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The Concept of Monumentality in the Research into Neolithic Megaliths in Western France

Luc Laporte

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Author's address:
Luc Laporte, DR CNRS, UMR 6566 - Univ. Rennes
luc.laporte@univ-rennes1.fr

www.j-n-a.org

Abstract

This paper focuses on reviewing the monumentality associated with Neolithic megaliths in western France, in all its diversity. This region cannot claim to encompass the most megaliths in Europe, but it is, on the other hand, one of the rare regions where megaliths were built recurrently for nearly three millennia, by very different human groups. We will first of all define the terms of the debate by explaining what we mean by the words monuments and megaliths and what they imply for the corresponding past societies in terms of materiality, conception of space, time and rhythms. The notion of the architectural project is central to this debate and it will be presented for each stage of this very long sequence. This will then lead to a discussion of the modes of human action on materials and the shared choices of certain past societies, which sometimes inspire us to group very different structures under the same label.

For nearly 60 years, archaeologists in Europe have attempted to define the characteristics of each megalith-building human group, in terms of material cultures, funerary practices, symbolic representations and other remains of daily life. This was part of the opposition to the excesses of unbridled diffusionism or hasty functionalist comparisons, for example. With the radiocarbon revolution, new chronologies have been established and regional studies have proliferated. Today, some authors rightfully highlight the unique and incomparable aspects of the biography of each of these sites. Reflections on their common denominators have petered out, while the same term, however, still distinguishes them from all other monumental forms.

1. The terms of the debate

The monumentality of megaliths in western France cannot be treated as an unequivocal subject on account of the diversity of the structures, which are grouped here under the same term, the chronological span extending over several millennia, but also because of the different academic traditions from which each of these terms emanates. Here, we will consider megaliths attributed to the Neolithic, between the 5th and the 3rd millennia BCE. This excludes Iron Age stelae from our analysis, for example, which are particularly abundant in Brittany and are generally rightly considered to be a distinct phenomenon, although given how this term is used throughout the world they could also be characterized as megaliths (Laporte et al. 2015).

1.1. Megaliths

In this article, the definition we will use for the term "megalith" does not claim to be a universally accepted definition, but it corresponds perfectly to the subject under consideration (Laporte/Bocoum 2019). It groups together different structures comprising at least several very large stones, often with a rather rudimentary aspect at first sight, moved by humans and then simply erected towards the sky, or arranged as part of larger structures. This latter part of the phrase refers to the somewhat ambiguous distinction between dolmens and menhirs passed on from early research in Europe on the subject (Laporte 2015a). In this paper, building *megaliths* will be differentiated from the appropriation of *chaos* blocks resulting solely from an intellectual construction,[1] as well as from monoliths where all the original surfaces of the blocks from the outcrop have been totally transformed,[2] or even from "cyclopean" dry-stone constructions where large blocks were carefully shaped and adjusted.[3]

Of course, when they are observed in detail, most of the large blocks used in the construction of megaliths in western France bear at least several marks of mechanical actions left by humans, in particular during their extraction, or less often during transport. But what strikes the outside observer at first sight is their similarity to the outcrop or chaos of natural blocks. In the same way, we very frequently note how each of these large stones retains its singularity, in terms of colour, shape, surface roughness, the curve of the profile, features naturally present on the surface, and the like, even when they are arranged as part of a more complex structure (Laporte et al. 2011, 294). This very clearly results from a choice.

The term megalith cannot be applied to constructions without very big stones and the use of these very large blocks cannot be summed up solely in terms of an economy of means, although their construction can at times give rise to such attitudes. They always have an important and singular role in the structure. However, the study of megaliths cannot overlook the fact that other similar structures were sometimes built at the same time and in the same places, with different materials (Joussaume 2003). This can bring us to include in this study some constructions built exclusively in dry-stone form, earth or wood, but always when approached in each strictly local context. The cultural, economic, symbolic and social contexts of these monuments will also be taken into account. However, in Europe, it is currently rather uncommon to describe a society or even a period as megalithic, unlike in India, for example.

1.2 Monuments

Most of these megaliths can be considered monuments, perhaps more because of their use as memorial places (Furholt/Müller 2011, 16), than in relation to the (French) dictionary definition. "According to the terms of the Academy dictionary (1694), the monument must be durable, illustrious and glorious, which means that it must be related to rewarding and unforgettable episodes of history; the monument must be superb, and magnificent, with remarkable aesthetic creation […] During the premodern period, the word monumentum was used to designate any edifice constituting the feature of a place and linked to remembrance. This could be a landmark […] or a funerary edifice, used to mark a limit. The word transited through Anglo-Saxon land surveying where monumentation referred to demarcation" (Chouquer 2008, 85). At present, the term monument is often loaded with heritage values which also contribute to changing the

1 Natural chaos of very big blocks, engraved or used for ritual purposes during pre- or proto-historic times, has recently been proposed to be inscribed in the supplementary World Heritage List, explicitly because these would be megaliths.

2 Otherwise, Egyptian monolithic statuary as well as obelisks could be considered megaliths.

3 Till the mid 20th century, cyclopean Mycenean tombs were often presented as precursors to Iberian tholoi, of which local megaliths were considered to be no more than a pale "indigenous" imitation, within oriental diffusionist models.

meaning of the word.

