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THE MEGALITH BUILDERS OF THE SOM

The term Neolithic was invented by Sir John Lubbock (later Lord Avebury) in 1865 and first used in his book *Prehistoric Times* published in that year. It was quickly adopted in France, Denmark and elsewhere. In the International Congress at Brussels in 1872 Gabriel de Mortillet discussed the breaking up of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods into shorter periods, and in his *La Préhistorique*, first published in 1883, we find the Palaeolithic broken up into periods, but not the Neolithic. De Mortillet confessed that he could not devise separate periods within the Neolithic; it was he thought a unitary phase in man's past which he at first proposed to call the Peurichardian after the settlement site of Peu Richard in the Charente-Maritime, and later the Robenhausian after the Swiss Lake-dwelling site of Robenhausen, here following an earlier suggestion of Paul Gervais.

Philippe Salmon, a few years later, decided on three periods for the French Neolithic: the Campignian, named after the site of Campigny in the Seine-Inférieure (as it then was – now Seine-Maritime), the Chasséo-Robenhausian, named partly after Robenhausen and partly after the Camp de Chasse in Saône-et-Loire, and the Carnacian, named after Carnac in the Morbihan, so rich in famous megalithic monuments (Salmon, 1887 and 1891). Meanwhile Montelius (1876) had proposed a fourfold classification of the Neolithic in northern Europe, Gross (1883) and Heierli (1901) a threefold classification of the Swiss Neolithic, and Rutot (1907) a fivefold classification of the French and Belgian Neolithic into the Tardenoisian, Flénusian, Campignian, Robenhausian, and Omalian.

Déchelette, when he came to publish the first volume of his *Manuel d'archéologie préhistorique* (1908), was not sympathetic to the schemes of Salmon and Rutot, and while appreciating the divisions of the Neolithic proposed by Montelius and Sophus Müller in Scandinavia, confessed, as Gabriel de Mortillet had done, that the Neolithic in France and the British Isles could not be split up into periods; he did however suggest that the study of different pottery styles might be the way forward, and that pottery might be the *fossile directeur* for the Neolithic (Déchelette, 1908, p.337). Yet for a while French archaeologists went on proposing various vertical classifications of the Neolithic in the Salmon and Rutot tradition; there is no need to list these schemes here (see Nougier, 1950a, p. 22–5 and Daniel, 1960, p. 32). What was needed

was an abandonment of the old idea that the prehistoric record was a chest of drawers and an examination of the Neolithic material geographically and from what Childe has called the chorological point of view (Childe, 1956, p. 15).

This new approach to the problems of the French Neolithic began with the publication in 1927 by Bosch-Gimpera and Serra Ràfols of their *Etudes sur le Néolithique et l'Enéolithique de France* – an extension of their entry s.v. Frankreich in Ebert's *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte*. Here are distinguished not successive periods but roughly contemporary civilisations or cultures of which the three main ones related to the south of France, the northern Plain and Brittany. For the megalithic monuments of the northern plain or the Paris Basin they coined the name Seine-Oise-Marne, often abbreviated to SOM. Writing of the SOM they said "C'est l'époque des galeries couvertes de la Seine, de l'Oise et des grottes artificielles de la Marne: nous l'appelons donc "civilisation de Seine-Oise-Marne" parce que c'est surtout là que se trouvent les foyers de cette culture qui s'étend d'ailleurs jusqu'à la frontière de la civilisation bretonne (embouchure de la Loire) jusqu'à la Charente et la Dordogne" (Bosch-Gimpera and Serra Ràfols, 1927, p. 26).

