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MEGALITHIC ART IN THE BOYNE VALLEY PASSAGE TOMBS

Andrew Benoit
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to quantify the locations of megalithic art within the main passage tombs at Knowth and Newgrange with the aim of better understanding the meanings associated with the art. Of particular interest to this study was the identification and analysis of the location of “endogenously derived arts” as a way to take into account the often overlooked role that altered states of consciousness play in rituals throughout prehistory and history. Furthermore, this study places megalithic art at the forefront of its analysis in the context of the tomb as a whole, rather than only analyzing the art or including it as a piece of evidence in a wider interpretation of the tombs. The resulting study identified the kerbstone as the main location for megalithic art, especially endogenous arts. This, in turn, provides evidence against the somewhat dominant belief that huge megalithic tombs were the result of a centralization of power as the Neolithic progressed. Instead, this research suggests that the tombs primary function was communal.

Determining Location: Process and Results

Using the diagnostic model developed by Dronfield, this study aimed to quantify the location of specific motifs within the largest tombs at Knowth and Newgrange. Dronfield’s model was used due to its incorporation of ASC into its basic analysis, and because it provides relatively rigorous classification abilities. The data used in this study was acquired from the corpus of art at Newgrange (O’Kelly, 1982) and Knowth (Eogan, 2002). Dronfield was excluded due to the relative small quantity of art and lack of published data. Each motif collection on an individual face was given an alphanumeric code, which represents several variables integrated into one data point. Over 581 motif collections were analyzed. Motif collections should not be confused with either the total amount of motifs or stones. While this scheme of data classification does limit some avenues of analysis, it best suits this study’s purpose.

The main result of this study was the overwhelming amount of art — both endogenous and non-diagnostic — found to be on the kerb at both Newgrange and Knowth. This emphasis is stronger with endogenous motifs than with non-diagnostic motifs. Almost all endogenous art was found on the kerb at both tombs. Very little art is found on the back of the kerbstones. This has been observed before, notably by Dronfield, but the data here provides a more robust understanding of the relationship of the art and the tomb. The co-occurrence of both faces and motifs overwhelmingly being applied to the tomb suggests that this was an intentional decision, as not all locations have similar rates of occurrence between faces and motifs. The largest difference between the two tombs is the emphasis on the chamber at Knowth which is not recorded at Newgrange.

Conclusions: Communal Art

The overwhelming quantity of art on the kerb of both tombs calls into question the common assumption that the tombs represent the development of a powerful elite that used its newfound “power” to direct the construction of such large tombs. The high occurrence of art on the kerb suggests that the builders were consciously expanding access to the symbols beyond those who were allowed access into the tomb, or could fit inside. Furthermore, the exceptionally high occurrence of endogenous motifs on the kerb as compared to the interior of the tomb suggests — somewhat counterintuitively — that the outside of the tomb may have been a focal point for rituals involving altered states of consciousness, rather than the inside of the tomb.

Furthermore, the intense variation in the quality of the motifs on the kerbs suggests that carving was not solely undertaken by trained artisans, but was perhaps open to a wider section of the population. The high level of art on the kerbs supports the idea that Psilocybe mushrooms were used to enter altered states, as the exterior of the tomb does not lend itself to the induction of altered states via flickering light. This further supports the idea that the tombs held a communal function, as the induction of altered states could not be easily regulated. All of this suggests that the large tombs at Knowth and Newgrange primarily functioned in a communal role, rather than as a representation of a new elite’s power.

This analysis fits with Dronfield’s own discussion of power and shamanism related to the construction of such massive passage tombs (Dronfield, 1994). It also aligns with Carlin’s argument that the outside of tombs had long been a focus for development, rather than an emphasis appearing in the Late Neolithic and representing a drastic break from the practices of the tomb’s original builders (Carlin, 2017).

Endogenous Phenomena and Altered States

There is a growing appreciation in archeology for the widespread use of mind-altering substances and practices and their important roles in many societies, especially in their rituals and art. Endogenous phenomena refer to “non-iconic visual experiences which are generated by structures in the visual nervous system and whose shapes are determined by properties of those neural structures” (Dronfield, 1994). Endogenous phenomena can be produced through a variety of methods, ranging from simple optical stimulation to the use of mind-altering substances. To test whether or not art can be identified as deriving from endogenous vision, Dronfield developed his diagnostic model based on Lewis-Williams and Dowson’s earlier “Neuropsychological model.” The model, which provided the basis for the motif categories in this study, focuses on the identification of motifs. His tests found that Irish megalithic art is highly likely to be derived from endogenous vision rather than simply resembling it. He further identified Psilocybe mushrooms, flickering light, and migrainous neurological conditions as the likeliest sources for the endogenous art.

Further Questions

Large parts of the analysis provided in this study are dependent on the chronology of the art on the tombs. It is clear that some motifs were added before the stones were part of the tomb, and some are likely to have been added after. However, until we have a clearer idea of when the art was added onto the tomb it is difficult to discuss who might be involved. It could be the case that the tombs gained a more communal function later on in their use, perhaps aligning with the material changes in the Late Neolithic, such as the adoption of Grooved Ware. Similarly, Dronfield assumes that the adoption of hallucinogens was a later development that shifted the use and function of the tombs, but both assumptions are far from certain. Perhaps most importantly, this research highlights the need for re-investment into archeological research focusing on altered states of consciousness as an everyday fact of life. As the current pharmaceutical investment in mind-altering substances continues apace, the acknowledgment of substances uses and their role throughout time and space becomes increasingly important. Archeology has an important role to play in properly contextualizing the current explosion in mainstream access and acceptance of mind-altering substances.

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