Much too often, the monumentality of megaliths is only perceived as an indirect measure of the capacity of a given society to coordinate its efforts for a very costly task in economic terms that is not really vital for the survival of the group. From this perspective, the transport of blocks weighing several dozens of tons appears to be an almost instantaneous and measurable illustration of the exercise of power. In Europe, megaliths appear at a time when animal traction does not seem to be widespread and thus involve the participation of a lot of people. However, the discovery of a wood-

Fig. 1. Monumentality of mounds. All are singular, in particular the most imposing ones, as they are the outcome of the specific history of each place, but they often result from similar dynamics. Our knowledge of the history of each place is also deformed by the period of study, which reflects the development of research in this domain: mound of the Tumulus St. Michel explored between the middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (A), and tumulus C of Péré studied at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century (B).

en yoke at the Early Neolithic site of La Draga in Catalonia (Tarrus et al. 2006, 26) casts doubts on this and points towards at least the occasional use of animal traction. Recent experiments also imply that fewer people could have been involved than previously thought (Poissonnier 2015).

The imposing size of the structure in which these blocks are arranged has also been cited in this way; modern chapels are situated at the top of the St. Michel tumulus at Carnac and Hougue Bie in Jersey (fig. 1). Again, must they be considered snapshots? Too often, these monuments were intuitively perceived to be petrified for eternity, whereas they were almost always part of other dynamics. The amount of work involved in building the St. Michel tumulus, for example, would not have been the same if it had been a single architectural project, or if construction had been spread over several successive generations. The most recent data now point towards the latter hypothesis (Laporte 2010).

1.3 Societies

In other terms, the monumentality of megaliths in western France is a fact, but it is still implicitly characterized by a certain form of "primitivism," which stems from the very earliest research into the topic, as though it was highlighted by the technical baggage deemed to be rudimentary of the societies which defied the elementary laws of gravity in this way. Sometime after the discovery of the Easter Island giants by European navigators during the 18th century and well before the discovery of much earlier prehistoric paintings from Paleolithic caves, the rock engravings on the Gavrinis dolmen, for example, were invoked during mid 19th-century debates on the cognitive capacities of primitive humans.

Today, scholarly discourse has changed and most of our colleagues are perfectly aware of the pitfalls of such reasoning (Jeunesse 2018). However, their discourse does not totally expunge evolutionist models classifying the political and social organization of these European Neolithic societies among the most rudimentary systems. It is as if the coarseness of the blocks used, which are at first sight rather similar to the aspect of the stones at the outcrop, continued to influence our image of the human groups who exploited them. This may also be due to a certain degree of confusion concerning the reasons underpinning the use of such large blocks by certain groups. We will come back to this point in the ensuing paragraphs.

Over the past few years, several French philosophers, such as Foucault or Bourdieu, are frequently cited in English language specialist studies of megaliths. On the other hand, the language barrier has seriously hampered the diffusion of the ideas of several other theorists. This is the case in particular for the anthropologist A. Testart (2005), who attempted to propose a classification of societies without any evolutionist assumptions. By his own admission, this work remained incomplete. All these sociological models largely based on the first observations of Europeans or of their descendants now need to be refined, completed or challenged by university colleagues, who are themselves direct descendants of the groups in question. From now on, however, they will know how to cast off other specific constraints, in particular those linked with the creation of new identities.

1.4 Materialities

There are different forms of action on matter and distinctions between these different forms have not always been sufficiently taken into account, at least for this particular case. The first that comes to mind here consists of transforming a raw material. However, there is another attitude, which is discernible just as early on in the human mind (Bradley 2000; Laporte/Dupont 2019), and which consists in appropriating a natural entity (and all of the key characteristics attributed to this entity, whether they are natural or supernatural). Transforming a raw material is the only way of materializing geometric shapes that only exist in the human mind. Appropriating a natural entity requires a considerable degree of abstraction, but involves conserving the individuality of the entity in the eyes of the observer.

Opting for one or the other of these two forms of action on matter is first of all a choice, but was mixed up for too long with an economy of means. Both are implemented in distinctive ways. For example, in the construction of Neolithic funerary monuments in western France, the megalithic chamber is often at least partly formed by very large, carefully arranged blocks, each of which retains its individuality. On the other hand, the tumulus in which this megalithic chamber lies presents a perfect geometric shape obtained by the manipulation of elementary pieces derived from the transformation of a raw material. At times, other blocks are erected in the enclosure, or in the dry wall, and delimit the reserved hidden area.

At roughly the same time and in the same sector, other funerary monuments – with similar shapes – were built exclusively from raw materials, while very large blocks were erected independently and in isolation, pointing towards the sky. Some of these blocks seem to come from outcrops where they were engraved, such as the flagstone of the dolmen de la Table des Marchands. In the same way as the places where they were erected, the places these blocks come from may have held a particular value in the eyes of Neolithic builders (Cassen 2009; Scarre 2015, 148). Many ethnographic examples mention in particular the spirit attached to these stones, which cannot be moved without asking their permission. In such cases, the notion of the personification of standing stones, which are sometimes presented as galleries of ancestors (Bueno Ramírez et al. 2016), would only be a special case.