This isolation of the SOM culture was quickly accepted by many prehistorians such as Gordon Childe (1939), C. F. C. Hawkes (1940), and Daryll Forde (1930). In recent years this culture has been re-described by Childe and Sandars (1950), Piggott (1953/4), Bailloud and Mieg de Boofzheim (1955), Arnal and Prades (1959), Nougier (1950a, 1950b), the present writer (1960), and Bailloud (1964)¹. The general picture given is one in which a basic mesolithic hunting population is first acculturated into the Neolithic by contacts with early farming communities from eastern and southern France, and then "adopted" the custom of burial in collective tombs some of which are megalithic Gallery Graves or *allées couvertes*, and others are cut in the soft chalk of the Champagne area. Childe's summary refers to "the adoption of the megalithic faith by a Forest population on the chalk downs of Champagne and round the Paris Basin ... the grave goods disclose a warlike population living by stockbreeding and hunting but almost certainly also tilling the soil" (Childe, 1957, p. 312–13). We ask here, is this still a possible and reasonable solution, and what exactly does it mean? We particularly ask, whence came the builders of the megalithic structures, call them what we will – missionaries, traders, prospectors, colonists.

¹ We have three important pieces of evidence to help us isolate the megalithic component in the SOM culture – the form of the tombs, the construction of the tombs, and the decoration that appears on some of them. In form the megalithic structures of the Paris Basin are Gallery Graves with small antechambers often with porthole devices demarcating the break between antechamber and chamber. This form of tomb occurs in other parts of France notably in Brittany, Normandy and the Loire Valley. Comparable structures also occur in southern France, in Germany and in Scandinavia, notably Sweden. It has been suggested that the Paris Basin Gallery

Graves came from southern France: Childe saw them as reproducing “most faithfully the plan of the rock-cut tombs near Arles” (1957, p. 314). The present writer at one time thought they came from western France and were an extension of the Loire Gallery Graves (1941) but now on studying the distribution of these Gallery Graves in detail would regard them as representing a settlement pattern based on the Seine from Rouen to Paris and spreading up the Eure, Epte, Oise, Aisne and Marne (1960, p. 41).

Distribution patterns can, however, be deceptive. The same settlement pattern of tombs in the Paris Basin, could, perhaps, have arisen independently among people settled along these river valleys. The great disputes about megalithic monuments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were part of the great theoretical disputes in archaeology and anthropology as to whether things could be invented more than once. Once a class of prehistoric antiquity – the megalith – had been created, and megalith-building conceptualised as a special activity of prehistoric man, more and more did it become difficult for archaeologists to think other than in terms of megalith-builders who started somewhere and spread around the world from Ireland to Japan. I think it fair to say nowadays that most archaeologists are prepared to accept several independent origins for megaliths, and to realise that the phrase ‘Megalithic monument’ does not mean specifically structures formally, constructionally and functionally identical and therefore historically connected. It has to be argued – if it can be argued – that megalithic structures in Japan, India, the Caucasus, Palestine and western Europe are necessarily connected because they employ large stones in their building and because we have agreed to label them megaliths. Even now within what used to be thought of as a single province of megalith tomb builders, namely Mediterranean, western and northern Europe, it is being argued that there were several centres of origin of megaliths. The stone circles of Britain, for example, may well be stone copies of wooden henge monuments, and a local megalithic manifestation in the British Isles. The megalithic monuments of Malta may well be surface versions of rock-cut tombs (Evans, 1959; Trump, 1961, 1962, 1963), and the present writer has argued that the Gallery Graves of the south of France are megalithic versions of the wholly or partly rock-cut tombs in the Arles-Fontvieille district (Daniel, 1960). Recently Vera Leisner, and the late Georg Leisner (1943, 1956) have revived the ideas held earlier by Leeds (1920) and Bosch-Gimpera (1932) that megalithic tomb architecture was independently invented in northern Portugal and Galicia; and C. J. Becker (1948) has argued for an independent origin of the *dysser* of Denmark which he says, could be translations into megalithic architecture of previous funerary structures built with wood or certainly without big stones. As we in southern Britain study in greater detail with the assistance of new excavations our unchambered long barrows we must reflect again on their relationship with the chambered or megalithic long barrows. It was often argued

that the unchambered or earthen long barrow might have been an impoverished and non-megalithic version of the great stone chambered mounds like Stoney Littleton and West Kennet; but could it now be that these monuments were megalithic versions of the earthen funerary long barrows, and they themselves funerary versions of long houses? The problem is posed in a fresh form by the excavations of Professor Atkinson and Professor Piggott in Wayland's Smithy in 1962 and 1963. These hitherto unpublished excavations show that the well known megalithic long barrow with its terminal chamber incorporates an earlier long barrow with communal burials but no megalithic structure.

