



**HAL**  
open science

## Irish and Breton megalithism

Gilles Boucherit

► **To cite this version:**

Gilles Boucherit. Irish and Breton megalithism. Bretagne / Irlande : quelles relations? = Brittany/Ireland: what relations?, Université de Bretagne Sud, Lorient (CRBC), Jun 2014, Lorient (An Oriant), France. pp.11-33. hal-01373330

**HAL Id: hal-01373330**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01373330v1>**

Submitted on 28 Sep 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Irish and Breton megalithism

Gilles Bucherit \*

On the Atlantic façade, megaliths are a characteristic of Brittany in general, especially of the Morbihan area, but they can also be found across the Channel, in Ireland and the other Celtic countries east of the Irish Sea, and at the southernmost part of the Atlantic façade, that is Portugal.

Research is in progress, but when confronted with unmovable and speechless artefacts, archaeologists may have a hard time finding an interpretation for some characteristic engravings. The history of religions can help interpret some of those artefacts, thanks to a few basic concepts on pre-Christian beliefs about the origin of life, involving deer and the role this animal might have had in our ancestors' mind, back in the Mesolithic but also in the Neolithic eras. Hopefully this animal, unnoticed until now by archaeologists, will find its due place in a world dominated by man, and will also help make things clearer between Irish and Breton megalithism. Their relationship has remained unclear in spite of Michael Herity's 1974 hypothesis<sup>1</sup> on the Breton origin of Irish passage tombs. This origin remains unchallenged in Alison Sheridan's

\* Bibliothécaire adjoint spécialisé, en charge du fonds « Bretagne et pays celtiques, Breizh ha broioù keltiek » de la bibliothèque de Rennes 2, membre associé du CRBC Rennes.

1. Herity, Michael, 1974, *Irish Passage Graves: neolithic tomb-builders in Ireland and Britain 2500 BC*. Dublin. According to him, passage grave builders arrived at the Boyne mouth around 2500 BC and Neolithic farmers at a conventional 3000 BC.

<sup>1 2</sup> *Bretagne/Islande : Quelles relations ?*

2003 contribution<sup>2</sup>, in which, however, the emergence of passage tombs is much older than previously thought.

Provided progress in archaeology makes it possible, this paper will first examine the likely origins of Breton megalithism, between Barnenez and the Morbihan. It will then examine the relationship between hunter-gatherers and agriculturists, their possible melting, their migration to Ireland around 4000 BC and, through a comparison with related cultures, some of them very far, the unexpected importance of deer in their mythologies and their rites. The paper will then focus on the figure of Anna, and suggest that she runs throughout the cultural layers that have succeeded one another in these two regions, Ireland and Brittany. This anthropomorphic Neolithic female figure, who probably replaced the zoomorphic Mesolithic one in Brittany, both of them anonymous, probably originates from Anatolia where the agriculturists came from as soon as the 7th millennium BC. She was probably given her name, Ana, by the Celts of the first or second Iron Age, at the time when their culture was dominant in the region. Of course, in Turkish Ana today means 'mother' but it is an Indo-European word. It will also be suggested that Irish Celtic sovereignty, applied to the land considered as a mother, must have been a new concept for these hunter-gatherers and agriculturists.

Eventually, the paper speculates that in these two regions, Ana may be viewed today as the syncretic symbol of the female figures of each successive people and civilizations.

## Morbihan

The words Megalithism and Neolithic are sometimes misused, especially in regions like Brittany where the two phenomena coincide. Both terms are sometimes used indifferently for the same period of time, although Megalithism is a cultural phenomenon which occurred in the course of the Neolithic era. In other words, the Neolithic era, which originated with agriculture in the Middle East around the 12<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, encompasses to a great extent, in terms of time and

2. SKERIDAN, Alison, 2003, '2. French Connections I: spreading the marmites thinly.' in Ian Armit, Eileen Murphy, Eiméar Nelis and Derek Simpson, eds., *Neolithic Settlement in Ireland and Western Britain*. Oxford, Belfast, 4.

~~G. BOUGHÉF~~ - *Irish and Breton megalithism...* 13

place, Megalithism, the origin of which lies in Brittany and Portugal at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium or so. [III. 1]

Megalithism is widely believed to have been born in the Gulf of Morbihan, maybe because of the world-renowned alignments in the Carnac area, among other famous places. Locmariaquer and Mane Vihan or the Petit Mont, for instance, are located at each end of the mouth of the Gulf of Morbihan, which means 'small sea' in Breton, where the isle of Gavrinis happens to be. However, radiocarbon dating places the earliest constructions in Barnenez, in the bay of Morlaix, on the northwest coast of Brittany, rather than in Morbihan, in 'around 4700-4500 BC [...]',<sup>3</sup> whereas 'the mounds in Morbihan were constructed around the period 4500 BC.'<sup>4</sup> [III. 2]

It is necessary to start from the beginning, by examining the Mesolithic era between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic, *i.e.* in roughly 9000-5000 BC, at Tévéc and Hoëdic, situated in the bay of Quiberon in Morbihan. These two islands could not be reached by foot at the time under consideration. Collective burial places have been found in 'Mesolithic shell middens in artificial mound-like structures, which contained also burial cists and hearths associated with them'.<sup>5</sup> This was before the beginning of the Neolithic period, which began in Western Europe when people starting from the Levant (Anatolia) around 7000 BC<sup>6</sup> reached the Atlantic coast, bringing with them agriculture. Until then, the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers would bury their dead in a flexed position and often ornament their graves with deer antlers in sometimes magnificent style, as in the case of the woman with child of grave J in Hoëdic, possibly as a tribute to her mythical status. 'Tévéc and Hoëdic also display elements which might be interpreted as nascent monumentality, as exemplified by the small tumuli erected over graves at Tévéc, or the stone stele of grave K at Hoëdic.'<sup>7</sup>

It must also be observed that in the majority of cases where controlled excavation of a long mound has been undertaken, the long mound has

3. CUNLIFFE, Barry, 2008, *Europe between the oceans*. Yale University Press, 163.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

5. *Id.*, p. 133.