1.5 Time and rhythms

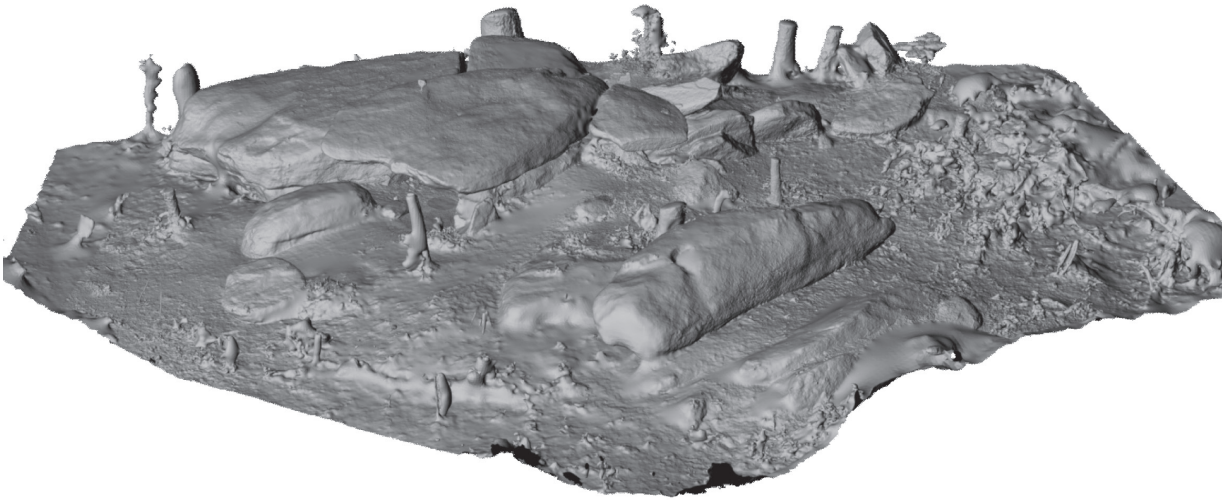
Another assumption is linked with the rhythm of technical improvements. Again, this is another implicit guiding factor in a number of our predecessors' interpretations of the evolutionary character of megalithic architectures. In the 1940s, G. Daniel (1941) proposed a bush-like pattern for the evolution of megalithic architectures in western France, by adopting a rather new concept at that time and a somewhat innovative application of the biological evolution of human lineage. The concept itself derived from the latest developments in quantum thermodynamics several decades earlier. This idea is no longer applied to the evolution of the living world, but it was used in almost exactly the same way, at least until the beginning of the 2000s, for the sequencing of megalithic architectural forms in the western France (Laporte 2012, 24).

The notion that more elaborate skills result from long practice is nothing extraordinary, provided that the duration of time over which this occurs is specified. This type of reasoning resulted in placing the Angevin dolmens towards the end of the Middle Neolithic, due to the lack of accurate dating elements. However, the transport of the

enormous blocks used for the construction of these dolmens requires the mastery of technical constraints and it seemed difficult for many authors to imagine that this occurred at the beginning of the sequence (Joussaume 1985). Nonetheless, the same authors also place the largest stones ever manipulated by human groups during the course of European prehistory towards the beginning of this sequence. The weight of the large broken menhir of Locmariaquer in Morbihan is estimated at about 300 tons (fig. 2).

Such approximations can only be considered to be pertinent if

Fig. 2. Very large vertical standing stones. The large broken menhir of Locmariaquer (A), the alignments of Kerzerho at Erdeven (B), and the quarry of Roch O'Couet (C), in the Morbihan. A gallery grave was subsequently built in this quarry. Photos L. Laporte, Scanner 3D CNPAO-UMR 6566/Study P. Gouézin (2017).



they contribute to defining the problem, but they have been cast into doubt by the refinement of chronologies. This situation was probably acceptable when the available scale of precision was about a millennium. But it became a lot more uncertain when the problems raised concerned just a few generations. Yet, only a few rare examples of megaliths in western France provide *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem dates for each construction phase, each new development, each distinct architectural project, for the Neolithic period. Recent attempts to pursue this method are still largely incomplete* (Schulz Paulsson 2017).

1.6 Space and landscapes

We could at least attempt to assess the monumentalities of each type of megalithic structure based on their intrinsic characteristics, although we are perfectly aware that this is insufficient. These intrinsic characteristics include the characteristics of each component as well as those linked with the position of the structure in the landscape, for example (fig. 2). Considerable earthworks over large surfaces are sometimes associated with raised constructions, in particular quarrying, which contributes to the monumentalization of places. For funerary monuments, beyond the form of burial areas or tumuli, three main types of structures can be identified.

In western France, small square, trapezoidal or more often circular monuments are frequently associated with distant quarries (Laporte 2013). Others, such as the Motte de la Jacquille in Charentes (Ard et al. 2016), are positioned on a circular hill, which could have been shaped for the purpose but was not studied in this way by the excavators. Peripheral ditches often surround elongated structures, sometimes over distances of several hundred meters, and delineate a surface reserved for the dead on ground trampled by the living (Ghesquière et al. 2019). Finally, the lateral quarries bordering a number of elongated trapezoidal monuments are reminiscent of those surrounding the houses of the first LBK farmers (Laporte et al. 2018).

All of these constructions structure the surface and constrain movement through the effects of symmetry, reflection, rotation or translation, and sometimes even through optical correction effects (Laporte 2015b), almost as if this was a first, rather illusory attempt to domesticate space and time. The alignments of Carnac, which extend over several kilometers and cross a number of valleys, portray a very singular manner of representing space, which we can only perceive today with topographic maps and aerial views. The monumentality of these places also involves a number of cultural factors that must not be underestimated.