I am making here this point: if Becker's argument is right in Scandinavia, and there is a case for a similar sort of evolution in southern Britain – and a case can be argued – then did the same thing happen in northern France? If so we ought to find elongated burials in non-megalithic mounds; and surely Madame Basse de Menorval (1953) has found one such in the site at Bonnières between Paris and Rouen, a remarkable site which the local archaeologists and municipality have preserved excellently by building a house and museum over it. But is Bonnières one of a class of prototypes of the Paris Basin megalithic tombs: or is it a late and non-megalithic version of these tombs? (*cf.* now Modderman, 1964¹).

Without being dogmatic about these matters, it does seem at the moment that the distributional argument is strong. I would see the builders of the Paris Basin Gallery Graves coming up the Seine in their boats as the Vikings did much later, and the non-megalithic sites like Bonnières and the rock-cut sites of Champagne as locally developed versions of these tombs such as Aubergenville and Epone and the rest of them. Undue attention has been focussed on the rock-cut tombs of the Champagne area; they have been quoted as the most northerly examples of rock-cut collective tombs, and so they are, if we do not accept, as I think we should not, the Dwarfie Stane in Orkney and St. Kevin's Bed, Glendalough as rock-cut tombs (Daniel, 1962, p. 55). But again, as with the phrases megalith and megalithic, the use of the phrase 'rock-cut' may just have grouped together a wide variety of prehistoric collective tombs that are not formally and functionally connected. There are as is well known rock-cut tombs in southern Portugal and southern Spain, in the Balearics, in Sardinia, in southern France and in Italy and Sicily, but they are not in themselves representatives of a single diagnostic type; they are rather rock-cut versions of a Mediterranean tradition of preparing collective tombs that were sometimes surface built, with megaliths, sometimes surface built with drystone walling, and often rock-cut.

At the moment then it looks as though the Gallery Graves of northern France represent a coastal settlement penetrating up the Loire and into central Brittany and Normandy and moving up the Seine into the Paris Basin and beyond. Whence came these settlers? There are three possibilities; they could have come from northern Europe, particularly from Sweden, or from southern France, or from Iberia.

We have already spoken of three arguments that can help us, and have so far only spoken of the form of the tombs. The other two important points were the construction of the Paris Basin tombs and the art that decorates the walls of some of them. Most of the Paris Basin Gallery Graves are not, strictly speaking, surface tombs, but are constructed by cutting a trench in the edge of a low hillside, lining this trench with megalithic slabs and roofing it with capstones. This is a technique of construction which is met with in Iberia, at Antequera and Matarrubilla and elsewhere.

But to my way of thinking the art in the collective tombs of the Paris Basin is the most decisive factor in trying to assess the origins of their builders. Seven of the Paris Basin Gallery Graves have carved designs on some of their orthostats: the best known of these designs are from Epone, Dampsmesnil, and Boury, and they consist of partial representations of a female figure, usually stylised to a necklace or a pair of breasts. In the rock-cut tombs of the Champagne or Marne area there are, among nearly two hundred rock-cut tombs, four anthropomorphic carvings. These are all in the Petit-Morin valley, three in the Razet group of tombs at Coizard, and one at Courjeonnet. These four figures are set on the walls of the antechambers of the tombs as though guarding the entry; the Courjeonnet figure holds a hafted axe, and at Coizard and Villevénard there are representations of hafted axes without any associated human figures. These figures and representations on the megalithic and rock-cut tombs have often been described (Octobon, 1931; Hemp, 1933; Favret, 1933; Daniel, 1960). There can be little doubt in the minds of most archaeologists that here we see the cult of a female tutelary deity and the cult of a hafted axe and that both these cults, almost certainly associated, go back to the early third and late fourth millennium societies of the east Mediterranean.

