One World Archaeology

Kathryn Rountree
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Archaeology of Spiritualities

Springer

One World Archaeology

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Introduction

Exploring New Approaches to the Archaeology of Spiritualities

In September 2011, as we were editing this volume, our attention was caught by an online article in *Archaeology News Network* about a team of Oxford University scientists who were engaged in a project aiming "to produce a global map of the land owned or revered by the world's religions".[1] The researchers estimate that about 15% of the world's surface is "sacred land", much of it in groves and forests containing some of the richest biodiversity in the world, including numerous threatened species. While the researchers' primary goal is the measurement, assessment, conservation, and official protection of the globe's biodiversity using scientific methods and tools of quantitative assessment, they also want to understand the use of sacred places in cultural, recreational, and religious activities over time, and their value to local people in terms of, for example, harbouring medicinal plants. Thus they plan to also work with the community groups for whom these places are sacred, entailing encounters with a vast range of religious belief systems.

This article caught our interest for several reasons. First, the prestigious and ambitious nature of the project signals scientists' growing acknowledgement of the acute and perpetual importance of understanding sacred places for human communities. The fact that such places constitute a large portion of the planet demonstrates that they warrant significant attention. Second, while prioritizing the methods and tools of quantitative assessment, the research team is interested in a rather more holistic understanding, which necessitates their working with other kinds of tools too. One tool requires engaging with the community stewards of sacred places whose expert knowledge, practices, and religious beliefs can assist the scientific enquiry. Hence, the often critical insights offered by ethnographic data, or living people—used appropriately—are recognized as having a potential role alongside other kinds of scientific data. Third, the article reminds us that sacred sites, forests for example, while crucially significant in the life-worlds of communities, are not necessarily associated with architectural structures or obviously "ritual objects". Moreover they may not be set apart for exclusively religious purposes, but integrated with other aspects of people's lives—the economy or health and healing, for example. Thus sacred places are not necessarily readily or solely identifiable as "religious" or "ritual" sites.

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[1] "Scientists map religious forests and sacred sites", posted by TANN. The research team is based in the Biodiversity Institute in the Oxford Martin School. Retrieved September 7, 2011, from http://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2011/08/scientists-map-religious-forests-and.html.

This growing scientific interest in sacred places speaks to the timeliness of this book, with its focus on understanding sacred places and what they may have meant to the communities who once lived in or near the places where archaeologists conduct their research. We are particularly interested here in the use of diverse and innovative research tools and perspectives to try to reach more comprehensive and nuanced understandings. Archaeologists' efforts to understand past societies are inevitably informed by enculturation within our/their own societies, traditionally most often societies with Judaeo-Christian foundations, with their particular, commonplace perspectives of religion, ritual, and belief (even if individual archaeologists themselves may no longer personally subscribe to these beliefs and practices). Our goal is to promote a fresh exploration of the intersection of archaeology and religion or spirituality, one we hope will provoke interest and further research.

While archaeological approaches to the study of religion have typically, and to a degree inevitably, been influenced by Western religious paradigms, especially Judaeo-Christian monotheistic frameworks, archaeologists have rarely reflected on how these approaches have framed and constrained their research questions, hypotheses, definitions, methodologies, interpretations, and analyses. They have also tended to neglect an important dimension of religion: the human experience of the numinous, religion's embodied dimension. While the embodied and experiential aspects of religion have been explored recently within some other disciplines—particularly social and cultural anthropology, sociology, and religious studies—the archaeological literature has yet to venture far in this direction. The limited exploration of this issue has been in the context of phenomenology, which has, however, tended to over-intellectualize experience rather than truly explore embodiment.

Within the religions of many of the world's peoples, sacred experiences and embodiment—particularly in relation to sacred landscapes and beings connected with or constituting those landscapes—are often given greater emphasis, while doctrine and beliefs are relatively less important. Systems of belief may well not, or not only, entail *belief in* and *worship* (or *veneration*) *of* deities. Rather, ancestors, spirits, and other-than-human beings and features in the landscape, including the urban landscape, may have significant, active roles in an individual's, family's, or community's life and relationships. The lines between the natural and supernatural, human and not-human, animate and inanimate may be less well drawn than many Western-raised archaeologists are familiar with. Vesa-Pekka Herva explains in her chapter, for example, that houses were thought to be animate, sentient, and conscious beings in seventeenth-century Tornio and elsewhere in the northern periphery of Sweden. Several authors (Wallis and Blain, Herva, VanPool and VanPool, Kelly and Brown, Goodison) engage with challenges to conventional understandings of personhood which extend it to the non-human world and, indeed, to the archaeological material record. Such innovative attempts to locate an analytical consciousness and methodological approach outside of familiar Western epistemological frameworks—within a framework of animism, for example—open up thought-provoking and exciting avenues for interpretive possibility.

As the authors of many chapters emphasize, trying to distinguish between the religious and everyday aspects of life may constitute a meaningless pursuit in many cultural—and consequently archaeological—contexts. Every society's apprehension of the sacred is culturally situated and to a (frequently large) degree integrated with other aspects of its social and cultural life. Thus, the questions which initially engaged our interest as editors were: How do we recognize and investigate "other" forms of religious or spiritual experience in the remains of the past? How might we discern the nature of people's sacred ("spiritual" or "religious") experiences in the archaeological record? How might we recognize and attempt to understand the life-worlds and cosmologies which may have informed these experiences?

There is of course an inherent tension and challenge in archaeology's encounter with religion/spirituality, or with the evidence of past religions/spiritualities. Within a Western rationalist framework, science and religion are habitually seen as alternative epistemologies and competing authorities on "truth". Archaeologists are scientists for whom the material world in all its fragmentary minutiae constitutes "evidence": this evidence is and must be the discipline's starting and finishing point. Yet deciphering the relationship between the material and non-material worlds in the field of religion is arguably more challenging than in other aspects of archaeological analysis and interpretation. As a number of authors point out, the relationship between the material and non-material spheres for past societies may well have been mediated by elusive symbolism and systems of magical correspondences, altered states of consciousness, esoteric knowledge, ecstatic experience, particular emotional or psychological states, superstitions and magical beliefs—all of which are difficult for the archaeologist to "get at". Acknowledgement of this difficulty has prompted the contributors to this volume to variously co-opt, in addition to more traditional archaeological approaches, ethnographic, historical, archival and folkloric data, oral traditions, comparative and analogous data sets, and to explore experiential and experimental methodologies. In their chapter, Alan A.D. Peatfield and Christine Morris include a discussion of their use of shamanic techniques at a Minoan peak sanctuary—sites long accepted by archaeologists as associated with ecstatic rituals—in order to open another window of potential understanding of embodied spiritual or religious practices in the Cretan Bronze Age. This kind of experimental work contributes to a growing cross- and inter-disciplinary interest in issues concerned with embodiment and the human senses, and the positive re-valuing of subjective epistemologies and methodologies as legitimate, fruitful avenues of enquiry.