6. MAZURIÉ de KEROUALIN, Karoline, 2003, *Genèse et diffusion de l'agriculture en Europe*. Paris: éditions errance, 5.

7. SCARRE, Chris, 2002, 'Contexts of Monumentalism: regional diversity at the Neolithic transition in north-west France', in: *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 21, no. 1, 30, 45.

14 *Bretagne/Islande : Quelles relations ?*

been found to be an addition to or later extension of an earlier funerary

structure of rectangular or more often circular plan.<sup>8</sup>

The idea put forward by scientists is that Morbihan monumentality might have roots in those Mesolithic hunter-gatherer burials. But the long mounds (*tertres funéraires*) belong in the second stage of monumental structures of the initial Neolithic phase;<sup>9</sup> the earliest class of monumental structures in Armorica are the menhirs, which appeared as early as 4600-4500 BC at Lannec er Gadouer<sup>10</sup> for instance:

[The long mounds] are found exclusively in the Morbihan, overlooking the Baie de Quiberon and therefore represent a distinctive regional development. It was in much the same area that the menhirs, many of them decorated, were also found.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the chronology of menhirs, it is worth mentioning this example taken at Saint-Just in South-Central Brittany:

[...] [concerning] menhirs and *tertres*, [...], the socket for the fallen menhir at La Croix-Saint-Pierre contained charcoal, yielding a date of 6070 ± 80 bp (5270-4740 BC) (Briard *et al.* 1995). The charcoal may pre-date the erection of the menhir, but the hearths associated with quartz menhirs 17, 18 and 19 in Le Moulin alignments at Saint-Just were also dated to the period 4940-4100 BC (Le Roux *et al.* 1989).<sup>12</sup>

The question now is to know how this initial Neolithic phase in the region of Morbihan developed.<sup>13</sup> In Portugal as in Brittany, shell middens were maritime places where the ancestors were interred. In the Morbihan region, the main phase of use covered the thousand years from 5500 to 4500 BC although the sites of Tévéc and Hoëdic continued to be used up to 4000 BC.<sup>14</sup>

There [in Portugal] the earliest Neolithic settlements (c. 5750-5250 BC) are found in the inland limestone massifs of the Estremadura, away from the principal Mesolithic population areas focused around the Tagus and Sado shell middens. It was only during a second stage (from 5250 BC) that

8. SCARRE, Chris, *Ibid.*, p. 49.

9. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 133.

10. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

11. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 162-163.

12. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

13. LE ROUX, Charles-Tanguy, 2001, *Carnac, Locmariaquer et Gavrinis*. Rennes: Ouest-France, 17.

14. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 130 and 160-161.

↳ ~~BOUCHÉFFÉ~~ - *Irish and Breton megalithism...* 15

Neolithic communities expanded beyond the Estremadura (and comparable early settlement nuclei) and absorbed or replaced the indigenous Mesolithic groups.<sup>15</sup>

By comparison with Brittany:

à la pointe de Kerpenhir, au sud de la presqu'île, l'étude d'une 'tourbière littorale' aujourd'hui submergée a révélé que, dès la fin du VI<sup>e</sup> millénaire av. J.-C., la région avait été vigoureusement défrichée et mise en culture ; c'est à ce jour le plus ancien témoignage de néolithisation reconnu en Bretagne.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the careful examination of lithic material contributes to dismiss the possibility of an extension of Neolithic culture along the northwest Atlantic coast round the Iberian peninsula.<sup>17</sup> The chronological argument, however, may not weigh in favour of Brittany: dates of around 4500 BC for passage graves in the valley of the Gardiana suggest a broad contemporaneity with developments in Brittany.<sup>18</sup>

Among the different theories put forward, the acculturation of indigenous Mesolithic communities through contacts with the south [in Brittany] offers a much more persuasive model than the arrival of pioneer farming communities to explain the transition to

the Neolithic.<sup>19</sup>

The coast of Vendée is also occupied by populations which bring with them the new neolithic techniques, may-be as early as 5.300 BC. Very soon, some tools are adapted by Mesolithic groups of the Pays-de-la-Loire and Brittany, who still keep their traditional techniques.<sup>20</sup>

The various traces of megalithic burial rites along the Atlantic coast reflect the different patterns of interaction between indigenous belief systems and new ideas reaching the area as part of the Neolithic package. In Brittany,

15. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

16. LE ROUX, Charles-Tanguy, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

17. MARCHAND, Grégor, 2001, 'Carvalho A.F. (1998) Talhe da pedra no Neolítico antigo do Maciço calcário das serras d'Aire e Candeeiros (Estramadutra portuguesa)' in: *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française*, t. 98, no. 1, 144.

18. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 40; CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

19. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

20. MARCHAND, Grégor, 2001, 'Il y a 7000 ans les derniers chasseurs cueilleurs en Bretagne', in: *Penn ar Bed*, no. 182, 36.

#### 16 *Bretagne/Irlande : Quelles relations ?*

After a fifth-millennium phase of long mounds and menhirs, the menhirs (or at least some of them) were pulled down and incorporated into an entirely new form of burial monument – the passage grave.<sup>21</sup>

For instance, at the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, the original earthen mound known as Mane Vihan dating from the midfifth millennium with a stele at one end was partially overlain by a stone-built cairn.

Surprisingly, this new burial system with menhirs and long mounds may date back to the Mesolithic period, since a small standing stone has been erected in front of one of the burial sites at Hoëdic. Moreover, it has been shown that the cists found inside those monuments were 'often set within small circular mounds'.<sup>22</sup> What can be seen at those sites may reveal a continuity of ritual use.<sup>23</sup> In Morbihan, the original system was replaced by another one with stone passage graves. With this new burial system, some menhirs or steles in the open air, possibly related to fertility of the land, had to be placed underground.