While not agreeing in whole with the all-embracing and hyper-diffusionist presentations of an earth mother goddess set out by Neumann (1956), Crawford (1957), E. O. James (1959) and von Cles-Reden (1961), it is difficult not to accept the fundamental tenet in all these and many other books, namely that there spread from the east Mediterranean in what might still be called formally Neolithic and Chalcolithic times a religion and a form of burial, and it is the iconography of this religion that we find on the walls and grave-goods of the megalithic tombs in western Europe. It is one of the fascinations (and perhaps pitfalls) of studying megaliths to trace the eye-goddess in the eye-temple at Tell Brak, in the statuettes of the Cyclades, the plank-idols of Cyprus, among the spirals of Malta, in Spain and Portugal, in France, and her naturalistic representation fading away in Ireland at Knockmany and New Grange (Ó'Riordáin and Daniel, 1964), in the north of Scotland (Henshall, 1963), in Denmark, and being curiously remembered on the chalk-idols from Folkton in Yorkshire (Piggott and Daniel, 1951, p. 13).

The figure represented in the Paris Basin is a Mediterranean figure; how did she get there? Many, including Childe (1957, 314) regard the funerary goddess as

coming from the south of France where many statue-menhirs are to be found. But these south French statue-menhirs, in the departments of the Aveyron, Tarn and Gard are not, for the most part, in megalithic tombs, and their iconography is, it seems to me, parallel to that of the Paris Basin figures and not ancestral to them. In a word both the statue-menhirs of southern France and the funerary figures of the Paris Basin derive ultimately along separate lines from the east and middle Mediterranean.

It seems to us that they are separate lines: one went perhaps via Sardinia and Sicily to southern France and created the strange statue-menhirs whose – ultimately Aegean – tradition survived into a much later time in northern Italy (Octobon, 1931) and Corsica. The other went to Iberia and here flourished first in the mobiliary art of the megalithic tombs, as shown in the idols of Almeria, the decorated marble cylinders of the Guadalquivir region, the decorated pottery of Los Millares, and most of all, the schist plaques of southern Portugal. When this art became mural, as it did in the Dolmen de Soto near Huelva, it became dramatically and unmistakably the ancestor of the goddess faces on the tombs of the Channel Islands and the Paris Basin. We know now from Carbon 14 dating to which detailed reference will shortly be made, that megalithic tombs were being built in western Europe from at least a few centuries before 3000 B.C., and we know from archaeological sources (cross-dating, faience beads *et al.*) that some megalithic tombs were being used, and probably some built right up to the end of the second millennium B.C. and until the arrival of people in what an old terminology would call the Late Bronze Age. We must now face up to the fact that monuments of large stones which our nineteenth century predecessors would have lumped together under the single label “megaliths” were being built in western Europe from perhaps 3500/3250 B.C. to 1000/750 B.C. One should say, parenthetically, that there are some who would like to suppose that the actual building of such tombs went on a thousand years later. Miss Collum was one (Collum, 1935) and Dr. Raftery another (Ó’Riordáin and Daniel, 1964) but this is not the generally accepted view. Indeed it would be fair to say that a great number of archaeologists, at this moment, brought up on the sort of short chronology fed out by Childe in his *The Dawn of European Civilisation* (1957) and Hawkes in his *Prehistoric Foundations of Europe* (1940) are reluctant even to accept that megaliths could be built in western Europe from before 3000 B.C. to at least 1000 B.C.

