



Special Topic: Place Exploration

*How is Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath represented,
visualised and understood?*

Third Year Special Topic Research Project

Name: Paul Cahill

Department: Sociology

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Special Topic Director: Dr. Mary Benson

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Abstract

A case study approach of Brú na Bóinne; how it is understood, represented and visualised in contemporary society. It investigates the various, subjective meanings people invest in place and how those meanings are reflectively incorporated into the identities of those who interact with the site. Qualitative methods of research consisting of interviews, thematic analysis of online data and analysis of online visual representations are used. It is found that identity is constructed in multiple ways at Brú na Bóinne: through tourist consumption of historic sites and through beliefs and understandings of the 'totemic' role of those sites. People engage with these identities online where a platform is provided for the formation of communal identities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This Research Project is based on the topic of place exploration and examines how Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath is represented, visualised and understood. Further sub-questions in the project set out to examine how Brú na Bóinne is represented and visualised in tourism, how it is represented online and how people engage with Brú na Bóinne today. Brú Na Bóinne is a point of national significance in Ireland. It is one of the Republic of Irelands three UNESCO World heritage sites, containing the “largest assemblage of megalithic art in Western Europe” (UNESCO, 2020). It is also a major tourist attraction in ‘Irelands Ancient East’ (Fáilte Ireland) with the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre receiving over 5 million visitors since opening in 1997 (Tuffy in O’Brien 2019). Recently, new discoveries have been made revealing several previously unknown archaeological sites at Brú na Bóinne (Keogh, 2018: 1). These discoveries sparked my interest in the site and led me to question what meanings people attribute to the place of Brú na Bóinne through tourism, place attachment and community formation amongst others and whether these meanings invested in Brú na Bóinne are congruous with one another or if, as Gieryn (2000) posits, they are “inevitably contested” (465).

As such, this research project examines the role Brú na Bóinne, a place which has been settled by humans for at least 6,000 years (Cooney 1997: 3), plays in the construction of personal and social identities today. The aim of this project is to add to the existing body of knowledge around place, creating deeper understandings as to how people give meaning to place and how place, in turn, gives meaning to people. It investigates the various, subjective meanings people invest in place and how those meanings are reflectively incorporated into the identities of those who interact with the site. An overview of some of the sociological material relating to the key themes of this project will be provided in Chapter 2. This material acts as a theoretical framework for the study. Following this, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach taken. This project utilises qualitative research methods consisting of interviews, thematic analysis of

online data and analysis of online visual representations of Brú na Bóinne in order to understand how Brú na Bóinne is represented, visualised and understood. In Chapter 4 the findings of this project are comprehensively analysed and discussed in light of the material covered in the literature review. Finally, in Chapter 5 I reflect upon the research process, present a summary of the project as a whole and suggest avenues for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with place exploration, particularly how the area of Brú na Bóinne is represented, visualised and understood. The aim of this chapter is to provide a general overview and understanding of the existing sociological material relevant to this topic. In order to do so, this material will be categorised into four significant themes relevant to this research project; those being place, identity, tourism and community. Within each of these themes a historical context will be established, exploring the key theoretical concepts within each theme and analysing their significance within the field.

Firstly, this literature review begins with an exploration of the study of place within sociology. Citing the work of Bourdieu (1990), Goffman (1972) and Bauman (2000) among others, a critical analysis of identity will then be provided. Next, using the work of Corrigan (1997) as a framework, a synthesis of the sociological study of tourism will be delivered- contrasting Urry's (1990) tourist gaze with MacCannell's (1976) view of tourism as the ritual quest for authenticity. Following this an analysis of tourism within the specific context of Ireland, and Brú na Bóinne, will be given- setting the scene for the study. Finally, this literature review will explore the theme of community with a particular focus on the development of online communities in the context of globalization and new communication technology. The literature reviewed here will provide a sociological framework from which to structure and interpret the findings of this project creating an understanding as to how is Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath is represented, visualised and understood.

2.2 Place

“Nothing of interest to sociologists is nowhere (Casey 1993): Everything that we study is emplaced; it happens somewhere and involves material stuff” (Gieryn 2000: 466). Place is not simply that which is physical and tangible; it cannot be understood purely by geographical or architectural fact alone. Place exists also in the experiences of those who interact with them; places are implanted with hidden layers of meaning that transcend their physicality (Hernández et al. 2007), “Embedded within the concept of place are layers of sedimented meaning derived from memory, sentiment, tradition and identification with a spatial location” (Corcoran 2002: 203).

As Tuan (2001) notes, it is impossible to define place without first reaching an understanding of space. Space is an unoccupied area or expanse which is undifferentiated, carrying with it an inherent potentiality for meaning to be bestowed upon it (Tuan 2001: 6), it is “detached of material form and cultural interpretation” (Hiller and Hanson 1984 in Gieryn 2000: 465). Space becomes place when value is invested in it. Conversely, place would become space if “the unique gathering of things, meanings and values are sucked out” (Gieryn 2000: 465). Therefore, people continuously invent and re-invent places through their lived experience of them by bestowing space with meaning and value.

Gieryn (2000) suggests that place has three necessary and sufficient features that define it; these are geographic location, material form and the set of meanings and values invested in a place. He claims that place is a unique spot in the universe; one with finitude; although he notes that a place's boundaries are often subjectively elastic (Gieryn 2000: 464). He furthers his definition of place stating that places consist of material form, the physicality of space acts as an instrument through which social action takes place (Gieryn 2000: 465). Lastly, he includes investment of meaning and value as his third feature of place. Places are constructed both physically and socially; each place is “interpreted, narrated, perceived, and imagined” (Soja 1996 in Gieryn 2000: 465) in various ways. “In spite of its relatively enduring and imposing

materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is labile-flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (Gieryn 2000: 465).

Holtorf (2015) furthers Gieryn’s position on the malleability of place over time, positing that places are multi-temporal. Places are in themselves ‘temporal collages’ (Lynch 1972: 171); they are at any given moment uniquely shaped by past actions “as much as aspirations for future presents” (Holtorf 2015: 171). For Holtorf (2015), people shape places by interpreting their history and, in doing so, creating their own contemporary understandings- a process which amounts in “a collection of incrementally unfolding meanings” (171). Brú na Bóinne, along with any given place, is such a temporal collage- it is a place where people are at present engaged in an “imperceptible and continual process of increasing the unbelievable mess of the past” (Oliver 2001: 66-67 in Holtorf 2015: 171).

The landscape and built structures of Brú Na Bóinne have remained relatively fixed over time, however the meanings invested in place, as well as its ‘sense of place’, have inevitably altered over the years. This research project seeks to explore the meanings which are invested in Brú na Bóinne today, how those meanings relate to each other and how they are reflectively incorporated into the identities of those who engage with Brú na Bóinne. As such, this research project will offer a glimpse into the representations and subjective understandings of those who interact with Brú na Bóinne and will formulate results which are specific to the place at one particular point in time.

2.3 Identity

The self originates from and is reflective of society; individuals are engaged in an ongoing process of self-formulation and reflection in the context of the society in which they are acting (Stryker 1980). Individuals form the basis of groups, these groups create generally accepted

language and meanings which the individual uses to engage in social interaction (Stets and Burke 2003: 128). Stryker (1980) explains that the self is composed of multiple parts, or identities, which correlate to the different role relationships one plays in society, such as mother, colleague, teacher etc., each identity carrying with it their own set of predispositions for how one is expected to act. Individuals balance a multitude of identities which exist in a hierarchy, providing a guideline for behaviour and giving meaning to one's life (Stets and Burke 2003: 142).

Identity is simultaneously that which creates unity and difference between individuals; identity creates a sense of belonging and sameness between those who share commonly held beliefs while also differentiating those who do not hold those same beliefs (Lawler 2008:2). Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) theory of the habitus suggests that individual behaviour is conditioned by the commonly held beliefs and set of rules, or 'doxa', of one's social groups, or 'fields'. He contends that the power relationships between these fields structure human behaviour. Bourdieu also notes that individuals will use their economic and cultural capital (their physical assets as well as learned dispositions and cultural knowledge) and utilise their agency (their ability to make choices based on their personal desires) to negotiate with and position themselves within their habitus (Bourdieu 1990).

Of course, the theoretic frameworks of identity proposed by both Stets and Burke (2003) and Bourdieu (1990) apply to Brú na Bóinne, a place which plays a symbolic role in identity formation. For instance, a tourist travelling to Brú na Bóinne approaches the place with a certain set of dispositions which they adhere to while visiting- they may fulfil 'the role' of the tourist. What exactly that role is and the manner it is fulfilled varies depending on their 'doxa' and the social capital to which the individual has access to. This research project seeks to explore these subjective understandings- how people perceive, interact and form identity with relation to Brú na Bóinne.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1972) delineates his theories of dramaturgy. Here, Goffman (1972) distinguishes the ideas of the front and back stage; two distinct modes of performance that an individual engages in depending on the nature of the social situation they find themselves in. In a person's front stage performance an individual adapts their behaviour for an audience; they engage in impression management and adhere to formal social conventions. The backstage however affords the individual a chance to relax from their front stage roles- a chance to contradict its rules and act informally (Goffman: 1972). For example, a waiter working in a busy restaurant would put on a front stage performance whilst serving customers; adhering to the formal role of their profession. However, when that waiter enters the restaurant's kitchen and is among the company of fellow members of staff they can afford to drop some of these conventions and act informally in this backstage environment. This research project examines how people construct, present and manage identity with regard to a particular place. In section 2.4 'Tourism' of this literature review, I will outline how MacCannell (1973) adapts Goffman's theories of dramaturgy, asserting that certain tourists actively seek out front or back stage locations in "a ritual performed to the differentiations of society." (MacCannell 1973:13).

Bauman (2000) contends that in the current age of 'liquid modernity', the construction of an identity which remains consistent over space and time is unachievable, rather, he holds that the contemporary individual searches for fleeting social experiences and finds their identity through a pattern of consumption (2000). Bauman (2000) believes that society has undergone several shifts; the first of which being the melting away of the 'solids' of the ancient regime (tradition, customary rights, obligations). Bauman furthers this with societies subsequent 're-solidifying' into the new order of modernity which based itself on the scientific and bureaucratic measurement of effects and the prevalence of class relations and the economic sphere.

Again, Bauman believes that modernity has 'liquefied'; this time societies 'hardware', or the tangible, embeddedness of commodity, has been replaced by 'software'- an electrical, information based condition. He also holds that a disintegration of agreed upon dispositions has also taken place, effectively allowing individuals to radically disengage from the system in a process of "deregulation, liberalization and 'flexibilization' ... the unlocking of individual choices from collective projects and actions" (Gane 2001:269). The individual is no longer primarily a producer, but a consumer that can select from the "supermarket of identities" (Bauman 2000:83).

If Bauman (2000) believed that individuals form identity through their pattern of consumption, a counter argument would be Emile Durkheim's (1995) belief that one of the means to which individuals form identity and social solidarity is through collective investment in religious totems. Durkheim held that particular societies delineate the sacred from the profane- not through natural distinctions but social ones. Religious totems, which could take the form of any object or symbol, produce social solidarity by creating collective representations of the society itself: they are deemed worthy of respect and worship by a society who imbues into them their own meanings of sanctity. An individual, therefore, creates identity and constructs group solidarity by venerating such a socially constructed totem. Thus, identity is not only constructed through consumption but also through commonly held belief and the desire to connect to society through sacred totems. This project will explore the extent to which consumption and belief in the sacred, or the investment in the totem, contribute towards identity formation at Brú na Bóinne.

2.4 Tourism

“Tourism results from a basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary” (Urry 1990: 11). For Urry (1990), tourism arises from the desire to escape the banality of everyday life in pursuit of the extraordinary. He says that tourist sites are primed for visual consumption, curated to satisfy the ‘tourist gaze’; that is to say they frame the tourists experience in such a way as to fulfil the tourist’s desire for that which is out of the ordinary (Urry 1990: 3). For Urry, tourists are not on the lookout for the real but instead ‘signs’ of the real: “When tourists see two people kissing in Paris what they capture in the gaze is ‘timeless romantic Paris’...” (Urry 1990: 3). As such, those in the tourist industry manipulate the environment to ensure the tourist comes across the right signs at the right time and place (Corrigan 1997: 142).