We have chosen to use "Spiritualities" rather than "Religion" in the book's title in order to de-emphasize the institutionalized, formal, doctrinal, faith-based aspects of religion and reflect a broader focus on the plurality of ways humans in diverse cultural contexts construct and relate to what they deem sacred. Our intention is to destabilize the sacred/secular dichotomy, and pay attention to the ways in which "spiritual" ideas, emotions, and practices habitually enjoin the quotidian and everyday. We wish to shift emphasis away from the simple defining and identifying of "religion" and "ritual" in archaeological contexts, and to explore how different cosmologies in the past may have encouraged different forms of engagement with both the material and unseen worlds. Most importantly, "Spiritualities" signals our interest in the whole spectrum of religious and spiritual experience, including the religions of traditional, tribal, and indigenous peoples, contemporary religious or spiritual movements, and the acknowledged "world religions". The chapters are broadly unified in their approach to the archaeology of spiritualities, sharing a common preoccupation with the relationship between materiality and spirituality, between spirituality and the quotidian, and between people and places, and in their desire to explore new perspectives and methodologies. At the same time they offer a diverse geographical spread in terms of the sites and contexts which have formed their research focus, and a range of scholarly preoccupations.

Part I, "Life, Death and Ancestors", introduces themes which have significant resonances in subsequent parts. The manner in which a community deals with the bodies of its dead, the ways it mourns and continues to engage with the dead, especially dead kin (ancestors), helps us understand not only a society's beliefs about death, but also its beliefs about life and how it is, or should be, lived in community. It is therefore fortunate—and probably unsurprising given their importance—that evidence of mortuary practices is often preserved in the archaeological record. Muiris O'Sullivan's expansive opening chapter discusses a range of Irish megalithic tombs and mortuary practices—with an emphasis on the Hill of Tara—with respect to the insights they offer about Neolithic people's spirituality and beliefs concerning humanity's place in the cosmos. Comparisons are made between aspects of the Irish record and sites in Britain and continental Europe. O'Sullivan suggests that the location of at least some passage tombs "is the key to unlocking deeply meaningful places in the Irish Neolithic landscape, such as mountains and rivers that had been sacred since time immemorial", on the evidence of their continued use by different communities over centuries and millennia, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age and into historical times. The repeated use of certain special places in the landscape by a series of cultures is also addressed in the chapters by Kelly and Brown, Paz, and Jonuks.

The enduring connection between living people and the ancestors, and between people and places, mediated through objects found at shrines and sacred sites, is also an important theme in Timothy Insoll, Benjamin Kankpeyeng, and Samuel Nkumbaan's analysis of an assemblage of ceramic figurines and figurine fragments recovered recently from a mound at Yikpabongo, northern Ghana. The authors insist on the intimate, interdependent relationship between the material and spiritual given that the figurines may represent the material embodiment of ancestors. They suggest that the figurines' deposition (as wholes or fragments) may provide clues about the social and individual construction of personhood, and the abiding nature of kin relationships and networks whose mutuality and reciprocity are uninterrupted by death.

The modern Pagans discussed by Robert Wallis and Jenny Blain also insist that "matter matters, and it matters much": spirituality is rooted in materiality. Wallis and Blain focus on the contemporary importance of "ancestors" and their welfare for modern British Pagans, particularly Pagans' concern about the reburial of ancient "pagan" human remains. People in this relatively new religious movement, with their polytheistic and/or animistic cosmologies and approach to sacred landscapes, construct identities partly by negotiating between past and present, interweaving evidence of the physical past with archaeologists' interpretations and their own imaginings. Pagans contest what, or more importantly *who*, constitute "ancestors"; they also contest institutional authority as the singular authority to make such determinations from ontological and epistemological standpoints. Wallis and Blain conclude that in order to move beyond the impasse created at the interface of spirituality and science, stakeholders with an interest in sacred sites must engage in dialogue, and be prepared to renegotiate their discursive positions.

Modern Pagans are not alone in their interest in animism as a relational ontology—where human persons inhabit an interrelated world filled with persons, only some of whom are human. A number of archaeologists have been experimenting recently with using an animist epistemology for interpreting sites, and some of this work is included in Part II, "Relational Ontologies and Engagements with Landscape" (see also Chap. 10). Herva prefaces her discussion of spirituality and material practices in post-mediaeval Europe, particularly in the town of Tornio in early modern Finland, by explaining the divorce of the material and spiritual worlds as a result of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, which "evicted such spiritual properties from the material world and instead envisioned a clockwork universe composed of autonomous physical objects and governed by universal laws and mechanical cause-effect relationships". She scopes the potential of a relational ontology and magical thinking as alternative epistemologies to science, whereby the boundaries between organism and environment, subject and object, are collapsed, and "things" can make and manipulate human people as readily as vice versa. Examples of this type of thinking are found, she says, in the architecture of Renaissance Europe, people's relationships with sacred trees in Finnish folk culture, and people's relationships with houses in seventeenth-century Tornio, where houses were perceived as person-like and spiritual beings with which people engaged.

Christine VanPool and Todd VanPool take the archaeological use of an animist perspective into the American context, demonstrating the mutual referencing and interdependence of ethnographic and archaeological data. They set out three general principles of animist cosmology and epistemology which they believe will assist archaeologists interested in the social role that spiritually potent (non-human) beings play in the social relations that structure any given culture, illustrating the principles with a variety of examples from American Southwestern groups. They discuss in particular the site of Paquimé in Mexico, one of the largest religious and economic centres in North America, where an animistic ontology is indicated by evidence from ethnographically studied communities reflecting historical continuity with Paquimé, as well as being ubiquitous throughout the general cultural area's historic and prehistoric occupations.

John Kelly and James Brown similarly draw on continuities between past and present indigenous North American peoples, invoking the animist cosmologies, oral traditions, ritual and vision quest practices of contemporary people of the eastern Woodlands to help elucidate the meanings of basalt and red cedar recovered from Cahokia, an ancient city in the sacred landscape of the St. Francois Mountains along the central Mississippi river. Their engagement with living peoples' worldviews and spiritual traditions in order to help interpret the material evidence from Cahokia, alongside scientific analysis of the finds and their environmental context, again demonstrates the role ethnographic data may play.