2. Monumentality of architectural projects

The monumentality of a place or an edifice develops and is sometimes perceived differently over the course of time (Scarre 2011; Osborne 2014). Here, we will not approach the monumentality of a megalith as the end result of its long-term biography from the point of view of a 21st-century observer. Instead, we will attempt to explore the intrinsic part of monumentality in each of these megaliths built during the Neolithic. It is a perilous exercise, as it implicitly involves tracing back to at least some of the intentions of those who conceived these architectural projects. Some would say that it is an impossible task, considering the huge chronological and cultural distance. Others would say that it is a feasible venture, given that the

observer and the observed phenomenon are part of the same human genus.

2.1 The architectural project

The notion of architectural project is central here (Laporte et al. 2014). This term could be compared to the notion of conceptual project, intrinsic to the *chaîne opératoire* so dear to prehistorians. But it also encompasses all the actors involved in this process (such as the social orders, symbolic constructions and technical systems that they are part of), within an approach that is perhaps more widely applied by historians or sociologists. Architectural project is, in any case, the term used for all other forms of architecture, and we see no reason why it should not be applied to megaliths under the pretext that megaliths are partly composed of large stones with a rather rudimentary aspect. However, attempting to retrospectively access the architectural project entails appropriately estimating the whole range of technical constraints and skills deployed during construction (Laporte 2016). The very recent study of several Neolithic monuments in western France suggests that we are perhaps only beginning to become aware of all the knowledge necessary, such as the rigor involved, for these constructions which are much more elaborate than was previously thought.

Several basic principles are recurrently mentioned in archaeological literature to describe this architectural project. One of them, as we saw above, refers to the chaos of natural blocks, at the rock outcrop or cliff. Another proposition, which emerged just as early in the history of research, uses the idea of the underground cave to describe what is, in reality, a space constructed above ground. In the case of funerary monuments, many comparisons were made between the external aspect of the mound, or the internal arrangement of the sepulchral areas, and domestic constructions, that is, the home. Another line of thought focuses on the idea of a reserved area and another again on the cemetery, which resulted in the classification of many megalithic complexes in western France as necropolises (Laporte 2013).

None of these hypotheses is truly incompatible, if we accept that these arrangements were also subject to representations. However, at the very beginning of the sequence and undoubtedly before the middle of the 5th millennium BCE, they seem to comprise distinct arrangements: isolated standing stones, or stones aligned in the open air, such as on Hoëdic Island in Morbihan (Large/Mens 2016); small wooden funerary huts, later covered by a mound, such as Croix-Saint-Pierre in Saint-Just, Ille-et-Vilaine (Briard et al. 1995), or, on the contrary, huge monumental, non-sepulchral houses, such as at Fleury-sur-Orne, in the Calvados (Ghesquière et al. 2015), or Beaurieux in the Nord (Colas et al. 2018); very elongated peripheral ditches, such as Passy type structures in the Yonne, which also surround genuine megalithic monuments a little later, such as Motte des Justices in Thouars, les Deux-Sèvres (Germond et al. 1994); even perhaps already several small dry-stone circular chambers covered by corbeling, in spite of the controversial dates of Bougon F0 (Mohen/Scarre 2002).

2.2 The staging of funerals

At about the same time, between Loire and Seine, enormous slabs were firstly transported for the burials of just a few people (Laporte et al. 2011). In the same sector, towards the end of the sequence and nearly two millennia later, we observe similar practices and arrangements, also described as boulder graves, although in this case

Fig. 3. Very big horizontally moved stones. Thick capstone above chamber III with dry-stone walls of tumulus C at Péré at Prissé-la-Charrière in the Deux-Sèvres (A), or above the sepulchral chamber of one of the two monuments of la Perrotte at Luxé in Charente, with walls comprising finely worked limestone orthostats (B). Photos P. Aventurier and L. Laporte.

they cover abundant collective graves. Is this convergence purely incidental? Or is it rather the mark of implicit intentions that only clearly appear when links are established and become undone, at the beginning and the end of this sequence? In the meantime, the Angevin dolmens were built in the Loire Valley, sometimes referred to as the brontosauruses of megalithism, due to the exceptionally huge size of the slabs used (Joussaume 1985, 110). Further south, at Prissé-la-Charrière in Deux-Sèvres, one of the chambers with dry-stone walls is covered by a single slab weighing several tons (fig. 3A).

The Angoumois dolmens in the Charente Valley have always been renowned for their extremely imposing capstones, which appear to be rather non-modified after extraction and can weigh up to several dozen tons, associated with finely worked orthostats, sometimes adjusted to fit each other, some of which are no more than 20 cm thick (Burnez 1976, 41-42). These stones constitute wall facings and cannot be considered bearing stones. When we look more closely, the orthostats of the chamber result here from an advanced transformation of the raw material, in a similar way to the small stones in the cairn. They allow for the creation of an internal cubic volume with smooth and non-differentiated walls, like for example for the Perrote monuments at Luxé, or La Boixe B at Vervant. At these monuments, only the capstone conserves all the irregularities of the natural bar from which it derives, visible on the ceiling of the chamber (fig. 3B). On the other hand, on both sides of the corridor, several large, regularly spaced and clearly individualized stones were erected.