Using Paris as an example again, Urry (1990) explains how the tourist gaze came to be framed in that city. In the nineteenth century when Baron Haussmann renovated the narrow, winding Medieval streets of Paris into grand boulevards to mitigate overcrowding and unrest in the city centre the streetscape was radically altered. The newly constructed long, wide streets had the effect of framing the city for the tourist gaze (as well as affording French troops ease of movement to suppress popular unrest). Each boulevard offered a distinct vantage point of dramatic streetscapes; each sweeping vista ending with the most ornate architectural designs (Corrigan 1997: 143). Additionally, these boulevards allowed individuals a better opportunity to observe their fellow wayfarer. Here, framed by the surrounding streetscape, the tourist gaze is shifted unto the people themselves engaging in their day to day activity. Within this cityscape, a particular “street stroller” (Corrigan 1997: 143), the *flâneur*, was able to observe the everyday behaviour of people as well as the events of the city discretely and without interference (Corrigan 1997: 144).

The spatial implications of Baron Haussmann’s process of renovating the Parisian streetscape effected the boundaries of certain social groupings, particularly those along the lines of social

class. The poorer classes, who once populated the sprawling streets were displaced and excluded from the new vision of Paris when the boulevards were constructed. Their presence was considered by the leisurely class to be somewhat of an eyesore upon the majestic and ornate streets. Meanings of place changed as the physical environment was altered. The ramifications of this were that access was limited for the poorer classes, effectively widening the cities inequalities. Haussmann's renovations of Paris are relevant to Brú na Bóinne in that it too is a place where visitors experience of place is framed to satisfy the tourist gaze by an interpretive centre and through direction of tour guides. Additionally, as with any place, physical alterations to Brú na Bóinne redefine the boundaries as to which groups of people can access place and which cannot.

For MacCannell (1976) however, the quest for authenticity is that which most underlines tourist activity. In the world of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), a world saturated in bureaucracy and dominated by large corporations, the individual feels their own personal experience is shallow and inauthentic and, as such, searches for authenticity elsewhere (Corrigan 1997: 137). MacCannell (1976) uses Goffman's (1972) theory of the front and back stage to explain how tourists search for authentic scenarios to immerse themselves in. He claims that the tourists aim is to find and engage in real life back stage scenarios: "Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives..." (MacCannell 1973: 592 cited in Corrigan 1997: 138), it is "a ritual performed to the differentiations of society." (MacCannell 1973:13). The tourist here does not simply "connect a marker to a sight" but rather they "participate in a collective ritual, in connecting one's own marker to a sight already marked by others" (MacCannell 1976: 137). This type of tourist engages in the ritual act of sightseeing not merely to see the sight but to gain a privileged insight into a particular place which has been deemed by society at large to be of great social and cultural importance.

Of course, these back stages can be artificial themselves; front stages can be disguised to resemble genuine back stages: “‘attractions’ offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience, an artificial product to be consumed in the very places where the real thing is as free as air” (Boorstin 1961: 99 in MacCannell 1973: 599). Places can be thematised to resemble the authentic. For example, Irish pubs in international cities are often furnished with accoutrements associated with traditional Irish culture (silver wear, traditional Irish musical instruments, road signs...), manufactured in an attempt to emulate the real. This can also be taken to a larger scale with whole areas adapted to a certain theme. To take Paris as an example again, Disneyland is primed for tourist consumption. It’s choice of shopfronts, restaurants and cafés recreate what looks to be a naturally occurring streetscape but what really is a contrived consumer experience mounted by a single organization. Corrigan (1997) defines post-tourists as those who deliberately look for this type of staged authenticity, “revelling in the play of tourist signs” (Corrigan 1997: 132).

Tourism plays a vital role in Ireland’s economy. In 2019 the island of Ireland received 11.2 million overseas visitors, generating €5.8 billion for the economy whilst supporting 325,000 jobs within the industry (Tourism Ireland 2019). Cultural and heritage tourism have developed as a key feature of this economy. As Kneafsey points out, Ireland followed a wider European trend in the conversion of spaces of production into those of consumption: “Coalmines become museums, factories become visitor centres and, most relevant to the case of Ireland, countryside becomes leisure landscape” (2009: 111). In Ireland, a particular focus was set on developing heritage attractions such as “historic houses, interpretative centres, parks and monuments” (Kneafsey 2009: 111).

Irish people’s customs and lifestyles, especially their propensity for hospitality, are thought to be somewhat inextricable from the country’s cultural and heritage product: “Irish people become inscribed within tourist expectations. Tourists expect a certain type of behaviour and

are disappointed if these expectations are not met” (O’Connor and Cronin 1993: 73). In their study, Baum et al. (2008) shows that Irish marketing material promoting the island as a tourist destination has a tendency to present a homogenous image of Ireland and Irishness. That image is of a pastoral ideal, a particular type of country lifestyle envisioned by the former Taoiseach Eamon De Valera in which traditional Gaelic values are of paramount importance; “The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit” (De Valera 1943: 00:00:04-00:00:20). Baum et al. (2008: 14) highlights how this promotional image of Irish homogeneity creates an incongruity between tourist expectations and reality for, as Baum et al (2008) allude to, Ireland has benefited from an influx of inward migration and as such Irelands tourist sites are staffed by a diverse multicultural workforce.

The Irish tourism industry is currently facing several challenges. Firstly, Brexit and the uncertainties surrounding the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union has hampered the number of tourists visiting Ireland from the United Kingdom, the area from which Ireland receives its largest amount of overseas visitors (Central Statistics Office 2020). Adding to the heavy strains already placed upon the industry, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the temporary closure of many tourist locations throughout the country as well as the cancellation of major cultural and sporting events in the interest of public health. The Office of Public Works, which is “responsible for the running and care of national monuments in state care” (Office of Public Works 2019) closed the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre as a result of the virus outbreak (Office of Public Works 2020). These vast social distancing measures had implications towards the subject matter and methodological approach of my research: limiting the extent to which I could engage in face to face interviews and leading to an increased focus

as to how Brú na Bóinne is represented, visualised and understood online- changes which I will further discuss in Chapter 3: ‘Research Methods’.

2.4.1 Brú na Bóinne, Setting the Scene

“Out of the mists of the stone age, this structure has stood since the dawn of recorded history...” (National Geographic 2010: 00:00:01-00:00:06). Brú na Bóinne, from the Irish ‘mansion’ of the Boyne, is one of the Republic of Ireland’s two UNESCO world heritage sites (the other being Skellig Michael in county Kerry). Brú na Bóinne is largely situated between the rivers Mattock and Boyne- located 40 kilometres North of Dublin city, 8 kilometres west of Drogheda and 5 kilometres east of the village of Slane. Built during the Neolithic or Late stone age, 4000-2500 BC (Cooney 1997), Newgrange along with the megalithic tombs of Knowth and Dowth constitute the three prehistoric sites which “dominate visitor perception” (Cooney 1997:3) at the Brú na Bóinne archaeological ensemble at the bend of the Boyne, Co. Meath. Surrounding these sites are over forty satellite passage graves as well as monuments from the Iron Age, early Christian and medieval periods (UNESCO 2020). Combined, these sites formed “a funerary landscape recognised as having great ritual significance” (UNESCO 2020). Considering the concentration of such an assemblage within a relatively small area it is evident that place was majorly important to its stone age builders. As Cooney (1997:3) notes: “...the tombs were placed by people very deliberately to be seen and to be part of the landscape, tied into the terrain by use of earth and stone, tied into the seasons by alignment on critical points in the horizon”. Today, the area’s landscape is still renowned for its historical, artistic, social and cultural importance.

The World Heritage Site constitutes a core area of 770 hectares as well as a surrounding buffer zone comprised of 2560 hectares, assigned to protect the property from developments which

would degrade its integrity (UNESCO 2008). The area's terrain is mostly low-lying which suits its modern and ancient function as agricultural land. Most of the passage tombs within Brú na Bóinne however are built on higher ground. Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth are situated on the highest points within the area and (on a clear day and with even clearer eyesight) can be seen from up to 15 Kilometres away from the Hill of Tara (Eogan 1997)- “the quartz façade of Newgrange shines like a beacon in the sunlight, reflecting the passage tomb’s primacy of place in the ritual landscape that we call Brú na Bóinne” (Archaeology Ireland 2014: 2).

Brú na Bóinne is a point of both national and international significance. It contains “Europe's largest and most important concentration of prehistoric megalithic art” (UNESCO 2020), with Knowth alone containing over 200 decorated stones; the same amount “as the combined total from known passage tombs abroad” (Eogan 1997). These stones are highly decorative with elaborate geometric patterns such as “triangles, lozenges, zigzags, circles and spirals” (Eogan 1997) engraved upon them. The architectural design of the passage tombs is equally impressive. Newgrange, the most widely known of the passage tombs at Brú na Bóinne is comprised of several distinctive components. Newgrange is a circular mound 85 meters in diameter and 13 meters in height (Condit 1997). The entrance to Newgrange leads to a cruciform passageway where the remains of the dead were deposited below an impressive corbelled roof (Condit 1997). The structure also has an astronomical function- its roof box aligns with the rising sun of the Winter Solstice each year, allowing a stream of light to enter and illuminate the internal passage way (Condit 1997). As well as its great physical distinction, the landscape of Brú na Bóinne is of great mythological importance, featuring in a rich tradition of myth and legend.

As a result of these impressive characteristics the area of Brú na Bóinne is a major tourist attraction. Since opening in 1997, the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre, which facilitates tours to both Newgrange and Knowth, has received over 5 million visitors (Tuffy in O’Brien 2019).

Newgrange has been open to the public since 1699 (Tuffly and Ó hOistín 2012), in what began as rudimentary visits to “the caves” (Tuffly and Ó hOistín 2012). Archaeologist, M.J O’Kelly along with his wife, Claire, attributed greatly to the modern understanding of Newgrange by radiocarbon dating the structure and discovering the function of the roof box- two developments which “created immense public interest in the site and ensured that more and more people would want to visit Brú na Bóinne” (Archaeology Ireland 2014: 1). To facilitate this mass interest in the sites of Brú na Bóinne a visitor centre was constructed in 1997, subsequently undergoing a multi-million-euro renovation in 2019 (O’Brien 2019). As well as offering guided tours the visitor centre has a café, a gift shop and offers a shuttle service to and from the monuments. Brú na Bóinne is marketed as a key component of ‘Ireland’s Ancient East’ (Fáilte Ireland 2020) along with many other places of great historic significance East of the River Shannon. This research project situates itself within Brú na Bóinne and aims to formulate an understanding as to how this place is understood by those who interact with it, how it is represented and the role it plays in identity and community formation.

2.5 Community

Community is a term which within sociology has many diverse and elusive meanings. At its core, Day (2006) proposes that community “...refers to those things which people have in common, which bind them together, and give them a sense of belonging with one another” (1). In many cases, the presence of community necessarily requires a separate set of people who do not belong to that community- it is built upon perceived boundaries which often change over time. As Day (2006) notes, the idea of community raises questions about “...social inclusion and exclusion, identity and belonging” (1). Community is often made up of people who share a similar identity, or elements of identity. For instance, the community of Dublin’s Docklands,

in the past, was characterised by shared work habits, class consciousness and a sense of belonging to place- whereas those who lived outside the physical boundaries of the docklands and those who worked outside the docking profession were deemed to be outsiders (O'Carroll and Bennett 2017). The parameters of community altered and meanings of place became contested as the built environment of Dublin's Docklands transitioned from an industrial to a post-industrial landscape (Drudy et al. 2000). Likewise, community is linked to Brú na Bóinne through connections to place, however the precise shape and nature of those community boundaries change over time as the physical environment alters and inevitably involves the creation of insiders and outsiders.

Indeed, community is not necessarily bound to place. For Anthony Cohen (1985), community is something which is symbolically constructed. Cohen (1985) believes the boundaries of community are built upon symbolic lines rather than territorial ones. Symbols, for him, are versatile and are understood differently by different people- the web of meaning attached to them are created and re-created in social interaction (Cohen 1985). He posits that communities create boundaries through shared investment of meaning in particular symbols. This becomes particularly important in the context of globalization and new communication technologies which, as Wellman (2005: 53) argues has led to community becoming increasingly defined socially rather than spatially. Online Community is one such instance of a community which is formulated upon symbolic and social connections rather than spatial ones- Wellman (2005) believes that online, connections take the shape of 'networks' between individuals- weak affiliations between individuals which often work to serve a specific purpose, without the need for spatial proximity between actors.

