



Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis

Author(s): John Carey

Source: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 10 (1990), pp. 24-36

Published by: Department of Celtic Languages & Literatures, Harvard University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557214>

Accessed: 26-04-2020 15:30 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Department of Celtic Languages & Literatures, Harvard University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*

TIME, MEMORY, AND THE BOYNE NECROPOLIS

An Old Irish anecdote entitled *De Gabáil int Síde* ("The Taking of the Otherworld Mound") provides us with a brief but intriguing account of the polity of the supernatural inhabitants of Ireland, the immortal beings variously designated by such phrases as *Tuatha Dé* "tribes of the gods" or *aes síde* "people of the Otherworld mounds." After the Gaels have conquered the surface of Ireland they are still obliged to establish a treaty relationship (*cairdes*) with the immortals, in order successfully to raise their crops and herds. The king of the *Tuatha Dé* is the Dagda, and it is he who apportions the *síd*-mounds among his followers, reserving for himself the most important: this is *Bruig na Bóinne* or *Síd in Broga*, the tumulus now known as Newgrange in County Meath. The Dagda's son Oengus, also called the Mac Óc,¹ petitions his father for a dwelling of his own:-

"I have nothing for you," said the Dagda;² "I have finished the distribution." "Obtain for me,³ then," said the Mac Óc, "just a day and a night in your own dwelling." That was granted him, then. "Now go to your companions," said the Dagda, "for you have used up your time." "It is manifest," said he, "that the whole world is day and night (*is laa 7 adaig in bith huile*); and that is what has been granted me." Then Dagán [= the Dagda] went forth, and the Mac Óc remains in his *síd*.⁴

In the tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* ("The Wooing of Étaín"), also composed in the Old Irish period, a somewhat different version of these events is given. Here the Bruig is in the possession of a figure named Elcmar, the cuckolded husband of Oengus's mother, and it is the Dagda himself who tells his son how to trick Elcmar into yielding it to him. He is to threaten him with death during the games held to celebrate the festival of Samain (a time when no one is supposed to bear weapons), inducing him to promise anything in exchange for his life.

". . . And let this be the will of Oengus: kingship for a day and a night in the Bruig; and let him not yield the territory to Elcmar

until he submits (the matter) to my decision; and when he has come let Oengus's argument be this: that the territory has passed to him as his own property forever (*būhdīsli*) in exchange for refraining from killing Elcmar. And it is kingship for a day and a night (*rīgi laí co n-aidchi*) which he had demanded; and," said he, "it is in days and nights that the world is spent (*is laib 7 aidhib do-chait[h]er an doman*)."

The plan is successfully carried through, and Oengus takes permanent possession of the Bruig; Elcmar is obliged to move to the nearby síd of Cleittech.⁵

A third account, much later than those just cited but apparently dependent on neither, occurs in the Early Modern Irish tale *Altram Tighe Dá Mheadar* ("The Fosterage of the House of Two Vessels"). Here it is Manannán who is overlord of the Tuatha Dé, and who tells Oengus how to seize the Bruig from Elcmar:-

"Do you know, Oengus," said Manannán, "that this house is not suitable for Elcmar, and that he is not worthy of the stronghold, and that the Bruig will not always be his? When we are all seated in the drinking-hall, arise before Elcmar and command him to depart, for that will be a good omen and good luck for you, and destruction and misfortune for him.⁶ And (the means of) his expulsion will be the charm (*sén*) through which the angels came from the King of heaven and the Lord of the universe, the charm through which we took the sovereignty of Ireland from the Fir Bolg, the charm through which the sons of Míl in turn took the lordship of Ireland from us. Command him not to come (again) to the house from which he departs until *ogam* and *achu* are mingled together, until heaven and earth are mingled together, and until sun and moon are mingled together (*nogu cumusgti ogham 7 achu re chēile, 7 nocu cumusgi neam 7 talam ara cēile, 7 nogu cumusgi grian 7 ēsga ara chēile*)."

