

BOOK REVIEWS

GERALDINE STOUT AND MATTHEW STOUT, *Newgrange*, Cork University Press, 2008, v + 122 pp. RRP €19.95, £14.95. ISBN 978-1-85918-431-8.

This little book is designed for a generalist audience—those who have visited, plan to visit, or wish they could visit the neolithic passage tomb of Newgrange, County Meath. Its authors make no pretence that it is other than a ‘personal’ interpretation of this much-discussed monument. It is a beautifully illustrated book, its many high-quality colour photographs and drawings alone making it a valuable acquisition for anyone interested in Newgrange.

One of the more interesting aspects of the book is its detailed and sometimes frankly critical discussion of the work carried out on the site under the supervision of Michael O’Kelly, the archaeologist responsible for the 1960s excavation and ‘conservation’ of the site. As the Stouts are quick to point out, the approach favoured then would scarcely rate description as conservation now: the extensive structural use of concrete and steel, for example, would simply not be countenanced under present best practice guidelines. O’Kelly is also responsible for the vast height of the impressive quartz wall which now greets the visitor to Newgrange. As this book points out, were it not for the modern concrete and steel, the wall would have collapsed soon after its erection at this improbable height and angle, and is therefore highly unlikely to resemble closely the original arrangement of the quartz. Still grander ideas were bandied about: the dark granite stones which now dot the wall ‘like currants in a quartz scone’ might have been formed into patterns like those on the kerbstones, but as the Stouts put it ‘happily this notion was not expressed in the final reconstruction’.

There is a tendency in this book to adopt old-fashioned ethnographic explanations of the magico-religious variety for what is observed at Newgrange. For example, the paucity of grave goods is attributed to a ‘strict code of religious practice’, when we are also informed that the site has been subject to the depredations of treasure hunters for the past 200 years. It is asserted, without evidence, that stone lamps found near the entrance were used by ‘pilgrims’ lighting their way to the tomb in the dark winter mornings, when it is equally likely that they were used by caretakers or artisans working at the monument, particularly since there seem to have been residential structures also on the site. We are told authoritatively that ‘the religion of the passage tomb builders was grounded in the landscape and seasonal changes’, which may well be true, but which can never rise above the level of speculation. Similarly,

the ‘opening out of religious ceremony’ on the cusp of the neolithic and bronze ages is said to represent a ‘drive towards greater inclusivity’, although there can be no possible way of knowing this as a matter of fact: even if greater numbers of participants can be evidenced (which it is not convincingly), this says nothing about intention. This overstating of theories extends also to archaeology: it is asserted ‘with certainty’ that megaliths were carried considerable distances by sea on the basis of a large piece of a decorated stone found on an island some four kilometres distant from the location of the other pieces on mainland Brittany. Although direct carriage by sea is the most likely explanation, it cannot be claimed ‘with certainty’ that the stone was not transported by land to the shore opposite the island, which is hardly a ‘considerable distance’ away.

There are also inconsistencies that are mildly annoying. In some places, references are to the ‘south-west’ and ‘north-east’ and in others to the ‘left’ and ‘right’ sides of the passage, necessitating constant reference to the excellent map provided in the book, to correlate the information. On one page (p. 56) conjoined spheres of chalk are referred to as a ‘dumb-bell shaped object’ and on the next as ‘representations of testicles’. Some readers (particularly male ones) might not quite be able to envisage how a single shape can be described both ways. The maps of Brittany are supplied with distance scales which are not only inaccurate in absolute terms, but also entirely incompatible with each other.

Much of the book is given over to comparison of Newgrange with the neolithic monuments of Brittany. This is very interesting and informative, but the case for the transmission of the decorated passage tomb phenomenon from Brittany to Ireland is not convincingly made, based as it is on imprecise dating and an apparent belief that Ireland could not possibly transmit such ideas to the Continent. There are some slightly dubious comparisons here, too, as an undecorated vertical zone on a megalith is described as ‘immediately reminiscent’ of the deliberate vertical grooves on the entrance and rear kerbstones at Newgrange, which are none too similar even to each other.

This is a nice little book, and perhaps it is a little unfair to quibble over such academic niceties as the distinction between speculation and accepted fact. Nonetheless, to assume that the reading public is incapable of appreciating such distinctions smacks of intellectual snobbery. The occasional qualifying word or phrase might have raised this book above the level of nice but untrustworthy.

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