However, place can still act as the basis for community online. Chayko (2014) suggests that after the 'triple revolution' of internet, mobile communications and social media that communications technology manages to convey a strong 'sense of place' online by 'mentally

transporting' people to a shared environment, which they often imagine as a neighbourhood. For her online communities succeed in "...in mentally "transporting" people who share similar ideas and interests to specific, similarly envisioned environments" (Chayko 2014: 979). She further holds that online connections strengthen connections offline; that people who interact online are, as a result, more likely to meet face to face (Chayko 2014). Through the concept of community, this project will explore how people of shared identities come together in communal interaction centred around Brú na Bóinne, with a specific focus on online community.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

3.1 Research Question

How is Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath represented, visualised and understood?

- How is Brú na Bóinne represented and visualised in tourism?
- How is Brú na Bóinne represented online?
- How do people engage with Brú na Bóinne today?

For this research project, I conducted a study as to How Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath is represented, visualised and understood. This question, along with its sub questions, seeks to explore the variety of meanings invested in Brú na Bóinne and how those meanings are reflectively incorporated into the identities of those who interact with the site. It sets out to examine how a particular tourist site is represented and understood. How place resonates as a marker of identity and community and how that identity may be affected by tourist practices. In order to best answer these questions, I have employed a qualitative research approach.

3.2 The Qualitative Approach

This research lends itself to the qualitative approach as it seeks to explore understandings of the social world from the perspective of those being studied (Bryman 2016: 393). Within the qualitative approach non numerical data is gathered from a focused sample group allowing us to understand how people understand, experience, interpret, and produce the social world (Sandelowski 2001). This research project combines elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning. It is deductive as it begins with an analysis of literature, from which research questions were developed. It is also partly inductive as the research question follows with the collection of empirical data and the generation of a hypothesis. The qualitative approach allows me to gain an insight into the subjective perceptions, thoughts and feelings of people with relation to Brú na Bóinne- allowing me to best answer how it is represented, visualized and understood.

I approached this research project from a constructivist ontological position; that is to say that I believe there are multiple understandings of reality which change over time. Qualitative research methods are constructivist as they recognise that people view the social world from a multiplicity of realities (O’Leary 2014: 130) which are in a “constant state of revision” (Bryman, 2001: 16–18). This type of methodological approach allows for me to gain a snapshot into the “behaviors, perceptions, knowledge, emotions, value systems and culturally shared meanings” (Guest et al. 2013: 26) that people hold with regard to Brú na Bóinne during a particular point in time. Qualitative research methods are categorized within the ‘interpretivist paradigm’ which views reality as something socially constructed. It is a type of research which involves “the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organized, and represented’ (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 114).

One disadvantage of using qualitative research methods is that the hypotheses of studies using small sample sizes cannot be easily generalised to reflect a larger population (Rahman 2017: 105). As Bryman (2012) outlines: “qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied” (Bryman 2012: 392), therefore the findings of qualitative research do not always remain valid when applied to other social settings. However, it is a form of research which favours depth over breadth: this research will afford me an in depth view of a specific tourist setting rather than a general understanding of place at a wider societal scale. Focusing my research project upon a small tourist setting, that of Brú na Bóinne, allows me to conduct a rich, in depth analysis of how it is represented, visualised and understood from the subjective perspectives of those who engage with it. Another disadvantage which may arise through the use of qualitative methods is issues of positionality, which could potentially result in bias in my interpretation of results. Section 3.5 ‘Issues of Positionality’ addresses this issue directly and details how I attempt to mitigate such bias from impacting upon my research.

3.2.1 The Case Study Approach

The case study approach involves a contextualised description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, community, group or institution (Merriam 2002). As previously mentioned this study attempts to understand a specific social setting or place; that of the tourist site of Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath. This study is historically and socially specific to a fixed context and examines the complexity and particular nature of the case in question (Stake 1995). The case study approach has the advantage of showing how something works “in a real life situation” (Kane and O’Reilly-De Brun 2001: 215). Although, as mentioned previously, due to the small sample size of this research the results of this study are somewhat

limited by the specificity of the context in which the study took place in; that of a single tourist site at a particular point in time. However, that does not entirely eliminate this study from comparative analysis as it could be examined with relation to other heritage sites in Ireland or with other sociological studies of place, identity, tourism or community at other prehistoric sites.

3.2.2 Interviewing

The nature of my methodological approach to this research project was altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, I had intended to conduct several field interviews at the Brú a Bóinne visitor centre as well as a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews. However, due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre (along with all tourism sites operated by the Office of Public Works) was closed in the interest of public health (Office of Public Works 2020). No face to face interviews could be conducted adequately while adhering to proper social distancing measures. As such, in the interest of my health and the health of my research participants, my methodological approach changed to that which would best answer my research question under the circumstances of a nationwide lockdown. In place of interviews I elected to conduct a thematic analysis of online data and visual representations of Brú na Bóinne.

I did however conduct one semi-structured interview through Skype before social distancing measures came into play which I have included in this study. This interview allowed me to gain an in-depth account into the research participants own “experience and perceptions” (Cousin, 2009: 71) surrounding Brú na Bóinne. Semi-structured interviews allow for the collection of data on specific, guided topics and produce answers which can be compared between different participants whilst also giving room for the conversation to flow and for the

participant to freely express their thoughts (Guest et al. 2013: 31). Anthony Murphy, who I interviewed, is an expert source of knowledge on Brú na Bóinne and other places of mythological importance throughout Ireland. He is a writer and photographer who has written five books, both fiction and non-fiction, on Irelands ancient sites. He established Mythical Ireland- an online blog, YouTube page and Facebook group which explores these sites through “...archaeology, anthropology, astronomy, mythology, spirituality and geodesy” (Mythical Ireland 2020) among others. Murphy, along with Ken Williams, also discovered a previously unknown monument in Brú na Bóinne while flying drones there in the Summer of 2018 (Keogh 2018). Although only one interview was conducted for this study it still provided me with a rich insight into the biography, experience, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings (Bryman, 2001: 402) of one individual in relation to Brú na Bóinne.

3.2.3 Thematic Analysis of Online Data

I gathered data from Tripadvisor, a popular online site which provides a platform for users to submit reviews of a range of services “...accommodations, restaurants, experiences, airlines and cruises” (Trip Advisor 2020). There were 2,354 reviews of Brú na Bóinne on Tripadvisor; 2003 of which were in English (the remaining 351 were in 13 other languages). I analysed all reviews of Brú na Bóinne which were in English between March 2020 (the most recent review) to January 2017. From these reviews I selected 18 Respondents whose comments were of thematic relevance to my study. These reviews provided me with access to personal accounts of people’s experience at Brú na Bóinne. I selected and coded this data on a thematic basis, suggested by the key themes which arose from my literature review: those being place, identity, tourism and community. This involved applying a symbol to parts of the text to easily categorize them by theme. Encoded from this online data are “...component parts that seem to

be of potential theoretical significance and that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied” (Bryman, 2001: 402). Below is a table containing the gender and country of residence of each Tripadvisor user featured in this study as well as the title of the review they left on Brú na Bóinne Tripadvisor page.

Sources of Data

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Title of Review</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Country of Residence</i>
A	Fantastic ancient site	-	Australia
B	Nice, not a must for me	Female	USA
C	Spectacular Site	Female	USA
D	Amazing Place. Inspired.	Female	Ireland
E	Amazing	Male	Ireland
F	Ancient History	Male	UK
G	Amazingly stunning	Male	Israel
H	Wow!	Male	UK
I	A travel through time	-	Italy
J	Book in Advance	Male	USA
K	Newgrange/Knowth Monuments	Female	USA
L	Stunning historical site	Female	USA
M	Overwhelming	-	Germany
N	Giant Neolithic Mound Tombs – Worth a visit	-	USA
O	Beautiful but restrictive	Female	USA

P	Interesting passage tombs	Male	USA
Q	Blew my mind	Male	Ireland
R	Worth the trip but difficult not to feel like a tourist	Male	USA

3.2.4 Visual Representations

I also analysed several visual representations of Brú na Bóinne which are available online. The visual sources analysed are comprised of two particular internet sources which virtually recreate and represent the landscape of Brú na Bóinne. The first of which is Voices from The Dawn (2020), a website which allows users the opportunity to experience the sites of Brú na Bóinne through virtual reality. It offers 360 degree panoramic viewpoints, which can be viewed in virtual reality from a head mounted display, from inside and outside the passage tombs of Dowth and Newgrange. The second of which is the 2017 livestream of the Winter Solstice at Newgrange on Youtube which was filmed by Ireland’s Ancient East who gave their broadcast the slogan “be there, wherever you are” (Ireland’s Ancient East 2017). This analysis will allow me to understand some of the ways as to which Brú na Bóinne is visualised- as I have set out to investigate in my research question. According to Secundulfo (1997: 33), visual data offers the researcher a frozen frame of reality at a particular point in time. Both the Voices from the Dawn virtual reality tour and Ireland’s Ancients East livestream do such a thing at a particular point in time at Brú na Bóinne. Additionally, including these visual sources in my study will “...enhance the richness of data and help with the relationship between the researcher and participant” (Glaw et al. 2017: 2).

3.3 Analysis of Data

Figure 3.1: An outline of the steps taken in this qualitative research project:

Initial readings surrounding the topic of inquiry (Place Exploration)



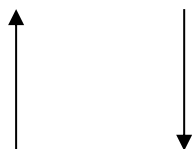
Developing an idea, research question, sub-questions and themes. Formation of general research question and initial theoretical framework (this includes theories, literature surrounding the area of inquiry etc.)

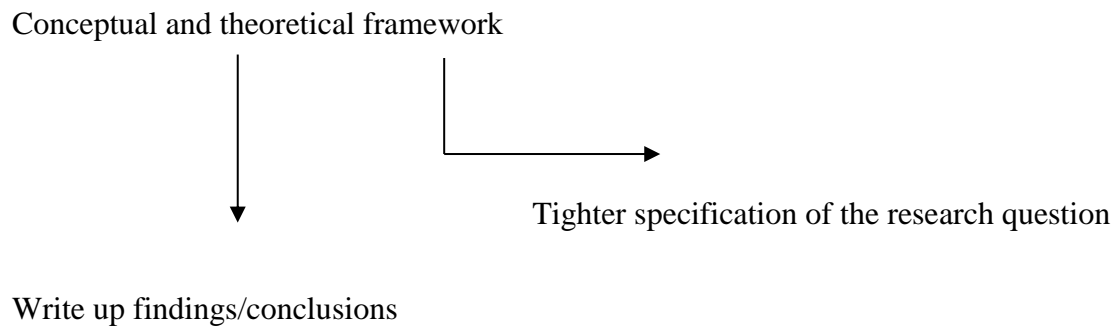


Collection of relevant data – interviewing, photographic representation, documentary analysis, online sources etc.



Interpretation of data / analysis of data





(Figure adapted from Bryman: 2004: 269)

3.4 Ethics

Ethical awareness is central to the research process. “Qualitative research involves working with people and making ethical choices about how to treat them” (Marvasti 2004: 134). This relationship between researcher and participant requires the social researcher to make ethical decisions on “...the things that should or should not be done regarding the people being observed and written about” (Marvasti 2004: 133). Ethical guidelines come from above, from the side, and from below: from national and international law, ethical guidelines from Maynooth University and the Sociological Association of Ireland and from below- from my own moral code as a researcher. I have made every effort to comply with Maynooth University’s code of ethics while conducting my research to ensure that it adheres to the Universities professional standards.

Three key ethical considerations which I aimed to uphold were those of consent, confidentiality and trust (Silverman 2004: 219). Firstly, I informed my interviewees about my research project and provided them with a consent form which outlined their involvement in my project before interviewing and including them in my research project. This signed document ensured the interviewee understood that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to refuse

to answer any questions and to withdraw at any time. As well as this I vowed to guarantee the anonymity of my research participants. The exception to this in my study is Anthony Murphy, who agreed for his name to be used in my research project. I ensured the confidentiality of my participant's data by storing it on my password protected laptop which is accessible to only myself.