The chapters in the third part, "Playing the Field: Archaeology, Ethnography and Oral Traditions", also draw experimentally on the tools and perspectives of multiple disciplines. Victor Paz explores continuities linking past and contemporary cultures in the context of Palawan Island in the Philippines, addressing explicitly the debate about whether ethnographic analogies can reasonably be used to propose cultural continuity over a time gap of millennia. He notes that amidst the flourishing of alternatives to exclusively positivist approaches and the vogue for multivocality, attempts to understand past spiritualities are now regarded more favourably and optimistically within archaeology, but the task is no less daunting or demanding of scholarly rigour and caution. Paz's novel approach is to track and decipher the "collective unconscious" in the material record as it is represented, for example, in specific cultural elements such as artefacts, landscape forms, motifs, and symbols. Following what he calls "a cautious trail", he lays out an approach he believes will link the ethnographic present to the deep past through a chain of reasoning demonstrated from an archaeological context in linear time. It is no accident, he concludes, that some sites remain ritually significant over long periods and through several changes of culture.

In Estonia, says Tõnno Jonuks, some holy sites have been used for almost two millennia, but their meanings, and the places themselves, have changed constantly. There are other holy places which have been abandoned or re-introduced with changes in religion or habitation patterns. Holy places or *hiis*—hillocks, flat areas, depressions, valleys, swamps, and wetlands—generally lack archaeological artefacts and other features, and thus since the end of the nineteenth-century oral traditions have been the main source used to identify and interpret them. In spite of the difficulties of dating folklore (meaning that *hiis* can seem to pertain to a timeless past), its unquestioned (and consequently problematic) aura of "authenticity" and tendency to represent an ideal world, and the use of stereotypical, romantic motifs influenced by literature, Jonuks believes nineteenth- and twentieth-century oral traditions can be useful in the study of *hiis*. More adventurously, he suggests that by analyzing archaeological material and using various holy sites known from folklore as analogues, it may be possible to find places once religiously important but which folklore has disappeared over time.

Emília Pásztor traces analogies between symbols found on Bronze Age jewellery from the Carpathian Basin and Near Eastern symbols of celestial divinities, particularly Ishtar/Astarte, who by that stage represented the planet Venus. Similarities in the symbols, along with evidence of an amber trade between the

Baltic and ancient Syria, Pásztor says, suggest an ancient connection between the two. Moreover, she argues, the Venus motif, apparently related to fertility and protection in the Near Eastern belief system, is still found in the Carpathian Basin (on Hungarian folk jewellery, shirt embroidery and carvings, for example), and in ethnographic contexts it continued to have broadly analogous meanings pertaining to magical protection against the evil eye, healing, and fertility well into the twentieth century. Again, however, the problems associated with positing continuity signal a need for caution. While recent or contemporary evidence of the use of such symbols may invite interesting propositions about continuity, local diversity in their forms and meanings is a reminder of the need to recognize symbols' transformation in different historical, cultural, and geographic contexts.

Finally, the fourth part, "Embodied Spiritualities: The Case of the Minoans", presents novel analytical and methodological approaches to the archaeology of Minoan Crete. Lucy Goodison argues that archaeologies of spirituality will remain marginalized unless archaeologists explicitly problematize the Judaeo-Christian religious legacy, especially its features of monotheism, anthropomorphism, and transcendence, in terms of how they influence the customary thinking of Western people in general, and archaeologists' interpretations of prehistoric religions—in this case, Early Minoan religion—in particular. She critiques interpretations positing goddesses or a single goddess in the Early Minoan period, claiming such misreadings reflect the Judaeo-Christian legacy in Western thinking rather than the material record, which depicts humans, trees, animals, mythological and hybrid beings in apparently ritual contexts in ways suggestive of entirely different relationships between humans and other-than-human beings. Goodison believes that for archaeological narratives about embodiment to gain traction, a new model for understanding the Early Minoans is needed—one grounded in a sacred, animate topography comprising diverse beings, engaged in dynamic "transactions" in conjunction with critical or special moments in time.

Peatfield and Morris' work is located firmly within current archaeological interest in the body and embodiment, and in experiential and experimental methodologies. While archaeologists working on the Cretan Bronze Age have long accepted the importance of ecstatic rituals in Minoan religion, Peatfield and Morris reflexively explore the usefulness of such ritual as a contemporary epistemology with explanatory power. They take the "vocabulary of ecstasy", traditionally accepted by researchers only as an intellectual idea, and translate it into an embodied research tool which can assist the investigation of Minoan religious practices. Their chapter explores issues raised by their experimentation with shamanic practices at peak sanctuary sites, the apparent tension between objective and subjective analysis, and the role of the performative and experience in archaeological enquiry.

Finally, Simandiraki-Grimshaw, a scholar of Greek origin, picks up issues discussed in the previous two chapters regarding goddesses and theism, the use of diverse epistemologies, and issues of embodiment. She critically and reflexively reviews a range of approaches to the Minoans, alongside those of archaeologists, and presents an insider's perspective on the role of Minoan Crete in the construction of Cretan identity. Simandiraki-Grimshaw concludes that it is "neither feasible nor ethical to treat Minoan religion and ritual as artefactual domains devoid of embodied spiritual experiences". However, she cautions, archaeologists should not imagine they can replicate the embodied spiritual experiences of Minoan people. Rather, archaeologists' bodies can be employed as tools in a more holistic sense than traditionally accepted within the discipline, offering, in conjunction with other tools, expanded opportunities for robust interpretations of the material remains of the past. Here, she echoes Goodison's conclusion, and Peatfield and Morris's praxis, that "embodied spiritualities call for embodied archaeologists".

The intention of this volume is to open a space to explore critically and reflexively archaeology's encounter with diverse cultural and temporal expressions of religion and spirituality, and to offer a platform for innovative analytical approaches and experimental methodologies in this area of the discipline. While of primary interest to archaeologists, we anticipate that the book will also interest scholars in the anthropology and sociology of religion (especially given the incorporation of ethnographic material in the analyses of a number of authors), religious studies, theology, and consciousness studies. Most of the chapters began life as papers offered in the "Archaeology of Spiritualities" stream of WAC-06, held at University College Dublin in July 2008. Several additional authors were invited to contribute chapters because of their pertinent and very interesting research in this area. It has been our pleasure to work with all of them, and we thank them warmly for engaging with the spirit of the volume and their contributions to the archaeology of spiritualities.