#### **Barnenez**

Cairn Barnenez is situated in the bay of Morlaix and it has been found that '[...] chambers F (4720-4040 BC) and G (4940-4330 BC) are several centuries older than the outer sections of their passages. [...] These outer passages also incorporate reused slabs in their construction, some or all of which may originally have been free-standing menhirs'.<sup>24</sup> [III. 3]

The clearest case, however, is provided by the outer capstone of passage J, which bears on its lower surface a carved motif sometimes interpreted as a head with long flowing hair. Thus the enlargement of Barnenez involved the demolition and reutilization of a series of free-standing menhirs or stone settings.<sup>25</sup>

In Barnenez, the reuse of free-standing menhirs in passage graves is thought to have happened at the beginning of the fifth millennium. It also happened in Morbihan, but several centuries later. Furthermore, it is known that 'if final Mesolithic sites are absent from the coastal

21. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

24. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

25. *Id.*, p. 39.

fringe, it was equally found that earlier Neolithic sites were absent from the interior',<sup>26</sup> as if Neolithic and Mesolithic populations had lived a separate yet contemporary life for a while.

The length of time elapsing between the erection of the freestanding menhirs, their bringing down and eventual incorporation into passage graves is not known. It is very likely that the same process also occurred in Morbihan, probably for the same reasons, since the same stele called sometimes 'déesse-mère' ended up underground. Moreover, some features of an anthropomorphic stele similar to those found on reused slabs in Barnenez have been found in Larmor-Baden and the Moustoir, near Carnac.

The idea of a so-called mother goddess in each civilisation, Mesolithic and Neolithic, is not in question.

The way she appears 'as a head with long flowing hair' does not seem to be in question either, but rather the place where she is located, that is above or under ground in a grave.

But is the very concept of a goddess relevant in the fifth millennium BC?

[...] We might [...] assign a notional date of about 4500 BC as the earliest probable time for the culture reconstructed from the inherited vocabulary of the Indo-European languages. [...] a terminal date for the Proto-Indo-Europeans would be set not much later than 2500 BC, possibly somewhat earlier. In the broadest terms then, the Proto-Indo-Europeans were a Late Neolithic or Eneolithic society which began to diverge about 4500 to 2500 BC.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the 'sky-god' idea was born among Proto-Indo-European breeders, around the middle of the fourth millennium BC. The word for 'god' is attested in the third millennium, in Indo-European, on the Pontic-Caspian steppe, and the Celtic word is derived from it:

**'Dagdae** from *dag* - "good" and *dia* "god" :

- **dia** m. "god"
- **dia** m. "day", from \**diyēs*, accusative \**diyem*, as in Latin *diēs*, *diem*.

26. SCARRE, Chris, *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

27. MALLORY, James Patrick, 1989, *In search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology, and Myth*. London: Thames & Hudson, 127.

28. DEXTER, Miriam Robbin, 1990, *Whence the goddesses*. New York, Oxford, Beijing, 51.

#### 18 Bretagne/Irlande : Quelles relations ?

The name for day in Celtic comes obviously from the Indo-European name for the day sky and the day god [...]. D-65'<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, how can a concept that did not exist at that time be used today for Mesolithic or Neolithic Western Europe? 'Great mother' for instance would be a more relevant terminology.

In summary, hunter-gatherers lived in a world of spirits. Agriculturists, who are food-producing people, probably mark the mythological transition from spirits to divinities. The Celts of the Iron Age had their gods and goddesses, so did the Tuatha Dé Danann with Dagda and Brigit, for instance.

As far as agriculturists are concerned, it is not surprising that they should locate the source of life underground – as this is where life that makes vegetation grow comes from and where dead people are buried – and think of earth as a mother. But why should hunter-gatherers locate the origin of life underground since they are indebted to animals living

above ground for everyday life? And at the time of departure, their souls are supposed to escape to the otherworld sometimes in the company of an animal like a deer, for instance, called psychopomp by specialists, as can be seen in Tévéc and Hoëdic. And even though the soul of their seer(esse)s is supposed to go in the upper, or even in the lower world, they don't go underground.

Many other Mesolithic people of Western Europe are known to have used deer artefacts reminiscent of those found in Tévéc and Hoëdic. In Star Carr (around 8700 and 8460 B.C.) on the coast of North Yorkshire, findings:

[They] include a large number of antler spear heads barbed along a single edge [...] as well as 'mattock heads' manufactured from elk antler, [...] and a series of red deer antler 'frontlets' which may have served either as hunting disguises or as head-dresses in some ceremonial activity.<sup>1</sup>

The Evenki from Siberia can help us understand Star Carr deer artefacts thanks to their hunting rites.

These people, formerly known as Tungus, are living in the Taiga from the river Ob'Irtysh in the west, [to] the Okhotsk seacoast and Sakhalin in the

29. LAMBERT, Pierre-Yves, ed., 1966, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien de J. Vendryes, Lettre D*, CNRS ed. Translated and abridged by the author.

G. BOUCHÉFFET - *Fish and Breton megalithism...* 19

east, [and] the river Upper Tunguska (Angara), [the] Lake Baikal and the river Amur in the south<sup>2</sup>.

Ethnically they belong to the Baikal or Paleo-Siberian group, close enough to the Mongols. In the north they speak Tunguso-Manchourian languages. They are hunters and breed reindeer in the enormous territory from the Yenisei to the Okhotsk Sea. They mainly hunt equidae, for meat and fur. They also fish and raise horses and cattle in the south.

'The Evenk religion is of historical interest since it retains some extremely early archaic forms of belief. [...] Among the most ancient ideas are spiritualization of all natural phenomena, personification of them, belief in an upper and lower world, belief in the soul (*omi*) and certain totemistic concepts. Later on these rituals were conducted by the shamans.'<sup>30</sup>

The very word 'shaman' originated among these people.

