

Carving Out Realities: Passage Mounds and Rock Art in Neolithic Ireland United Through Common Ontological Underpinnings



Introduction and Goals

Throughout the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (3700 BCE – 1900 BCE), people in Ireland constructed numerous megalithic structures across the island. One of these structures was the passage mound, which consisted of a central chamber and passageway made from large stones, which was then covered in concentric layers of materials such as soil, turf, stone, flint, bones, and pottery. Many of these spaces were aligned with the rising and setting suns of different relevant dates, such as the solstices and equinoxes.

The complex and varied rock art carved into these megalithic spaces has long been the subject of speculation and archaeological investigation. I identified that in recent decades; there has been a timidity to approach these yet-understood symbols in archaeological contexts. In many cases in which the symbols are the focus of study, they have been divorced from their architectural environs. My goal in this independent study was to study the iconography of ancient Ireland alongside their megalithic contexts to create a more complete picture of both.

Evidence and Analysis

Wrapping and Site K

The concentric wrapped layers of Newgrange Site K, and other passage mound spaces, is replicated in ring gap and U-ring motifs in rock art. In both contexts, concentric wrapped layers often surround a central pit, or cup mark. In passage mounds these layers were made up of and surrounded many elements of the social landscape: light, human remains, specific turves, quartz, tool deposits, and more. The selection of distinct turf layers with displayed foliage might suggest specific cultural associations with particular places.