When the charm is uttered, Elcmar and all his people are compelled instantly to depart from the Bruig; when asked where they have gone, Manannán says, "I do not know that, and no prophet or sage in all the world knows it, but only the one omnipotent God."⁷

The differences between the three versions are significant, but a basic theme is common to them all: that Oengus won the Bruig from its former owner through the power of the word, whether by verbal dexterity or magic.

Furthermore, the speeches through which Oengus gains his triumph all have to do with the manipulation of time: in the Old Irish tales, he tricks the incumbent into granting in perpetuity what he thinks he has only yielded for twenty-four hours; in *Altram Tighe Dá Mheadar*, he places Elcmar under an enchantment which will last until the end of time (the fusion of moon and sun).⁸ Similar formulae occur elsewhere in the literature, indicating that the underlying concepts had a broader significance in the tradition.⁹

The “kingship for a day and a night” is not the only time-trick played in *Tochmarc Étaíne*: Oengus owes his very existence to another. At the beginning of the tale, the Dagda uses his power over the movement of the sun to gain access to Elcmar’s wife Bóand:-

The Dagda sent Elcmar away on an errand to Mag nInis, to Bres son of Elatha; and the Dagda placed Elcmar under mighty enchantments when he departed, so that he should not soon return, and he kept the darkness of night from him, and warded hunger and thirst away from him. He caused him to wander far afield, so that nine months would pass like a single day; for he had said that he would return home between day and night. Meanwhile the Dagda went to Elcmar’s wife, so that she bore him a son, named Oengus; and the woman had recovered completely when Elcmar returned, and he did not perceive her misdeed, namely, sleeping with the Dagda. . . . [The child] was called the Mac Óc, for his mother said, “Young is the son (*is óc an mac*) who has been begotten at the beginning of a day and born between it and evening.”¹⁰

Here the equivocation practiced by Oengus—use of the expression “day and night” to mean “always”—is paralleled by the thaumaturgy of his father—the magical extension of a single day to comprise nine months. The two episodes reenforce one another: even as the lordship of the Bruig hinges upon the ability to master time by redefining it, so the individual destined to possess it is himself the incarnation of such mastery.

A few miles northeast of Newgrange is another tumulus, called Dowth (Old Irish *Dubad*). The two sites appear as a pair in the saga *Tochmarc Emere* (“The Wooing of Emer”), where Cú Chulainn’s riddling statement that he has journeyed “between the god and his prophet” (*etir in dia 7 a fáith*) is explained as meaning that he has passed between Newgrange and Dowth.¹¹ A collection of *dindsenchas* or toponymic lore in R.I.A. Stowe D.2.2 explains Dowth’s name as follows:-

A king ruled over Ireland, Bresal Bódíbad was his name. . . . He summoned the men of Ireland from every quarter, to build a tower for him like Nimrod's tower, so that from it they might go to heaven. His sister came to him, and said that she would make the sun stand still in the vault of heaven without moving, so that they might have a long day in which to perform their task. The maiden went off to one side to work her magic. Bresal followed her and lay with her; so that it is because of the sin that was committed there that that place is called Fertae Chuile ("Tumulus of Sin"). Night came upon them then, for the maiden's magic had been spoiled. "Let us go hence," said the men of Ireland; "for we only pledged ourselves to be at work making this hill for a single day. And since our work has been darkened (ro dubadh) upon us, and night has come, and day has departed, let each go to his own place." "*Dubad* ('Darkening') will be the name of this place forever," said the maiden. Thence are named Dubad, and the Hill of Dubad.¹²

This account is written in late Middle Irish, and survives only in a single manuscript; but there is evidence that traditions linking Dowth with a figure whose name resembled that of Bresal Bódíbad were already current in the ninth century, and presumably earlier.¹³ The analogies with all versions of the Oengus legends are striking: the linking of earth and heaven (*Altram Tighe Dá Mheadar*), the stopping of the sun by magic (*Tochmarc Étaíne*), an illicit sexual union (ib.), and a contract covering a single day (ib., *De Gabáil int Síde*) are all present.

