‘select individuals’. What kind of individuals? Again: women? men?

There is also a discussion of the relation of tomb sites to water – rivers and the sea. Hensey proposes that the tomb builders may have wanted to honour the places across the sea from which they had come. Hensey does not discuss the controversial issue of whether the Celts came to Ireland from continental Europe (as widely assumed until about twenty years ago) or from N Africa and S Spain and Portugal via the Atlantic. The ‘Atlantic Celts’ theory has been argued by John Koch and supported by Barry Cunliffe, at the scholarly level, and written up vividly at the popular level by Bob Quinn. Did the pre-Celts who built Newgrange arrive, like the later Celts, from across the sea? Hensey supposes so. They are ‘Neolithic’ farmers. Hensey notes that when they arrived there was an existing population of hunter-gatherers. Where did *they* come from? They are usually supposed to have been descendants of the few Mesolithic people who survived the Ice Age. I suppose space in this focused book on Newgrange did not permit a discussion of all this, but a summary would be useful.

Ch.2

Constructing New Realities.

This discusses the deterioration of the climate from 4,000 BC onwards. Hensey conjectures that this required more and more complex forms of worship and tomb building in order to appease the gods or the powers of nature – or something! There is no evidence for this, except the fact that while the climate was deteriorating the ‘tombs’ were becoming more complex. It is simply a correlation. And in ‘harder’ sciences than archaeology, as the 19th century psychologist Karl Pearson put it, ‘a correlation is a confession of failure’ – unless it includes precise measurements along with a statistical analysis. These cannot be offered when one of the variables is ‘religion’.

The title of the chapter gives it away. The new realities are being constructed by Hensey who, as becomes evident, is steeped in social constructionist theory. Fair enough, but it is not science.

Throughout this book, Hensey describes concrete observations carefully and systematically, as in his analysis of techniques of stone carving and ‘pick dressing’. I suppose I am too concrete in my thinking. (The idea of pick-dressing stone appeals to me). I prefer these technical discussions to such revelations as that ‘These features indicate the incorporation of culturally encoded beliefs into the architecture.’

Ch.3

Into the Earth

Here Hensey develops an idea from Chapter 2. As agriculture at first worked alongside hunter-gathering and then began to replace it, but in a period of deteriorating climate, religious rituals became more necessary. The passage tombs ‘housed spiritual forces’ which could be drawn upon. Ritual specialists entered the tombs to deposit bones. The tombs were often constructed to have recesses in the walls, occasionally one or two more than the usual three in the cruciform innermost chamber. Hensey suggests that these recesses were used in ‘rites of separation’ in which special individuals (sex not specified) communicated with the spirits of the dead by isolating themselves inside the tomb for long periods in total darkness where they could experience the kind of visual phenomena recorded in the engravings on the stone of the tomb. This is similar to known practices of shamans in more recent isolated societies. ‘Not only was there the contrast between the separated individuals inside the chamber and their families and the wider community outside, but also between the darkness within and the daylight outside; between interiority and exteriority.’

I find it hard to believe the New Age shamans were bothered by theories of ‘interiority and exteriority’. Here the 21st century academic speaks. And Hensey, citing studies by ‘rock-art expert David Lewis-Williams’ on ‘entoptic phenomena’ in neolithic cave art, goes on to discuss ‘entoptic forms’.

[They occur in] trance states, and can be induced by a range of techniques and practices, including sensory deprivation, fasting, and controlled breathing. Recorded entoptic forms include grids and lattices, sets of parallel lines, bright dot / flecks, zig-zag lines, nested catenary curves, filigrees and spiral forms, which appear to conform well to the corpus of passage tomb art.’

Strictly speaking, ‘entoptic phenomena’, as defined in 19th century research by Helmholtz

and others on the physiology of the eye, consist of perceptions of patterns in the blood vessels of the retina. They are usually blotches or specks, floaters, dots and tree-like capillaries. They are caused by light having shone too strongly on the eye! Not by sitting in total darkness. But in recent years the term 'entoptic' (Greek for 'within the eye') has been expanded by some researchers to include events in the visual cortex of the brain. This inclusion is rather like saying that the pre-frontal cortex is an extension of the hand. It blurs the issue (pun intended). I shall discuss it later in a separate section, *Seeing in the Dark*.