Lastly, I maintained a relationship of trust with my research participants. I built a strong rapport with participants by generally acting in a friendly and respectful manner towards them and through adhering to Maynooth Universities code of ethics. My use of user generated data from Tripadvisor, or the blogosphere, presented its own ethical concerns. Although this data comes from an internet source which is freely available within the public domain and thus can legally be included in sociological research at will, others argue that it is unethical to include personal blog material without first contacting its author (Jones and Alony 2008). This process would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible to achieve owing to the large scale and frequent anonymity of users of the blogosphere (Jones and Alony 2008). As such, I included material posted by individuals online in my research project but ensured their anonymity by changing their names within the project (to Respondent A, Respondent B, Respondent C, etc.).

3.5 Issues of Positionality

As Gieryn (2000) posits, place is "inevitably contested" (465). Brú na Bóinne means different things to different people. The Neolithic people who constructed Newgrange created a centre of overt ritual practice (Eogan 1997: 9). It's large kerbstones are adorned with the recurring motif of a circle with radiating lines, leading some to speculate its builders engaged in sun worship (Harbison 18). Those farmers who settled the same land between the River Boyne and Mattock a millennium before the construction of those passage tombs (Eogan 1997: 9) may

have held drastically different views to their distant descendants. Certainly, when Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th century opinions held on Brú na Bóinne were likely to have shifted- evidence suggests a drop off in human activity there, but as noted by Archaeology Ireland (2014: 1): “it is unlikely that the great mound ever disappeared totally from popular consciousness. Newgrange took on a new life, disguised in the early tales and mythologies of the time...”.

Today, as at all times, there are manifold opinions on Brú na Bóinne as place. A tourist views it in different light to an archaeologist, a mythologist holds a different opinion to an art historian. Likewise, I too hold a distinct and subjective opinion on Brú na Bóinne. “Both the researcher and those in the research carry with them a history, a sense of themselves and the importance of their experiences” (May 2001: 21). I live in County Meath myself, not far from Brú na Bóinne. Growing up the site has been represented to me as one of huge local and national importance. Newgrange was in the curriculum of my art history leaving certificate. Symbols of Newgrange surround my everyday life: they feature on the Meath GAA crest and on the logos of local authorities such as Meath County Council. I have family members who have worked with local historical societies and close friends who have worked for the Office of Public Works, delivering tours at Newgrange. I have taken these tours myself and experienced Newgrange as a tourist. I have also had the experience of working within the tourism industry as a historical interpreter elsewhere and as such I do not view tourism from a neutral position.

Furthermore, I formulated the research question and techniques for data collection, chose a methodological approach and drew conclusions from the interpretation of data (Bryman 2001: 21-22). As Bailey (2007) notes “Good research often requires reflexivity: critically thinking and writing about who we are and how the choices we make affect our results” (14). As such I have taken into account all of these personal factors which formulate my subjectivity as a

researcher; I have endeavoured to conduct my research with an awareness of the social, cultural and political context from which I view the world (Bryman 2016:388) and to use this understanding to prevent bias in my research.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

4.1 Place

There exists a multitude of subjective understandings of Brú na Bóinne as place. Brú na Bóinne is interpreted, narrated, perceived and imagined in a range of varying ways by different groups of people. As Gieryn notes “In spite of its relatively enduring and imposing materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is labile-flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (Gieryn 2000: 465). Brú na Bóinne, like any other place, adheres to these rubrics as different people attribute different meanings to it.

From my analysis of Tripadvisor reviews and my interview with Anthony Murphy it is evident that there is a widely held respect and recognition of the achievements of those who constructed the structures of Brú na Bóinne as well as shared esteem for the impressive nature of the sites physicality. There was a general consensus from respondents on these matters. However, the exact nature of people’s opinions on the place varied on a number of levels.

*“It was fantastic, the entrance is through a truly impressive tunnel of rock that slopes upwards slightly and is narrow in places to the end...
...On the winter’s solstice the rising sun beams through the long corridor of rock and forms a narrow channel of light that hits the back room of the altar room, they have artificial lights set up to simulate this. - It was fantastic; I love these old structures and am fascinated by how and by whom they were built” (Respondant A Tripadvisor 2020)*

Here, Respondant A; a tourist, reports on the wonders of the built environment of Brú na Bóinne. They demonstrate a keen interest and admiration for not just the ancient structure but

also for those who built it- they are intrigued by the meanings that were attached to place in the past and derive their understanding of place from those meanings. This person is aware of layers of meaning at place. As Corcoran (2002) posits “embedded within the concept of place are layers of sedimented meaning derived from memory, sentiment, tradition and identification with a spatial location” (203). Respondent A’s comment demonstrates Holtorf’s (2015) belief that people shape places by interpreting their history and, in doing so, they create their own contemporary understandings- a process which amounts in “a collection of incrementally unfolding meanings” (171). Evidently, this is the case at Brú na Bóinne where, for some, a sense of wonder is derived from the physical environment but also from the social meanings which have existed and developed there over the years.

For Anthony Murphy the area encompasses a myriad of meanings. Murphy is passionate about Brú na Bóinne and is dedicated to exploring the sites mythological background as well as having a very strong interest in its archaeology, anthropology and astronomy among others. He provides tours of Brú na Bóinne and has written several books about the place but for Murphy, Brú na Bóinne is also a place which offers respite: an environment which presents him with an escape from the pressures of working life. Travelling there in the early morning or near sunset, Murphy avoids the busy tourist hours and as such comes in closer contact with nature- an experience of place which offers him a form of meditative escapism:

“But I mean there’s a de-stressing thing I mean I work you know and my line of work in newspapers is deadline driven and, you know, it can be pressurising and it can be stressful so that ability to go out to into the landscape, take pictures of monuments and sometimes just to stand there watching the sun setting and listening to the birds- I mean it’s very refreshing. It’s very uplifting and refreshing and- soulfully nourishing thing to do, you know?”

It is clear that understandings of Brú na Bóinne as place vary from person to person. While both Respondent A and Anthony Murphy share a deep respect for the built environment and

its history; the ancient structures of the landscape and those that built it- Murphy's understandings of place differ from Respondent A's in that he moves beyond the typical tourist perception of place. He holds an admiration for the natural elements of landscape which help him to relax and escape the pressures of a busy working life. This is but one example illustrating how, as Gieyrn (2000) suggests, various meanings are invested in place by different people. Of course, there are a multitude of understandings of place- in section 4.3 Tourism I will further delineate some of the various understandings of Brú na Bóinne with relation Tourism and, in the following section; 4.4 Identity, I will explain how some of these opinions contrast with one another and reflect the varying identities people form with relation to Brú na Bóinne.

In the previous quotation Murphy says the natural element of Brú na Bóinne is something which he believes represent a more authentic 'sense of place'. Through the words and photography of his online work he seeks not simply to state the facts of place but also to portray a feeling or a mood in his work which gives people access to this "... deeper sense of place".

Speaking about his work online he says:

"...I know much of it is written in the form of prose but its poetic to a degree. And you get the impression that you're doing much more than just showing people a picture of place. You're actually giving people a sense of place, the deeper sense of place because after the busses have gone and all the tours have departed, a silence falls on Brú na Bóinne- the place becomes almost devoid of humans and a silence falls on the place and that silence reminds you that there's another world, other than the world of humans, and that we share this world with nature..."

"...I think I've been much better able to present a mood of Brú na Bóinne to the wider public than the textbooks or the official tours, etcetera have been able to present. You know, they're very, very fact based and I think Mythical Ireland is a little bit more imaginative, you know? I allow scope for beautiful imagery, poetic words, mystical imagery as it were. Mystical. Spiritual? I don't know if that's the word you would use- I'm careful because I'm not- there's an undeniable spiritual aspect to the work but that not what defines it..."

Again, it is clear that place can be understood and represented differently by different people- here Murphy's understanding and representations of Brú na Bóinne allow for sentimental

interpretation and attempt to convey the “mood” of the place in a less factual manner than official tours. Murphy shows that, with relation to Brú na Bóinne, a ‘sense of place’ can be conveyed through online representation. This aligns with Chayko’s (2014) theory that communications technology manages to convey a strong ‘sense of place’ online by ‘mentally transporting’ people to a shared environment.

Brú na Bóinne is represented online in a variety of ways. One such online representation is the Winter Solstice Livestream, broadcast by Irelands Ancient East on You Tube (2017) which gives viewers the rare opportunity to witness the Winter Solstice from within Newgrange’s central passage by means of a livestream video. Another is Voices from the Dawn (2020), an online site which provides users with virtual reality images from within and around several Irish prehistoric monuments. Included on the site is a virtual reality tour of two of the major archaeological sites at Brú Na Bóinne: those of Newgrange and Dowth. The site features ten panoramic vantage points at Newgrange from within the passage and central chamber as well as a view of the surrounding countryside from atop the mound. From here, the user can proceed to Dowth by pressing a marker on the horizon and, like at Newgrange, explore several scenes in and around the mound. This website replicates the visual environment of Brú Na Bóinne, allowing internet users to engage with a virtual version of place. Again, as Chayko (2014) theorizes, these online representations show how a ‘sense of place’ can be conveyed online by mentally transporting people to a shared environment.

These online representations may be of interest to tourists who are dissatisfied with how the major sites at Brú Na Bóinne are represented on official tours. Some Tripadvisor users, like Respondent B and C below, reported being unhappy with the fast pace of the tour and the large amount of people at the sites at Brú Na Bóinne. These people may find the online experience, particularly Voices from the Dawn (2020), to be a useful platform from which to explore and learn about the sites at their own leisure.

“Took too much time out of our trip since you can’t just drive up, see it, you have to get to the visitor centre early, check your ticket, walk to the busses, ride the buses, wait for your tour guide to start speaking... I prefer experiences where you aren’t so crammed together with people” (Respondent B Tripadvisor 2020).

“Our guide gave a talk and explained what we about to see inside but was a bit short and impatient with us once we entered the tomb. The tours are timed precisely and there was a group right behind us so she hurried us on...” (Respondent C Tripadvisor 2020).

However, as MacCannell (1976) points out, many tourists relish the opportunity to gain privileged insight into a particular place which has been deemed by society at large to be of great social and cultural importance- those tourists who engage in the quest for authenticity. In light of this quest for authenticity, it is unclear whether any tourist would accept the online experience of Newgrange in place of the real one, despite how a ‘sense of place’ may be conveyed online. I will further explore these themes of authenticity and tourism in section 4.3 Tourism.



Winter Solstice Live Stream 2017

133,676 views • Streamed live on 20 Dec 2017

857 54 SHARE SAVE ...

Broadcast live: tourists pose for selfies inside the central chamber at Newgrange during the 2017 Winter Solstice (Irelands Ancient East 2017)



Exploring the central chamber of Newgrange through virtual reality (Voices from the Dawn 2020)

4.2 Community

Here, I will analyse the role Brú na Bóinne plays in community formation, with a focus on online community and tourist community. Firstly, Anthony Murphy’s website; Mythical Ireland, acts as a fulcrum for communal interaction between likeminded individuals who share an interest in the sites at Brú na Bóinne, as well as other ancient sites in Ireland. As Day (2006) proposes, community “...refers to those things which people have in common, which bind them together, and give them a sense of belonging with one another” (1). Mythical Ireland, connects individuals who share a sense of attachment to Brú na Bóinne- attachments which are diverse and come from varying fields of interest:

“Well one thing that it definitely has done is brought together likeminded people into one place... people who have an interest in ancient sites, archaeology, mythology and folklore, astronomy, cosmology.. or a blend of the whole lot. Some people are quite spiritual and find the sites, sort of, well for them the sites have a spiritual quality, you know?”

“I would say they feel as if they are part of a community, not necessarily the Mythical Ireland community but a community that is interested in these things, you know, and this just happens to be the point at which they come together, you know?”

It may not be the case that Mythical Ireland is overtly recognised by its members to be a community- nonetheless, it is a place where likeminded people, those whose identities are shaped by similar understandings of place, unite with a shared interest with regards Brú na Bóinne and other Irish ancient sites. Indeed, this also shows that community is not necessarily bound to place. Cohen (1985) believes the boundaries of community are built upon symbolic lines rather than territorial ones- here, although community is not bound to the physicality of place, Mythical Ireland uses place as the basis for community formation online, drawing upon Brú na Bóinne to construct a symbolic community.

As Anthony points out in the quote below: these online community connections often materialise into offline ones. He alludes to instances in which individuals who have engaged with Mythical Ireland online come to him in person in order to converse. This demonstrates Chayko's (2014) position that online community reinforces (and in this case even creates) offline connections:

"...anytime I've been involved in events, and I've done a huge amount of talks over the years, I nearly always meet someone at the talk who says, you know: 'hi Anthony' – and I don't know them but they know me because they've seen me on YouTube or whatever they'll say something like, you know – 'Oh I watch your videos' or 'I browse your website' and, so, you know, they feel they're part of a community. And the number of those people actually is increasing as time goes on..."