Kathryn Rountree

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Part I
Life, Death and Ancestors

Chapter 1
The Spirituality of Prehistoric Societies: A View from the Irish Megaliths

Muiris O'Sullivan

Abstract Spirituality is the inner human quality that gives meaning to life and provides motivation to keep going even in darkest times. Being at the core of personal and group identity, it is closely intertwined with the fundamental beliefs and values that find expression in ceremonies associated with mythology and religion. It is also an essential characteristic of self-image and the relationships through which the individual or group negotiates the world. Although complementary to materiality in one's experience of life, spirituality has a material dimension in that profound spiritual experiences occasionally find expression in material symbols. Many symbols acquire the status of icons that not only represent but are believed to participate in what they portray. This underlies the offence caused by disrespect to a national flag or religious image, while also explaining how ancient religious texts are deemed "sacred scripture" and presented in specially bound and illuminated volumes. Beyond the reach of history the mythological narratives of deeper prehistoric times have "grown silent and unstated through the natural process of time" (Ó hÓgáin 1999: vii) and the original vibrancy of any extant symbols associated with them is irretrievable. That said, the stage on which these myths were set is the same landscape we inhabit today (O'Sullivan 2010). Aspects of the scenery may have changed but the underlying structure endures, as do props in the form of surviving monuments and other archaeological features. New props have continually been added over time but earlier ones survive in various phases of decay, collapse and ruin. While intrinsically valuable as gateways to the past, these ancient monuments by their location provide information on the landscape as perceived and experienced in ancient times. But a landscape feature does not have to be designed and built by humans to be incorporated into mythological narratives. Anything distinctive in the

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environment may be appropriated, especially if deemed to be mysterious, liminal or otherwise remote from the everyday. Thus, caves, mountains, distinctive rock formations or rivers might be as culturally charged as an ancient mound or a stone circle. A modern perception of the landscape, no matter how well informed, could never approach serious empathy with a Neolithic experience. Yet by examining patterns of behaviour in the context of megalithic tombs it is possible to identify issues that were taken seriously in Neolithic Ireland and thus focus dimly on the heart of fourth millennium BC spirituality.

From Animism to Monumentality around 4000 BC

The human story in Ireland is normally traced to the arrival of pioneering hunter-gatherers around 7500 BC, presumably from Britain, who established a Mesolithic way of life that persisted for more than three millennia. The archaeological footprint of these societies is ephemeral but they account for more than a third of the time over which people have occupied the Irish post-glacial landscape. Before assuming that hunter-gatherer lifeways remained broadly homogeneous through that long span of time, we might consider how much our life experience corresponds with that of someone living around 1000 BC. We are conditioned to accept that social change moved more slowly in the Stone Age, but this may be a product of perspective, just as the variegated colours and forms of an island recede into a uniform tone from a long distance. There is a deficit of relevant archaeological information apart from a dramatic change in lithic technology around 5500 BC, the social implications of which are not clear. Mesolithic societies in Ireland were consistent on at least one issue: they do not appear to have made a significant monumental impact on the landscape. In the absence of built monuments, traces of ritual practices are archaeologically faint, their identification fortuitous, a case in point being the discovery of the Early Mesolithic cremations at Hermitage, county Limerick, which emerged only because of development-led excavations (Collins and Coyne 2003, 2006).

Intermittent episodes of forest clearance in Ireland during the fifth millennium BC were as nothing compared with the large-scale clearance after 4000 BC that transformed the countryside within a century or two (see Cooney 2000:37, fig. 2.4, for example). In many areas, the wooded terrain had been replaced by open grassland and a period of intensive farming was emerging, represented most dramatically by the extensive complex of co-axial fields discovered beneath blanket peat in county Mayo (e.g. Caulfield et al. 1998). The Neolithic had arrived—and the environmental transformation was matched by an equally pronounced change in material culture. A new range of lithics appeared, as did pottery, and the polished stone axe came into its own. Sturdy rectangular timber houses were constructed in a short-lived but island-wide housing boom during the thirty-seventh century BC. An increased variety of settlement types is reflected in the small number of known Early Neolithic hilltop enclosures, notably the early phases underneath the megalithic complex at Knowth in the Boyne Valley (Eogan 1984:211–244, 1991), another at Donegore Hill, county Antrim (Mallory 1993) and a third at Magheraboy near Sligo town (see http://www.excavations.ie/Pages/HomePage.php). After 3500 years of relatively stable development, at least as represented in the sparse archaeological record, the centuries after 4000 BC were indeed radical, in keeping with the experience of virtually all parts of Western Europe at the transition to agriculture. And, in line with other parts of Atlantic Europe, the emergence of farming sparked a tradition of megalith building.

By the time the first megaliths appeared in Ireland, the megalithic tradition had already been established along the Atlantic seaboard of mainland Europe for approximately a thousand years. The earliest clearly attested insular versions of the tradition are known as Portal Tombs and Court Tombs, respectively. Portal Tombs are picturesque and often spectacular monuments with enormous capstones and a pronounced entrance framed by two tall portal stones over which the largest part of the capstone tends to occur (Fig. 1.1). The monument tapers towards the rear where the third of the supporting stones occurs, a comparatively lower and less imposing orthostat (Fig. 1.2). The sides and front of the structure are generally closed off by means of further large stones to form a chamber within which human remains tend to be found. In many cases, there is a residual cairn but it is the megalithic structure that catches the eye and inspires the imagination. In footprint and spaciousness, Court Tombs are generally larger than Portal Tombs, but they tend to be lower and more modest in profile. Contained within a trapezoidal cairn, their defining characteristic is a pronounced open court, ranging from full to residual, leading to a covered megalithic gallery divided into a succession of chambers. These chambers are the normal repositories of the human remains found in the Court Tombs. The significance and original role of these megaliths is normally understood in terms of their situation in the landscape, their structural qualities, the nature of the human bone and associated material deposited within them, and the manner in which Neolithic societies interacted with the monuments and the human remains.