These deer artefacts were used for very important ritual ceremonies:

'And in the course of their *shingkelevun* ritual (arranged by the Evenkis before a hunt in order to ensure success)':<sup>31</sup>

Evenki hunters, [...], wore ritual costumes, with caps made from the skulls of reindeer or elks, imitating the heads of these animals.<sup>32</sup> The hunters performed a pantomime dance, portraying the characteristic movements of the animals, and accompanied it with an improvised song addressed to the beasts.<sup>33</sup>

For example:

They appeal to [...] the guardian and defender of the clan, saying : 'Grandmother *bugady*, intercede, help!' They entreat her, as the mistress of the taiga and animals : 'Grandmother *bugady*, give us animals, send us a catch!<sup>34</sup> [...] She appears as a zoomorphic being, merging completely with the image of an elk cow or a doe of a wild deer.<sup>35</sup>

30. VASILE VICH, G.M., and A.V. SMOLY AK, 1956, 'The Evenks', in LEVIN, M. G. and L. P. POTAPOV, eds., 1964, *Narody Sibiri (The Peoples of Siberia)*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 620-647.

31. ANISIMOV, Arkadiy Fedorovich, 'Cosmological concepts of the peoples of the North', in: Michal Henry N, ed, 1963, *Studies in Siberian shamanism*. Toronto, 176.

32. OKLADNIKOV, Alexey Pavlovich, 1970, *Yakutia*, Arctic Institute of North America, 97.

1 RENFREW, Colin, 1974, *British prehistory : a new outline*. London : Duckworth, 85

2 See following note

33. *Id.*

34. ANISIMOV, Arkadiy Fedorovich, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

35. *Id.*

20 *Bretagne/Islande : Quelles relations ?*

At this point one should also make reference to the tribes situated on the other side of the Bering Strait, since this Evenki pantomime dance bears similarities with the ‘dancing’ of the Blackfoot decoy runner<sup>36</sup> ‘[to whom] spiritual forces are believed to be transmitted during the bison drive ritual from the medicine woman [...], and in turn to the bison.’<sup>37</sup> The Blackfoot’s name in the vernacular is *Niitsítapi* meaning ‘the original people’.<sup>38</sup> They live in the Great Plains as far north as Canada, they hunt bison and have the reputation of being good warriors. Both these American and Siberian tribes obtain their food through the mediation of a woman representing the protective spirit of the clan.

Perhaps this grandmother is not very different from her possible heiress with a child in grave J at Hoëdic, in a flexed position, ornamented with deer antlers, who has already mentioned. Therefore ‘the head with flowing hair’ in Barnenez on the menhir formerly raised to the sky could well have been sculpted by hunting-gathering tribes of the end of the Mesolithic era, in so far as it is a female head. But the fact that this head is anthropomorphic is in contradistinction with the Mesolithic populations, who use zoomorphic symbolism in their graves. It may be evidence of the influence of agriculturists with their anthropomorphic sculptures. *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture*,<sup>39</sup> the title of a book authored by Jacques Cauvin, makes it possible to grasp the nature of the evolution from hunting to digging in the course of which spirits made way for divinities. The difficulty with those feminine skulls from the 10<sup>th</sup> millennium in the Levant is that they are hairless. Thus one can logically opt for syncretism in Barnenez, as a provisional solution. The same can be said for cosmology when one examines the Evenk myth of the Cosmic Hunt:

36. ‘A young man disguised with buffalo horns and robe to decoy the herd’ and lure it where it should go. Buffalo hunting on the Northern Plains’ [<http://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/889>], p. 1 out of 4, 15/6/2014.

37. KEHOE, Thomas F., ‘Subsistence and beyond in Upper Palaeolithic bison economy’, in BRUGAL, Jean-Philip, DAVID, Francine and James G. ENLOE [*et al.*], 1999, ‘Le bison: gibier et moyen de subsistance des Hommes du paléolithique aux Paléoindiens des Grandes Plaines’, *Actes du colloque international, Toulouse 6-10 juin 1995*, Antibes: éd. ADPCA, 257.

38. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confédération\\_des\\_Pieds-Noirs](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confédération_des_Pieds-Noirs). -(page consultée en avril 2014)

39. CAUVIN, Jacques, *Naissance des divinités, naissance de l’agriculture*. Translated by Trevor Watkins, Cambridge, 2000.

G. BOUGHÉRET - *Irish and Breton megalithism... 21*

In this connection, of particular interest are the Evenk concepts of the cosmic elk Kheglen (Kheglun), which are identified with the constellation of the Great Bear. Conforming with these concepts, the visible sky is nothing else but the taiga of the upper world. Within it lives the cosmic elk Kheglen. During the day the elk goes into the thickets of the heavenly taiga, and therefore is not visible from the land of people. At night he comes out onto the mountain peaks, and being the most powerful of the dwellers (stars) in heaven, may be seen by people from the earth. Judging by the fact that the constellation Little bear is considered in these concepts as Kheglen’s calf, we may conclude that the cosmic image of the elk is understood at the same time as that of a ‘mother-elk’.<sup>40</sup>

But the agriculturists also depend on the sky, that is the weather, for



their food:

The belief system manifest in the construction of the passage grave developed in the Atlantic zone, in Iberia and Brittany, in the first half of the fifth millennium. It embodied a complex cosmology that required some of the tombs to be set out so as to 'capture' the setting or rising sun on the midwinter or midsummer solstice. As part of this cosmology, linear and circular settings of standing stones were erected, the former most spectacularly in the Carnac region, and an intricate art developed involving the 'carving' and painting of the surfaces of the standing stones.<sup>41</sup>

Is it possible that a whole mythology might give sense to these megalithic representations on earth, involving for instance 'ar Wrac'h, Kornandon(ez)' and so on? The etymology 'Korr an andon', *i.e.* 'dwarf of the source' would fit our purpose well indeed. Barry Cunliffe thinks that:

Contact by sea [on the Atlantic façade] must have been maintained over a period of time and in all probability these disparate regions remained in contact on a continuous basis. [...]. From the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, the concept of collective burial in megalithic tombs and the associated belief systems spread eastwards, deeper into Europe. [...]. By the mid-third millennium the Atlantic zone of Europe had become linked by corridors of communication by sea and by way of the great rivers. [...] The various cultures of western Europe were now beginning to share many things.<sup>42</sup>

40. MICHAEL, Henry N., *Op. cit.* p. 161-162.

41. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 166-167.