The importance of the acceptance of this chronology to us here is the question: where in these two thousand years did the postulated builders of the SOM Gallery Graves sail along the Atlantic seaways? When did these people in presumably ancient versions of the present Portuguese *saveiros*, get to the Loire, the coasts of Brittany and Normandy and penetrate up the Seine and its tributaries to build the SOM tombs and then spread into the chalk country of the Marne? The question is a rhetorical one; the constant accession of C-14 dates from the radiocarbon labo-

ratories of the world has produced a climate of thought in which we are thinking anew about megalithic chronology, but not yet sufficient dates to enable us to apply certain chronological information in a way that determines our megalithic theories. There are, for example, only two C-14 dates from Scandinavia at the present and both are from the “cult-houses” of Tustrup and Ferslev. These dates have not yet been published but will, I believe, be published before the publication of this article. Dr. Paul Kjaerum has kindly communicated them to me: Tustrup is 2440 ± 120 and Ferslev 2480 ± 120 . There are less than half a dozen dates at the moment from megalithic sites in Iberia (Leisner and da Ferreira, 1963) and less than a dozen dates from France and the British Isles.

We must therefore go cautiously at the moment, but, with whatever caution we move, it seems to take us to the inevitable conclusion that megalithic monuments were in existence in western Europe before 3000 B.C. This should not, of course really surprise, when we consider the claims made – but not, to my mind, substantiated in detail – for megalithic monuments dating from the sixth millennium B.C. in Jordan and Israel (Anati, 1963). It seems to me that if we accept as facts the dates from Brittany, Iberia and Ireland – and surely they are facts – we must see the spread of Passage Graves in Atlantic Europe as somewhere between spanning the last quarter of the fourth millennium B.C. and the first quarter of the third millennium B.C. That is to say some Passage Graves date from 3250 to 2750 B.C.

What about the Gallery Graves, the *allées couvertes*, of which our SOM examples are very fine representatives? The first answer is that nowhere, in the whole of western and northern Europe do we have as yet any radiocarbon dates to suggest that any Gallery Graves are as early or earlier than the Passage Graves. Therefore, whatever we may think about the inter-relations of these regional types of megalithic tomb plan it would look as though the Gallery Grave was definitely later. We could then postulate that, whatever the origins of the SOM Gallery Graves – be it Iberia or southern France – they should be perhaps after 2500 B.C. and perhaps, in many cases, much after. On the present radio-carbon probabilities outside the Paris Basin we could then think of the Paris Basin tomb builders as somewhere after 2500 B.C. It would seem likely today that the possible floruit of the SOM tomb builders is somewhere in the millennium 2500 to 1500 B.C., and I am not unmindful of the alleged faience found in one of the tombs but no longer traceable in the collections at St.-Germain (Daniel, 1960).

Fortunately we have one radio-carbon date from the Paris Basin. It is not from a megalithic tomb but from a rock-cut tomb in the Champagne area excavated by G. Bailloud and Professor A. Leroi-Gourhan. This is the tomb of Mesnil-sur-Oger in the department of the Marne. Its archaeological material is by general consent late or very late in the Seine-Oise-Marne culture and the two charcoal counts gave a mean average date of 1785 B.C. which suggests that this tomb was used somewhere

between 2000 and 1500 B.C. (Coursaget, Giot, and Le Run, 1962; Leroi-Gourhan, Bailloud and Brezillon, 1963).

While one example is no proof, it is at least an example that provides a date which fits in to our theory. We can now re-see the original idea of the two distinguished archaeologists who invented the SOM culture: we can now see colonists from Iberia travelling along the Atlantic seaways, along routes already pioneered by the Passage Grave Builders and arriving on the coasts of Brittany and Normandy, penetrating up the Seine and settling among an indigenous population of Mesolithic hunters and fishers who had already learned some of the arts of the Neolithic revolution. To a certain extent this reinterpretation of the SOM culture, if accepted, is of great value to our understanding of what the megalith builders were in Europe as a whole, and the concepts of culture-contact and acculturation in northern France may well help us to understand the nature of megalithic "settlement" in other areas like Brittany, Ireland and Scandinavia. Whether as Gordon Childe argued (1957) it is possible to distinguish in the Paris Basin between the tombs of chiefs and the communal tombs of followers is another, and more complicated issue.

NOTE

¹ This paper has not been altered since it was read in 1964. References have been added to a few publications which have since appeared, but it was not possible to take account of their content in the present text.

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