Even allowing for the passing of generations during the course of even one or two centuries, the transformation in the environment and material culture described earlier must surely have been accompanied by profound social changes. There was undoubtedly an increase in population, probably driven in part by migrants from Britain and mainland Europe, and inherited values and beliefs were in all probability challenged by the variety of new circumstances. Fresh models of identity were almost certainly generated and a new sense of the environment and its many layers of meaning were inevitable. The effects of such tensions on core mythological beliefs and spiritual experiences are a matter of speculation, but it is interesting that the outcome in terms of ceremonial monuments blends inherited traditions with introduced ideas. Both the Court Tomb and Portal Tomb have contemporaneous parallels in Britain (see Lynch 1997, for example), and communal burial was the Early Neolithic norm in Ireland as well as Britain, but it has often been noted that the common occurrence of cremation in Irish contexts is a distinguishing feature. It is not that cremation is unknown elsewhere or that unburned human remains are

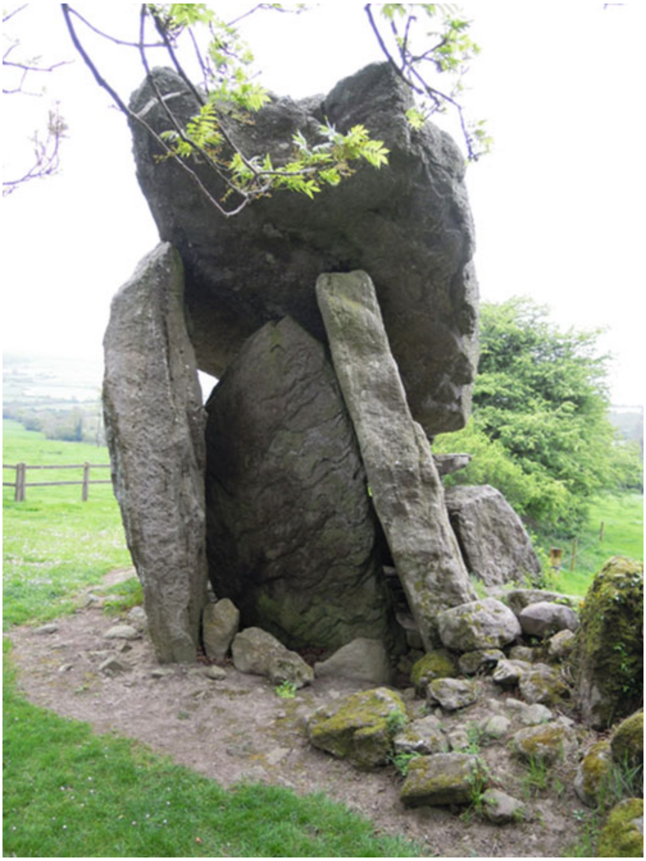

Fig. 1.1 Portal tomb, popularly known as *Leac an Scáil*, Kilmogue, County Kilkenny. Was this envisaged as a doorway to the underworld?

absent from the Irish sites. On the contrary, inhumed bones accounted for all the Neolithic burials at the Portal Tomb at Poulnabrone in county Clare (Lynch 1988), for example, but cremation occurs with unusual frequency in the earlier prehistoric monument types in Ireland (Cooney and Grogan 1994:69, fig. 4:14) and may be a reflection of indigenous mortuary practices mirroring lingering traditional beliefs. In the same vein, it is tempting to regard these early megalithic tombs as marking locations that might, in earlier times, have been represented by clearances in the woodland, special trees or other such natural phenomena that might have lost their currency in the new environment. The Portal Tomb might be envisaged as an elaborate entrance to an imagined underworld/otherworld, bearing in mind the focus on the front "doorway" (Fig. 1.1) and the existence in many cases of a residual cairn (Lacy 1983:29–36). If so, the audience and especially the mediating ceremonial enactors were directed towards the entrance, and part of the mystique of the monument may have involved symbolic journeys into the interior, notably involving the

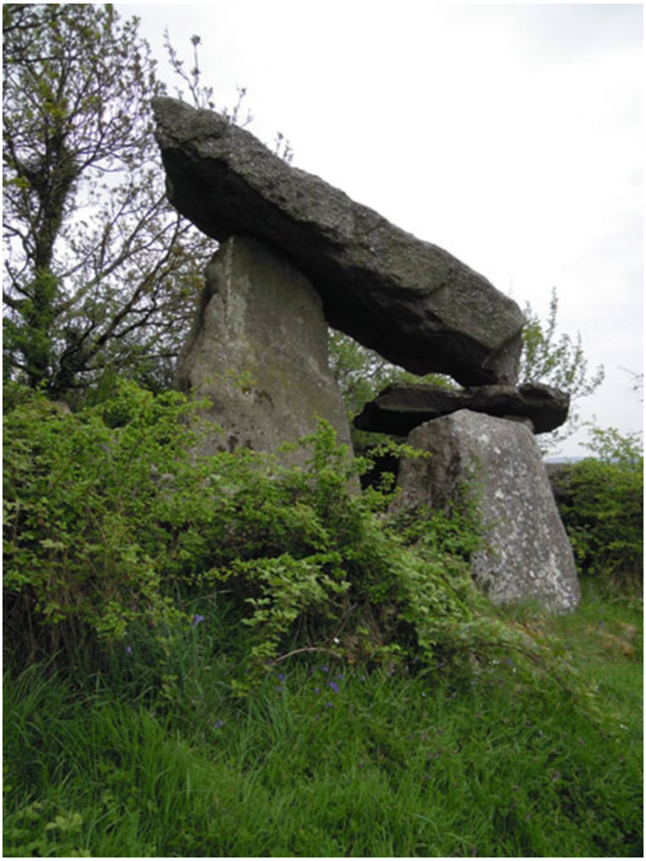

Fig. 1.2 Side view of *Leac an Scáil* showing the height tapering towards the rear

deposition of human remains. The Court Tomb, although quite different in appearance, encapsulates a similar dynamic. Here the audience, or perhaps a select element of the audience, was marshalled within the court and the focus was on the entrance to the gallery where the burials occurred (Fig. 1.3). Whatever their differences in design, both of these classes of megalithic tomb would have facilitated continuing dialogue with the ancestors, standing as constant reminders of the dead. There is nothing to suggest any major differences in worldview between the builders of the two types of monuments, although their distribution while overlapping is not identical (see Waddell 1998:figs. 31 and 41) and the siting of Portal Tombs speaks of a specific interest in coasts, rivers and even streams that is not found in the case of Court Tombs (Ó Nualláin 1983). Notwithstanding these differences, the generally dispersed pattern of their combined distribution around the countryside suggests that each megalithic monument may have functioned locally in the context of a specific group defined by kinship, place or some other common trait.