How are we to interpret such a collection of material? I do not think that the tales as they exist can be plausibly derived from any single earlier narrative. Indeed, they show clear signs of kinship with a scattered range of comparanda: to Oengus's "kingship for a day and a night" may be likened the trial year of kingship which brought Conchobar sovereignty over the Ulaid;¹⁴ the dilation of time at Oengus's conception recalls the supernaturally extended night in which Zeus begot Heracles;¹⁵ and the story of Dowth exhibits striking analogies with Snorri Sturluson's account of the building of the walls of Asgard.¹⁶ To acknowledge these heterogeneous parallels does not, however, explain away the themes which the four stories hold in common, nor their narrow geographic range: I am aware of no Irish legends associating the control or construction of sacred sites with the manipulation of time other than those which concern the tumuli of the Boyne valley.

Timelessness and eternity are qualities fundamental to the Irish conception of the realm of the *síd*-dwellers; and the early literature is full of tales which exploit the temporal anomalies of the Otherworld in a variety of intriguing and sometimes baffling ways.¹⁷ What sets the Boyne legends apart is not the association of such anomalies with the *síde*, but the fact that they here result from deliberate acts which reflect control over time. More specifically, this control affects a single day (or day and night): it can be expanded to last for nine months (the Dagda), for an indefinite period (Bresal's sister), or for all of time (Oengus).¹⁸

There is another connection between the Boyne tumuli and the manipulation of time, but it is of a very different order. I refer of course to the celebrated southeast orientation of the Neolithic passage tomb over which the Newgrange mound was raised, aligned so that the sun as it rises on the winter solstice shines through a special opening above the doorway and penetrates into the tomb's inner chamber.¹⁹ While we have no direct knowledge of the beliefs which motivated the building of this structure, it seems clear that they involved some supernatural association between the movements of the sun and the dead whose remains were deposited in the tomb. The analogy between this evidence and that of the medieval legends, where the right to occupy the Bruig is contingent upon control of the day's relationship to time as a whole, is a striking one—but what are we to make of it?

Archaeologists have often stressed the importance of the fact that a major cult site of the Neolithic period should have had potent supernatural associations in Christian times: thus Michael J. O'Kelly wondered whether it may have been "the people who built the Boyne tombs . . . who planted the first seeds of Irish oral literature," and surmised that "one should begin to think of [the literature] not as a window on the Iron Age but as one on the Late Neolithic."²⁰ But he did not develop these conjectures in any detail; so far as I know, only Martin Brennan has pointed to the specific parallels between the literary and the monumental evidence, and even he refrains from pursuing the questions which they raise.²¹ Such restraint is entirely appropriate: 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; in the first part of this paper I have tried to address this need.

What is the time period involved? Recalibrated radiocarbon dating places the construction of the Newgrange passage tomb at between 3320 and 2910

BC²² It appears to have been sealed shortly after it was finished, and contains no materials from the Beaker settlement which occupied the site some centuries later; in fact it seems likely that the entrance had by then already been concealed by the collapse of the outer surface of the cairn, rendering any further direct observations of the solar alignment impossible.²³ There is no convincing evidence that the tomb was entered between that time and its rediscovery in A.D. 1699; the alignment was not observed until 1967.²⁴ On the literary side, the earliest of the tales may go back to eighth-century originals, but the high degree of variation between them suggests that the legend continued to have an oral basis throughout the medieval period. 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.²⁵ Besides the sheer duration of this interval, we must reckon with the momentous cultural developments which it included: the conversion of the Irish to Christianity and also, almost certainly, the arrival of Celtic language in Ireland.²⁶

Could an idea survive such far-reaching changes, and so many centuries? No *a priori* dogma can settle such a question in advance: the evidence must be considered on its merits. In my own opinion the specific localization of the legends, taken together with the apparent uniqueness of the design of Newgrange,²⁷ cannot reasonably be dismissed as mere coincidence.

