



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Solar Deities and Neolithic Monuments in Irish Mythology

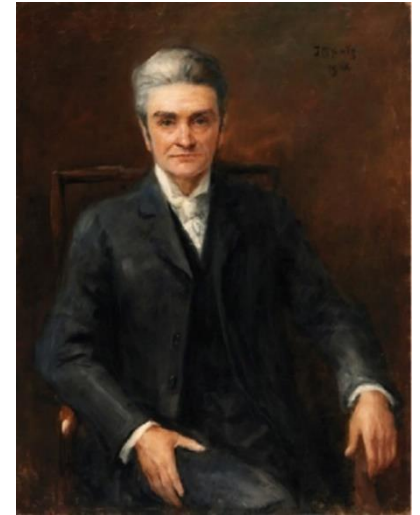
Dr. Frances Clynes



Photo: The Death of CuChulainn taken by Poul Madsen

Gods and Monuments

‘In all the ancient Irish literature we find the connection of the gods with the raths and cairns perpetually insisted upon. The scene of the destruction of the Firbolg will be found to be a place of tombs, the metropolis of the Fomorian a place of tombs, and a place of tombs the sacred home of the Tuatha along the shores of the Boyne. The connection between the great raths and cairns and the gods is never really forgotten’.



Standish
O'Grady, *Early
Bardic
Literature*,
1879

Portrait –
National Gallery
of Ireland

Brú na Bóinne

'Brú na Bóinne, in addition to possessing the most imposing megalithic monuments in Ireland, has an equally imposing, if less obvious, concentration of place names associating some of the chief figures in early Irish mythology with a variety of natural and artificial figures.'

Geraldine T. Stout, *Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p. 62.

'Here (Newgrange) archaeology and myth converge.'

John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), p. xiii.