From analysing data from Tripadvisor it is evident that Brú na Bóinne attracts a vast number of visitors. Their communication with one another on Tripadvisor however is minimal and primarily serves a functional purpose- to advise future visitors on what to expect at Brú na Bóinne. This aligns with Wellman's (2005) view that online community is composed of 'networks' between individuals- weak affiliations between individuals which often work to serve a specific purpose, without the need for spatial proximity between actors. From reading the reviews however, it is clear that for certain people Brú na Bóinne resonates with their

personal identity and connect the place with communities they perceive themselves to be in. For instance, many Irish tourists at Brú na Bóinne feel a sense of pride in the monuments. They perceive Brú na Bóinne as a point of communal cultural heritage; one which connects to their ethnic identity:

“I came away inspired by those people who had gone before, and so so proud of our amazing cultural heritage. A must experience.” (Respondent D Tripadvisor 2020)

“As an Irish person I'm so proud that this important site is managed so well by the Office of Public Works. I have taken overseas visitors here on several occasions and they (and I) have been blown away by the history attached to both Newgrange and Knowth” (Respondent E Tripadvisor 2020)

Interestingly, not only does Brú na Bóinne connect to a sense of pride in national cultural heritage for certain individuals but also to a shared human heritage, on wider international scale. As Day (2006) notes, the idea of community raises questions about “...social inclusion and exclusion, identity and belonging”. For some visitors, Brú na Bóinne gives them a sense of belonging despite not living in Ireland. Respondent F, an international visitor, refers to the builders as “our ancestors”- perceiving a direct connection between place and their identity. Another tourist from abroad; Respondent G who resides in Israel, sees Brú na Bóinne as a site reflective of collective human history, somewhere that people are intimately bound to, independent of ethnicity or nationality:

“Newgrange is awesome and the Boinne valley is stunning. The construction of the tomb is very interesting and you get to go into the inner chamber. The effort that our ancestors put into building this was immense.” (Respondent F Tripadvisor 2020)

“This site in fact reflects history of our species, us humans” (Respondent G Tripadvisor 2020)

4.3 Tourism

It is clear from the previous section that tourists, between themselves, attach different meanings to place at Brú na Bóinne. In this section, tourist understandings of Brú na Bóinne will be

examined in view of Urry's (1990) tourist gaze which arises from the desire to escape the banality of everyday life in pursuit of the extraordinary and MacCannell's (1976) contrasting belief that tourists are on a ritual quest for authenticity, or for access to genuine back stage scenarios. Firstly, for many tourists at Brú na Bóinne the ancient monuments offer a chance to experience the extraordinary. They are astonished with the opportunity to experience, first hand, such ancient structures:

“To be inside a 5000 year old structure is just amazing. The tour guide was knowledgeable and entertaining and the simulation of the effects of the sun during Winter Solstice was almost magical. Highly recommend it. (Respondent H Tripadvisor 2020)

“A travel through time: A magical experience, complemented by an engaging and informative documentation centre and very competent tour guides” (Respondent I Tripadvisor 2020)

These tourists are captivated by the experience of being in such an old structure. For them, Brú na Bóinne provides an escape from ordinary, everyday life by offering them the chance to “travel through time” (Respondent I Tripadvisor 2020). Both tourists refer to the experience as “magical”, further suggesting they perceive the experience as one far removed from the ordinary and the banal. This mirrors Urry's (1990) perception of tourism: tourists at Brú na Bóinne pursue the extraordinary and escape that which is familiar. Urry (1990) believes that this desire for the extraordinary is focused through the ‘tourist gaze’- that tourist sites are visually primed for tourist consumption. This is seen at Brú na Bóinne where tourist activity is directed by a visitor centre and tour guides. Tourists perception of place is focused upon certain aspects of the site- for instance the ‘tourist gaze’ is fixed upon the roof box at Newgrange where the light from winter solstice entering the chamber is simulated. Respondent H refers to this feature and calls it “almost magical” (Tripadvisor 2020). Tourists also connect Brú na Bóinne to certain ‘signs’, as Urry (1990) suggests tourists are inclined to do. Many tourists on Tripadvisor compare Brú na Bóinne to other, international historic sites such as the Pyramids

in Egypt and Stonehenge in England. They connect the place to other sites of great archaeological importance:

“The site is basically the Stonehenge of Ireland, so it’s popular, and for good reason. It’s an amazing site and one that you must visit” (Respondent J Tripadvisor 2020)

As previously discussed in section 2.4 *Tourism* in the literature review, Irish people’s customs and lifestyles, especially their propensity for hospitality, are thought to be somewhat inextricable from the country’s cultural and heritage product. As O’Connor and Croinin (1993: 73) note: “Irish people become inscribed within tourist expectations. Tourists expect a certain type of behaviour and are disappointed if these expectations are not met”. Irish customs and lifestyle did not appear to be a major point of concern for international visitors at Brú na Bóinne. Although the service and delivery of the tours was a key factor towards tourist enjoyment of their experience at the site, there was little mentioned on Tripadvisor about expecting, enjoying or even missing stereotypical Irish customs, lifestyle or hospitality. What is evident however, is a connection by tourists between Brú na Bóinne and the ‘sign’ of pastoral Irish landscape. As Baum et al. (2008) highlights, Irish marketing material promoting the island as a tourist destination has a tendency to present a homogenous image of Ireland and Irishness. Although traditional customs and hospitality were not a pressing point of concern, international tourists did connect the site to the ‘sign’ of beautiful, pastoral Irish landscape. Brú na Bóinne, for them, is a place where countryside is recognised by as leisure landscape:

“I went to Ireland, and on my way driving around this beautiful Island, my journey came to Knowth and then Newgrange. An archaeological wonder of the world. In the countryside of the most beautiful land Ireland has to offer visitors” (Respondent K Tripadvisor 2020)

“Plus all the beautiful Irish countryside surrounding you!” (Respondent L Tripadvisor 2020)

For MacCannell (1976), tourists engage in the quest for authentic experiences and access to genuine back stage scenarios. This is the case at Brú na Bóinne where tourists appreciate the ability to access a genuine archaeological site with “real history” (Respondent N). There are several aspects of the site to which tourist perceptions alternate between the authentic and the inauthentic. Some tourists enjoy the simulated experience of the winter solstice, where the roof box is lighted with an artificial light, and see the sites as genuine prehistoric structures true to their original form:

“Absolutely outstanding experience! This site is a thousand years older than the pyramids! It is hard to describe the feeling when you are in the central chamber. Then they switch the light off – leaving you in absolute darkness – and simulate the sunlight entering through the passage at winter solstice. An amazing experience and definitely not to be missed” (Respondent M Tripadvisor 2020)

Others, however, find aspects of the site to be inauthentic or contrived. This impacts upon their enjoyment of the tourist experience:

“... the massive mounds at the site, older than Stonehenge, are accompanied by an excellent visitor’s center and the opportunity to actually enter one of the mounds and see the inner chamber is unique. Behind the curtain, one has to keep in mind that the mound that visitors can enter is restored, and some parts are controversial (read about it on-line), but even so, the history is real, the construction impressive, and the site well worth a visit” (Respondent N Tripadvisor 2020)

“... We boarded another bus and after a 5 minute drive we arrived at New Grange. This is the larger of the two mounds we saw. It was very beautiful, but honestly I felt the tug of time at Knowth. Maybe because it seemed less manicured...but it just felt serene. New Grange felt very sterile...although it was impressive” (Respondent O Tripadvisor 2020)

Respondent N is very much attuned to a distinction between the authentic and inauthentic and even uses the same dramaturgical language as Goffman (1972) to describe the front and back stage regions of the site, referring to the way the tourist site is restored and constructed for

tourist activity as being “behind the curtain” (Tripadvisor 2020). Although this tourist perceived certain parts of the restoration of the site as intrusive to their experience, they still felt the overall experience to be one of authenticity: one of “real” history (Respondent N Tripadvisor 2020). Similarly, Respondent O shares a matching concern for authenticity. For them Newgrange appeared more manicured in comparison to Knowth. This impacted upon the sense of place they perceived: they held Newgrange, where they believe to be more manicured, to be “sterile” and Knowth, where they perceive to be less manicured, as “serene” (Respondent O Tripadvisor 2020). This would position both of these tourists within MacCannell’s (1976) position on tourism: they are tourists who search for authentic experiences and genuine back stage scenarios.

Thus, at Brú na Bóinne, both Urry (1990) and MacCannell’s (1976) type of tourist are present. There are those who search for the extraordinary and seek to escape banal, everyday life and find it through the first-hand experience of such ancient structures. Here, the ‘tourist gaze’ is also primed at the site for visual consumption through tours, the visitor centre and features such as the winter solstice simulation. Others however are in search of authentic experiences and seek out genuine back stage scenarios- as MacCannell (1976) proposed tourists do. At Brú na Bóinne this comes in the form of access to a genuine historic site with “real history”. It has been shown that this ‘authenticity’ hinges upon visitor perception at Brú na Bóinne: for some restorations to the site are regarded as inauthentic and contrived and that impacts upon their enjoyment of place.

4.4 Identity

Brú na Bóinne is understood in a range of different ways. The ways in which those understandings come to effect identity are equally manifold. Bauman (2000) argues that in the age of ‘liquid modernity’ people construct identity through consumption. At Brú na Bóinne it

is evident that identity is constructed through the consumption of the historic site through tourism. As shown in section 4.3 *Tourism*, it has been shown that tourists consume place in different ways. For some, this consumption of a historic site shapes their understandings as well as their identity with relation to the past:

“These 5000 year old passage tombs definitely merit a visit. I especially like the Newgrange tomb, since you were able to enter the actual chamber and got a nice demonstration of how the passage was aligned with the sun” (Respondent P Tripadvisor 2020)

Respondent P, through their consumption of place as a historic site generates meanings from their experiences. These experiences, in turn, go on to shape their identity. As Stryker (1980) explains, the self originates from and is reflective of society; individuals are engaged in an ongoing process of self-formulation and reflection in the context of the society in which they are acting. This tourist constructs their identity through consumption (in this case the consumption of a historic site) as Bauman (2000) theorizes people who live in the age of ‘liquid modernity’ do. However, others formulate identity with regards Brú na Bóinne which extends beyond the basic tourist experience, or that which the ‘tourist gaze’ is focused on:

“There are very few places in the world where you can stand in a building 5000 years old (predating the Egyptian pyramids and Stonehenge by a distance) which is still in its original state of construction! If it doesn’t blow your mind, you need to get here and try it for yourself. It may seem underwhelming on first site but this is a chance to connect to something deep in the human psyche” (Respondent Q Tripadvisor 2020)

“Worth the trip but difficult not to feel like a tourist: I would have liked more quiet time at the site because it felt rushed to return to the bus for the ride back to the visitor center. For being at a 5,000 year old site, there was little time and solitude to contemplate a spiritual presence or the awe of the historical nature of the site” (Respondent R Tripadvisor 2020)

Respondent R does not identify with the ‘doxa’, or set of rules and dispositions (Bourdieu 1990), associated with tourism. This individual is unhappy to consume the site in the typical

manner (that of a brief tour of the site) as for them they understand the place to be a sacred one where a spiritual presence may be felt. For them, Brú na Bóinne is a sacred site: the sanctity of which they believe cannot be fully appreciated through the rudimentary mode of tourist consumption. In contrast with those tourists who form identity through consumption, these people see Brú na Bóinne as a 'totemic' (Durkheim 1995) place- a place where meanings of place symbolically produce social solidarity by creating collective representations of the society itself: a place deemed worthy of respect and worship by people who imbue it with their own meanings of sanctity.

As Lawlor (2008:2) comments, identity is simultaneously that which creates unity and difference between individuals; identity creates a sense of belonging and sameness between those who share commonly held beliefs while also differentiating those who do not hold those same beliefs. Hence, it is clear that identity is constructed in multiple ways at Brú na Bóinne: both through the consumption of the place as a tourist site but also by how people construct meanings from those experiences. For some meanings of Brú na Bóinne extend beyond that which is the typical 'tourist gaze' focuses on- these people construct identity around beliefs and regard the site as a place of spiritual importance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research project has explored how Brú na Bóinne, a contemporary tourist site, is understood, represented and visualised. It has done so through the topic of place exploration. As Gieryn (2000:471) states: “places are endlessly made”. Meanings are invested in place and, in turn, those meanings go on to shape identity and community formation with regards to place. Identity is constructed in multiple ways at Brú na Bóinne; through the consumption of historic sites and through beliefs and understandings of the ‘totemic’ role of these sites. People engage with these identities online where a platform is provided for the formation of communal identities.