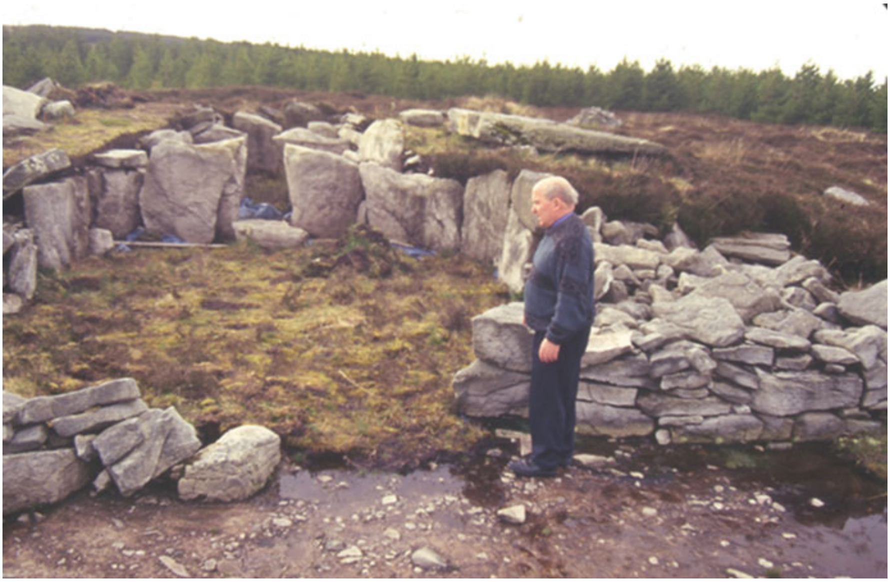

Fig. 1.3 Rathlackan Court Tomb, County Mayo, Ireland. Providing scale at the entrance to the court is Professor Seamus Caulfield, pioneering director of the Céide Fields research project. The access to the burial gallery is visible at the inner end of the court

Emergence of Middle Neolithic Burial Practices (c. 3500 to 3300 BC)

A more subtle array of new ideas can be seen from the mid-fourth millennium BC onward. The common feature is an increased focus on individuals in death, which contrasts with the communal burial traditions of earlier Neolithic communities, and an apparent convergence in a specific region of the island, the heartland of which appears to have been in south Leinster and parts of Munster. Such burials are known from the Lough Gur settlement site, a cave at Annagh, and a natural rock shelter at Caherguillamore, all in county Limerick, but the normal context is a central cist covered by a carefully constructed circular cairn and/or mound (comprehensively discussed in Raftery 1974). The principal or only burial is normally unburned, sometimes disarticulated and usually an adult male. Invariably, the individual is accompanied by a decorated round-bottomed pottery vessel. Associated subsidiary burials occurred at some of these sites, and the enduring topographical and presumably cultural significance of the mounds afterwards can be gauged from the incorporation of secondary burials in some of them during the Early Bronze Age more than 1500 years later. A feature of the Middle Neolithic burial mounds is the emphasis on enclosure reflected in their design. The walls and roof of the central cist are often doubled or even trebled with additional slabs of stone; enclosing arcs of boulders occur beneath or through the cairn and mound and the tumulus itself appears to have been ritually constructed in a succession of acts involving burning and other ceremonies. It reflects incredible attention to detail in closing off the final resting place of a single individual. One of these sites requires specific attention in the context of ideas developed below. At Ashleypark near Nenagh in county Tipperary, a pre-existing natural limestone block was modified to form part of the burial cist and this was covered by a cairn and overlying mound 26 m in diameter, surrounded by a series of ditches and banks to comprise an elaborate monument some 90 m across (Manning 1985). Within the burial cist, itself an unusually large structure measuring nearly 5 m in length, there were the bones of an elderly man and a 4–5-year-old child. The remains of an infant were also located in the cist but in a separate area approximately 3 m from the other two individuals. We can only speculate on the roles of the child and infant in the rituals around the burial of this clearly special adult, but it might help if the genetic relationship between the three individuals, if any, could be clarified. We will see below, however, that the incorporation of infant bones as an accompanying feature, grave goods perhaps, became a theme at the height of the Passage Tomb tradition a century or two later.

Passage Tombs

Passage Tombs are the best known of all Irish Neolithic monuments and those at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth form the core of the Boyne Valley World Heritage Site (Fig. 1.4). Archaeological excavations at both Newgrange and Knowth revealed evidence of prior Neolithic activity, including a succession of phases in the case of Knowth, but the floruit occurred in the centuries between 3300 and 3000 BC. Other sites like the Mound of the Hostages on the Hill of Tara, county Meath, Fourknocks in the same county, and Knockroe in county Kilkenny are likely to be broadly contemporaneous with this, as are British sites like Barclodiad y Gawres in Anglesey and Maes Howe in the Orkneys. That said, the origins of the Passage Tomb tradition lie shrouded in mystery. Controversial radiocarbon dates from Carrowmore in county Sligo were interpreted as proof that these Passage Tombs were some of the earliest megalithic in Europe (Burenhult 1980:111), but this claim was forensically disputed by Caulfield (1983) and is not generally accepted. Recent radiocarbon dating of bone from Carrowmore suggests that some of the Carrowmore sites may pre-date those in the Boyne Valley by a few centuries. This is not surprising as there are strong similarities between Passage Tombs and the mid-fourth millennium BC monuments discussed in the previous section (Raftery 1974; O'Sullivan 2009).

The classic Irish Passage Tomb is contained within a round mound or cairn, usually defined at the edge by a kerb of megalithic boulders (Fig. 1.5) and forming part of a cluster in which the focal cairn is larger than its satellites. The clustering varies from the tight-knit group of 18 sites at Knowth to the loosely distributed Suir Valley group in which a handful of sites extends from south Kilkenny to east Limerick with the focal cairn on the summit of Slievenamon in south Tipperary (Fig. 1.6).