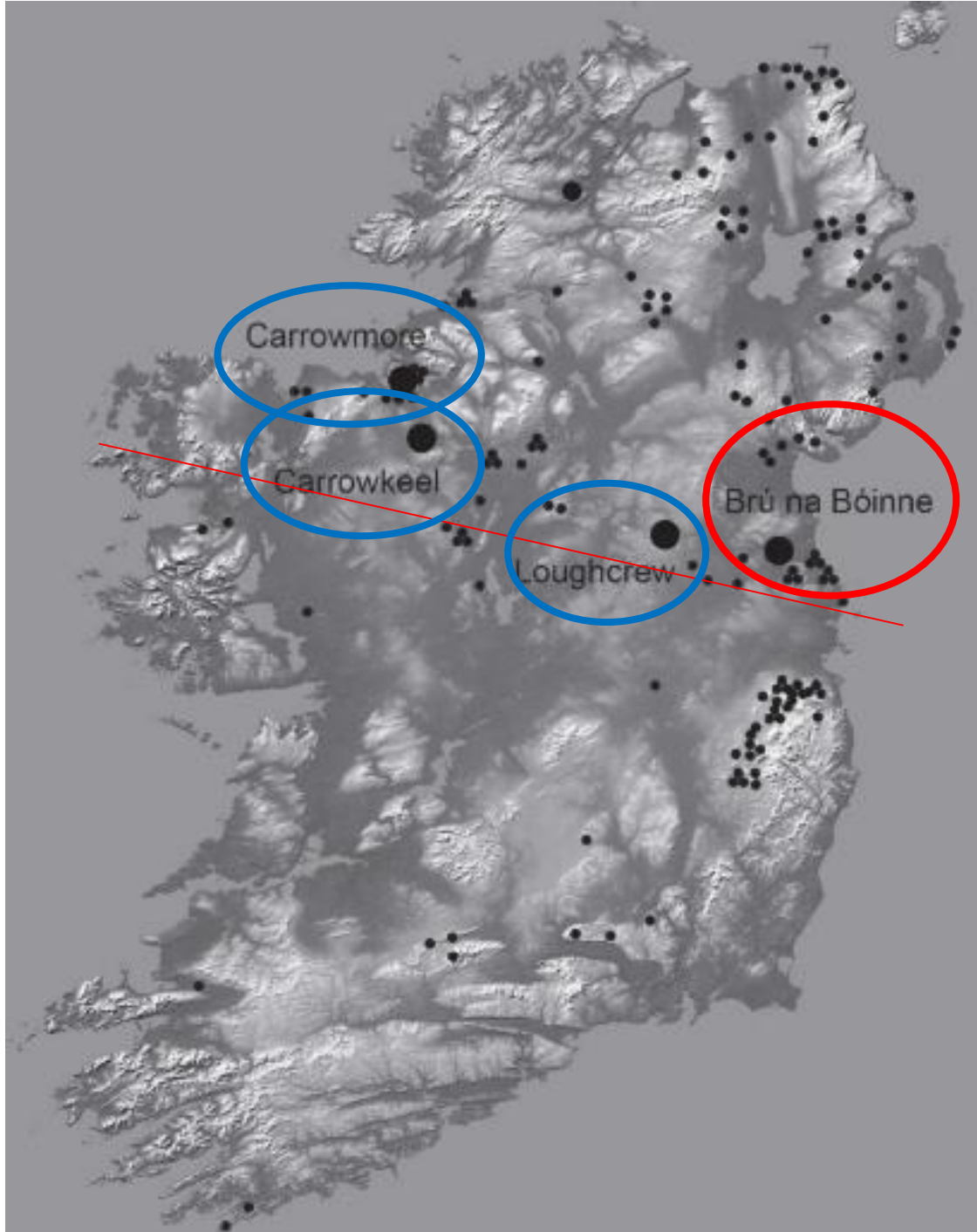
3500 BCE



This era corresponds to the period of the Early Dynasties of Egypt and Sumer but unfortunately left no written record

Irish Sites

- Passage Tombs
 - 4 Main Sites
 - Carrowmore
 - Carrowkeel
 - Loughcrew
 - Brú na Bóinne
 - 40 tombs
 - Newgrange
 - Knowth
 - Dowth



Passage Tombs

Type 1 - Simple monuments with chambers of only 5-6 stones

Type 2 – Increased importance of the cairn, changes in the design and the role of the passage, chamber complexity and the first occurrence of corbelled roofs. The cairn was usually kerbed with horizontally lain stones as opposed to the upright boulders sometimes found in Type 1. Access to the passage in Type 2 was now facilitated by a covered passage, thus creating a tunnel-like experience. These are the most common passage tomb. A distinguishing feature is the geographical remove from wider society – often in high places like the top of a mountain or surrounded by a river. This type contained artwork, usually on the inside. These were the first tombs with solar alignment. Chamber design was more complex with chambers containing recesses becoming more common. There tends to be an emphasis on the right hand side of the tombs, which may be because the Sun moves towards the right.

Type 3 – Passage tombs began to incorporate design features intended for public consumption. Platforms were built around the cairns that seem to facilitate assembly. Art became more elaborate and the monuments are exceptionally large. Larger stones are used and kerbstones are longer. The passages are longer and the corbelled roofs higher. Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth are representative of this type.

There is an emphasis on the external part of the monument with quartz often being used. The earlier tombs had quartz inside. These tombs seem to show changes in how the monuments are being thought of and used.

External changes include:

Straightened façade around the entrance area

Platform extending from the cairn

Stone settings

Flat-topped cairn could facilitate gatherings on top

Kerbstone art – 18 of the 19 monument with kerbstone art are in Leinster and 13 of those are in Bru na Boinne
linear monuments leading to the monument

Robert Hensey, *First Light*

Irish Passage Tombs



- Located on a hill or ridge with unobstructed view of the horizon
- Usually near water
- Access often involves a steep climb