Gradually, each of the initially distinct basic principles become associated with each other – in a different way each time – within a wide diversity of arrangements corresponding to as many possible combinations (Laporte et al. 2002, 209). Of course, the architecture itself does not evolve, but builders' intentions change, as well as the architectural projects that they conceive. This diversity seems more accentuated in certain sectors, like for example in the Jurassic limestone plains bordering the Armorican Massif. It can be more clear-cut in places, as on the edges of the Gulf of Morbihan, which artificially gives a unilinear dimension to architectural sequencing if we want to take this point as the sole reference. However, the combination of these different elements only truly stabilizes during the last third of the 5th millennium BCE, and effectively portrays the image of a rather standardized model at that time.

2.3 Gathering in the dead

The integration of a permanent link between the world of the dead and the world of the living, materialized by a corridor in megalithic constructions, seems to have been an important step. As such, "closed" cists (some would be called "dolmens," in northern Europe) have been frequently perceived as opposing passage graves. However, the underground cist in one of the monuments of La Jardelle, at Dissay in Vienne (Pautreau et al. 2004), had an access ramp; it is surrounded by a hairpin-shaped ditch, which is similar to those of certain Passy type structures. The access to the entrance of the *caveau* of the St. Michel tumulus at Carnac was closed by three large vertical slabs at the time of discovery, whereas all the others are horizontal (Le Rouzic 1932). There are many examples: each time, we totally ignore how long such access structures to stone cists may have been in use for, although they are often described as provisional when they are not covered passages. Some built corridors seem to have been only briefly in use. In this respect, the aim is not to establish whether the burial chamber had a covered access or not, at least in western

France.

In addition, the idea that allegedly closed spaces only contained the remains of a single individual is never so frequent when bones are not preserved, due to soil acidity, as on the ancient bedrock of the Armorican Massif. As for the observations so often cited for the most imposing Carnac tombs, they have not been renewed since the middle of the 19th century. Everywhere else, particularly on limestone bedrock, the number of corresponding individuals is extremely diverse. In reality, there was a time – at least in some places – when funerary chambers were used, regardless of their form, before the monumentalization process. From then on, this process reserved a specific sealed area for the deceased. According to recent developments observed in the British Isles, it is possible that this precept continued to apply, even when the structure had a covered passage (Scarre 2016). Therefore this is not just a question of chronology.

It corresponds rather to one of the combinations among those discussed above, and others are possible. Between the cave (burial) and the house (living), there is also the granary, the granary of the dead. We were struck by the similarity of the shapes of a number of corbeled vaulted chambers built above the ground and the profile of a buried grain silo (Laporte et al. 2011, 298). We then wondered about the very essence of the corresponding burial practices. Were they used for just gathering some of the deceased from a family, an age class, a generation, a clan? As a stock for the symbolic survival of future generations, which people could come to draw on depending on their needs and circumstances? Disturbances and emptying are also some of the gestures observed in both cases (fig. 4). At the present time, in India, the wars explicitly attribute this granary of the dead function to clan cists, where secondary bone deposits eventually merge into a common corpus linked to the founding ancestors' spirits (Daladier forthcoming).

2.4 Shadows and light

Underground and overground worlds, perishable or permanent materials, thus seem to respond to each other in a different interchange each time. However, the interpretation of this interchange entails a certain amount of subjectivity. The interpretations of the archaeologists who explored these megaliths have never ceased to vary, depending on the era, the region or the country. Some of our colleagues from the Iberian Peninsula, who are also specialists in Paleolithic cave art, have highlighted the idea of the decorated cave as a sacred space. There are no such cases in northern Europe, which was covered in ice at that time. The image of block chaos, such as in Wales or Scotland, was easier to apply in the British Isles. In Portugal and in Denmark, mounds were compared to the imposing shell midden accumulations from the Mesolithic. In continental Europe, the outline of the houses of the first LBK culture settlers was also evoked at an early stage.

The analysis of the engravings on megalith slabs is also subject to this rule, although such features undoubtedly individually contribute to the monumentality of each structure. The differently accepted interpretation of some signs as wild animals (sperm whale, seabirds) or domestic animals (bovids) now provides the basis for discourse on the structuration of space and the representation of the world (Cassen et al. 2018). The plant world is hardly mentioned, apart from through the tools used to exploit it, in particular axe blades. Some of the latter attest to very long-distance exchanges (Pétrequin

Fig. 4. Staging. Engraved decorations at Gavrinis (A) and painted decorations at Barnenez H (B). Photos L. Laporte and R. Rodrigo de Balbin Behrman.

et al. 2017). Since their discovery, the slabs of the internal areas of the monument of Gavrinis in the Morbihan department remain a unique sight (fig. 5). The recent demonstration of the existence of paintings inside chamber H of Barnenez further widens the series (Bueno Ramírez et al. 2015).

In the same way as the megaliths, these images are not rigid. The detailed study of traces of pecking highlights the transformation of numerous engraved sticks into representations of hafted axes, reflecting important ideological and perhaps social changes (Mens 2013). Movement may also partly come about as a result of the observer changing viewpoints, thereby accentuating contrasts and animating the walls. Moving through the low corridor leading to chamber E of Barnenez, the points of small dark stones in the dry-stone walls give a spiked aspect to this part of the structure. The corridor leads into a high circular chamber with a pale-colored vault speckled with black dots, due to the geological nature of the materials used. This vault reflects light in the opposite way to a celestial dome.