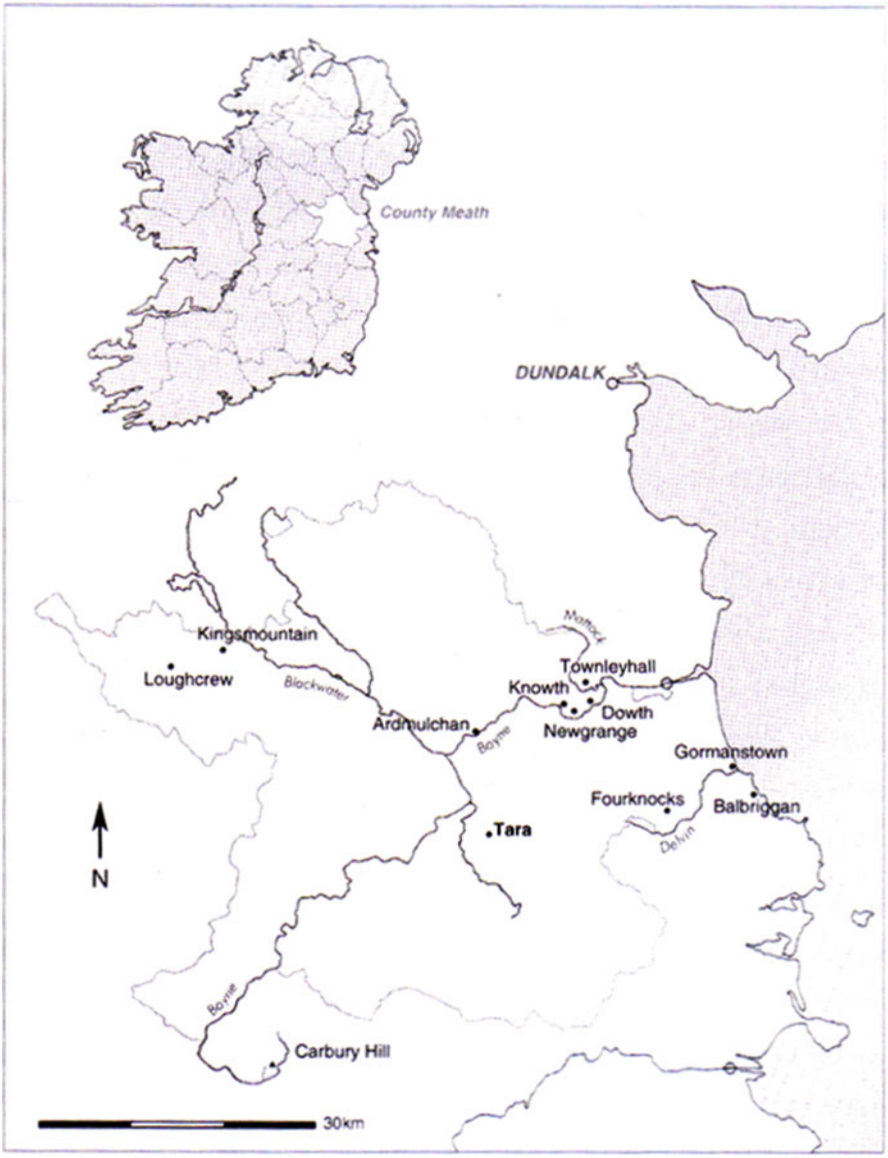
County Meath
DUNDALK
Mattock
Kingsmountain
Loughcrew
Blackwater
Townleyhall
Knowth
Dowth
Newgrange
Ardmulchan
Boyne
Gormanstown
Fourknocks
Balbriggan
Delvin
Tara
N
Boyne
Carbury Hill
30km

Fig. 1.4 Passage Tombs in County Meath, Ireland, showing the relationship with the Boyne River and its main tributary, the Blackwater

A Passage Tomb is usually reached along a passage from an entrance that is often highlighted architecturally. Both the chamber and passage are lined with orthostats and the passage is usually roofed with lintels (Fig. 1.7). In plan the chamber is sometimes cruciform (a specifically Irish form), occasionally stalled, or sporadically a simple quadrilateral variant. The roof components of the chamber vary from

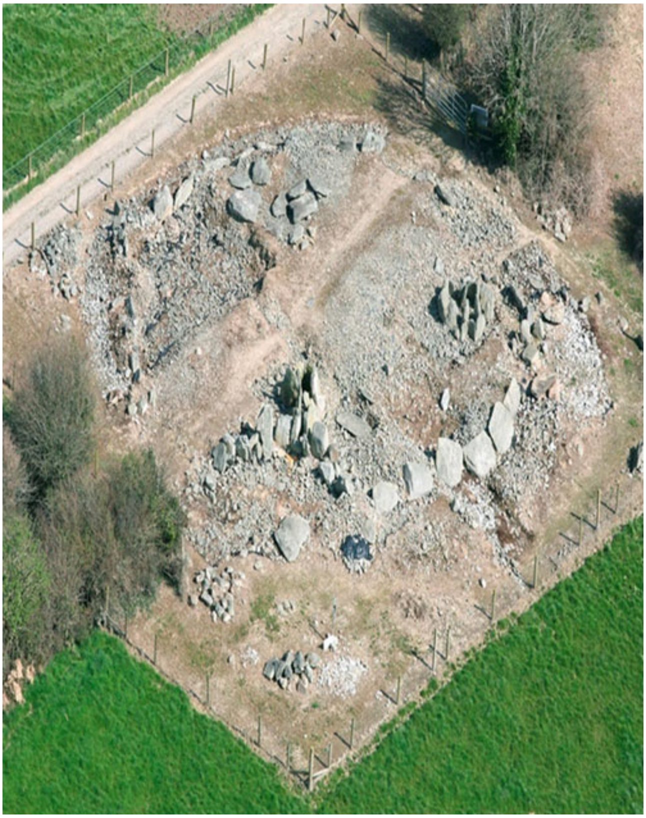

Fig. 1.5 Aerial photograph of Knockroe passage tomb structure from the south-west prior to conservation in 2010–2011. Note the megalithic kerb, with two tombs south of the laneway

enormous lintels, as in the West Tomb at Knowth, to elaborately corbelled capping, as in the East Tomb or at Newgrange. As in the earlier megaliths, but in contrast to the closed central cist of the mid-Neolithic burial mounds, there is access from the exterior to the interior.

In spite of echoes of earlier insular traditions, the Passage Tomb of all Irish megaliths belongs to a mainstream European strand known from the south of Spain and Portugal to southern Scandinavia, including Brittany, Ireland and parts of Britain. The Irish version shares many of the general characteristics but it is also distinctly insular in several respects, most notably the emphasis on the cremation rite in human bone deposits and the development of a megalithic kerb around the perimeter of the round cairn or tumulus. Passage Tomb cairns were located in Ireland on the pinnacles of some prominent mountains as if to suggest that their builders were in a position of unique influence and privilege. The cairn on the summit of Slievenamon is a case in point (Fig. 1.8). This is constructed over a natural rock formation that is peculiarly evocative even today, raising the possibility that the