In Chapter 1, I set the research project in context, explained my motivations in undertaking the project and defined how this study relates to other work in the same field. Following this, in Chapter 2 the Literature Review identified some of the key sociological knowledge within the themes of place, identity tourism and community. This chapter provided a sociological foundation from which my data was analysed. In this section I also ‘set the scene’ of my project- providing an outline of the place my study focuses on: that of Brú na Bóinne. Next, in Chapter 3 I stated my research question and sub questions and outlined the methodological approach I chose to undertake in this study; that of the qualitative approach. In this chapter I also explained how the focus of my research was altered by the Covid-19 pandemic and provided an overview of research ethics with relation to this project. Finally, in Chapter 4 I applied the concepts and theoretical framework of the Literature Review to analyse and interpret my findings.

Brú na Bóinne, like any place, is subjectively understood in different ways by different people. As Gieryn notes “In spite of its relatively enduring and imposing materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is labile-flexible in the hands of different people or

cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (Gieryn 2000: 465). Through the use of qualitative research methods I was able to explore the diverse understandings of place with relation to Brú na Bóinne: from tourists who see the site as an extraordinary place far removed from the banality of everyday existence, others who see the monuments of Brú na Bóinne as an authentic connection to the past and to those like Anthony Murphy who, unlike the majority of tourists, can access to Brú na Bóinne beyond the typical tourist hours and enjoy the place for its meditative escapism. Of course, place is “inevitably contested” (Gieryn 2000)- there are those whose understandings of place do not align with how it is represented in mass tourism; those who believe it is a sacred site: the sanctity of which they believe cannot be fully appreciated through the rudimentary mode of tourist consumption.

Brú na Bóinne, however is not just represented in one way- it is represented in a number of varying ways. It has been shown that through online representations of Brú na Bóinne such as Anthony Murphy’s *Mythical Ireland*, *Ireland’s Ancient East’s Winter Solstice* livestream (2017) and *Voices from the Dawn’s* virtual reality (2020) a ‘sense of place’ of Brú na Bóinne has been created on the internet. This aligns with Chayko’s (2014) theory that communications technology manages to convey a strong ‘sense of place’ online by ‘mentally transporting’ people to a shared environment. These online representations go on to be the basis of community formation between individuals who share similar identities with regards Brú na Bóinne, as is the case with *Mythical Ireland* where it has been evidenced that online connections can bolster and even create offline ones.

I have explored how contemporary tourist understandings of Brú na Bóinne adhere to both Urry’s (1990) theories of the tourist gaze which arises from the desire to escape the banality of everyday life in pursuit of the extraordinary and MacCannell’s (1976) contrasting belief that tourists are on a ritual quest for authenticity, or access to genuine back stage scenarios. The ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry 1990) is focused in Brú na Bóinne to give tourists a sense that they

are experiencing “magical” trip through time. Other tourists perceive their experience as exclusive access to an authentic historic site. With regards to identity, it has been shown that some tourists construct their identity through the consumption of Brú na Bóinne as a historic site whereas others regard the place as ‘totemic’, differentiating the landscape as something spiritual and sacred. Identity, therefore can be constructed in multiple ways- through the consumption of tourist sites but also by constructing meanings from these experiences. Through sites like Mythical Ireland these identities can be performed- allowing people who share similar understandings of place and to form communal relationships with regards to Brú na Bóinne.

With regards to avenues for further research I believe it would be interesting to further explore the relationship between tourists and ‘virtual place’; to see how Urry’s (1990) type of tourist, who explores for the extraordinary through the ‘tourist gaze’, and MacCannell’s (1976) tourist, who seeks out authentic experiences and backstage scenarios, might differently perceive virtual tourism, and particularly, how they might perceive heritage or ancient sites like that of Brú na Bóinne through the medium of modern virtual reality technology.

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Appendix 1

Transcript of interview with Anthony Murphy, 2nd March 2020.

Interviewer (I): Okay so to start off can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Anthony Murphy (AM): Well, the condensed version: live in Drogheda, born in Drogheda, forty-five years old. Eh, career wise I have worked in a newspaper industry all my working life which is now going on twenty-six years. Ehm, yeah, I was a reporter, I was later an editor- I edited the Drogheda Leader newspaper, I became editor of the Dundalk Democrat *brief loss of connection* ... editor with the Irish Farmers Journal. So that's the day job in the background. I've a lot of hobbies and passions and interests. Mythical Ireland would be the main one

I: Mhmm

AM: and a combination of writing and, the web and, eh videos and photography and.. yeah, well I've published six books and I've a seventh written and I'm writing an eight so, ehm yeah I'm kind of busy behind the scenes as well.

shared laughter

I: So when was it you set up Mythical Ireland?

AM: That was in March of the year 2000. So that's actually this month twenty years ago.

I: Okay

AM: Ehm, at the time myself and Richard Moore who was, who IS, a good friend of mine we were- we had started to research together in early 1999 the astronomical alignments of the sites in the Boyne region and their associated mythology and in March of 2000 I just had the idea that I should put some of this stuff on the web. The web back in those days was a fledgling thing really, you know, ehm and so I just put up some images and words about sites and some of the myths and some of the astronomy and eh, it became very popular so. What you see today is a far cry from what was there *laughing* twenty years ago, as you can imagine, you know? Ehm, actually when the website was redesigned a couple of years ago we removed a lot of the stuff. There was just simply such an enormous amount of material there. I'll, I'll add it back in, but ehm, it was just too big. It was hopelessly impossible to navigate because there was just so much stuff, you know?

I: Yeah, yeah, and who was it you had in mind when you set it up? Who was it that you were trying to reach out to?

AM: I- well, I'm not sure that I kinda thought about that consciously at the time but I think now that- you see one of the things that I've always been good at is communicating. When I was in secondary school my teachers told me I should work in radio or TV because I'd be very good at presenting things- I think I was trying to popularize information that may have seemed, you know a little bit academic or a little bit.. staaale, a little bit heavyyy, you know- or in some cases a little bit inaccessible-

I: Yeah

AM: -and in fact as time has gone on I realized that's exactly what Mythical Ireland does, and that's exactly what I'm doing to this day- I'm taking all this information and I'm processing it and I'm putting it out to the public in a way- in layman's terms and in layman's video's and etcetera, etcetera in ways that they can understand so I suppose I'm popularising it- what can be actually a difficult and heavy subject, especially when it comes to archaeology, you know?

I: Yeah- and you've most certainly done a good job because the Mythical Ireland page has I think 53,000 likes on Facebook- a huge following.

AM: Yeah, ehm, now it was increasing massively until two or three years ago and then Facebook changed its algorithms and all of a sudden the number of new likes per month just fell off a cliff and, you know, they're suppressing a lot of the stuff now but I managed to build it up before they changed everything which means that they're 53,000 organic likes, they're not 'payed for likes'. I've never done any sponsorship or payed advertising on Facebook, ehm, but I do find now that it depends on the subject. I try to plug my books on Facebook, they just, the posts just get lost whereas if I share a nice picture you know it can get hundreds of shares so they're obviously doing something to limit anything that they see as interfering with possible revenue streams for them, you know?

I: So one thing that my thesis is looking at is how Brú na Bóinne can foster community. You know, how a community would build up around the ancient sites of Brú na Bóinne and Mythical Ireland itself is a community which organizes itself around these sites, not just at Brú na Bóinne but those all throughout Ireland. Could you speak about that a bit?

AM: ... I'm not sure that I fully understand the question.

I: Well, how does Mythical Ireland foster community?

AM: Well one thing that it definitely has done is brought together likeminded people into one place and that was the lovely thing about Mythical Ireland from the early days, from the days when it started off, was that I got such lovely feedback straight away- people who said, 'yeah, I needed this information and your..' you know the photographs obviously help, like I'd hate to be doing a website about ancient Ireland or history or even some sort of geographical website or something about coastlines or whatever, if I couldn't take photographs because where would I get them, you know? I'd be entirely reliant on other people so the photography helped enormously. No but bringing them together in one place- people who have an interest in ancient sites, archeology, mythology and folklore, astronomy, cosmology.. or a blend of the whole lot. Some people are quite spiritual and they find the sites, sort of, well for them the sites have a spiritual quality, you know? Ehm and for the dissemination of information to that community and.. I'm not sure if you mean.. do you mean local community or just community in general?

I: Community in general, I mean bringing people from anywhere together in relation to-

AM: -yeah, well anytime I've been involved in events, and I've done a huge amount of talks over the years, I nearly always meet somebody at the talk who says, you know: 'hi Anthony'- and I don't know them but they know me because they've seen me on Youtube or whatever and they'll say something like, you know- 'Oh I watch your videos' or 'I've read some of your books' or 'I browse your website' and, so, you know, they feel that they're part of a

community. And the number of those people actually is increasing as time goes on and I think that inevitable when you publish books if you can write half decently and your subject matter is interesting people eventually try to contact you. I've had a lot of that over the years, people try to contact me by email, people who want to- like yourself I mean you're an example of it actually, I don't know whether you feel you're part of a community but one of the wonderful, wonderful things about social media- and there are a lot of negative things too- one of the wonderful things is that- when I was a child and I was interested in astronomy, this was before computers, before any homes in Ireland really had home computers in the mid to late eighties and before the internet- if you wanted information about astronomy you had to go to the library to get books. But another way to do it was join some astronomical society- so there's the Irish Astronomical Society, Astronomy Ireland and then there's the British organizations and I remember writing to all those to ask them, you know 'could you keep on your mailing list, to keep me informed about things' and what I often got semi-regularly in the post were typed newsletters, typed on a type writer, you know? And that's how things were back then. Now, you felt like you were part of a community then because you didn't feel as if you were doing this thing all on your own which I did when I was a young- like I don't know whether I was six, seven or eight when I got into astronomy, I was very young and it was very lonely for the first couple of years because *brief loss of connection* contact. Today you can sit down and go Google, right, I'm gonna start collecting stamps and you can Google stamp collectors and immediately start hooking up with people, sending emails, joining groups on whatever it happens to be; Boards.ie or Facebook or whatever and there's tonnes of information there immediately available, you know, and I think that's one of the wonderful things about it is that if you're interested in something you can find out fairly quickly and if you go beyond the superficial Google search, you know, somebody might be looking for information about Newgrange but if you go beyond that and go a little bit deeper then you start to weed out the people who are kinda serious about it all and then you start to say 'oh I seen this guy on a YouTube video, now I see he's written a book and he's got this website and he runs a blog, you know, he does talks' and that's where people are inclined to reach out to me to ask me, for instance, to do talks or to lead them on tours which I also do. So yeah- and I know personally as a result of Mythical Ireland I've befriended a lot of people. Now I couldn't possibly give you a figure, but I mean I would say there's at least a hundred people out there who I'm in semiregular contact either on social media or email and people that I meet when they come to Ireland, when they come back to Ireland. Who I met purely as a result of Mythical Ireland. I would say that they feel as if they are part of a community, not necessarily the Mythical Ireland community but a community that is interested in these things, you know, and this just happens to be the point at which they came together, you know?

I: So, would say tourists for instance that have just visited Brú na Bóinne- have they contacted you after visiting the site looking to get more information?

AM: Oh yeah! Yeah. I tend to find what happens- you get a certain type of information at Brú na Bóinne, I mean the tours are very good and the interpretive centre is very good, but what they don't tell you, I find, is really anything about the mythology and the folklore.

I: Right.

AM: -and apart from the obvious which is the solstice alignment at Newgrange, they don't really talk that much about astronomy. So their speciality is divulging the information that they have claimed from the archaeological texts so it's sort of ninety percent archaeology and history with the rest of the ten percent made up with thrown in nuggets of information maybe to do with astronomy, maybe some tiny bit of mythology you have you know DNA studies which are becoming an increasing part of the thing- ehm, so I think one of the reasons people follow up then and try to reach out to me is because they're looking for more information or they're looking to go deeper.