If we do accept the evidence for continuity, there are important consequences for our overall picture of Irish culture. Oral societies do not preserve ideas and information out of simple antiquarianism: knowledge of the past survives only because of its relevance to the present, and is constantly vulnerable to modification as the context of this relevance changes over time.²⁸ In the case of Newgrange, we must therefore suppose not only that there was some cultural link between its builders and the first speakers of Goidelic in Ireland, but that this link exercised a formative influence on the belief system of the latter. Again, the survival of some version of these ancient doctrines in the medieval literature indicates that the world-view of the Irish remained, at least in certain respects, astonishingly stable throughout the intervening centuries: the Boyne legends were still relevant, and important, in the Christian period.²⁹

We know little, and are doomed never to know much, about the non-material culture of the preliterate inhabitants of Ireland. The considerations advanced in the present paper indicate, however, that ideas inherited from the Late Neolithic were viable and indeed dynamic elements in the mythology of the Irish Celts. I have discussed only a single doctrine, reflected in a handful of texts: we can only guess to what extent other traditions about the *síde* and their inhabitants may go back to the same

source. In seeking to understand the pre-Christian background of Irish civilisation we must consider, side by side with the insights afforded by the comparative study of Indo-European, the possible influence of the mysterious but impressive culture of the megalith-builders.

Harvard University,
Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures
61 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

NOTES

¹ On this name see T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 516-17.

² The text here reads *Nímtha duit ol in Dagda. Ní tharnaic fodail lemm* (LL 32921-22): Hull renders the Dagda's first statement as "There is not to me for thee," interpreting this to mean "I have none for thee"; and he deletes the *ní* with which the second statement begins on the grounds that "this reading has no support in D.4.2, and furthermore makes no sense." But use of *attá* with dative infix to indicate possession does not appear to be otherwise attested with ellipsis of the thing possessed; and unmotivated insertion of *ní* on some copyist's part is difficult to account for. It seems to me that both difficulties can be resolved by taking the disputed *ní* to mean "anything"; cf. in *Timna Cathaír Máir* the statement *Nimthasa ní dhuit*, uttered in a very similar context (ITS 46.164 §10; cf. *ibid.* 173.111). *Ní* was presumably dislodged from its original position in the sentence (cf. in D.4.2 *Nimtása ferann duit*), then reinterpreted as the negative particle.

³ The manuscript here reads *éta* (LL 32922), emended by Hull to passive *étar* on the basis of "the corresponding passage in D.4.2"; but there too we find an *active* 2 sg. imperative form, *tabair*. The usage of *ad-cota* "gets" is unusual here, but no less so with Hull's emendation: it is probably best to retain the text as it stands.

⁴ Vernam Hull, ed., "De Gabáil in t-Śída", *ZCP* 19 (1933) 53-58. I have provided my own translation of the Old Irish recension in *LL* (vol. 5, p. 1120). This version of the Mac Óc's seizure of the Bruig seems to be alluded to in the *dindšenchas* poem "A chóemu Breg, bríg nád bréc" (*Met. Ds.* 2.20.25-36): cf. Thurneysen's remarks, *Heldensage* 607 n.4.

⁵ Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, eds., "Tochmarc Étaíne," *Ériu* 12 (1938) 146. Cf. the account in the poem "Secht o.f.n.," ascribed to Cinaed ua hArtucáin (ob. 975), ed. Lucius Gwynn, "Cináed úa Hartacáin's poem on Brugh na Bóinne," *Ériu* 7 (1914) 226-28.

⁶ Cf. in *Eachtra Airt meic Cuind Delbchaem*'s instructions to Art regarding his fairy stepmother: "Go... to Tara, and tell Bécuma daughter of Éogan that she is not to remain there but should depart thence suddenly; and it is an evil omen (7 *corob olc in sēn*) if she is commanded to leave Tara." As soon as Art commands her to depart, she leaves Ireland (R. I. Best, ed., "The Adventures of Art son of Conn, and the

Courtship of Delbchaem," *Ériu* 3 (1907) 149-73: 170-72). The two tales are approximately contemporary; as it happens, both have survived only in the Book of Fermoy.

