

Book Reviews

George Eogan and Elizabeth Shee Twohig, eds. *The Megalithic Art of the Passage Tombs of Knowth, County Meath* (Excavations at Knowth Volume 7, Royal Irish Academy Monographs in Archaeology. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2022, xli and 848pp, 218 colour and b/w illustr., 13 tables, hbk, ISBN: 978-1-911479-42-0)

This is a hefty volume, weighing in at over 2 kg. Much more remarkable than its size and scope is the fact of its existence. This volume marks the culmination of a campaign of excavations that began sixty years ago in 1962 on the major passage tomb at Knowth, Co. Meath, Ireland. Sadly, the volume was published posthumously after the recent death of its main author, George Eogan. It is a shame he was not able to see this magnificent achievement to its end.

This volume has been many years in the making, and it is hard to think of a better person to bring it to publication than Elizabeth Shee Twohig, as the book also crowns her many achievements in cataloguing and analysing the megalithic art of Ireland and Western Europe. The volume contains the expertise of a number of others including my former colleague Muiris O'Sullivan (whose input is acknowledged in the text, p. xiii, and who is one of the authors of the catalogue that comprises the final section of the volume) and Kerri Cleary (the co-editor of the companion Knowth volume 6). Two important individuals are listed as contributors but not on the front cover of the volume. These are Robin Turk, draftsperson for the volume, and Ken Williams, the photographer for the volume. Since the volume catalogues the megalithic art of the passage tombs at Knowth, it is a shame these individuals are not given more prominence as the volume would be much poorer without their contribution. Robin Turk's illustrations are clear and precise and help to enliven the text, while Ken Williams'

photography is staggeringly good, and indeed Ken contributes most of the photographic documentation of the site. The final two-thirds of the volume include a photographic and illustrated catalogue of all the carved stones at Knowth produced by Ken.

As those who work in the field of rock art studies will know, the interpretation of rock art is prone to quite a degree of extrapolation and embellishment. One of the things that I really like about this volume is that the authors take quite a cautious approach to meaning and significance. They do not attempt to tie down the meaning of the various motifs that make up the corpus of megalithic art. Instead, the focus of the two major chapters on the Knowth megalithic art is on the techniques of carving (Chapter 3) and the styles of megalithic art (Chapter 4). Very usefully, the authors define a typology for different techniques of working the megalithic art at Knowth and review experimental archaeological work and archaeological evidence in Britain, Ireland, and Norway for the tools used for rock art production. This chapter begins the process of a detailed typological description of the different art motifs and styles found at Knowth, a descriptive process that is usefully carried throughout the book as the Knowth sites are compared with sites further afield. Chapter 4 is particularly key, as it discusses the different art styles present at Knowth. Megalithic art has undergone numerous terminological changes over the years (see discussion in

p. 125), and it is hoped that the terminology now used by the authors will be adopted as the terminological 'gold standard'. They define a series of styles at Knowth including 'standard megalithic art', 'recycled art', 'large-scale kerbstone art', and 'ribbon-line art'. The first of these is a widespread style (both at Knowth and further afield in Ireland and Britain) and is rendered by three major techniques: picked-line, incised-line, and close area-picked. Although 'recycled art' shares similar motifs and techniques with 'standard megalithic art', it differs in that motifs are limited to spirals and zigzags, carving is often concentrated on two thirds of the stone leaving one end without carving (p. 133), suggesting that the uncarved portion of the stone was originally set in the ground. All of the examples of this art identified at Knowth are in hidden or partly hidden locations (p. 138).

The identification of 'recycled art' as a distinct horizon of activity, and a distinct phenomenon, was especially exciting to this reviewer as I have previously argued that processes of making have been underplayed in many discussions of Neolithic art (Jones & Díaz-Guardamino, 2019). Additionally, the focus on spirals and zigzags is intriguing as it is precisely these motifs that are found in later Neolithic horizons in Britain and Ireland, particularly in association with material culture such as Grooved Ware pottery and carved stone balls, as well as vertical open air rock art sites like Copt Howe in the Lake District, northern England (Bradley et al., 2019). This potentially accords well with the known dates for this style. The authors note that further afield at sites in Carrowkeel (Co. Sligo, northwest Ireland) this style corresponds to the period 3300–3000/2900 cal. BC (p. 147). Are we looking at a distinctive phase of visual expression associated with a developed phase of passage tombs and later material

culture during the late/final Neolithic? The identification of this distinctive art style raises intriguing possibilities. The 'large-scale kerbstone art' is an exaggerated form of the 'standard megalithic art' style with a similar range of motifs (and an emphasis on curvilinear motifs, p. 150), but with an emphasis on picking as a technique. Interestingly, the authors suggest that this style postdate 'standard megalithic art', often being carved on top of 'standard megalithic art' (p. 153). Finally, the 'ribbon-line art' uses broadly picked lines with swirling patterns over most of the stone and is typically found on orthostats at the start of passageways and on kerbstones at the entrances to tomb 1 West and East (p. 154). This distinctive style also raises intriguing possibilities. If we agree with Robin's analysis (2010) that passage tombs are built in a series of phases from the interior outwards, does the incidence of 'ribbon-line art' at the start of passageways and the entrance kerbstones correspond to distinct phases of rebuilding and recarving? This is not directly addressed by the authors, but is one possible reading of the 'journeys' they describe in Chapter 6 of this volume. The likelihood that 'ribbon-line art' corresponds with episodes of rebuilding and reworking is underlined by the fact that 'ribbon-line art' appears to overlay the 'standard megalithic art' style in a number of locations. Overall, the definition of the various phases of art styles evident at Knowth offers an excellent springboard for future analysis. It is really exciting to see that distinctive phases of carving can be stylistically defined and have a relative sequence.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the wider context of Knowth and its megalithic art, and to interpretative conclusions. The beginning sections of Chapter 5 offer an excellent overview of Knowth in the context of Brú na Bóinne art (at