Ch. 4

Waiting for the Sun

Hensey provides an impeccable description and study of the mechanics whereby the sun's rays around the winter solstice (on unclouded mornings) shine through the specially placed roof box along over 60 feet to the floor of the inner chamber. He also discusses the orientation of various other Neolithic monuments oriented to the solstices or (rarely) the equinox. And he describes his own experience of the sun's light entering the chamber of Newgrange at the winter solstice.

He does not go so far as to propose, as some have done, the idea that Newgrange functioned as an observatory. Instead he integrates the 'first light' of the solstice into religious practice. He makes it clear that he is moved by his experience of this first light, which he describes eloquently. And it is, after all, the title of his book.

The relation to the summer solstice event at Stonehenge (which Hensey does not mention) is obvious. Stonehenge too has been claimed to be an observatory.

But if these places were purpose-built as observatories, again they do seem to be rather resource intensive. Some 20th century observatories in high mountains started as nothing more than shacks!

Almost certainly the alignment of these megalithic structures with the solstices was part of religion. And the religion presumably claimed the power, as religions do, to influence the world for the better. But Hensey launches into a 'Meditation on Light', describing an artist's installation at the Tate Gallery which enhances 'seeing yourself sensing.' So:

Light can only be seen in interaction with space; it is the resistance of space that makes it apparent. Without Newgrange, the sunlight in the Boyne valley would not have been narrowed to a beam that could be observed in darkness at such close quarters. The construction and design of the passage tomb allowed that particular type of engagement.

Leaving aside the dodgy physics of ‘the resistance of space’, has Hensey never been in a wooden barn? Or even a good old Irish shed with a chink in the slates or thatch of the roof? Again the doors of perception can be cleansed without having to build a Newgrange. As Hensey points out in the book, in 3,200 BC or so, Ireland was densely wooded. People would have built barns, houses, and other buildings out of timber. When I lived in Quebec on a farm with various out-buildings I often stopped working with animals or pitching hay to look at beams of the sun piercing through into the dusty space, luminous and floating with motes. I suspect such everyday experiences furnished the idea for the design of the door-box at Newgrange. Hensey notes evidence that it was added to an existing structure.

Ch.5

Where the River meets the Sea

This is a highly interesting discussion of the close links of the tombs on their virtual island between the Boyne and a smaller river as they join their ways to the not too distant sea. Around the winter solstice a ‘salmon run’ up the Boyne began. Religious rituals involving sea creatures may have been involved, as suggested at other passage tombs at Carrowmore close to the Atlantic where whalebone artefacts are found. But Hensey does not mention the ‘herring bone or fern leaf’ at Newgrange.

Ch.6

Going Public

Discussion of possible public rituals (highly conjectural) at various passage tombs, along with descriptions of various artefacts, including ‘pendants and beads, bone or antler pins, balls of stone and baked clay, sherds of pottery... and quartz.’ Further discussion of artistic motifs carved in stone.

Ch. 7

A Secret History

Discussion of how many of the stones at Newgrange are carved in areas which are covered by earth or hidden behind other stones, and are not seen now, and in many cases never were. This

implies that the making of the art was more important than its display. This was probably religious. (It makes me think of the necessary poem which is put away in the desk drawer as unpublishable: it had to be written, and its meaning is itself.)

Ch. 8

Journey to Newgrange

Brief reprise of passage tombs from Carrowmore in the West, across to Newgrange.

Conclusion: An Archaeology of the Underworld

I have already noted my objection to plonking the Celtic concept of the Otherworld down onto pre-Celtic Newgrange – at least doing so without a careful discussion.

No modern academic study (and this *is* an academic study, although well worth wider reading) can do without an injection of theory, especially French theory. So there is a page about the ideas of one Maurice Block (not to be confused with the brilliant French historian Marc Bloch who was a man of action, not theory: he joined the Resistance and was shot by the Nazis in 1944). Block postulates ‘the *transcendental social* as opposed to the *transactional* social of everyday survival’. (This provides an example of the sloppy editing of this otherwise lovely book: there seems to be a noun missing in the phrase, and the second ‘social’ is not italicised.)

