



Definition of the megalithic phenomenon

Simply defined, the megalithic phenomenon is the practice of commemorating (in the most precise sense of the word – “to remember collectively”) certain places of special significance by means of the erection of large monoliths. These large stones are often worked (cut, carved) but also frequently appear in their natural state, that is, as they are found in the geological formation of which they form part. In keeping with this practice’s formidable reach across geography and time, the spaces and structures created by these monoliths are incredibly varied, ranging from single standing stones, to line or circle arrangements, to simple chambers made using a lintel structure, to complex buildings with multiple chambers, entrances, passages, etc.

It is a uniquely *human* phenomenon, in that we find it in societies across the planet (from Atlantic and Mediterranean Europe to the Korean Peninsula via the Near East, the Indian subcontinent, South America, North Africa, Sub-Saharan and Central Africa, Madagascar, Melanesia and Polynesia, etc.) and throughout every prehistoric and historic age since the start of the Holocene. From those that are currently considered the oldest in the world, the Gobekli Tepe temples (south-western Turkey), which date back to the 9th and 8th millennia before the common era (BCE), to those that were in use even into the 20th century of the common era (CE) in areas of Madagascar, Melanesia and Polynesia, megalithic sites have been a constant presence in many societies throughout the world for the last ten thousand years, whether active and in use, or commemorated as ancestral sites.

Thus, as a phenomenon with vast anthropological scope, megaliths bring us face to face with the striking reality of the tension between the diversity and uniformity of human cultures, but particularly with the universality of certain behaviours across time and space as a product and result of our common need for adaptation, for the satisfaction of our needs, and for social organisation. If there is one phenomenon that can encapsulate the extraordinarily collective nature of the experiences of the human species in the last ten thousand years, it is, without a doubt, megaliths. Societies separated by thousands of kilometres and by centuries of temporal distance came up with almost identical ideas and solutions for the commemoration of their most important symbolic sites; for ancestor worship, for the demarcation of their territories, for the construction of their cultural landscapes, and in order to communicate a message of permanence that would transcend the death of individual people and bear witness to a certain view and experience of the world from one generation to another. Large stone architecture is, to a certain extent, inherent to humanity, and this invites us to reflect on all that we human beings must have in common to have adopted – confronted with similar challenges and obstacles – such extraordinarily analogous solutions in times and spaces so distant from one another.

Research Priorities

1.- To research the extra-European megalithic phenomenon. Without a doubt, the region in which this phenomenon has been researched the best, and the most, throughout the world, is Europe. This is, of course, due to the fact that during the short lifetime of archaeological science – almost two hundred years – European universities and research centres have had growing funds and the technological and human resources to study this phenomenon. Incidentally, this does not mean to



say that there are not many mysteries and problems still to be solved in this part of the world. We would welcome an increase, during the coming decades, in the resources available to research the megalithic phenomenon in those non-European countries that lack the ability to undertake such research themselves. This would significantly improve our understanding of the similarities and differences of the phenomenon on a worldwide scale.

2.- To improve the quality of the data on the chronology and diachrony of megalithic monuments. Insofar as they often act as cultural memorials, megaliths continue to be used after their initial construction by successive generations in times that, in many cases, have seen enormous social and cultural transformation. Therefore, those who use them may live in material conditions that differ greatly from those of their founders or initial builders. In Europe, Neolithic megalithic sites often contain evidence that they were frequented and used during the Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman Era, Middle Ages, etc. The use of scientific dating methods that have the necessary precision and scope (for example, with regard to the type and number of samples dated) is an essential requirement for the understanding of this megalithic culture in the context of modern archaeological science.

3.- To improve the quality of scientific studies (especially osteo-archaeological, genetic and geochemical) of anthropological remains found in megalithic monuments. As locations built for the commemoration of ancestors, megalithic sites very often have a funerary function and were used to house the physical remains of previous generations. Therefore, many megaliths are veritable treasure troves of anthropological information. This information can help us to understand a variety of aspects of life in the Past that, for many decades, have gone unnoticed or been seriously overlooked (by archaeological research more focussed on artefacts or architecture), but that are currently gaining much more attention, especially in light of the spectacular advances that have come about in scientific methods that help us to understand such fundamental aspects as the biological conditions of an individual's life (sickness, occupational stress, diet, relationships, causes of death), mobility (migrations, individual movements, exogamous practices, etc.) or cultural and social practices (organisation of society, the carving of bone remains for their use as relics or cultural objects, etc.)

4.- To improve the quality of spatial studies (especially landscape analysis) on the surroundings of individual megalithic monuments. For a long time, the archaeological study of megaliths focussed on the recovery of the objects deposited as grave goods within their chambers. This approach gave rise to a limited and slanted view of the significance of megaliths, which, as research carried out in the last two decades has revealed, are of fundamental geographical importance. This importance is illustrated by the role that megalithic monuments play as territorial markers, delimiters and signs, as reference points in the landscape to facilitate navigation by land (or by sea, as demonstrated in Scandinavia), and as cultural memorials that, transcending the life and death of specific individuals, remain active for centuries and millennia, commanding the respect, the veneration and the worship of successive generations. Megaliths are often places that endure while the societies around them change.