## Ireland

Let us now move on to the first place the hunters-gatherers-agriculturists moved in with their passage graves, that is Ireland.

'There may well be a north-west French (specifically Breton) involvement in the appearance of the passage tomb tradition in Ireland and along Britain's Atlantic façade'.<sup>43</sup> Here is the way Irish megalithism probably began around 4000 BC: 'at this time there seem to have been long-distance contacts between centres of power, linking Orkney with the Boyne Valley, and the Boyne valley with Brittany and Spain. Some of these movements appear as diaspora-like spreads up the Atlantic façade'.<sup>44</sup>

'It may have been in this way that the foragers of southwestern Ireland, living on the remote tip of the Dingle peninsula

**[III. 4]**, were able to acquire cattle and a polished stone axe around 4100 BC.<sup>45</sup> 'In Ireland, [...] a series of such monuments, boulder-built, apparently without cairns, and with kerbs less than 25 m. in diameter, are to be found on and near the coast around the north and west, from Co. Down to Co. Mayo' **[III. 5]**.<sup>46</sup> This is true also for the megalithic tomb at Achnacreebeag **[III. 6]** situated on the west coast of Scotland:

The Achnacreebeag monument may well have been constructed by an immigrant community (or descendants thereof) from [southern Brittany around 4000 BC]. [...] The tomb type stands at the head of long and complex developmental sequences within Scotland; [...] similarly simple monuments [...] can be recognized elsewhere along the Atlantic coast of Britain and around the coast in the northern half of Ireland. These monuments

constitute the beginning of the passage tomb tradition in these areas.<sup>47</sup>

It is now necessary to have a look at the reasons why around 4000 BC there appeared 'the concept of collective burial in megalithic tombs and the associated belief systems'. First of all, it can be said that:

‘These tombs do indeed lie at the beginning of the Irish passage tomb

43. SHERIDAN, Alison, ‘French Connections I: spreading the marmites thinly’, in: *Neolithic Settlement in Ireland and Western Britain*, *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

45. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

46. SHERIDAN, Alison, *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

47. *Id.* Note that Michael Herity’s explanation (*Irish passage graves*. Dublin, 1974) is now obsolescent. He made passage grave builders (Neolithic B) arrive at the Boyne mouth around 2500 BC and Neolithic farmers (Neolithic A) at a conventional 3000 BC.

G. BOUCHÉFFERT - *Irish and Breton megalithism...* 23

sequence’.<sup>48</sup> And as has been seen, some archaeologists ‘briefly argue that the change which took place, between 4300 and 3900 BC, [...] marks a fundamental shift in ideology, [...]’:<sup>49</sup>

the ‘passage tombs, with their womb-like design and their new imagery emphasizing female referents, are seen as an expression of this new ideology. Its ascendancy over the older, male-oriented order is reflected in the deliberate destruction of some of the stelae and their physical incorporation within some passage tombs.’<sup>50</sup>

This explanation leaves no room for syncretism. It could well be that both civilisations, Mesolithic and Neolithic, were female oriented but obviously not in the same manner. It should not be forgotten that in Ireland, elk and roe deer as well as red deer were absent or extremely rare during the first half of the Irish Holocene (around 11,000 years ago). Red deer were reintroduced in Ireland at the beginning of the Irish Neolithic, and also into the Orkneys as on the tiny Holm of Papa Westray North for instance, during the final stages of the Orcadian Neolithic. ‘The significance of their introduction may be as much to do with ritual as economic reasons.’<sup>51</sup> It is known that ‘when neolithic man first came to Orkney, around 4000-3500 BC, it was a virgin territory’.<sup>52</sup> But is it possible to imagine agriculturists with a deer totem? Or can it be that former hunter-gatherers worshipping ancestors turned agriculturists, for instance, or lived side by side with them? Or else, a kind of mixed population? This does not mean that sporadic clashes are excluded, of course. This female-oriented way of seeing things seems better adapted to the future situation with its different newcomers seeking for roots, as can be shown.

**Ana**

Let’s jump a few centuries forward now. The Celts of the first or second Iron Age, otherwise called Warrior Celts, have conquered

48. *Id.*

49. SHERIDAN, Alison, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

50. WOODMAN, Peter, and Margaret McCARTHY, 2005, ‘Contemplating some awful(ly interesting) vistas: importing cattle and red deer into prehistoric Ireland’, in: Armit, Ian, Murphy, Eileen, Nelis, Eiméar and Derek Simpson, eds, 2003, *Neolithic Settlement in Ireland and Western Britain*. Oxford, Belfast, 36.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

52. HEDGES, John W., 1984, *Tomb of the eagles*. London, 155, 201-203, 205.

24 *Bretagne/Irlande : Quelles relations ?*

the island and the peninsula. They have settled where the former inhabitants lived, used their monuments, as narrated in sagas like the *Battle of Maige Tuired* (plain of the pillars), and eventually superseded the old mythology with their own. ‘Ar Wrac’h’ for instance in Brittany, is associated to monumentality. ‘Graniol’, otherwise known as Grah Niol,

the name of a massive stone shaped and decorated in a passage grave in Arzon on the Rhuys peninsula in Morbihan, is interpreted as ‘Gwrac’h an Heol’, which makes one think of the ‘Cailleach’ in Ireland, even perhaps of the Old Woman of Beare.