Following Block, in French theory mode, Hensey states: ‘The idea of an otherworld, imminent and approachable, is a transcendental concept that I think applies to all phases of passage tomb construction.’ But a little later he admits:

We know very little else about what kind of religious beliefs these groups may have had. They may have had spiritual beliefs around quartz and rock crystal as this material is often found in the monuments (sic) chambers. Some form of shamanism may have occurred...

Seeing in the Dark

After his discussion of ‘entoptic phenomena’ in Chapter 3, Hensey launches into a mini-essay on ‘Art and Altered Consciousness’. I am sure that to some old-timers like me this brings us back to the 1960s and 70s where many people took the fast track to Altered States of Consciousness (abbreviated in psychology to ‘ASC’) via drugs. One of their founding texts (before Timothy Leary put LSD in the centre of the market) was Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley took his title from William Blake:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to a man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

But Blake cleansed the doors of his perception in the open air, and through engraving on copper and painting in colours. The paradox is that these intensified states of being can be reached, it seems, through any radical change in the life of habit. Be that as it may, the Newgrange technique of isolation in the dark, as proposed by Hensey, certainly works. I have experienced it myself. In the 1980s, when I lived on the Pacific Coast, some psychotherapists used flotation tanks where after an hour or so of total sensory deprivation, all sorts of visions and revelations occurred – along with the visual phenomena which Hensey (following Lewis-Williams) describes as 'entoptic'. As I mentioned earlier, the word 'entoptic' has come to be used wrongly to include more than what occurs 'in the eye': it now sometimes includes (confusingly) events in the visual cortex of the brain.

There are already many terms for these cortical events. In German they are called the 'Ganzfeld' ('whole field') effect. They are sometimes labelled 'phosphenes', although this is usually a term for the visual effects caused by rubbing the eyes through closed eyelids. More casually they are called 'prisoner's cinema'. This cinema goes back a long way. In ancient Greece, Pythagoras and his followers induced it by sitting for long periods in pitch-dark caves. In the 20th century Wilhelm Reich described observations made by him and his colleagues of streaks of bluish light spiralling and zig-zagging in the dark of the 'orgone accumulator', a small room or box constructed with alternating layers of metal and organic material – with the metallic layer on the inside. The light phenomena could be magnified if observed through a lens. They moved independently of eye movements. They were 'out there', not entoptic (an issue which Reich demonstrated carefully). They were atmospheric.

For some years around 1970, with a biophysicist friend, Adolph Smith, I experimented with Wilhelm Reich's devices for 'drawing' the 'orgone energy', or 'cosmic life energy'. As I describe in my book *Pulsation*, Adolph and I could replicate many of Reich's experiments, and we concluded that there seemed to be an atmospheric 'field' around organisms. It seemed to us an open question whether visual phenomena occurred only in the 'field' of the organism or at large. (This does not imply that we accepted Reich's theory of 'life energy'. And the phenomena were not due to electromagnetic energy, on which Adolph had done his doctorate.)

As it happens, several mystical followers of Reich have proposed that Newgrange is an

‘orgone accumulator’, because it consists of alternating layers of stone and earth. Newgrange is *not* an accumulator. It does not contain layers of metal. Full stop. Nevertheless, those who propose this theory of Newgrange do so because the carvings on the stones remind them of the atmospheric light phenomena experienced in an accumulator as invented by Reich. In fact, anyone sitting in any totally dark room will begin to see these phenomena within an hour or so, in the form of blue or bluish-white light spiralling and zig-zagging. The inner layer of metal in an accumulator seems to enhance the effect, but a cave will do...

The stars painted by Van Gogh in ‘Starry Night’ are surrounded by spirals of light. Rapidly forming and vanishing spinning whirls can be seen even in daylight against a blue sky, and Hindu mystics call them the Hindi equivalent of ‘vitality globules’. But here, since the eye is stimulated by light, they can be labelled entoptic phenomena even though they are not the usual entoptic forms. (NB: even genuinely entoptic phenomena, unless they are due to damage in the retina, have to be triggered by external events, such as rubbing the eyes, or being exposed to bright light.)