⁷ Lilian Duncan, ed., "Altram Tige Dá Medar," *Ériu* 11 (1932) 190-92.

⁸ Manannán tells Oengus of three previous occasions on which the *sén* was used: (a) by God, to drive the rebel angels from heaven; (b) by the Tuatha Dé, when they conquered Ireland from the Fir Bolg, (c) by the Gaels, when they dispossessed the Tuatha Dé and drove them beneath the surface of the earth. These climactic events echo one another in suggestive ways. On the one hand, it was widely held that the Tuatha Dé were themselves rebel angels, and came to Ireland from heaven (see e.g. *Ériu* 35.102.58): thus (a) and (b) could be seen as two aspects of a single event. From a different viewpoint, the equation of rebel angels and Tuatha Dé entails a striking parallelism between the expulsion of the former from heaven and that of the latter from the surface of Ireland; note further that Manannán subsequently gives the fall of the angels as the reason for the creation of mankind, even as the defeat of the Tuatha Dé makes it possible for mortals to settle Ireland. It is of course very risky to base any arguments on the details of so late an account, and one so clearly molded by Christian concepts; but it may be significant that everything which we are told about the *sén* suggests an association of the seizure of the Bruig with cosmic and human origins.

⁹ The later recension of *Audacht Morainn*, speaking of the *ciallflaith* or "wily ruler," says that he "traverses (lit. 'rows') his span by days and nights, for all the world is traversed by days and nights" (*ráid a ré laaib 7 aidchib, ar is ó laaib 7 aidchib ráit[h]ir in bith huile*; Fergus Kelly, ed., *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976), 68 §46); on the age of this version see J. Pokorny, "Zu Morands Fürstenspiegel," *ZCP* 13 (1921) 43-45. The wording of the *sén* recurs in *Cath Maige Tuired*, in the spell recited by Lug when he circumambulates the army of the Tuatha Dé on one foot and with one eye closed: *Incomairsid fri cech n-aie, go comair ogma 's achu, go comair nem 7 talom, go comair grian 7 esqu* (Elizabeth Gray, ed., *Cath Maige Tuired*, ITS 52.58.595-6).

¹⁰ *Ériu* 12.142. There is a considerably more extensive account in the poem "Secht o.f.n.," where the halting of the sun is made explicit: "I will make the sun stand still until the end of nine months, a great feat, warming the bright grass in the radiant vault of the cold air" (*Ériu* 7.221; *LL* 29491-94).

¹¹ *Comp. CC* 26 §17, 37 §40; for the identification of *Síth mBresail* in *Tochmarc Emere* with Dowth see n.13 below.

¹² *Met. Ds.* 6 4.270-72. The idea of a *síd* being reared by “the men of Ireland” appears also in *Lebar Gabála*, where it relates to the Bruig: it is said of the Dagda that “it is upon him that the men of Ireland reared Síd in Broga, together with his three sons, i.e. Oengus and Aed and Cermait Caem” (*LL* 1107-8; cf. *ITS* 41.120, 150, 180).