Cairn T at Loughcrew – From Thomastown – an outlying cairn 3k SE

Otherworld

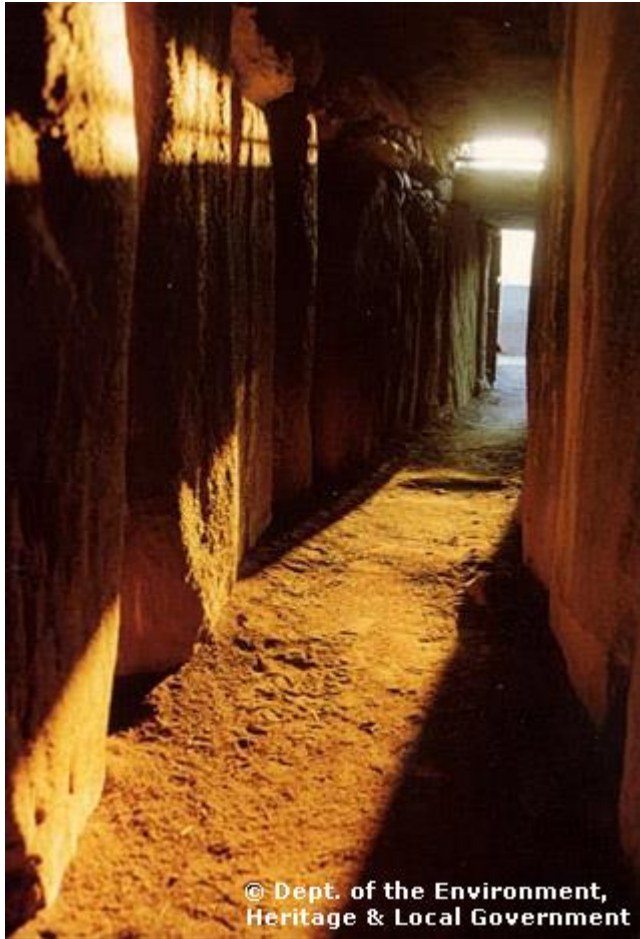


Cairn B at Carrowkeel

‘The psychological experiences gained by the writer in having visited almost 300 prehistoric sites...provide a degree of empirical evidence for the existence (in the mind of this climber at least) of an intangible “other world” as one ascends from a lowland landscape onto the summits of hills and mountains (where many of the passage tombs and related sites are located).’

Frank Prendergast, *Linked Landscapes: Spatial, Archaeoastronomical and Social Network Analysis of the Irish Passage Tomb Tradition*, 2011

Irish Passage Tombs



Passage at Newgrange

- Typically consist of a round mound delimited by a kerb of stones
- Outside decorated with quartz – *grian cloch*
- Design became more elaborate over time
- A passage lined with orthostats leading to a central chamber
- Chamber can be simple or contain recesses
- Chamber is dark with only light coming in through passage or special openings
- Backstone