So does all this support Hensey’s theory?

Yes it does, to the point that many of (not all of) the designs carved into the stones at Newgrange and on other passage tombs in Ireland are depictions of ‘atmospheric’ phenomena. And yes, in that anyone sitting for a while in the dark chamber of such a tomb would experience them.

But No it does not, in the sense that building an 85 metre-wide structure of 200,000 tons of stone, earth and quartz in order to experience dark-room or sensory deprivation phenomena seems a touch extravagant. Why, you could experience them in a hole in the ground!

I think Hensey is well over the top with his vision of mystical adepts or shamans living for prolonged periods of time in the three or four alcoves of passage graves. On economic grounds alone it makes no sense for a community to build such vast monuments for a few mystics or priests. And then there is the hygiene. Yes, I am concrete minded, but I just cannot see how this supposed long term isolation would work. The ‘rite of separation’ would be complicated by the necessity of the other rite of separation of shit from the body. (I use the crude word ‘shit’ because it is etymologically connected with words meaning ‘separate’). The shamans would need candles or rush-lights if only to dispose of their own excrement, or for people to bring them in water or a bite to eat. All this for a few visions which can be granted within an hour in any pitch-dark place without building a 200,000 ton monument!

There are a few other things I kept waiting for in the book which did not turn up:

Bones. They are mentioned as if omnipresent in the ‘tombs’ but, as I noted earlier they are not discussed in detail. What proportion of the bones are female and what male? Burnt or not? Some writers (e.g. Chris Callaghan in *New Grange – Temple to Life*, 2004) suggest that there are so few bones on the supposed ‘tombs’ and ‘graves’ that those few that have been found may have been dragged in by scavenging animals. Even if claims like this are made in non-academic books, an academic like Hensey might care to put French theory aside for a moment and discuss them.

Balls. Balls of limestone or of clay, ranging from one to several centimetres in diameter, are by far the most frequent artefact found in passage tombs. Hensey mentions these balls and there is a photograph of some, but he does not allow himself to speculate on them. Again being a concrete sort of thinker, I speculate that they are simply – balls! As in testicles and their relations the ovaries. As pastoralists as well as agriculturalists, people in 3,000 BC knew all about the functions of these organs. What more natural than to use stone balls as deposits along with a prayer for fertility?

At Grimes Graves in Norfolk starting around 3,000 BC (roughly contemporary with Newgrange) over 400 shafts from 35 to 45 feet deep were dug through chalk down to a layer of flint which was mined using antler-picks. And in the bottoms of the shafts archaeologists find deposits of hundreds of little balls of limestone.

‘The herring-bone or fern-leaf’. It was there in 1962. Why not mention it in connection with the ‘salmon run’.

Quartz. Hensey does mention quartz as possibly connected with religious rites, and as used in Kelley’s restoration of Newgrange, but given the vast quantities of quartz found in the mound, and the controversy over the restoration, it deserves more discussion. Consistently Hensey seems to fight shy of speculation and fall back on the comforts of ‘theory’.

The triple spiral. As far as I know there are only 3 places in Ireland where a carving of a triple spiral exists. One is on a very low stump of stone almost covered by bushes on Clear Island.

The other is on the standing stone now at Birr, close to the geographical centre of Ireland, known as the ‘navel of Ireland’. The other is at Newgrange. This suggests – at least some people on Clear Island wonder about it – that the makers of Newgrange first hit landfall at Clear, coming by sea from the South, and so marked the spot, then later at Birr marked the centre of the new land they had come to, and then at Newgrange their religious centre. There is indeed a triple spiral on the Clear stone. As for Birr, I have not seen the stone, and a spiral is not noted on the Internet sites that discuss it, but a spiral is sometimes thought to indicate a navel. So perhaps people have reasoned backwards from the ‘navel’ to a non-existent or obscured triple spiral. Perhaps this would be too conjectural a discussion for an academic like Hensey, but he is not afraid to conjecture about religion. By contrast he plays it safe with archaeology. I wish he stuck his neck out more in his own field.