The last sheaf of grain was often called the hag or Cailleach of the harvest, and was passed to those who had not yet finished their reaping.<sup>53</sup>

This is an agricultural context. But this female spirit puts on an impressive range of different representations depending on the cultural layer wherein she happens to be, starting from the Mesolithic to the Irish Celts of the Middle Ages:

Cailleach Bhéarach, [...] is primarily a nature and wilderness goddess here, inimical guardian of the fertility of the vegetable world (as in so many other texts of the animal kingdom too.) She stands in the relationship to the hero of the Divine Hag of War and Death.<sup>54</sup>

Symbolically, she covers three realms: wilderness, vegetation and war, corresponding possibly to the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Celtic eras or civilisation. It is noticeable that people in both countries seem to think of a female origin of things, at least before christianisation.

However, one should not overlook the fact that: ‘The Proto-Indo-Europeans, [...], were a martial, semi-nomadic folk, [...]. Most of the goddesses worshipped by historical-era Indo-European cultures [...] owe their origins to Neolithic Europe and to the near east [...].’<sup>55</sup> One example should be enough to show it:

In Hittite [...], which is the oldest written Indo-European language, the goddess *HannaHanna* meaning *ancestress* became ‘*anna*’ for ‘mother’,<sup>56</sup> The

53. Mac LEOD, Sharon Paice, 2012, *Celtic myth and religion*. London, 172.

54. Ó CRUALAOICH, Gearóid, 1988, ‘Continuity and adaptation in legends of Cailleach Bhéarra’, in: *Béaloideas*, Vol. 56, 176.

55. DEXTER, Miriam Robbin, *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

56. BENVENISTE, Émile, 1973, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 6.

Hittite therefore gives us the best way to explain Anna (or Ana<sup>57</sup>)’s Celtic origin till now.<sup>58</sup>

Killarney, Co. Kerry is in Munster where lie ‘Dá Chích Anann’, the two fabulous hills: ‘There is a stream running between the hills. One half flows north into a small lake called Lough Nageeha and the other half flows south into the Clydagh River.’<sup>59</sup> Most of the time the presence of water is overlooked. However, from a farmer arriving in a new country, the presence of water is essential. All the animals, sheep, cattle and goats that the Neolithic people brought with them produce milk. As a result, water can be associated with the land and with the milk the farmers get from their cattle, living from the land as if it were a mother. In Armorica, the bond between water, milk and the land is clearly evidenced around Carhaix, for instance in the Menez Are, or Aré Mountains:

There was neither a mother nor a nurse throughout the country who didn’t think they had to go [to the Frou chapel] once a year to invoke or to thank the ‘Milk Virgin’ known as the ‘Sources Mother’. Sources spring from everywhere in the small stony and sunken way which goes down to the oratory. Their water would come in mains to fill a round basin dug in the holy enclosure. [...] It was the nurses’ duty to clear and clean the water basin and then to throw needles in it from their blouse as a gift, and recite this short prayer:

*Lady of the Frou, mother and Virgin  
Good health to the child, and to us milk!*<sup>60</sup>

Commana, in the Aré Mountains, is a good example of this possible complex. The Neolithic grave ‘Ti lia ven’<sup>61</sup> in Mougev Vihan dates back from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>62</sup> It was built close to the source of a watercourse – the Mougau – which flows into the Elorn and to the sea.

57. MURPHY, Gerard, [1941], 1953, ‘The book of the lays of Fionn’, in: *Duanaire Finn*, part III. Dublin: Irish Texts Society, Vol. XLIII, 210.

58. BOUCHERIT, Gilles, 2013, Ana/\*Danu, Between Siberia and Anatolia?, Trier, à paraître.

59. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paps\\_of\\_Anú](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paps_of_Anú), (page consultée en avril 2014)

60. ‘Itrôn ar Frou, mamm ha gwerc’hès, / Yéched d’ar buguel ha d’emp les!’ AR BRAZ, Anatole, 1994, ‘Les saints Bretons d’après la tradition populaire en Cornouaille (1893-1894)’, in: *Magies de la Bretagne*, Paris, 934.

61. LE GOFFIC, Michel, 1984, *Commana et les monts d’Arrée*. Rennes: Ouest-France, 7; HEMON, Roparz, liae’h f. pierre plate, mégalithe. (p. 1773), liae’hven f. pierre plate, mégalithe. (p. 1774) in *Geriadur istorel ar brezhoneg. Levrenn III*, 1995-1998.

62. L’HELGOUARCH, Jean, <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commana> (page consultée en mars 2013).

#### 26 Bretagne/Irlande : Quelles relations ?

The northern pillar of the passage grave<sup>63</sup> has the (double) breasts of a Mother-Goddess or ‘stele idol’ as it is called by archaeologists. The name Commana is thought to originate from Komm, which means ‘valley’, which suits well ‘the high place of the village between two nascent hills’,<sup>64</sup> and An(n)a.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, Anatolia is the original place of the agriculturists mentioned earlier. The worship of a stele idol buried underground which can be observed in Western Europe is certainly very different from what it was in the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium when these people left for the Balkan peninsula. The Hittite Anna – Ana in contemporary Turkish –, meaning mother, should not be put in relation with this worship in so far as there are no blood ties between them. This Indo-European name came to Anatolia with the Hittite people, long after the agriculturists had left. The Celts, as for them, probably brought this name with them and spread it in Europe where it might have replaced former names which nobody has any idea of, yet hopefully in continuity with the symbolism of their former mythology. It must be emphasized that cauldrons, which are an important element in the Celtic mythological way of life, can be found in Ireland as early as the Late Bronze Age, *i.e.* between 1200-1000 BC. Indeed the Galatians went to Anatolia, but this was only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

Finally, it might be interesting to mention a series of deeds that suit well the female spirit, the name of whom differs in each one of the numerous cultures she has been through: she dropped cairns onto hills in Meath<sup>66</sup> out of her apron, was responsible for moving islands in west Kerry, built mountains from rocks carried in her creel in Scotland, and

63. VALLÉE, François, 1980, *Grand dictionnaire français-breton*, Gronwel. [Passage grave = Mougev in Breton = Allée-couverte : hent-korriganed, h.-kor(n)andoned m. pl. héñchoù-, mougeo f.-pl. -gevioù], voir fée ; p. 19.