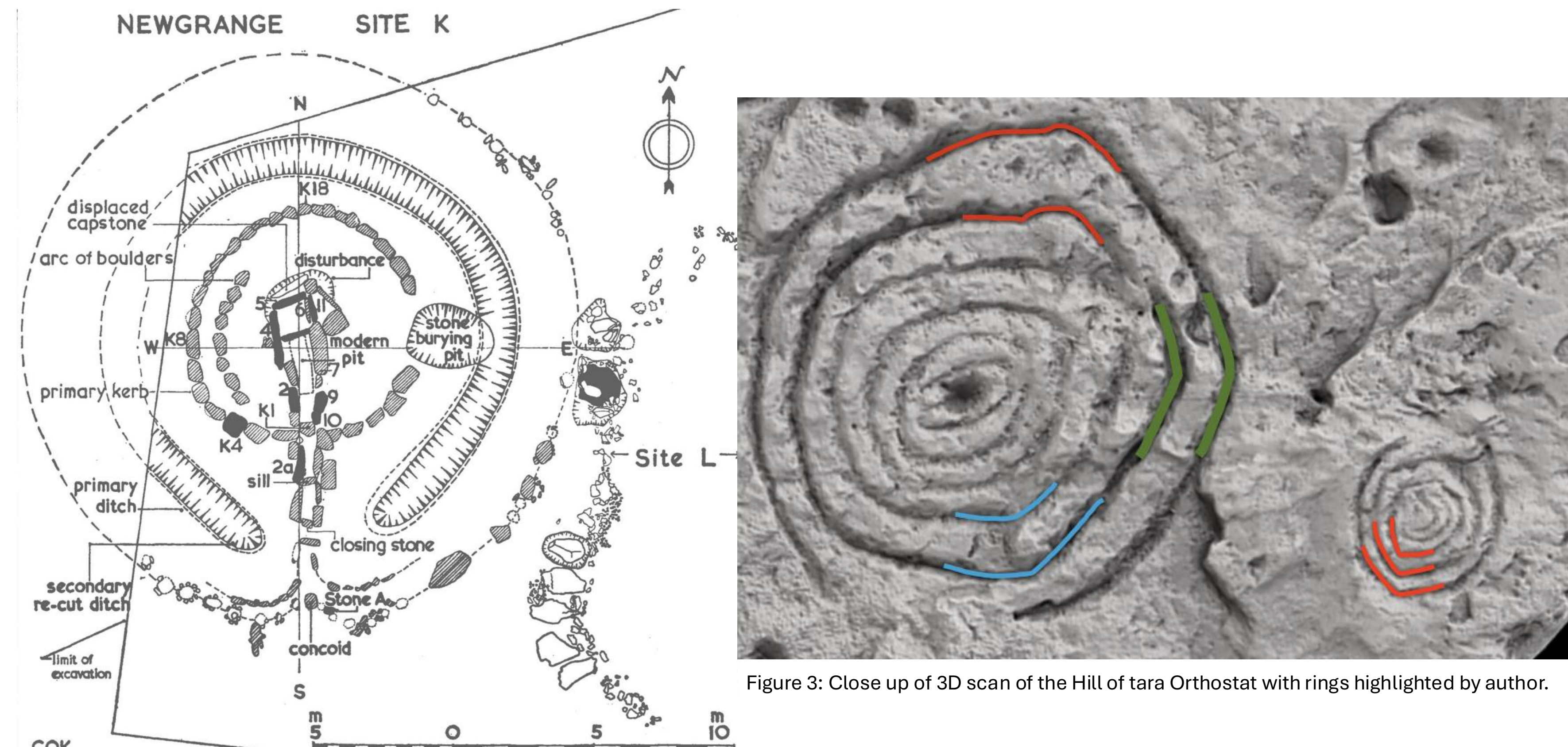


Figure 2: Newgrange Site K with labelled features and stripped layers.