I: You mentioned the visitor centre there. In one of your videos, a recent enough one where you were standing across from the Boyne-

AM: Oh yes!

I: You mentioned how the landscape of Brú na Bóinne is radically different from it was before in the past, with huge deforestation. The visitor centre allows visitors to walk through a virtual forest before going into Newgrange- can you tell me what you think of that experience?

AM: Well, yeah, you see.. this is all on screens. So you're walking through basically a corridor of screens that are showing graphical representations so it's not at all like walking through a real forest, its, its- I think they're just trying to, they're trying to create a little bit of an ambience, you know? You get the sounds and the sounds are apparently quite accurate, you know the animal sounds etcetera. Ehm, but now it wouldn't be a match for or anything close to the real thing. I don't think it's actually trying to replicate the real thing because if so it would have real or what you would call fabricated trees, you know? Yeah, I mean it's interesting, but yeah, it's not entirely convincing.

I: Did you enjoy the new visitor centre?

AM: Yes, I can see where it makes significant improvements in that there are a lot of screens that are showing short video clips and the great thing about that is when new information comes along you can swap out the video and update the video without having to take down a permanent exhibition stand and redesign another one so that's quite clever and there's quite a lot on that so I think the potential there for it to continuously evolve and improve. Yeah, so the old centre consisted in an awful lot of static displays and information boards- the new centre is more interactive, you know? There are places where you control the action, you go to a screen and you press play and you listen and the whole lot, so, you're not waiting for the video on a loop- you're in control of it per se. Now, I've only seen the new exhibition twice because I haven't been out there. Now, I tend to be out there quite a lot during the Summer so I'll get more familiar with it as time goes on, you know?

I: (addressing the light in the room I'm in which has been intermittently turning itself off during the interview) Sorry about my light by the way, I don't know why it keeps turning off- I think it might be motion sensitive-

AM: At least you can get it back on again! *laughs*

I: So on the subject of technology- in one of your podcasts you were having a walk around Brú na Bóinne, walking around the area and-

AM: Yes! That's the one that I call 'Don't Let the Poets Perish' was it?

I: Yeah, yeah- and you know you're listening out for the call of the curlew

AM: Yeah, yeah

I: You said that spending time in the Boyne Valley, soaking it up and escaping the distracting of technology is something you enjoy to do

AM: While carrying a zoom recorder, yeah- the irony of that is not lost on me!

Shared laughter

AM: And in fairness most of my, a lot, an awful lot of my trips out to the valley I have my camera. You know, I mean, I have just literally this evening- actually I was out twice today taking pictures, with the drone as well so- yeah I mean, you know it's not that I'm being dishonest it's that quite often I think the main point of it is that that's something that people sort of, a lot of people seem to lack today, a lot of people seem to be happy enough in their spare time to sit, you know, *holds up phone* in front of these things and in front of computer monitors and TV's and although a lot of people participate in outdoor hobbies and pursuits, you know, walkers and cyclists and runners and mountain climbers and all the rest- that sort of simple interaction with nature is something that we grew up with because, you know, if you didn't walk you had nothing to entertain you. I mean, when we were kids we had, most people in Ireland in the mid-eighties only had two TV stations: RTE One and RTE Two. We were lucky because of where we lived in Drogheda, we were receiving reception from one of the mountains in Northern Ireland where we could get BBC and Channel 4 as well- we actually had 6 channels which made our Western friends and relatives very, very jealous. And RTE was shut down at 11 or half 11 at night, you know, there wasn't a whole lot to do. Today of course there is so much to do but I don't know- I just find that- I met a gentleman at lunchtime today, I had a camera and he had a camera and it turned out he was a wildlife photographer and we got chatting and we had a good long chat and it was interesting to meet him but by and large I don't meet people you know- apart from the people who live out there, a lot of whom I'd know- I don't meet many people out there especially the sort of timings when I like going out there which are sort of the twilight times, you know? And it just strikes me that eh, you know, because life is so full of pressure now and so full of things and technology that we can't seem to pull away from that you know? It seems very difficult for people to say 'Right! This evening I'm going out into the countryside for a walk', you know? Ehm, of course there's more in the Summer but ehm, I consider myself and I've said it a lot of times in my work, in my written work and in my video work that I consider myself lucky to be able to do that. I don't know why I should consider myself lucky, I mean it should be just a normal natural thing, you know? But I mean there's a de-stressing thing I mean I work you know and my line of work in newspapers is deadline driven and, you know, it can be pressurising and it can be stressful and so that ability to go out into the landscape, take pictures of monuments and sometimes just to stand there watching the sun setting and listening to the birds- I mean it's very refreshing. It is a very uplifting and refreshing and-soulfully nourishing thing to do, you know?

I: Yeah! I'd agree with you- even being around the Battle of the Boyne site along the river it's nice and quiet, it's a lovely place to go

AM: Yeah, yeah.

I: So, I'll just speak a bit about your photography-

AM: Sure.

I: You say it's a key aspect of Mythical Ireland, and you say the social media presence of Mythical Ireland revolves around photography and the captions that you add to the photographs. So can you tell me about your photography and specifically your photography at Brú na Bóinne?

AM: Well as I was saying- it really got going in earnest when I met Richard in '99 and back then we were still using film and slides that was before commercially available digital photography although when digital cameras came about I bought one in 2004, a Nikon D70, which I still have there somewhere- and I never tuned back from digital because it was just so convenient. But I took a big interest in something that Richard called 'painting with light' where, you know, you put your camera on a tripod you open the shutter for 10 seconds, 20 seconds, 30 seconds, longer if you have a cable release and you walk around with a torch or flashes or whatever and create light on the monument and that combined with- you talk about the captions on the pictures, so I very rarely share a photo and just say 'Newgrange', you know, 'Dowth', 'Knowth', I generally have something to describe it. That description can be quite poetic, you know there's sort of a sense of poetry and of course myth is like poetry- I know much of it is written in the form of prose but its poetic to a degree. And so you get the impression that you're doing much more than just showing people a picture of a place. You're actually giving people a sense of a place, the deeper sense of a place because after the busses have gone and all the tours have departed, a silence falls on Brú na Bóinne- the place becomes almost devoid of humans and a silence falls on the place and that silence reminds you that there's another world, other than the world of humans, and that we share this world with nature etcetera, etcetera. Now, it's not a very natural landscape cause quite a lot of it is agricultural, it's all fields and farms but nonetheless I think I've been much better able to present a mood of Brú na Bóinne to the wider public than the textbooks or the official tours, etcetera have been able to present. You know, they're very, very fact based and I think Mythical Ireland is a little bit more imaginative, you know? I allow scope for beautiful imagery, poetic words, mystical imagery as it were. Mystical. Spiritual? I don't know if that's a word you would use- I'm careful because I'm not- there's an undeniable spiritual aspect to the work but that's not what defines it. It depends on, I suppose, how you define spirituality. For some people, you know, even landscape possesses spirit so that's okay and I don't have any problem with that but it has definitely been able to show Brú na Bóinne to a wide audience in a way, to be quite honest with you Paul, they would never see otherwise. That's not a boast, that's not at all a boast, it's not an ego driven thing- I'll tell you why. The simple fact of the matter is I have realized something in the past few years and that is that nobody else is really doing what I do. Nobody is combining archaeology, mythology, cosmology, astronomy, you know- poetry, photography, drone imagery, videography etcetera and presenting this very holistic package and I don't even like to use the word package, cause I don't see myself as an advertiser, my job, I don't see my position as being an advertiser, or a promoter or a marketer of Brú na Bóinne-

light turns off again, shared laughter

I: I'm sorry that's going to keep happening! Continue on, please.

AM: No problem, I mean, if that's how it comes across that's fine if people think I'm promoting it. Damn right I'm promoting it because I love the place and I want to share that passion. That's another thing that comes back at me a lot people say 'Oh you're so passionate about it', yeah, and I think if you hadn't got that you couldn't present it in the way that its being presented. I think when you haven't got the passion then it becomes dull and factual and banal and you know, it's just like everything else. What differentiates Mythical Ireland? Well, I think it's the mood of it. You can get the facts- there's probably two or three dozen websites that will give you the facts but the deeper immersion into things, where do you get that, you know? If you want to go deeper and you want to go down rabbit holes and you want to explore mythical themes, mystical themes, you know, you definitely don't do that on the official websites by and large, you know?

I: I think even in that podcast 'Don't Let the Poets Perish' on screen all you have is pictures, there is no video but you know, just from your recording you really get a sense of the place- I feel transported a bit into that place just from listening.

AM: Well, I'm really glad because one thing that I'm sort of- I'm not annoyed about it, but I would like- and perhaps this is the only part that I wouldn't like to be recorded- I would like not to have to work full time to pay the bills and feed the kids, and you have to be careful what you wish for because you know that some people when they end up working in their passion it becomes too much like a job but I want to do more of it but I also want to reach a bigger audience cause it although it may seem from the outside that I have a big audience that doesn't translate into book sales I mean I've never been on the bestseller list, you know? I've probably sold about 5,000 copies of Island of the Setting Sun which is being re-issued this year. I've probably sold 2- 3,000 copies of Mythical Ireland and probably 3- 4,000 of Newgrange. These are not big numbers, you know? When I share pictures on Facebook the most shares I ever had was for the Dronehenge discovery in 2018, eh by and large you get a couple of hundred likes and maybe fifty or a hundred shares and the same on Instagram and I'm not trying to be a social media marketer as such. However, I have realized that if I can continue to do what I do and provide quality content then people may come back and buy the books and do tours, maybe buy some of my photography and maybe god damn it I might actually be able to make a living out of this stuff, you know? But it hasn't just happened, yet, you know, after 21 years. So I'll keep trying.

Shared laughter

I: You mentioned Dronehenge there- what is Dronehenge and how did it come to be?

AM: Dronehenge is what we would call the footprint of a giant monument that we think is a late Neolithic monument that would make it somewhere in the region of four and a half thousand to four thousand nine hundred years old. Its younger than Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth but only by, you know, maybe three, four, five centuries. It's over 150 meters in diameter, which is over 500 feet. Its never been seen before until 2018 until the drought revealed it. Because of successive ploughing activity on that landscape over the past century, modern ploughing, monuments have become either denuded or obliterated. We think that Dronehenge was actually a timber monument so it rotted away and, I mean, really all that was left of it were holes and trenches in the ground. So all of the archaeology as it were is beneath

the ground. In terms of what it was, your guess is as good as mine. I explore that in my Dronehenge book but the likely scenario is that it's a, obviously a gathering place, some sort of an arena, maybe a sporting arena, an arena where sports, events, festivities, celebrations, trading took place and possibly all associated with Lughnasadh because in historical Ireland, post Christianity, we know there were substantial Aenoch sites- one of the most famous being Tailtin or Teltown, where the Teltown games or the Irish equivalent of the Olympic Games were initiated by Lugh in honour of his foster mother Tailtin. It turns out that in *Lebor na hUidre* *Of which he produces a copy* which is I think the earliest manuscript that we have in middle Irish, it's an eleventh century manuscript. In a story called 'Aided Nath Í agus a adnacól', which translates as 'The Violent Death of Nath Í and His Burial', there is a reference to the principal graveyards of Ireland and they were traditionally in *Senchas na Relec*; they were given as Relec Chroachan which is Cruachan in the West- Rathcroghan, Tailtin which is the equivalent of- well, Teltown is different to Loughcrew but Loughcrew is the tombs aspect and then.. I'm just trying to find it here- Relec in Broga which is basically the cemetery of the Bru. But then it said that there were three principal Aenoch sites: Aenoch Cruachan, Aenoch Tailtin and Aenoch in Broga and I was just stumped when I read this, I said 'I never knew there was a reference to it in the myths' and I think that is very important. I'll just show it to you *presents a particular page of the book to the camera*, its all in Irish there's no English translation of this book. Aenoch in Broga is basically in conjunction with the sites where they bury people, sites associated with tombs and the dead were these sites of celebration, you know? Fascinating stuff. Now this is the eleventh century, this is ancient, but I think this is something which has been missed by the scholars is that Brú na Bóinne which we constantly talk of as a place of the dead- you know I mean if you read the archaeological works, you know, you'll see a lot of references to the cult of the dead and places for the dead and houses of the dead- yeah grand and I'm not denying that at all, I'm not saying people weren't buried and cremated in these places but what I am saying is in association with all those sites was this complex of monuments which were basically in essence gathering places and places of celebration, you know? And so I think Dronehenge was an arena where something really exciting happened where a lot of people gathered to watch said exciting thing happening- I mean, think of a colosseum, you know? In fact, moments after I discovered it I thought in my head how it looked as if a big top had been positioned there, as if a circus had been there because of the dots in the outside that looked as if they might have been posts supporting the ropes for the tent.