¹³ Bresal Bódfbad appears in king-lists as a prehistoric king of Ireland belonging to the Cruithnian dynasty of Dál nAraide (thus *ITS* 44.294, *Corp. Gen.* 120); note however that in its text of the Dál nAraide pedigrees the Book of Leinster records the divergent doctrine that he was a Leinsterman (*Corp. Gen.* 271, *LL* 43439-40). It seems likeliest that the Ulster king has been confused with another figure, more specifically related to Dowth and its environs. Thus in *Tochmarc Emere* mention is made of the *síd* of the druid Bresal Bófáith, lying east of the Bruig: this is presumably identical with Dowth (*Comp. CC* 37 §40; cf. n.11 above). Bresal Bófáith in turn is to be identified with the *Boadan* linked with Dowth in *AU* s.a. 863, and associated more vaguely with the vicinity of the Bruig in Cinaed ua hArtucáin’s “Án sin, a maig Mic ind Óc” (*Met. Ds.* 2.12.29); and with *Bresal Briuga Bochéach*, included in a list of sages in the Book of Ballymote (*ZCP* 3.16.5). *Boadach*, ruler of the *síd* in *Echtrae Chondlai* (*ÉC* 14.222 [2] 7, 224 [5] 11), may perhaps belong here as well.

¹⁴ Different accounts of this are given in *Mesca Ulad* (see especially *MU*² 77-85, 130-40), and in the tract designated “Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa” (*LL* 12448-64). The temporal symbolism associated with Conchobar is emphasized by Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London, 1961), 153-54.

¹⁵ Thus Diodorus Siculus 4.9.2: “For when Zeus lay with Alcmene he made the night three times as long; and by the amount of time spent in begetting the child, he foretold how great would be the strength of the one who was to be born.” The resemblance of this myth to the tale of Oengus’s conception has been noted by Proinsias Mac Cana, “Mongán mac Fiachna and *Immram Brain*,” *Ériu* 23 (1972) 130.

¹⁶ Text and commentary in Gottfried Lorenz, ed., *Gylfaginning*, Texte zur Forschung Bd. 48 (Darmstadt, 1984), 488-502; for a stimulating reexamination of the tale’s parallels in folklore see Joseph Harris, “The Masterbuilder tale in Snorri’s *Edda* and two sagas,” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 91 (1976) 66-101.

¹⁷ I discuss some aspects of this subject in general terms in my paper “Time, space, and the Otherworld,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1987) 1-27; cf. my “Sequence and causation in *Echtra Nerai*,” *Ériu* 39 (1988) 67-74.

¹⁸ Another common element, clearly important but still mysterious to me, is that of *transgression*: the Dagda and Bresal commit adultery and incest respectively, while Oengus either tricks his father (*De Gabáil int Síde*), desecrates a festival (*Tochmarc*

Étaíne), or violates the bonds of fosterage (*Altram Tighe Dá Mheadar*).

¹⁹ For accounts of this phenomenon see Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend* (London, 1982), 123-26; *Early Ireland: An Introduction to Irish Prehistory* (Cambridge, 1989), 106.

²⁰ *Newgrange*, 48. In Britain, the case for cultural continuity between the Late Neolithic and the Iron Age has been energetically argued by e.g. Euan MacKie, who sees the druids as the intellectual heirs of the megalith-builders: thus "Archaeological tests on supposed astronomical sites in Scotland," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 276A (1974) 188-90; *Science and Society in Prehistoric Britain* (London, 1977), 226-29. More recently, Bernard Wailes has raised the possibility of "some continuity of ceremonial usage . . . from Neolithic to Iron Age" at Tara, Navan Fort, and Dún Ailinne ("The Irish 'royal sites' in history and archaeology", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 3 (1982) 1-23: 21).

²¹ *The Stars and the Stones: Ancient Art and Astronomy in Ireland* (London, 1983), 11-13. In the same book, Brennan makes an interesting claim: "Dowth acts as a synchronized counterpart of Newgrange. On the day of winter solstice the sun projects its rays into Newgrange at dawn and into Dowth at sunset" (ibid. 82; cf. 64-65). If in fact the two tumuli associated with legends of time-manipulation could be shown to have complementary orientations, the conjectures here being advanced would be significantly strengthened; unfortunately, however, there are serious difficulties involved in such an interpretation of the evidence. As Claire O'Kelly points out in her sharply critical review, the passage and inner chamber at Dowth South underwent such extensive reconstruction in the nineteenth century that no claims for a precise astronomical alignment can be based on subsequent observations (*Antiquity* 58 (1984) 66-67; cf. M. J. O'Kelly and Claire O'Kelly, "The tumulus of Dowth, County Meath," *PRIA* 83C (1983) 135-90). While the *possibility* of such an alignment apparently exists at Dowth South, therefore, its existence cannot be proved.