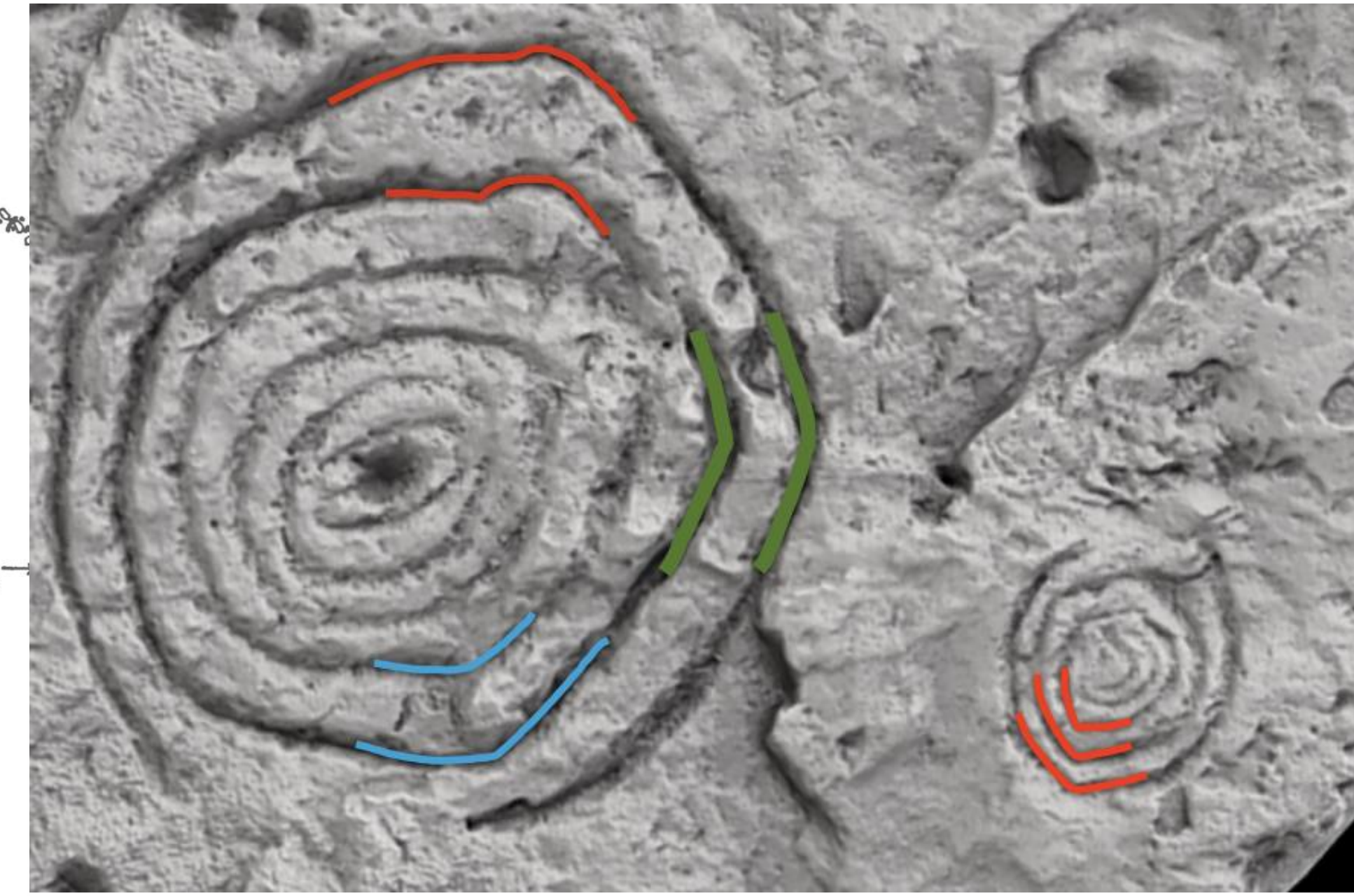


Figure 3: Close up of 3D scan of the Hill of Tara Orthostat with rings highlighted by author.

Light and Shadow at Newgrange and Knowth

At both Knowth and Newgrange, along with the famous alignment events in which light enters the long passageways on the solstices and equinoxes, less well known are the shadow phenomena that play out at the entrances to these spaces. At Knowth, light hitting a small standing stone casts a shadow on the entrance stones, which aligns with a carved line on the stone, splitting the iconography of the panel in half, and even bisecting the entire architectural and iconographic whole. At Newgrange, a similar phenomenon occurs in which a standing stone's shadow cuts the beautifully carved entrance stone in half, but beyond that it rests over a central symbol that I have argued displays similar ontological principles to the passage tomb itself. Here, in shadow, the standing stone and the entrance stone replicate the, or are perhaps another aspect of, the light entering the chamber.