Over the years and throughout different projects, a number of graphic representations have moved from the light to the shadows and some are even obscured inside the construction, but never in a totally random way (Robin 2009). Fragments of large engraved stelae in orthogneiss are frequently used as capstones around the

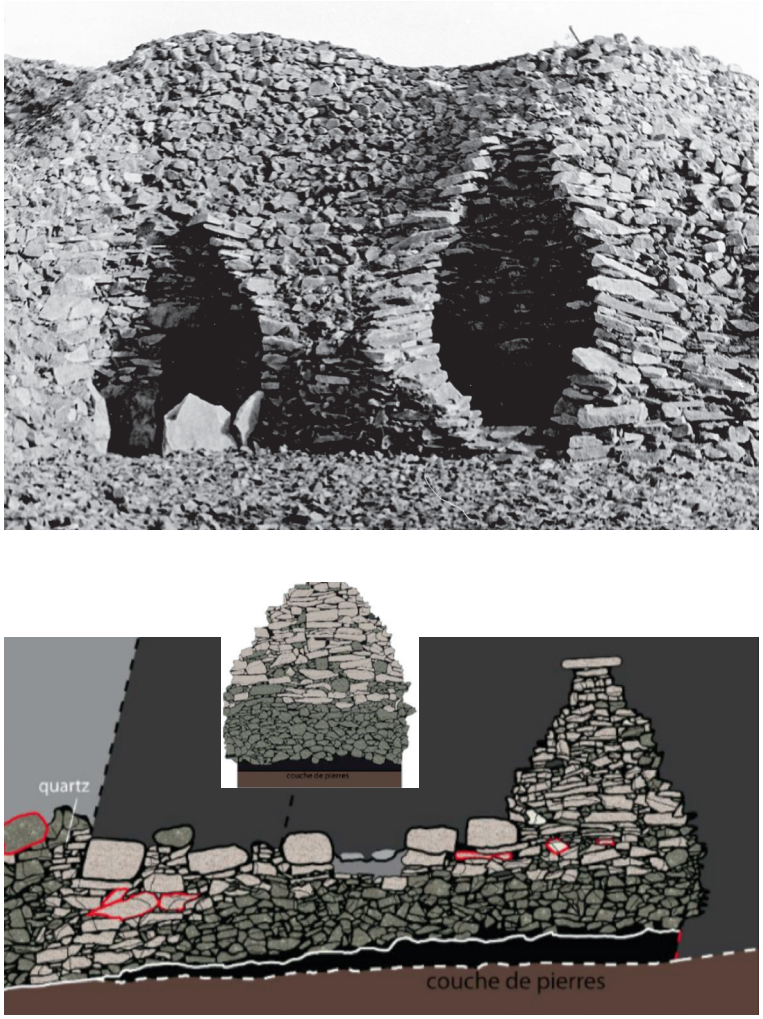


Fig. 5. *Small and large stones: internal arrangements* - corbeling in chambers C and D (A) and survey in elevation view of the chamber and the first part of the corridor of chamber G (B) in the large cairn of Barnenez. A/Photo taken during excavations by P.-R. Giot, Archives of the Archaeosciences laboratory - UMR 6566. B/ Survey in elevation view by F. Cousseau (2016): the color of the stones is as close to reality as possible.

Gulf of Morbihan. The megalithic chambers of La Table des Marchands and Gavrinis are currently separated by a deep ria, but initially belonged to the same entity probably erected in the open (Le Roux 1985). These are examples of reappropriation and reuse, and these recurrent attitudes in places of remembrance should not be mixed up with the construction of a periodization.

2.5 Ostentations

The distinction between upright stone structures simply erected in the open and structures with more complex interior arrangements should also be questioned. Indeed, this subject has been somewhat hindered by the confusion surrounding the standing stone itself and the different functions attributed to it in the diverse structures. The stones inserted at the base of the western facade of the large cairn of Barnenez, at Plouézoch in Finistère, also form an alignment of disjointed standing stones, in the same way as those arranged around the edges of chambers A and B, and their corridors inside the monumental mound (Laporte et al. 2017). More generally, recent work in the Morbihan has updated the idea of a certain convergence in the arrangement of standing stones erected roughly at the same time, in large alignments such as those of Carnac or on both sides of many dolmen access corridors (Gouézin 2017).

Another feature of many Neolithic funerary monuments in west-

ern France is that they are surrounded by a facade over one meter high, and sometimes even several meters high, during the Middle Neolithic, often built in dry stone (fig. 6). This feature also seems to distinguish them from many megalithic monuments on the Iberian peninsula, for example. It is not always possible to discern what is hidden behind this facade at first sight. The beginning of the 4th millennium BCE appears to be marked by a tendency to increase sepulchral spaces (Laporte 2011 fig. 12). The integration of new funerary chambers in an already existing project, the covering of an earlier necropolis in a new architectural project and, perhaps slightly later, the development of dolmens with compartmentalized chambers, and then transept-type chambers on the Breton coast are different forms of this same tendency.