64. TANGUY, Bernard, 1990, *Dictionnaire de noms de communes, trèves et paroisses du Finistère*, Douarnenez: Armen, 56.

65. Or even Mana according to Joseph Loth. But from Mana you are directed to An(n)a. It is only a matter of tonic stress. (‘Les noms des saints Bretons’, in *Revue Celtique*, 1908-1909, XXIX, XXX, quoted by LARGILLIÈRE, René, 1995, in *Les saints et l’organisation chrétienne primitive dans l’Armorique bretonne*, Crozon, 29.)

66. The archaeological complex of Brú na Bóinne is 5,000 years old and includes the burial sites of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, in the northeast of the county. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County\\_Meath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_Meath) (page consultée en avril 2014).

was queen of the Limerick fairies.<sup>67</sup> Wouldn't she be at home in Brittany as well with a little imagination, among the alignments in Carnac for instance?

This other example shows that she has been acculturated several times:

In that 'old time', the time before history and at the dawn of human existence, when culture and memory first come into play, a hag, we are told, a *cailleach* – with the implicit connotations of the divine, ancestral otherworld female elder – lived in County Kerry; in a valley called Gleann na mBiorach. Gleann na mBiorach means the Valley of the Horned Herds, herds of animals such as cattle and deer with whom the figure of the cailleach/hag is associated in Gaelic tradition, in both Ireland and Scotland.<sup>68</sup>

One can wonder the extent to which the name Cornely, quite widespread in the Carnac region, and related to horned animals such as deer or oxen, might have something to do somehow with the Gleann na mBiorach?

### Conclusion

It is a well-known fact that the Neolithic package did not reach Brittany from Portugal along the Atlantic coast, and that agriculture arrived through contact with pioneers south of the Loire rather than by colonists. In addition to that, this paper has argued that the origin of menhirs is grounded in a small standing stone in a Mesolithic tomb at Hoëdic.<sup>69</sup> However, nothing has been said about the origin of the agriculturists on the coast of the bay of Morlaix. Why not suggest that they came by sea, since they stayed on the coastal fringe in the beginning?

The study can be summarized as follows: free-standing menhirs in Barnenez, some of them decorated, were incorporated into passage chambers inside an elongated cairn, under what used to be a tumulus. Similar anthropomorphic features have been found in Larmor-Baden in the Morbihan area, where free-standing steles were found in the openair. The idea of free-standing stones may have originated among the

67. MURPHY, Gerard, 1953, 'The lament of the old woman of Beare', in: *Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 55, 84.

68. Ó CRUALAOICH, Gearóid, 'Non-sovereignty Queen aspects of the Otherworld Female', in: *Irish Hag Legends: the case of the Cailleach Bhéarra*, in *Béaloides*, Iml. 62-3, 1994-5.

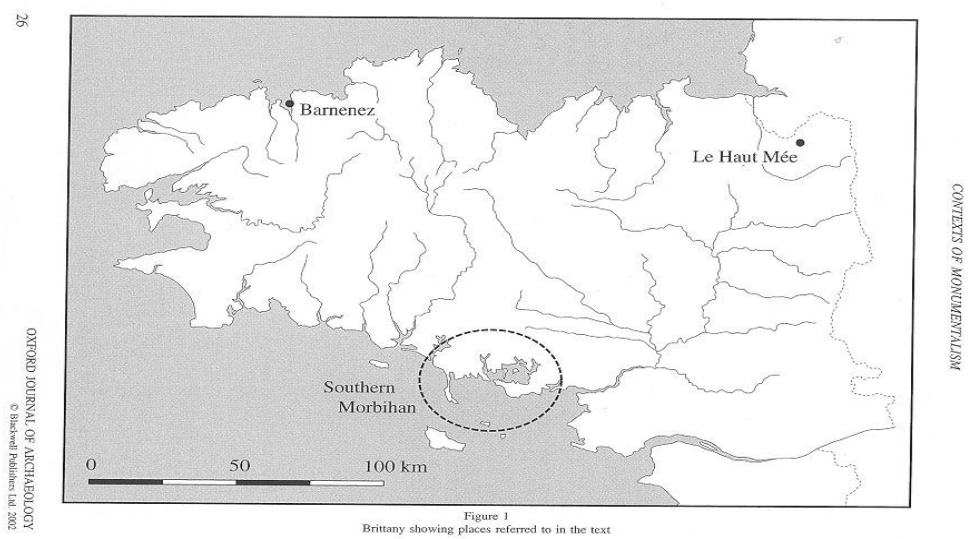
69. CUNLIFFE, Barry, *Op. cit.*, p. 133.

Mesolithic population, although the archaeological evidence, compared with Tévéc and Hoëdic, is lacking in Barnenez, for the time being. The fact that the 4500-4000 shift to passage graves in Morbihan came from the bay of Morlaix is now widely adhered to but the reason why it occurred is still up for debate. If tribal hunter-gatherers were as female-oriented as the agriculturists with their culture coming ultimately from the Levant, syncretism is a possible option, especially when considering the introduction of deer in Ireland and in the Orkneys for 'ritual as [well as] economic reasons'.

Later on, the Celts of the first or second Iron Age adapted their myths to this Megalithic civilisation that was already extinct at the very end of the Neolithic era.<sup>70</sup> Ana is a good example of syncretism between Hunter-gatherers/agriculturists and Celtic warriors,<sup>71</sup> since in Ireland her name is applied at least to one Neolithic site which symbolizes a kind of Celtic Sovereignty. Her name can also be found in Brittany in Keranna or Commana for example, as if this Celtic female

name were applied to a female spirit at the root of everything that made her way successfully throughout a non exclusively male-oriented Celtic civilisation.