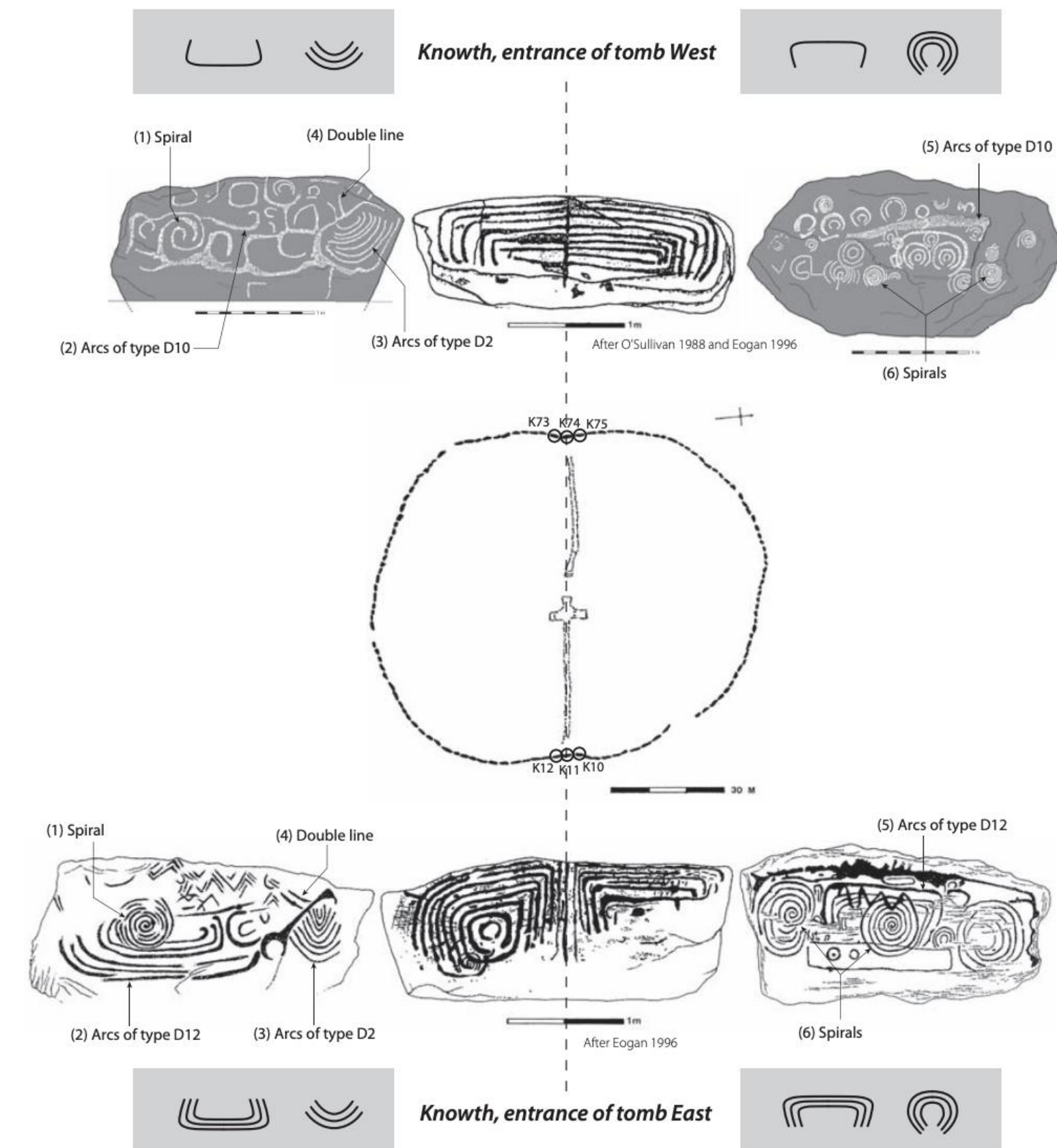


Figure 4: Iconography of Knowth with dividing lines highlighted within the context of space.