0 5 10 15 20 25 30m

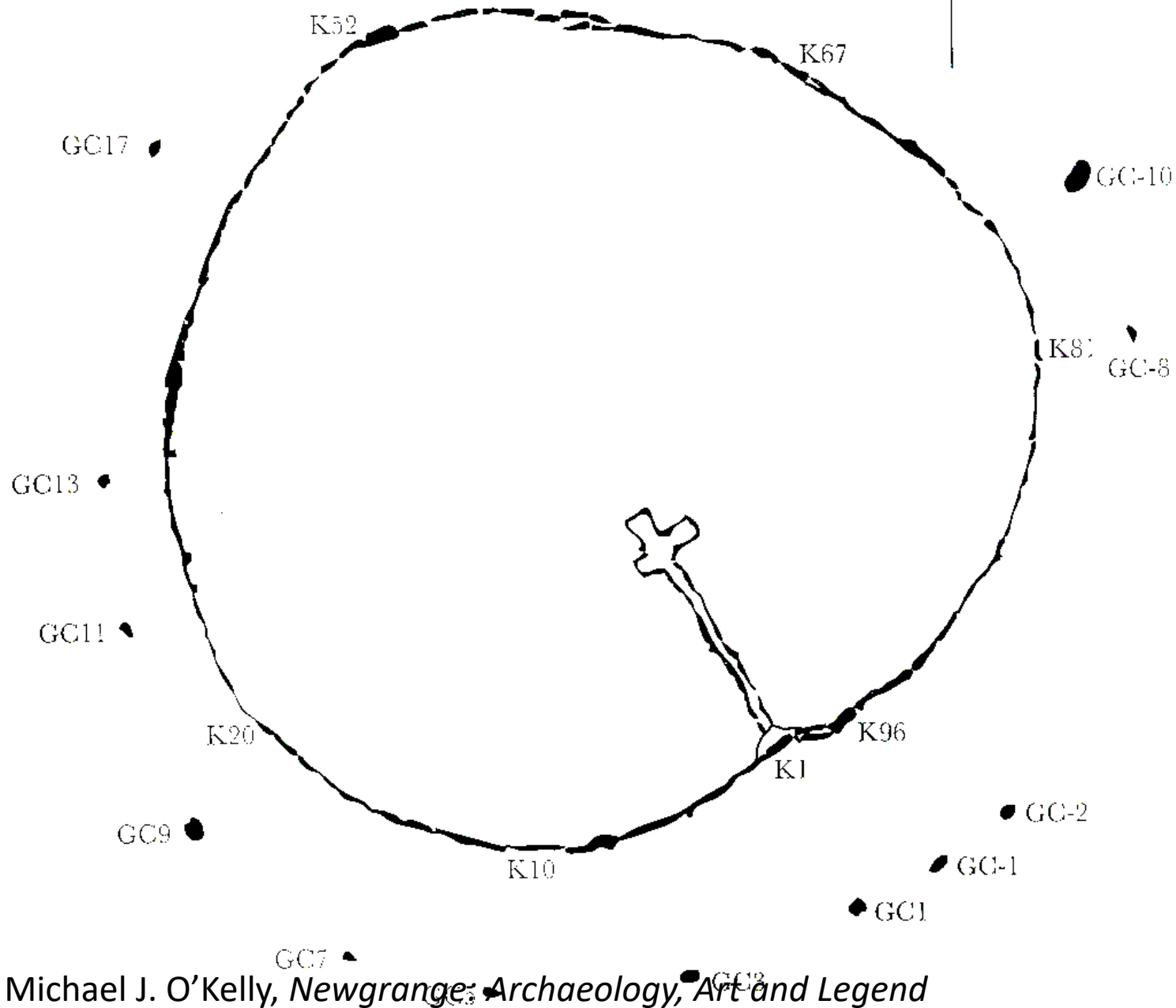


Image: Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*

Megalithic Art



One of the kerbstones at Knowth

- **16%** of tombs embellished with carvings
- Association between megalithic art and solar alignments
- In Ireland tombs embellished with art are almost always on the Eastern end of the complex
- Recesses on the right hand side of the chamber tend to be the most embellished
- Engravings sometimes on the back of stones and cannot be seen by visitors to the tombs

Newgrange

3200 BCE



Photo: Poul Madsen

[illegible]

- ## Drawing of the mound

Image: Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*

The Chamber



View from back recess looking towards passage

Image: www.newgrange.com

- 5.25m X 6.55m
- Corbelled roof of chamber topped by capstone
- 3 recesses with stone basins
- Recess on right had 2 basins and is the most profusely ornamented
- Remains of 5 people found in chamber
 - 3 cremated

The Roofbox



The entrance to the passage and the roofbox.

- Discovered in 1963
- On same level as floor of inner chamber
- 90cm high X 1m wide
- Aligned with rising Sun on Winter Solstice
- December 21st 1968
 - Michael O'Kelly confirms the alignment

The Winter Solstice



Image: www.newgrange.com

“It therefore seems that the sun [in theory] has shone [into] the chamber ever since the date of its construction and will probably continue to do so for ever, regardless of secular changes in the obliquity of the ecliptic”

Dr. Jon Patrick, DIT

From this he concluded that the alignment was deliberate

George Eogan



George Eogan, 'Two Maceheads from Knowth, Co. Meath', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 112, 128.