- 70. Around 2000 BC with the arrival of the first Indo-European people called 'Bell Beakers'.
- 71. The Irish Celts may have come as early as the Late Bronze Age. See KOCH, John Thomas, 2007, *An atlas for Celtic studies*. Oxford, 136; CUNLIFFE, Barry, 2001, *Facing the ocean*. Oxford, 284.



[III. 1] Chris SCARRE. Contexts of monumentalism, 2002.

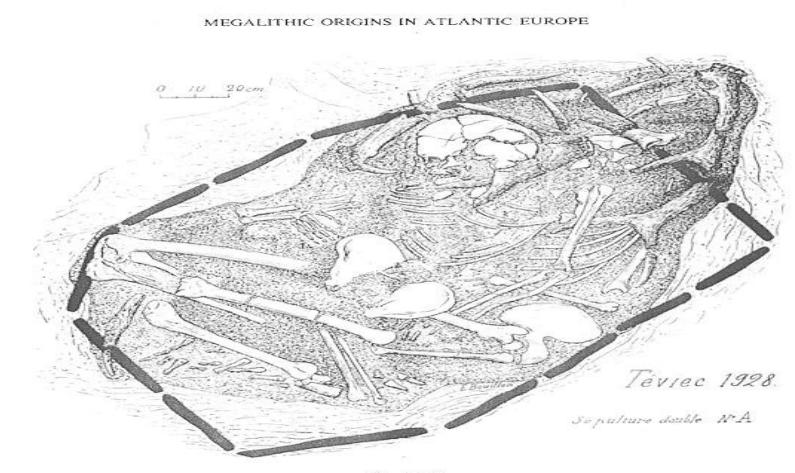


Figure 10  
Tévéc (Morbihan, France): grave A with surround of upright slabs enclosing double burial equipped with antler head-rest. (After Péquart et al. 1937)

[III. 2] Chris SCARRE, Megalithic origins in Atlantic Europe, 1992.

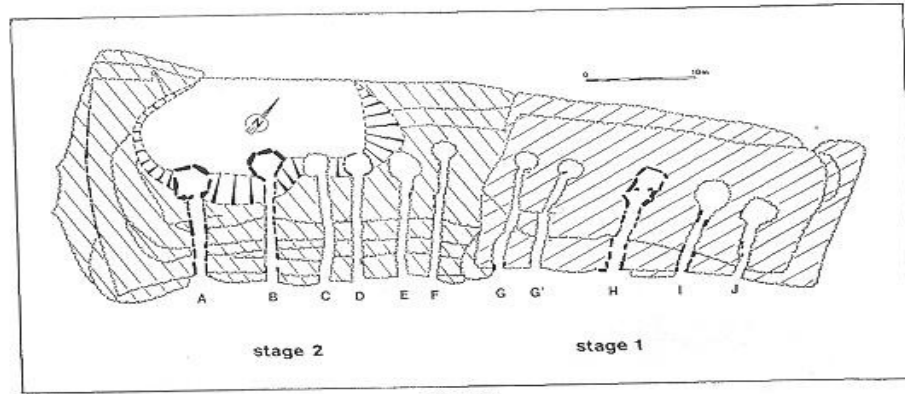


Figure 9  
The multi-chambered cairn of Barnenez (Finistère, France), showing initial monument (chambers G–J) and western extension (chambers A–F). (After Giot 1987)

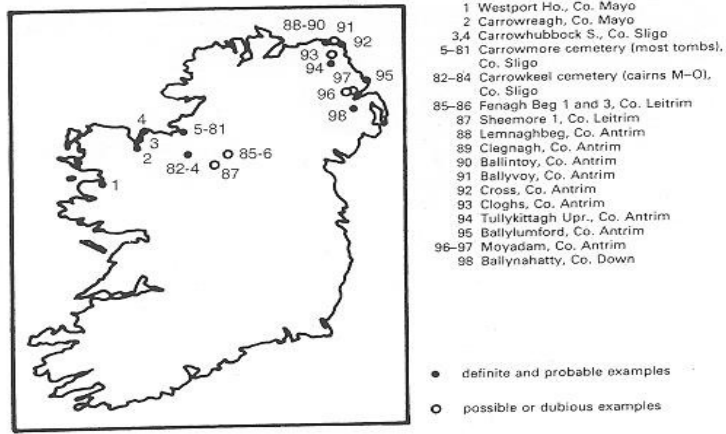
144

OXFORD JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY

[III. 3] Chris SCARRE, *Megalithic origins in Atlantic Europe*, 1992.



[III. 4] Peter WOODMAN and Margaret McCARTHY. *Contemplating some awful(ly interesting) vistas : importing cattle and red deer into prehistoric Ireland*, p. 35. 2004.



[III. 5] Alison SHERIDAN. 2. French Connections I : spreading the *marmites* thinly, p.13. 2004.

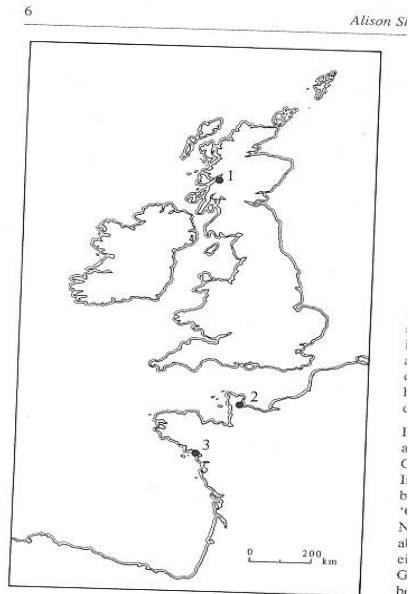


Figure 2.1 – Location of: 1. Achnacreebeag; 2. Vierville; 3. the Morbihan area.

[III. 6] Alison SHERIDAN. 2. French Connections I : spreading the *marmites* thinly. 2004.