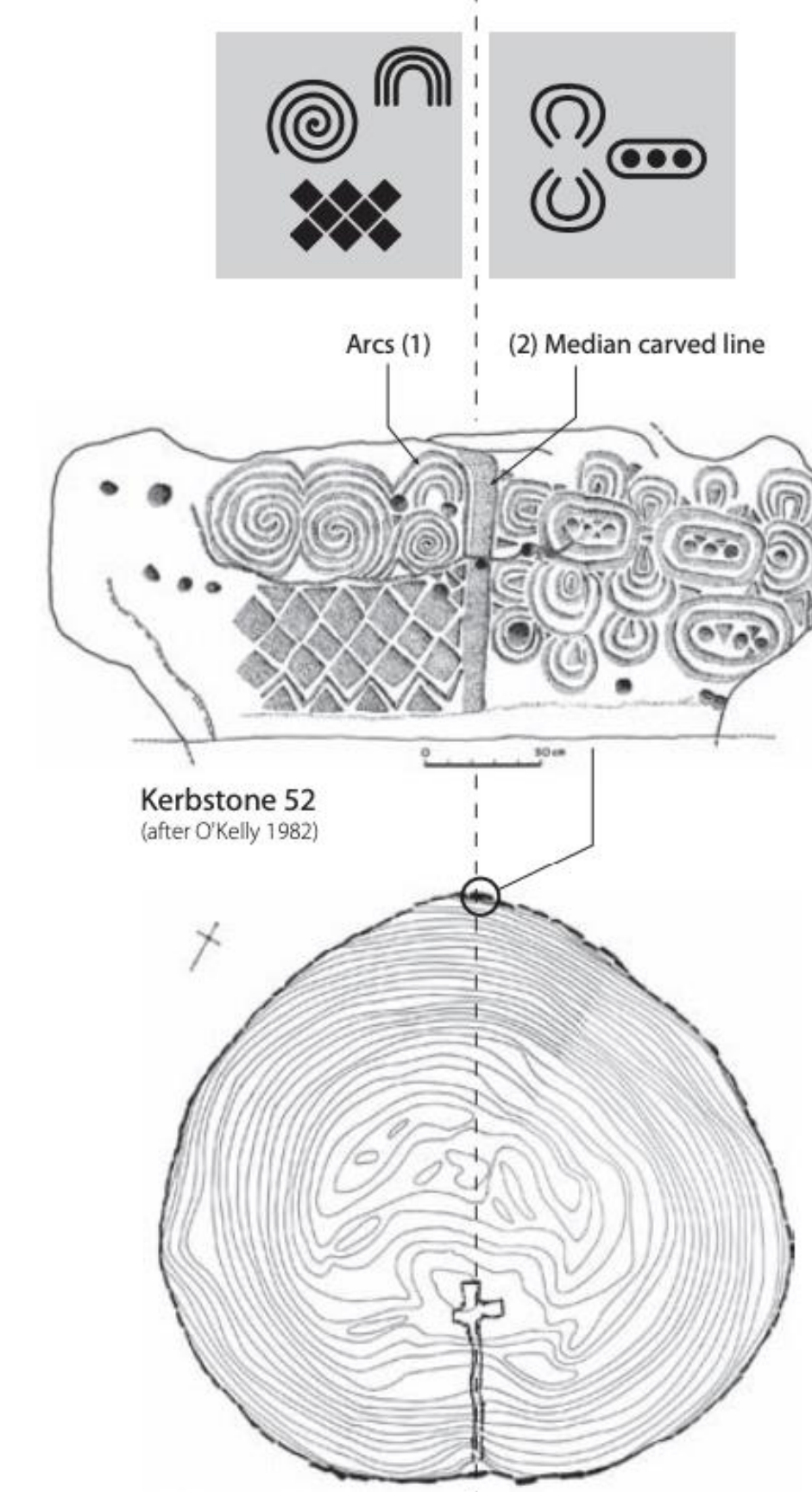


Figure 5: Newgrange with carved dividing lines alignment and architectural context

Conclusion

For my project, I looked to combine rock art and architecture to create a more cohesive picture of the megalithic world of ancient Ireland. The very idea that “carving” and “constructing” were two ontologically distinct realms of creation for Neolithic people is a modern, western imposition that should be questioned. In exploring such concerns, I identified common symbolic underpinnings that governed the form and process of both iconography and space. These similar principles include: The surrounding of a central pit, wrapping concentric layers of meaning that relate to each other layer, similar interactions with light and shadow, and the bisecting of both space and carvings. While I recognize connections between certain motifs and passage mounds, the point of this work is not to argue that the carvings are depictions of passage mounds or vice versa



Figure 7: Aerial Photo of Newgrange, Co. Meath, Ireland.

Advisor Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Olivia Navarro-Farr for all her help throughout this process, and for inspiring me to pursue archaeology. I feel very grateful for her having been my mentor during my time at Wooster, and I will carry the lessons she taught me wherever I go!

Influential Works

Brück, Joanna. 2019. *Personifying Prehistory: Relational Ontologies in Bronze Age Britain and Ireland*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Cummings, Vicki and Colin Richards. 2017. *Passage Graves as Material Technologies of Wrapping*. In *Neolithic Europe: Papers in Honour of Alasdair Whittle*, edited by Penny Bickle, Vicki Cummings, Daniela Hofmann, and Joshua Pollard, pp. 235-248. Oxbow Books, Oxford.

Fowler, Chris. 2021. *Ontology in Neolithic Britain and Ireland: Beyond Animism*. *Religions* 12(4):1-15.

Image Citations

- 1: Visual representation of the hermeneutic circle, created by author.
- 2: Newgrange Site K with labelled features and stripped layers. (O'Kelly, M, et al. 1978:277, Figure 13).
- 3: Close up of 3D scan of the Hill of Tara Orthostat with rings highlighted to show how deviations from regular circular pattern in one ring are reflected in another proximate ring. Altered by Author after The Discovery Programme. Original accessed at <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/mound-of-the-hostages-orthostat-6d1bc4bc52e2447aa5596f07c78eb8b>
- 4: Iconography of Knowth with dividing lines highlighted within the context of space. (Robin 2010, Figure 24).
- 5: *Newgrange with carved dividing lines alignment and architectural context*. (Robin 2010, Figure 22)
- 6: *Newgrange K1 with two lines highlighting the movement of the apex of the shadow cast from GC1. δ = -23° 26' is the path of the shadow today, while δ = -23° 59' is the path of the shadow calibrated for the 2500 BCE*. (Prendergast 1991, Figure 10a).
- 7: Aerial Photo of Newgrange (Condit, Cooney, and Carlin 2014).
- 8: *Newgrange K1 with two lines highlighting the movement of the apex of the shadow cast from GC1. δ = -23° 26' is the path of the shadow today, while δ = -23° 59' is the path of the shadow calibrated for the 2500 BCE*. (Prendergast 1991)