Image: www.newgrange.com

‘A splendid and infinitely great monument like this was probably intended as more than just a tribute to the dead. It could have been a receptacle or treasury for the emotions, feelings, and thoughts of the clan, while its building was perhaps an act of faith in the future and in the continuation or prolongation of the society’.

Sources of Knowledge



Entrance Stone at Newgrange

Photo: Poul Madsen

‘Archaeology has, in the course of the last three decades, enormously extended our knowledge of the Boyne tombs, but is by its very nature equipped to deal with only half of the problem here under consideration. If a case is in fact to be made for continuity between the megalithic and medieval periods, our picture of the former must be supplemented by a detailed consideration of the surviving texts’

John Carey, "Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis," p. 28.

Continuity Between the Megalithic and Medieval Periods?

'Can it be they who planted the first seeds of Irish oral literature and should one begin to think of this [Irish mythology] not as a window on the Iron Age but as one on the late Neolithic?'

Michael O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*, p. 48.

The themes in the myths are of great antiquity, and they may be part of a common Indo-European inheritance and may in fact be thousands of years old.

John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p 5.

'The timeline from the late fourth millennium BC to the early first millennium AD appears to be too long to accommodate a reliable strand of oral tradition. And yet, there are enigmatic suggestions of broad continuity, presumably interrupted and transformed along the way, but nevertheless sufficiently consistent to be explored.'

Muiris O'Sullivan, 'Megalithic Tombs and Storied Landscapes in Neolithic Ireland,' *Journal of Neolithic Archaeology* (2010): p. 14.

Irish Mythology

- Four Cycles
 - Mythological Cycle
 - Ulster Cycle
 - Fenian Cycle
 - Historical Cycle



Setanta

Image: www.anpost.ie

Mythical Locations



- Mythological Cycle
 - Tuatha De Danann landed in the West
 - Also connected with Brú na Bóinne
- Ulster Cycle
 - Ulster and Connaught
 - Conor MacNessa had his court at Slieve Gullion
- Fenian Cycle
 - Leinster
- Historical Cycle
 - Tara
 - 23K from Brú na Bóinne





‘In my own opinion the specific localization of the legends, taken together with the apparent uniqueness of the design of Newgrange, cannot reasonably be dismissed as mere coincidence.’

John Carey, "Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis" (paper presented at the The Harvard Celtic Colloquium, Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 29

Irish Mythology

‘But we cannot know to what extent [the myths] were based on oral accounts which would themselves have been transmitted in several versions, changed, improved, or corrupted, as they were recounted by different storytellers with different historical, cultural and artistic agendas’

Ciaran Carson, *The Táin (Kindle Edition)* (Penguin Books Limited, 2008), Loc. 99.

