It is hard to get the balance right between making a large corpus of data available and leaving enough space to discuss the wider interpretive implications, and the task does not become easier when a book has been as eagerly anticipated as this one. But our hopes have not been disappointed. Jessica Smyth has produced an informative, thought-provoking and highly readable volume synthesising a vast amount of data on the Irish Neolithic. Contrary to the picture on the cover, this is not just a book about houses – although readers learn a lot about them as they go along – but also a critical reassessment of Irish Neolithic settlement evidence in general, taking in activities across the landscape and setting them into a framework informed by ethnographic and archaeological parallels and by a critical reading of research history.

The book begins with a short chapter charting changing approaches to Neolithic houses from the 20th century onwards and elucidating especially the tortuous relationship between British and Irish standpoints, with the former increasingly going for all-out mobility and the latter, in spite of their scepticism, never quite getting around to defining what they actually mean by ‘permanence’. Chapter 2 sets out ways in which ethnographic parallels (in this case mainly from Southeast Asia and historical Ireland) can help overcome this apparent contradiction. The focus is not on the social group inhabiting a house, but rather on its architectural elements, maintenance and temporality, and the way in which domestic structures blend sacred and profane concerns. This sets the scene for chapter 3, which describes Irish early Neolithic houses in detail, including amongst others their basic shape and size, variation in internal layout, clustering, landscape setting and so on. Particular attention is drawn to how short-lived this house horizon was (apparently at most 100 years between about 3700 and 3600 cal BC; so not present at the very start of the period if a beginning around 4000 cal BC is accepted). In spite of great variation in detail, Smyth recognizes a Neolithic template of what a house was supposed to look like. Chapter 4 then looks at the material culture associated with the buildings and draws out two recurring sets of activities: the digging and filling of features, with special emphasis on deliberate deposition, and burning of (parts of) houses, with an interesting parallel to the treatment of the human body.

The evidence from the middle and later Neolithic (together covering c. 3600–2500 cal BC), discussed in Chapter 5, is far flimsier, but it is interesting that activities which involves deposition and burning provide continuity where the architecture does not. Smyth also discusses the influence of the expanding Grooved Ware phenomenon and the shift in balance between ‘domestic’ and ‘communal/ceremonial’ architecture, although the two aspects remain connected. Chapter 6 then takes us into the wider landscape, dealing with the range of activities represented amongst others by field systems, flint scatters, cave occupations, cobbled surfaces, extraction sites, and most importantly pits. A key point Smyth makes here is that the activities carried out in these places are not categorically different from those at house sites. To understand inhabitation
more fully, we should place the kinds and intensities of activities centre-stage, rather than insisting on static categorizations regarding the ‘permanence’ of a site – a possible meeting ground between British and Irish ways of interpreting the Neolithic evidence. These ideas are more fully worked through for eastern Leinster in Chapter 7, where Smyth traces connections between pit scatters, monuments and houses in detail, showing how these components played off each other over time. These strands are summarised in Chapter 8, which stresses the importance of a holistic interpretation of houses and the need for research excavations to follow up specific questions. The appendices provide very useful lists of C14 dates and of known early Neolithic houses from Ireland, with a basic description and literature.

In short, there is a treasure trove of detail here, while the author’s main focus on connections between different kinds of site is a refreshing attempt to accord equal importance to all traces of Neolithic settlement activity, not just the showiest ones. This deserves to be more widely followed across the discipline. Nevertheless, I have two (smallish) quibbles. One is in the way the detail is presented. Often, there are long descriptive passages, with the wider point not apparent until later. These can be quite repetitive – for example, in Chapter 4 virtually the same instances of structured deposition are described twice, only that the second time around they are classified according to whether they are foundation or abandonment deposits. We certainly need to have this level of detail on house features and associated material culture, indeed this is what makes the volume such a useful work of reference. But I am simply left wondering whether the running text was the best place to present it. Perhaps expanding the tables in the appendix could have decluttered the main text, leaving more room to discuss, for example, the relative frequency of different construction techniques or kinds of deposits in greater detail, or for a more in-depth attempt at an inter-regional comparison.

Another shortcoming is with the way the Irish evidence is integrated with material from Europe. One of the stated aims of the study is to show the relevance of the Irish material to discussions of the European Neolithic as a whole, but this is not actually attempted in a structured way. European comparanda are quoted, but are treated mostly like a kind of ethnographic analogy: a nice bit of (largely decontextualised) detail to elucidate a particular point. There is no systematic attempt to address issues such as the tension between diversity and uniformity (which is a recurring research problem across Europe), the apparent contradiction between short-lived houses and the use of oak (and evidence for repair), no concerted criticism of the house society model and the way it is currently being applied to pretty much any society that built any form of domestic structure, and no comparison of the longer-term trends revealed for Ireland with patterns in other parts of Europe.

However, this only stands out because the European dimension was set as an explicit goal. In actual fact, Smyth has achieved quite enough without taking this final step and has fulfilled all her other promises: rescuing this fantastic set of data from the languishing obscurity of grey literature and getting away from the unhealthy twin obsessions of monument-centred and house-centred Neolithic archaeologies. What is particularly good to see is that a thorough knowledge of data here goes hand in hand with a keen eye for the wider relevance of the observed patterns. Smyth’s call to finally get away from ‘permanence’ as an either/or interpretive choice is well made, and as more houses (and structures) are coming to light in Britain, this book will provide a benchmark for what can be gained from a nuanced study of settlement in its entirety. As such, it is a key starting point for further driving the interpretive ‘rapprochement’ between scholars working on both islands. As far as Europe is concerned, Smyth will no doubt further develop the many interesting similarities she has noticed in due course – but this is indeed the subject for another volume. For now, this book will provide a wealth of detail for anyone studying the British and Irish Neolithic, and a mine of interesting ideas and interpretations even for those beyond the islands.
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