²² M. J. O'Kelly, *Early Ireland*, 351.

²³ Idem, *Newgrange*, 68-75, 126; detailed discussion in Michael J. O'Kelly, Rose McCleary, and Daragh Lehan, *Newgrange, Co. Meath, Ireland: The Late Neolithic/Beaker Period Settlement*, BAR International Series 190, ed. Claire O'Kelly (Oxford, 1983).

²⁴ M. J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, 24-26, 123-24.

²⁵ It may be worth noting here that deposits, apparently votive, of Roman coins and other objects at the site indicate that it was a sacred place of some importance in the first to fourth centuries A.D.; thus R. A. G. Carson and Claire O'Kelly, "A catalogue

of the Roman coins from Newgrange, Co. Meath, and notes on the coins and related finds," *PRIA 77C* (1977) 35-55, esp. 43-44, 48-49.

²⁶ Opinion as to the date of the latter varies widely: the most recent contribution to the question is John T. Koch's article "*Ériu, Alba, and Letha: When was a language ancestral to Gaelic first spoken in Ireland?*", presented at the annual meeting of the Celtic Studies Association of North America at UCLA, May 1990. Various scholars have suggested that it was the Beaker culture which brought Celtic speech to Ireland at the end of the Neolithic (thus Nora Chadwick and Myles Dillon, *The Celtic Realms* (London, 1967), 4, 214; Peter Harbison, "The coming of the Indo-Europeans to Ireland: An archaeological viewpoint," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3 (1975) 101-19). Even so early an arrival would, however, postdate the construction of the passage tombs--this position's proponents in fact make the change in burial customs associated with Beaker artifacts an important part of their argument (thus Harbison, 112-14). Colin Renfrew's recent claims for the Early Neolithic (*Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (Cambridge, 1987), 237-49) have not found general acceptance, most scholars continuing to favor a date somewhere in the Bronze or Iron Ages; I find Koch's arguments for the Late Bronze Age persuasive.

²⁷ "Uniqueness" is of course a risky word. To date, however, no clear evidence of a precise alignment (as distinct from e.g. a southeast orientation) appears to have been found for any other megalithic tomb in Ireland; curiously, orientation of any kind is less common with passage tombs in Ireland than elsewhere (O'Kelly, *Early Ireland*, 106). More specifically, nothing resembling the "roof-box," the special aperture which admits the light at Newgrange, is known from any other Irish site; for a possible analogue at Maes Howe in Orkney see Aubrey Burl, *Rites of the Gods* (London, 1981), 124-26.

²⁸ Thus Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), 118-19: "Traditions about events are only kept because the events were thought to be important or significant. A selection process is already underway, starting in fact with eyewitnesses or contemporary reports. As time passes and the criteria of importance or significance change, the selection process continues"; and again, "The importance accorded to events is a matter of general consensus in a community. It is tied to the social impact of such an event. As groups and institutions change over time, the notions of 'significance' and of 'interest' also vary and may lead over time to the loss of information."

²⁹ Documenting the Bruig's significance in medieval legend would be a formidable undertaking: it is linked with supernatural events and personages at all periods in the literature. The fundamental importance of Oengus's taking of the Bruig as a "historical" reference point is reflected by the inclusion of *De Gabáil int Síde* among the "foretales" (*remscéla*) of the prose epic *Táin Bó Cualnge*, despite the absence of

any explicit thematic link between the stories (*LL* 32901-2). The survival of mantic practices associated with the Bruig is attested for the eleventh century: the “Annals of Tigernach” s.a. 1084 speak of one Gilla Lugán as visiting the site every Samain night to learn of future events from Oengus (*RC* 17.416-17).