Newgrange and Dowth) and further afield in Ireland. The chapter continues with excellent overviews of British and especially Iberian sites, which reprises some of Elizabeth Shee Twohig's earlier work and is stunningly illustrated by Ken Williams' photography. I remain nonplussed by the rebuttal of the argument that the spiral decoration of the Garboldisham macehead evinces a connection with Ireland (Jones et al., 2017). We based this assertion on date and similarity with 'standard megalithic art' style. Taken by itself, this may not be sufficient; but when we recognize that a suite of decorated artefacts dating from the British Middle Neolithic (from c. 3500–2900 cal. BC) are decorated with elements of 'standard megalithic art', then connections with Ireland seem difficult to refute. These artefacts include the Monkton Up Wimborne chalk block, decorated with nested arcs, and the incised plaque from Graig Lwyd, decorated with a series of fine triangular incisions (Jones & Díaz-Guardamino, 2022: 392) and form a distinct horizon of activity which differs markedly from what had come before in the British Neolithic. Notably, each of these artefacts are produced from local materials and decorated with different motifs in the repertoire of 'standard megalithic art'. It seems unlikely that these motifs were generated in isolation; and, since each of these motifs is found as part of the 'standard megalithic art' package, the parsimonious explanation is that they are derived from contact with Ireland. However we model the processes of interaction, this chapter does an excellent job of discussing the variety and extent of interactions around Atlantic Europe.

The final Chapter 6 begins with a quote from a lecture in Cork by Richard Bradley: 'A monument is first of all an experience, and secondly a type'. This prompts the authors to engage in an analysis of the stages of development of the

Knowth passage tomb complex, to consider sound and light in the experience of the tombs and the series of possible experiential journeys around the Knowth tombs. This section is richly illustrated by Robin Turk, with additional photography from Ken Williams. The idea of charting these journeys was excellent; but, in practice, the individual journeys were quite descriptive. It would have been nice to analyse and compare the character of these different journeys visually around and within the monuments at Knowth. Despite the careful avoidance of discussions of meaning, disappointingly the final chapter slipped back into representational mode in the discussion of the interpretation of the carvings, with a strong emphasis on sun symbolism (pp. 301–4). While solar and calendrical events are obviously of significance in the Brú na Bóinne complex, it was a shame to see the art reduced to this simplistic conclusion when its complexity had been highlighted in the rest of the volume.

A significant portion of the book is an appendix (Appendix 1) of all the decorated stones at Knowth photographically illustrated by Ken Williams accompanied by short textual descriptions from Muiris O'Sullivan. Intriguingly, Ken Williams also has a short chapter in the appendix (Appendix 2) comparing a series of different digital techniques for recording the passage tomb art at Knowth. He compares Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) and Structure from Motion photogrammetry (SfM) and concludes that SfM is preferable. RTI seems less easy to perform in the confined spaces of passage tombs. From experience, I feel that RTI lends itself less well to the accuracy and fidelity of documentation, and is better employed as an analytical tool. Combined with SfM, the two techniques work well, with SfM providing overall documentation, while RTI is better for detailed analysis of specific motifs.

Overall, this is an impressive volume. It deserves to be read by all scholars with even a passing interest in megalithic art and/or Neolithic Europe. It will stand as a monumental testament to the authors for many years to come.

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Václav Smrčka and Olivér Gábor, eds. *Health and Disease in the Neolithic Lengyel Culture* (Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2021, 398pp., numerous tables and illustr., ISBN 978-80-246-4514-8)

Bioarchaeology, scientific analyses in general, and, above all, integrated research open up exciting new venues to our understanding of past communities. In the current, ‘revolutionary’ phase of archaeology (as seen by many), it is always inspiring to see new publications that promise interdisciplinary interpretations. The volume here reviewed is based on archaeology, physical anthropology, and related biomolecular analyses: the target is to gain insight into dietary and health issues of fifth millennium BC Lengyel population in Central Europe.

At first glance, this volume offers the most desired state of research: at last—the reader hopes—we have cutting-edge bioarchaeological analyses compared and discussed with archaeological material and

results! The Czech editor and one of the main authors, the excellent physical anthropologist and stable isotope specialist Václav Smrčka, author of several significant works (e.g. 2005; 2019), leaves no doubt about the highest standards of his work. The book is composed of thirteen chapters. After an Introduction by the editors, Chapters 2 to 6 summarize the outcome of a journey into the cradle of the Lengyel culture, southeast Transdanubia. Chapters 7 to 13 give the results of the Lengyel (Moravian Painted ware) and Stroked Pottery cultures in Moravia, Czechia. The two scholars commissioned to peer review the volume were T. Douglas Price and Niels Lynnerup, a guarantee an excellent interpretation of the scientific analyses. Still, it is surprising that no Neolithic