In most cases, the position of entrances often becomes very difficult to detect, once they are sealed by a dry-stone wall. Hidden and obscured elements are sometimes just as significant in builders' intentions as ostensibly displayed parts. This forecourt area, at the end of the corridor, exists in all cases. It will be monumentalized in an imposing way in the Allées des Géants in Sardinia (Guilaine 1994); the Irish court tombs incorporate it into the construction itself. The case of the elongated Severn-Cotswold-type monuments is more ambiguous, sometimes with false axial doors such as at Belas Knap, whereas the much more discreet entrances to the burial areas are

Fig. 6. Small and large stones: external arrangements - facade of the Petit Mont at Arzon (Morbihan). Excavations J. Lecornec. Photo P. Gouézin.

in reality on each side of the monument (Scarre 2005). In western France, Middle Neolithic megaliths were definitely built to be seen, but clearly not built to expose all the components.

2.6 Necropolises

In Scandinavia, like in the South of France or in Galicia, each grouped monument is part of a necropolis and remains so throughout time in spite of a few rare counterexamples such as the famous Dombate dolmen in Galicia (Cebrian del Moral et al. 2011). In Andalusia, a new sepulchral chamber can be added inside an already existing monument (Linares Catala 2017). In southern Portugal, this often takes the form of a tholos tomb with clearly distinct architecture from the Antas containing the preceding edifices. In Ireland, on the other hand, imposing circular constructions overlap or even totally cover small earlier monuments, like at Knowth, for example (Eogan 1990).

Western France has necropolises only made up of separate circular constructions of different sizes, like for example La Boixe in Charentes. However, this does not preclude several extensions during the course of time, like for monument B of this same necropolis (Gomez de Soto 1998). The principle is similar to that of successive accretions, which was initially applied to the history of a large elongated monument such as Barnenez (Giot 1987). Each time sequencing could be established, these elongated monuments often covered previously existing circular structures, and never the opposite (Joussaume/Laporte 2006). These same dynamics probably also contributed to the current configuration of the Tumulus St. Michel, at Carnac, for example.

New investigations now enable us to clarify the scenario in other places and in a slightly different way each time. At Barnenez or Plouhinec in Finistère, like at Prissé-la-Charrière in Deux-Sèvres, the necropolis was first of all composed of distinct and independent monuments, sometimes with very different architectural forms. It is only during a second phase that they were incorporated into the same monumental mass, which was also sometimes built in stages. At Barnenez, during this process, the corridors of eleven distinct chambers were successively extended so that they ultimately led onto the same facade. The small circular monument initially surrounding chamber F, covered by corbeling, serves as an axis of symmetry. All the subsequent developments retained this initial bipartition of the necropolis. The two contiguous cairns of the monument in its final state, one in white stones and the other in black stones, are just the staging of the specific history of the place by the Neolithic builders themselves (Cousseau 2016).

3. A succession of architectural projects and monumentalities

The diversity of megalithic architectures in western France during the whole Neolithic period cannot be merely reduced to the opposition between "dolmens," "passage graves" and "gallery graves," as is still used in northern Europe to describe a succession of more standardized architectures over a much shorter duration of time (Montelius 1907). In western France, the origins of this trend present rather a "polythetic" dimension (Laporte et al. 2011), although they are often approached as the fruit of a unilinear evolution when we concentrate solely on the shoreline of the Gulf of Morbihan (Boujot/Cassen 1992). Different forms of architecture with distinct geneses, as much for

open-air features as for sepulchral structures or the "mounds" covering them, are progressively combined all along the 5th millennium BCE, differently in each place or at each stage, to finally crystallize around several standards towards the end of this same millennium (Laporte 2011, 218).

The idea of erecting very large stones towards the sky, vertically, or the one of moving very large blocks onto the tombs of some deceased, horizontally, seems to appear around 4700 BCE, perhaps even a little earlier, for certain authors: charcoal gathered in the infill of the pits for wedging (fallen) standing stones at Belz in Morbihan does not accurately date the period of their erection (Hinguant/Boujot 2009), hardly more than the spatial association between another of those standing stones and the plan of a house of LBK tradition at Saint-Etienne-en-Coglès in Ille-et-Vilaine (Cassen et al. 2019, 577). During a first phase of the Middle Neolithic (4700–4300 BCE) in western France, pots with deformed mouths are associated with inhumations in buried stone cists, such as those of La Goumoizières or La Jardelle in Poitou (Pautreau et al. 2006; Soler 2007), and also with the remains of a wooden funerary hut at Saint-Just in Ille-et-Vilaine (Briard et al. 1995). Boulder graves, as well as Passy type structures, belong to the same period in the center of the Paris Basin.

Another change concerns sepulchral practices. The dead move on top of the ground trampled by the living, somewhat as their equal and in areas now reserved for them (Joussaume 2003). Bodies of some deceased were then deposited in funerary chambers built over the soil. Such features can be integrated within very long mounds surrounded by a ditch, while others are materialized by small circular dry-stone constructions. To build the sepulchral room, large upright vertical stones as well as capstones laid out horizontally above the tomb were then progressively integrated into different forms of architecture; we totally ignore what a "pre-megalithic" phase could be (Schulz-Paulsson 2017). Within such an initial diversity of architectures, we can add the existence of structures in wood, including for the development of permanent accesses (Duhamel 1997), but also sometimes with earthen walls which went unnoticed for a long time (Laporte/Bocoum 2019; Ghesquière et al. 2019).