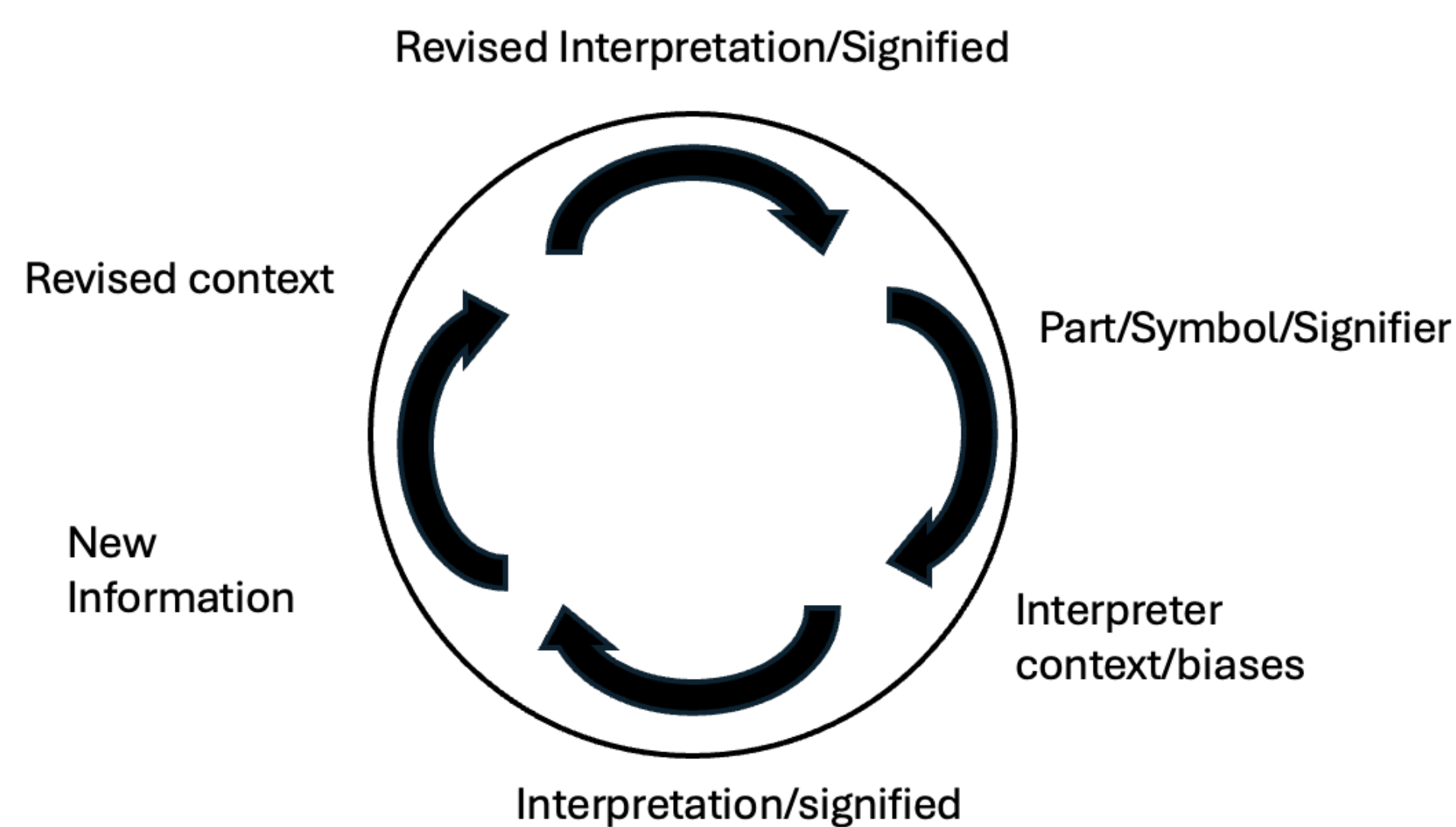


Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Hermeneutic Circle

Theory and Frameworks

To help bridge the gap in analysis between architecture and iconography in the case of passage mounds, I made use of a number of different theoretical bodies within archaeology to help build out an analytical framework.

Hermeneutics: the main theory that structures the interpretation of symbols in this paper. The hermeneutic circle is an intentional process in which one attempts to strip away their own cultural biases and contexts to craft a more culturally relative interpretation of a signifier.

Ontology: the nature of being/knowing. Emphasizes how one's view of the world would shape the way they choose to replicate it. The material manifestation of ontology is the context added during my use of the hermeneutic circle

Indigenous Archaeology: It is important to recognize that much of the theory employed in Neolithic studies mirrors indigenous thought and archaeology, such as the recognition of the existence of many ontologies across space and time.

Phenomenology: A large suite of theoretical bodies that all most basally rely on the study of experience. Umbrella that includes agency theory, labor theory, parts of archaeoastronomy, and enables the consideration of the tactile experience of creating