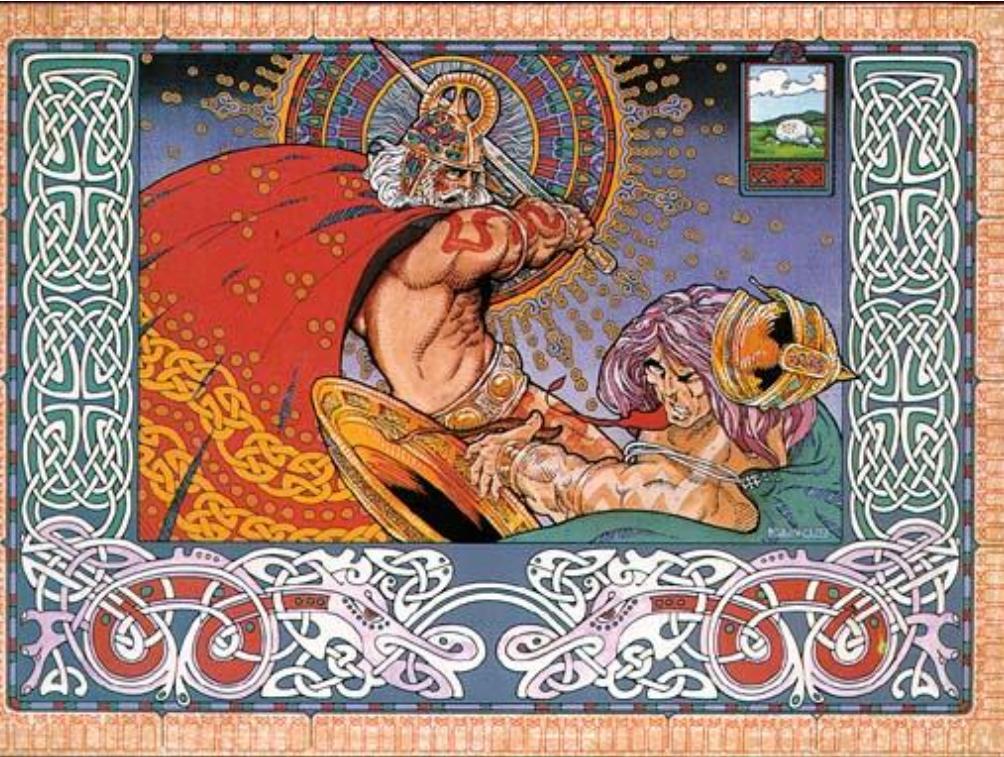
‘Even if we posit extremely early written sources for all of the versions, however, we are still left with an oral tradition spanning approximately four thousand years. Besides the sheer duration of this interval, we must reckon with the momentous cultural developments it included: the conversion of the Irish to Christianity and also, almost certainly, the arrival of Celtic language in Ireland.’

John Carey, "Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis," p. 29.