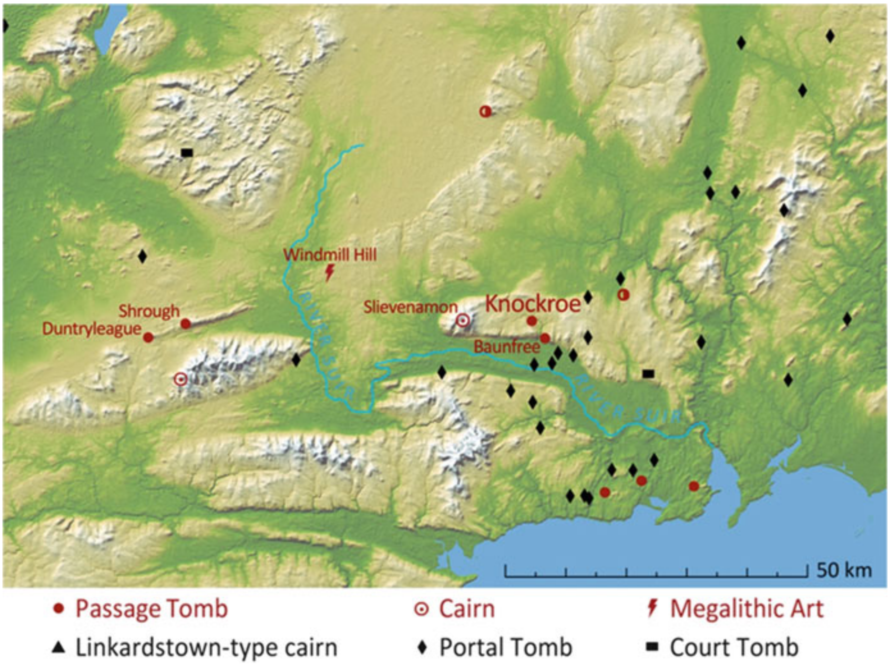
Windmill Hill
Shrough
Duntryleague
Slievenamon
Knockroe
Baunfree
River Suir
River Suir
50 km
● Passage Tomb
⊙ Cairn
Megalithic Art
▲ Linkardstown-type cairn
♦ Portal Tomb
■ Court Tomb

Fig. 1.6 Passage tombs and other Neolithic sites in the Suir Valley region of south-east Ireland

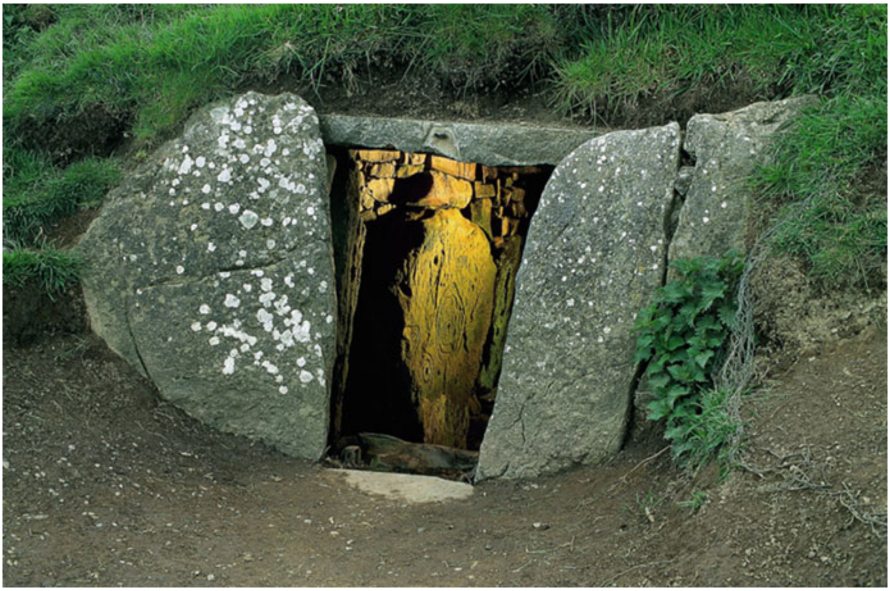

Fig. 1.7 Entrance to the Mound of the Hostages, a passage tomb on the Hill of Tara, county Meath, Ireland. Note the decorated orthostat in the interior

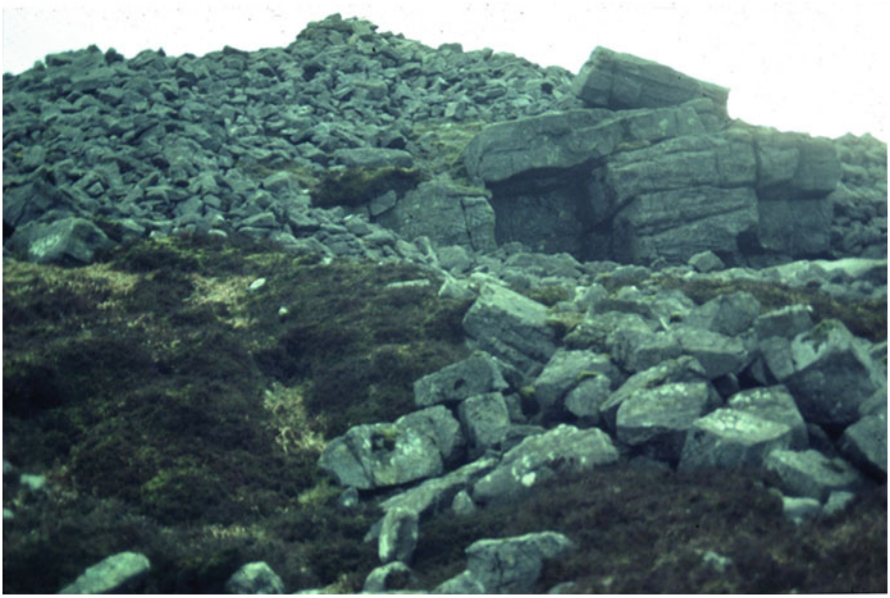

Fig. 1.8 High above the Golden Vale, one of Ireland's most fertile agricultural regions, the summit of Slievenamon Mountain is capped by a cairn enveloping a natural rock formation that has fired the imagination since time immemorial

rock formation may have been regarded as significant in its own right even before the cairn was added. Its capacity to stimulate the imagination can be gauged from its incorporation into an early medieval tale about Fionn Mac Cumhaill, an iconic mythological hero (Ó hÓgáin 1990:214), and its incorporation under a presumed Neolithic cairn is a strong echo of the manner in which natural limestone blocks were incorporated into the Ashleypark monument as noted earlier. Emphasizing the unique status of Passage Tomb locations, a few evolved into some of the most prestigious and iconic ceremonial landscapes of prehistoric Ireland. In this context it is not surprising that Passage Tombs are the most vivid expressions of Neolithic spiritual and intellectual values.

Architectural Symbolism

Even today, after 5000 years of environmental and human interventions, clued-up visitors to a Passage Tomb can appreciate the architectural prompts they encounter on their way from the exterior to the chamber. While the richness of the symbolism conveyed by these signs is beyond modern retrieval, they nevertheless indicate Neolithic attitudes and values as expressed in a communal ritual environment.