I: *laughing*

AM: And of course in my head I'm going 'Anthony, don't be ridiculous- why would you put a circus in the middle of Newgrange Farm' you know, circuses locate close to towns and GAA pitches and stuff where people can get to them, you know? But it struck me afterwards that actually I probably wasn't too far off the mark in terms of the whole circus thing because what is a circus except for a place where a load of people gather to see entertainment, you know? Similar idea- I'm not saying they brought lions and elephants into Dronehenge. I actually think one of the things they might have done, and I have no evidence for it because there is such a lack of excavation on henges in Ireland, but the evidence may come- is that there were probably violent sports in there too, you know. I wouldn't be surprised if they find evidence you know there was some sort of ancient version of hurling where the victors got to behead the losers, *laughing* that wouldn't be at all surprising you know?

I: *laughing* And was there any folk knowledge of Dronehenge?

AM: That is a good one. No- folk knowledge you have to differentiate from mythology, you know? Folk knowledge and folk lore is stuff that is still current, stuff that local people are talking about. Now that's very powerful in Brú na Bóinne because before the excavations and the restorations of Newgrange, local people told professor O'Kelly that the sun shone in there once every year on the longest day or the shortest day- some people got confused as to which day it was. Now, given that Newgrange's roof box had been blocked up for a long time and the whole kern had subsided and the cabin stones had pushed down as the passage stones leaned in, the light wasn't able to reach the chamber. The archaeologists actually tell us that was blocked of for 4,000 years. So the fact that local people were able to say this is fascinating, you know? Some archaeologists try to explain that away but I don't think there's any explaining it. It's just that knowledge- the transfer of knowledge orally is very powerful and it is possible for it to cross dozens of generations, you know? Perhaps hundreds of years. The mythology is interesting because as I've pointed out, in Tochmarc Étaíne, which is one of the big stories about Newgrange- Elcmar, who is one of the chief deities and presumably the owner of Newgrange is described as standing on the top of Newgrange at Samhain and he's sort of wearing druidical garb and holding a fork of white hazel, which is a very interesting symbol. But it says that he is looking out over the playing fields, there are youths at play in the playing fields. And I've made a lot of this my Dronehenge book because I think if you're standing at Newgrange in the late Neolithic- remember Newgrange the highest point of the whole valley- you're looking down into this floodplain of the Boyne with its lower terraces, it's got two terraces and you're basically looking at a series of henges that are down on the floodplain. We know that there are.. one, two *counting* A, P, Dronehenge, LP2, Hidden Henge – yeah, there are at least seven. At least seven that we know of. Some of those are earthen structures with an earthen bank on them, some of them are timber and they're all slightly different in design but similar in many respects. Well, I think there you have it in the mythology, you have a description of the king, the chief deity whatever you want to call him, looking out over the festivities in the henges- yeah, I think that's the closest we've come. There may be more, entirely probable in the future that we will find more references. Believe it or not a lot of early Irish manuscripts haven't been translated. Some of them have been translated, some of this is available as popular work I mean the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is available. Lots of people have tried to- well not lots, but there are several different versions of Cú Chulainn's exploits that you can read in popular works. There's lots of books about the Tuatha Dé Danann. There's lots of books that sort of touch upon the mythology of Brú na Bóinne but in terms of that deep scholarly work, going into the manuscripts and extracting that stuff, I don't think a huge amount- I think a huge amount has been done, but I think it represents only a part of the whole, you know. We'll probably find in the future references that might give us a little bit more information. There's nothing explicit though, there's nothing that says this is what this site was called. The seanachas which is a collection of place name mythology names the individual monuments at Brú na Bóinne. It's an exercise in.. it will wreck the head, because you know I suppose these are poetic descriptions of sites, we've lost that connection because on modern archaeological maps, apart from Newgrange and Knowth and Dowth, most of the sites have letters, you know? So you have Mound A, Mound B, Standing Stone C, Mound B1, Mound A1, Henge Site A, Henge P, Henge Q, you know? So they're all given letters but in Medieval times people were able to say 'No, that's the Mound of the Bones of the Mata', that is such and such a place, there are two mounds up

beside Newgrange that were describes as the two breasts of Mórrígan, the Mór-Ríoghain, one of the great deities of early times- but nothing explicitly unfortunately, nothing that you can say that's definitely a description of Dronehenge, you know?

I: The likes of Henge P, might it lose some of its value without a recognisable name?

AM: Well if you just think for a second about the vast amount of human labour that was expended on just one of those henges in a pre-metal age, no metal tools, and in a pre-mechanical age. So, you're digging with, we're told the sort of digging materials they're digging with were cow scapula shovels, shovels made out of cow shoulder blades and antler picks. I mean, by god, if you stand in the middle of one of those earthen henges and you just look of the size of it and you say: hang on a second, you're telling me people almost dug that with their bare hands, you know? You reduce that enormously by just calling it site P, you know? Now you may make the point Dronehenge is not exactly the most romantic name either but the national monument service calls Dronehenge the Geometric Henge which I think is a terribly functional label- you would nearly be better just slapping a letter on it, you know? At one point I was told it was in danger of being called site P1, you know? I wanted to call it Newhenge, because its in the townland of Newgrange and its close to Newgrange. The Newhenge of Newgrange, you know, Call it Newhenge. The media decided they were gonna call it Dronhenge- that's the name that stuck in the popular imagination, you know?

I: Was that a headline; Dronehenge?

AM: A headline and a reference in text in several publications over the few days after it was discovered, more so what you'd call the tabloids, you know? I suppose you can see where they were coming from- it was discovered with a drone and it's a henge and everybody know.. like if you ask people what's a henge most people say Stonehenge, right? So Stonehenge is like the model as it were. Even though it's a very unusual henge, but anyway- we don't have to go there, we don't want to be here all night

shared laughter

I: Okay Antony I'll ask you one more question before I leave you- we're coming up on an hour now. So you mentioned Elcmar, the chief deity

AM: Well he was one of the chief dieties.

I: If I was to give you the situation where you travel back in time and you suddenly came across Elcmar and you could ask him one question what would that be?

light turns off

AM: Why did you turn off the lights? *laughs* Well, okay, if Elcmar was real and Elcmar was associated with the people who built the monuments one of the fundamental questions would be around.. why? Why did you build it? Why so big? Why is it bigger than any other passage tomb in Ireland- well Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth. *laughing* And on behalf of the tens and thousands of visitors who have been to Newgrange and asked the same thing I would say: 'Come here, can you tell me what those triple spirals mean'?

Shared laughter

AM: You know- they may not have a meaning. You know, they're symbols, this is not language they may not have an explicit meaning. I would want to know how many people did it take to build over what time period, you know? And tell me explicitly where all the stones came from because the geologists are able to tell us they think they came from Clogherhead, Rathcore and Wicklow, you know? And how did you get the stones here- is it true that you strapped them to the underneath of a barge and brought them up the Boyne and show me how you got the stones from the river to the monument... Sorry was this the one question?

I: Yeah just the one question, you're cheating a bit now.

AM: Yeah I suppose one question would be why, wouldn't it? And why would probably actually answer quite a lot of questions. Why did you build those three great monuments? What was the why behind them, what was the purpose of them and I think that would lead to answering a certain number of the questions you know. Yeah, I think that's the one- isn't it, you know? ... I mean if you're gonna send me back in time you've got to give me more than two minutes with the guy, you know! I want to bring him to the Neolithic equivalent of the pub and get full of mead or whatever alcohol they drank back in those days and have the craic with him and find out all the shenanigans and the lowdown, you know? I'd ask him to tell me about all the individual deities- you know, what's Boann like? This is his misses- and he'd say 'Ah she's grand except for when she's having an affair with the Dagda behind me back, you know? *laughing*. I'd ask him what Lugh is like and what Aengus is like and who's the mother of the deities, is it Danu? And Mórrígan, what's she like? Yeah- If you sent me back in time the danger is that I'd stay there and not come back if I could bring my family with me, you know? You could not send me back in time Paul to ask just one question, you just couldn't. I would refuse to go. It's either the whole deal or nothing at all. Would you place a restriction on time and say Anthony you can ask one question and you have ten minutes? You would only literally just be starting to crack open the shell, you know?

I: Well that's all the questions I have for you- thanks very much for your time and answering my questions.

AM: No problem. My pleasure. Just in case there are follow up questions feel free to email me.

I: Right, will do. Thanks again.

AM: Brilliant, take it easy. Cheerio.

Appendix 2

Participant Identification Number: 16409966

CONSENT FORM

HOW IS BRÚ NA BÓINNE, CO. MEATH REPRESENTED, VISUALISED AND UNDERSTOOD.

Name of Researcher: Paul Cahill

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 2nd March 2020 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I understand that my name will not appear in the final project.

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

Appendix 3

Screenshots of Tripadvisor Reviews: Respondent O and A (Submitted to Tripadvisor November 2018 and July 2019)



Duanne S
Atlanta, Georgia
37 10

Reviewed 23 November 2018

Beautiful but restrictive

Our trip to Bru Na Boinne was the first stop after a red eye flight from Boston...so we were VERY tired. We arrived by rental car about 30 minutes before they opened. I had pre-purchased tickets to New Grange only. There were about 30 people from a tour bus ahead of us. When we got in we decided to also purchase a ticket to Knowthe since our New Grange bus wasn't due to leave for an hour. Because this area is a UNESCO World Heritage site, therefore it is heavily protected. After purchasing our other ticket in the visitors center we walked for about 5 minutes down a very pretty path to a circle drive with waiting tour buses, got on our bus and after a 5 minute drive we were at the site. The bus left us behind and we were locked within a fenced enclosure. Knowthe is a beautiful sight with amazing Paleolithic carvings on the stones surrounding the mound. We were allowed to walk into the passage and stand on top of the mound. We spent about an hour at the site and then the bus came and took us back to the circle drive. We boarded another bus and after a 5 minute drive we arrived at New Grange. This is the larger of the two mounds we saw. It was very beautiful, but honestly I felt the tug of time at Knowthe. Maybe because it seemed less manicured...but it just felt serene. New Grange felt very sterile...although it was impressive. We were allowed within the passage tomb and then spent another 20 minutes walking around the mound. We spent about an hour there before the buses picked us up. The guides were very good and very knowledgeable, but after Knowthe the guide at New Grange basically gave us the same set of facts...so as we were exhausted we just dozed off on our feet during that bit. I definitely recommend this 5,000 year old piece of history, but maybe go well rested. After we got back to the visitors center we had a very good lunch. Weather-wise it was absolutely beautiful but being in the open it was very cold and quite windy.

Date of experience: October 2018



Ask Duanne S about Bru na Boinne

2 Thank Duanne S

This review is the subjective opinion of a Tripadvisor member and not of Tripadvisor LLC



WW_Traveller023
Sydney, Australia
721 184

Reviewed 22 July 2019

Fantastic ancient site

Boarded the bus and travelled to the site at 3:15, about a 10 minute trip. We got dropped off and entered through the gate and waited for our guide. He took us to the entrance and gave us a rundown and then we were split into 2 groups by the colour of our tour stickers, to enter the passage tomb, we were in the first group. It was fantastic, the entrance is through a truly impressive tunnel of rock that slopes upwards slightly and is narrow in places to the end. This 'end' is a larger area with a domed corbel roof made of huge sandstone slabs, The open area is like a cross, ahead is a small 'room' and there are 2 rooms off this to the right and left, they liken this to a 'cathedral' with a long nave and the altar ahead and the 2 transepts to the sides, this seems fanciful considering that this was built about 4,000 years ago, but it does describe the area inside well. On the winter's solstice the rising sun beams through the long corridor of rock and forms a narrow channel of light that hits the back room of the altar room, they have artificial lights set up to simulate this. - It was fantastic; I love these old structures and am fascinated by how and by whom they were built. After we left and the 2nd group entered, we were able to walk around the barrow and see how the place was built, a work of art as much as a pre-historic site.

Date of experience: September 2018



Ask WW_Traveller023 about Bru na Boinne

1 Thank WW_Traveller023

This review is the subjective opinion of a Tripadvisor member and not of Tripadvisor LLC