

## The writing on the wall

Glyn Daniel

### The Stars and the Stones: Ancient Art and Astronomy in Ireland.

By Martin Brennan.

Thames & Hudson: 1983. Pp.208.

£12, \$19.95.

IN 1740 the Reverend William Stukeley in his *Stonehenge, a Temple Restored to the British Druids* noted the fact that the axis of Stonehenge and the avenue leading from it were directed to the north-east "whereabouts the sun rises when the days are longest". From Stukeley's time onwards there has always been an interest in the astronomical significance of prehistoric megalithic monuments, and this interest in archaeoastronomy (or astro-archaeology) has recently been revived by the writings and speculations of Hawkins and Thom. Its history has been well set out by John Michell in his *A Little History of Astroarchaeology: Stages in the Transformation of a Heresy* (Thames & Hudson, 1977) where he very properly describes Sir J. Norman Lockyer, for fifty years editor of *Nature*, as the founder of this scientific discipline.

The author of this book was born of Irish parents in New York, took a degree in Visual Communication, travelled to Mexico where he did research on prehistoric art, and then to Japan where Kimotaro Kitamura urged him to go to Ireland and study ancient Irish culture. This he did and has lived in Ireland for many years making a special study of the orientation of the Irish Passage Graves, and of their art. His first book, *The Boyne Valley Vision*, published, with a curious appropriateness, by the Dolmen Press in 1980, attracted a great deal of attention

because he claimed the Passage Graves were "timepieces, cosmic clocks", that "the Boyne valley inscriptions represent the earliest form of written communication", and that "geometry did not begin on the banks of the Nile: it began on the banks of the Boyne".

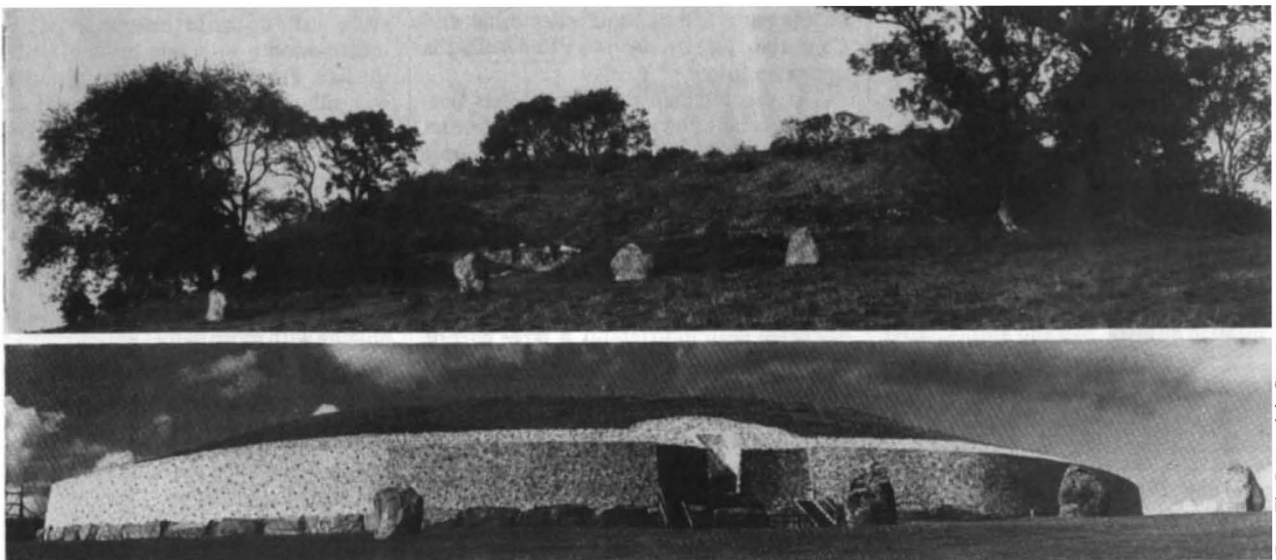
Now, three years later, he develops these apparently extravagant ideas with a wealth of diagrams and illustrations. No one ever doubted that Stonehenge was orientated to the Midsummer sunrise. Many were fascinated when it was discovered that Newgrange was aligned on the winter solstice, and now Brennan appears to have shown that many of the Irish Passage Graves have significant orientations and are, as he puts it, "synchronized to the beacons of the sun". Brennan declares megalithic studies to be "a war of ideas" and I subscribe to this view; but I would not agree with him when he says that the theodolites of researchers such as Thom and himself "clearly reveal the remains of a people deeply concerned with measuring time". Thom, Brennan and other archaeoastronomers turn the orientation of megaliths into part of exact and carefully planned observatories. Aubrey Burl is surely right when he says that the orientation of megaliths is symbolic, ritual and general — not specific and exact. Christian churches are orientated to the east, and mosques to Mecca, but this does not make the temples of Christians and Moslems into observatories or cosmic clocks.

As he develops his thesis, Brennan becomes more involved with what is usually called megalithic art, but for which Sir William Wilde, famous father of his famous son Oscar, coined the delicious word "tymboglyphics" or tomb writing. Many have tried to read this alleged writing, some declaring it to be Phoenician or Egyptian. Most of the specialists in megaliths who have paid attention to the scribings on the walls of the chambered structures, while noting signs that look like

rayed suns and serpents and observing the appearance of spirals and oculi-designs, have felt that the totality of the designs was undecipherable, and that we would never understand their meaning. Brennan does not agree: he thinks the art is directly related to the concept of the Passage Graves as "accurate sun chronometers whose structures are a celebration of light and measurement, and that there is a clear and distinct link between megalithic art and the astronomical events that animate megalithic structures giving them meaning and function".

We all invent the past, and there are no necessary reasons why the informed guesses and theories of established archaeologists and historians should always be right, and the uninformed guesses and theories of amateurs like Hawkins, Thom and Brennan should always be wrong. The general public will find this book interesting and full of food for thought, though some of the diagrams (like that of Barclodiad y Gawres, p.195) seem to introduce details unfamiliar to myself and the late Professor T.G.E. Powell who excavated the site and recorded the scribings with care. And they will chafe at an index that does not include references to authors and sources quoted. It is the credibility of the guesses and theories that we must all, independently, assess. In my own assessment, Brennan's claims that the Passage Graves display "numerous variations of the same sky-imagery which relates astronomical observations to cosmic models of rotating spheres and shells and the criss-cross patterns they generate", and that the art "reinforces the communicative power of the symbols to the extent that they become universal and timeless imprints of mankind's fascination with the sun, the moon and the stars", are not cogent, convincing or credible. □

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Barrow by the Boyne — Newgrange (top) before and (bottom) after reconstruction.

From *The Stars and the Stones*.