Mythological Cycle

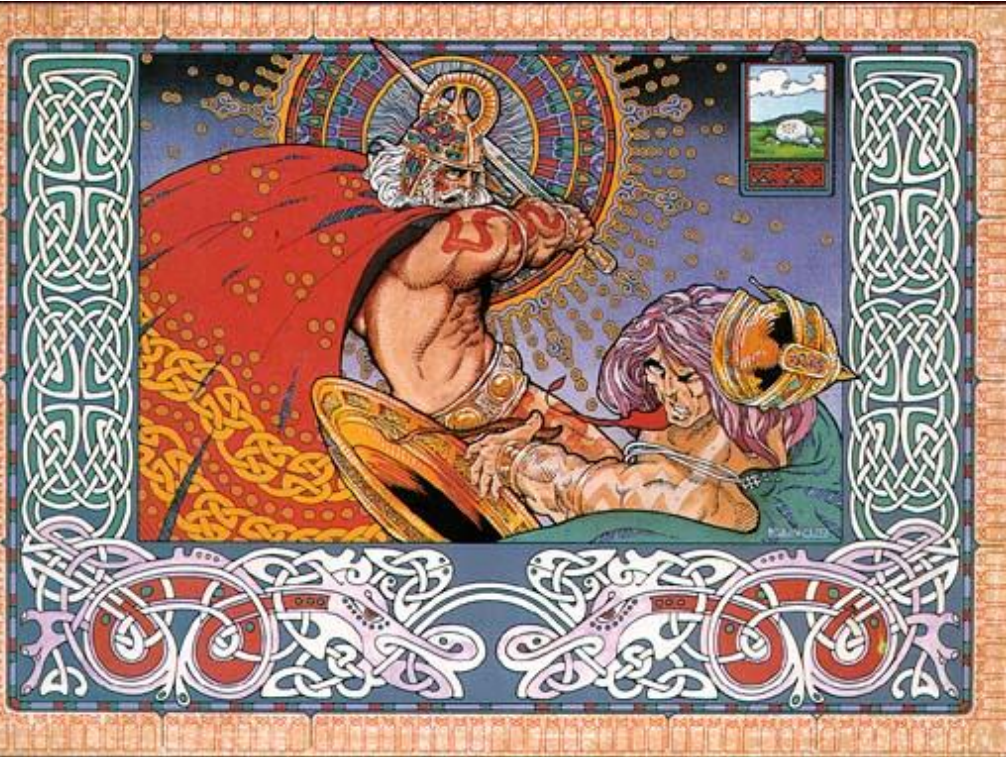
- Tuatha Dé Danann

- Immortal gods
- Arrived in a dark cloud from four cities in the north
- Four treasures
 - The Dagda's cauldron – from Murias
 - The spear of Lugh – from Gorias
 - The stone of Fail – the stone of destiny – from Falias
 - The sword of light of Nuada – Findias



Dagda

Mythological Cycle



Dagda

- Tuatha Dé Danann
 - Defeated native Fir Bolg
 - First battle of Magh Tuireach
 - Defeated the Formorians
 - Second battle of Magh Tuireach
 - Lugh becomes king of Tuatha
 - Defeated by the Milesians
 - But succeeded in having Ireland named after them
 - Now live in the sidhe

Newgrange in Mythological Cycle



Newgrange 1905

- Mythological Cycle
 - Home of the Lords of the Light
 - Brú – a place where no one dies
 - Elcmar and Boann

The River



Bend of the Boyne

Google Earth

Mythological Cycle



Dagda

Image from www.jimfitzpatrick.com

- Dagda
- Óengus
 - Personification of the day
 - Product of a union between the Sun-god and the Boyne
 - 'And so as to Óengus, son of the Dagda, sometimes he would come from Brú na Bóinne and let himself be seen upon the earth'

Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Complete Irish Mythology* (London: Bounty Books, 2004), p. 66.

Brú of Óengus

- Óengus
 - Tricks the Dagda into giving him the Brú by allowing him to think he is giving it to him for a day and a night. When the Dagda asks for it back, Óengus points out that all of time is day or night, so the Dagda has given him the Brú for all eternity
- Different versions of this myth
- All show Óengus winning the Brú by verbal dexterity and the manipulation of time, just as it was manipulation of time that brought about his birth.