3

Newgrange was built over 5,000 years ago by people who lived in Ireland. No one knows what language they spoke, and they did not write it down. To us now, Newgrange seems like *an* other world, but the concept (‘transcendental’ or not) of *the* Otherworld is something we only know from literature in Indo European languages which are not supposed to have entered Ireland before at the very earliest 2,500 BC and probably much later.

In my late teens I wrote a number of poems about the Otherworld to my then girl-friend E. For a few months we seemed to live in two worlds at once – this one and another, a magical one and the ordinary one. I had been reading Graves’s books *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess*, and I had met him at Oxford and we had talked about poetry. So naturally, in the poem *At Brú na Bóinne* I thought in the usual way of European poetry in the classical tradition, and I became the Sun as E became the Moon. And it fitted. If ever a girl was moon-like it was she, with changing moods, night-black hair, pale white skin (and eyes which were clear blue fringed with brown, somehow containing both day and night). And I was a fairly sunny character at the time and she drew on my warmth.

But a month after our Newgrange visit, back in Oxford, I read T F O’Rahilly’s book and learned that for the ancient Irish the Goddess was not the moon, she was the sun! The chief of all the Irish goddesses was Anu or Áine whose name originated in the Old Irish word for ‘ring’ – the circle of the sun. And I already knew that in Irish the word for sun, ‘grian’ is feminine. The two

words for moon, 'gealach' ('the white one') and 'ré' (a word implying measurement of time and space) are also feminine. And I also knew that in German the sun, die Sonne, is feminine, and the moon, Der Mond, is masculine.

So was Graves wrong? Of course not. He was true to one honourable tradition (the Latin-Greek 'classical' one), and the Germans and Irish seemed to be true to other traditions.

E and I went into the passage at Newgrange as part of our own myth. And the psychoanalytic concept of 'projection' suggests that we can project our myths or schemes onto the blank of the unknown. Hensey's book on Newgrange is excellent (although I think over-cautious) as archaeology, but once he gets into religion he too starts to project to those shamans studying light and dark in their alcoves. Although in his conclusion he has to admit that we *don't know* what the Newgrange religion was.

We also *can't* know in the absence of written evidence. Here O'Rahilly was right. A skull has nothing to tell us. But what about the evidence of language itself? We do know that the Irish and other Celtic speakers had a concept of the Otherworld (more central in their thinking than in that of other Indo-European peoples). It runs through Old Irish poetry and stories. Where did they get it from?

Most linguisticians agree that when Irish arrived in Ireland sometime between 2,000 and 1,000 BC (depending on different views) it gradually replaced the language of the preceding population, but possibly some elements of this earlier language survive in Irish as a 'substrate'. Some grammatical elements in Irish, in particular, do not seem Indo-European. In descending order of popularity, the current candidates for the earlier 'substrate' language are early forms of:

Hamito-Semitic (from N Africa via Spain – the Atlantic Irish perhaps).

Basque (possibly via a pre-Indo European Ice Age population: there are notable genetic links between the Basques and the Irish).

Uralic (proto-Finnish, which like Basque may have been present in Europe since the Ice Age. But this theory is more on the fringe than the other two).

In Semitic languages (Hebrew, Arabic), as well as in Lybian-Berber (Hamitic), the moon is masculine, and the sun is feminine.

In Basque and in Finnish there is no gender at all. In Basque it is expressed by direct nouns, as in for example 'Ama Lur' which means 'Mother Earth.'

So it is probable that the language of the people who built Newgrange either had no

grammatical genders at all, or (the most likely), in their language the sun was feminine. If so it has carried through to the Irish that replaced it. (Perhaps this replacement occurred in the Celtic and German lands of North West Europe: it did not in the Italic lands). As for the gender of the earth, in Irish it is masculine, in both senses – ‘world’ (‘domhain’), and ‘earth’ (‘talamh’).

So there is at least a good chance that if we imagine the ‘thought-world’ of the builders of Newgrange as including a male sun shining his germinative rays into a female earth, we are wrong.