During the course of the second half of the 5th millennium BCE, each of these developments, underpinned by ideas that were initially altogether rather different (the appropriation of a "natural" entity, underground space [cave], the cemetery, the granary of the dead, the house of prestigious ancestors, etc.), tends to converge towards more standardized structures where the existence of a covered access (corridor) was often perceived as a strategic item. At this time, the number of deceased buried in the same megalithic chamber is rarely more than ten. Recent paleogenetic developments suggest that these deceased could be members of the same clan, the same lineage or family (Gallay 2006; Sanchez-Quinto et al. 2019, Cheronnet et al. 2019; Rivollat et al. forthcoming).

Different types of "passage graves" are the more common of these new standards. For a long time, archaeological research focused mainly on the ruins that still mark the countryside and thus on the sepulchral chamber formed by large blocks. In this way, several regional styles have been distinguished, such as monuments with compartmentalized or transepted chambers on the southern coastline of Brittany and at the mouth of the Loire (L'Helgouach 1964), Angouleme type megalithic chambers with finely worked orthostats and an imposing capstone in the valley of the Charente (Burnez 1976), or those of Angevin type with an axial entrance consisting of a trilithon structure with a large overlapping flagstone (Gruet 1967). Monuments with transepted chambers, like those of Angoulême or

Fig. 7. Monumentalities at the end of the Neolithic – Crec'h Quillé passage grave with a short lateral entrance in Côtes d'Armor (Photo L. Laporte).

even Angevin type, are now attributed to the very end of the 5th millennium BCE, or even rather to the first half of the following millennium.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail each of these architectural specificities, which have already been described in numerous overviews (Joussaume 1985; Giot et al. 1998; Laporte/Le Roux 2004; Joussaume/Laporte 2006). But it would undoubtedly be erroneous to consider that the monumentality of these ruins, today, strictly corresponds to that imagined by Neolithic builders. These ruins must be seen through the whole monumental setting they belong to, and in this respect each of the architectural projects will expose (or hide) and combine differently at least some of the values yet presented in the first chapters of this paper. The staging of the whole megalithic necropolis history by Neolithic builders as well as the gathering of what was previously exposed to light or even "hidden" ostentations is part of this diversity.

From the second half of the 4th millennium BCE onwards, not many megaliths appear to have been built between the Loire and Gironde. Fewer megaliths were also built on the Armorican Massif before the end of the millennium, but they are more evenly distributed over the whole territory (Kerdivel 2012). Very large stones were frequently displayed for all to see in the external facing of the monument (fig. 7). Entrances are easier to identify, although they are not yet in the axis of the chamber. From then on, chambers are much more elongated and comprise more stone slabs than previously (Giot et al. 1998). More often than before, some of them bear figurations evoking the human body, for example a pair of breasts, sometimes highlighted by a necklace. The expression is minimalist, as though the characterized entity remained intricately linked to the material on which it was carved with no real need for explicit representation.

During the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE, monumentality be-

gan to change sides and from then on joined the world of the living. Large final Neolithic buildings measure up to 100 m long (Tinevez 2004). Others, such as Antran in the Vienne, are 20 m wide with an internal span of about 10 m. Megalithic funerary monuments decrease in the landscape. More often than before, some of these constructions include a natural outcrop. Others tend to blend into block chaos (Gouézin 2016). The chamber only rarely measures more than 10 m long, but the internal structure and the organization of deposits evoke the domestic sphere (Laporte/Tinevez 2004). There is no need to look for a transition phase with Middle Neolithic architectures. Trends as well as some of the principles underlying the conception of the architectural project change.

For some time, the dead were still deposited in the sepulchral areas of monuments, some of which were built over a millennium earlier. Sometimes, over a hundred dead were deposited in chambers that only contained a dozen burials during the course of the preceding period. In central western France, considerable Artenacian pottery deposits in the facade suggest a revival of commemorative rites, although it is impossible to determine whether members of the community were celebrated in this way or whether this was a way of making a claim to the construction of prestigious predecessors. The conceptual links built up in different ways during the preceding millennia began to come undone (Laporte et al. 2011, 323). Certain alignments of standing stones undoubtedly date to the beginning of the Bronze Age, as was clearly demonstrated for the monument of Château-Bu at Saint-Just in Ille-et-Vilaine. Individual graves under the mounds of the "little princes of Armorica" are large stone cists. After that, the tapered silhouettes of carefully made Iron Age stelae were only erected more than a thousand years later.

4. Conclusion

The monumentality of megaliths in western France, as perceived by our 21st-century peers, is partly a result of misinterpretation as it is first and foremost based on the observation of ruins. Only archaeology enables us to partly reconstruct these megaliths built several millennia ago. Landscapes have changed, a number of elements in organic matter have perished, rites have died out, and words have vanished. The monumentality of edifices erected by past societies, so frequently used for reasoning that they are hardly more accessible by direct observation, cannot be assessed without attempting to imagine at least some of their builders' intentions. Some of them were built as monuments, whereas others became so over the course of time.

Western France is one of the rare regions in Europe where megaliths were recurrently built for nearly three millennia and where these monumentalities are very diversified. In each place, each sector, and at different moments, no two monuments are exactly the same. Ultimately, they are characterized by the singularity of each block, whether they were isolated standing stones, moved to a tomb for funerary rites, or part of more complex arrangements. This leads to a reflection on the modes of human action on matter and on the choices of those who defied the most elementary laws of gravity in this way. Megalithism was clearly a long-term undertaking and left its mark on the landscape for a long time …[4]

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