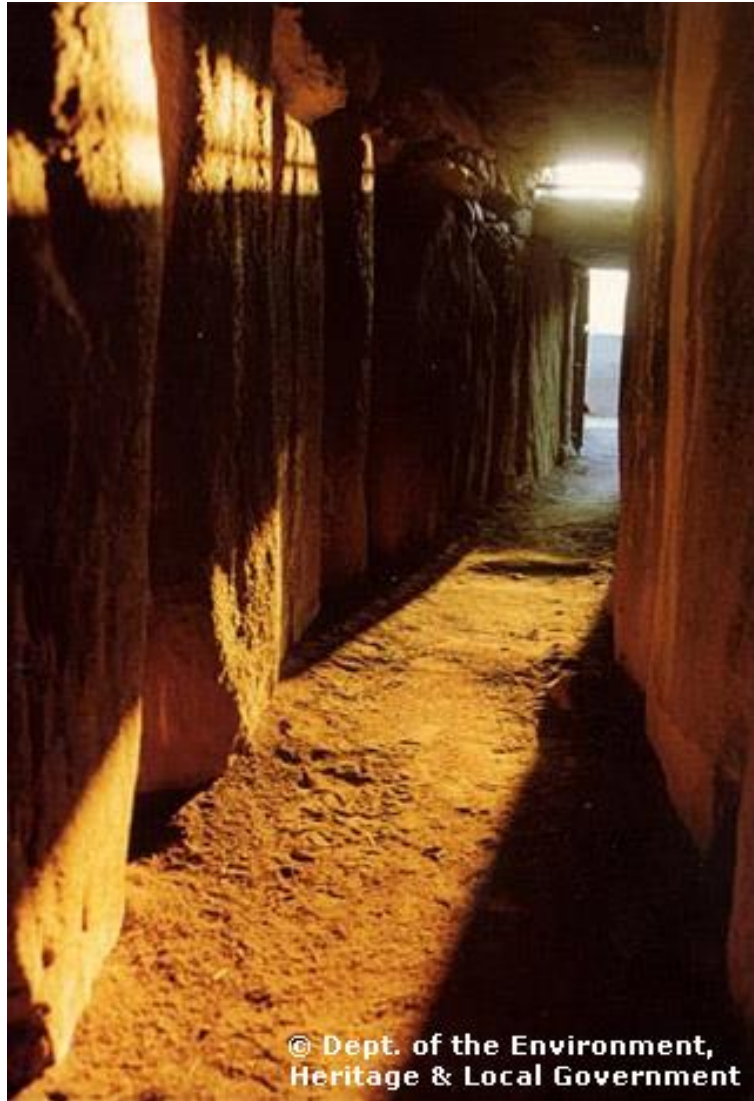
Brú of Óengus

The manipulation of time is unique in Irish mythology to the monuments at Brú na Bóinne, and marks them as part of the sidhe or fairy world, where temporal anomalies are commonplace.

Carey, "Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis," pp. 26-28.

'The analogy between this evidence [solstice alignment] and that of the medieval legends, where the right to occupy the Bruig [Newgrange] is contingent upon control of the day's relationship to time as a whole, is a striking one'

O'Kelly on the Solstitial Alignment



'Was this to enable a once-yearly visitation by the Sun to the gods who dwelt in the Brú, and does it tie in with one of the traditional roles of the Dagda which was that of Sun-god?'

Michael J. O'Kelly,
Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend (Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 47.

Ulster Cycle



Cuchulainn's Stone

Image: Poul Madsen

- Heroic Men
 - Conchobar Mac Nessa
 - Cuchulainn
- Supernatural Women
 - Medb
 - Aoife
 - Scathach
- Táin Bó Cúailnge
 - The Cattle Raid of Cooley

Newgrange in Myth



Orion over Newgrange

Image: www.mythicalireland.com

- Ulster Cycle
 - Cuchulainn
 - Son of Lugh the Sun God
 - Born at Brú na Bóinne
 - Unconquerable
 - Capable of super-human feats
 - Trained by the Morrigan and the Scathach
 - Travels to the Otherworld

Fenian Cycle



- The Fianna
 - Fionn mac Cumhal
 - Huntsman, hurler, wanderer, poet
 - Ate the Salmon of Knowledge from the Boyne
 - Newgrange and salmon

Salmon of Knowledge

Newgrange in Myth



- Fenian Cycle
 - Fionn mac Cumhal
 - The 'house of Óengus of the Brú which cannot be burnt or destroyed as long as Óengus is alive'
 - Diarmuid and Grainne

Newgrange

Historical Cycle



- The Cycle of the Kings
 - The stories of legendary and historical kings of Ireland
 - Continues into the Christian era up to the Middle Ages

Newgrange in Myth



The River Boyne

Image: www.newgrange.com

- Historical Cycle
 - Christian influence
 - Death of immortals
 - Newgrange as a tomb
 - "All those who adore it shall descend into misery and punishment."
 - Warning against sun worship in *St. Patrick's Confession*

Conclusions



Orion over Newgrange

Image: www.mythicalireland.com

- Appears in every cycle
- Conception, Birth and Home of Solar Deities
- Magical lengthening of the day
- Where the day is born
- Immortality
- In earlier cycles a place of birth or re-birth
- An eternal place that cannot be destroyed, 'as long as Óengus is alive'
- Only with the Christian era does it become associated with death and becomes a tomb
 - Christianised myths
 - Death of the immortals
 - Newgrange as a tomb

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