On the other hand, the design of Newgrange and other passage graves is womb-like. There is a long and narrow passage leading to a chamber with three recesses – like the chancel and transepts of a Christian church. The cross is a symbol of sex and of woman. And the builders in 3,000 BC knew all about anatomy. They will have butchered animals and seen all sorts of wounds. They knew what a uterus and ovaries look like. Furthermore the mound of a passage grave suggests a swelling belly. And for good measure, a spiral looks more like a breast than like an eye (as some archaeologists have noted). And since a navel stone (or ‘omphalus’) often has a spiral representing the navel, how about the triple spiral as two breasts and a navel? Of course it is anybody’s guess, but in triple spiral carvings one spiral is usually smaller than the other two.

But if the mound at Newgrange is seen as a woman with a womb, why focus a beam of sunshine up it, if the sun is not male? Well, we don’t know about the language spoken there, but if the sun was seen as female, then perhaps her heavenly warmth and light was mingling with her earthly form?

I haven’t a clue.

My physicist friends like to do ‘thought experiments’. ‘What if...?’ Then they think the implications through. I’d like to propose two brief thought experiments for Newgrange. I’ll call them (A) *The Patriarchy* and (B) *The Matriarchy*.

(A)

We have been gathering in the field between the river and the Great Mound since before dawn. These are the shortest days of the year when the rays of the rising sun shine along the passage into the mound to where the priests and the King are waiting. No women are allowed into the mound, and no ordinary people either. It is the entrance to an unknown world. The King goes in there to die every year on whichever of the shortest days the sun shines his light in. If all the dawns are cloudy it is ill omened. The coming year will not be a good one. But if the sun comes through

we shall be blessed. The King will emerge – reborn from his mother the earth! There is another man in the mound with the king and priests: a young man, especially chosen for his bravery and beauty, who will die instead of the King. His blood will pour into the bowl of sacrifice and later it will be sprinkled on the winter grass in the island between the rivers.

The sun is rising golden below a layer of cloud. It is coming out! There is a stir of excitement in the crowd. The ranks of warriors between us and the mound stand straight and hold up their spears. But we can see over their heads up-hill to the mound. It is happening! The sun's ray must be passing into the tomb since we can now see the curved wall of white quartz shining and dazzling. We roar and cry out in praise. Men, women and children all fall to their knees. We know that inside, in the womb of the earth, the King is being reborn as the blood of sacrifice drips into the bowl!

We remain on our knees on the cold ground waiting for the King to emerge.

(B)

We have been gathering in the field between the river and the Great Mound since before dawn. Between us and the Mound there is an enclosure where nine white sacred cows are grazing. These are the shortest days of the year when the rays of the rising sun shine along the passage into the mound to where the mothers and midwives are waiting. No men are allowed into the mound. It is the entrance to Mother Earth and it is reserved to women. They can visit it any time, and return to the womb of earth to say their prayers, to help other women in childbirth, or to give birth. Men – our ancestors – built this mound under the direction of their Queen. Soon our Queen will emerge into the light of dawn with the first-born child of the new year held in the arms of its mother. If not today, it will be tomorrow or the next day. That child shall be born whatever happens. But it is a good omen for the coming year if the glowing rays of Mother Sun are present at the first birth of the year.

The sun is rising golden below a layer of cloud. She is coming out! There is a stir of excitement in the crowd. All of us – men, women and children – are embracing each other and wishing each other well. We are the family of the Great Mother! It is happening! The sun's ray must be passing into the tomb since we can now see the curved wall of white quartz shining and dazzling. We cry out in happiness. The sacred cows moo. Some of the women have begun to sing prayers. We know that inside, in the womb of the earth, the first child of the year is being born.

We wait for a while as the sun rises. If no one emerges from the mound, many of us will go back to our homes and return tomorrow morning. Others will stay longer.

Suddenly a woman steps out of the mound onto the threshold boulder carved with the symbols of life and birth. She is holding high a new-born child wrapped in a white robe. She calls out and we can hear her voice: 'It's a girl!'

And here is a third thought experiment. Let's call it (*C*) *The In-Between*. Men and woman are in their usual harmony and occasional disharmony, doing their best to work together. What happens over the winter solstice at Newgrange? Over to you!