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Megaliths of the World

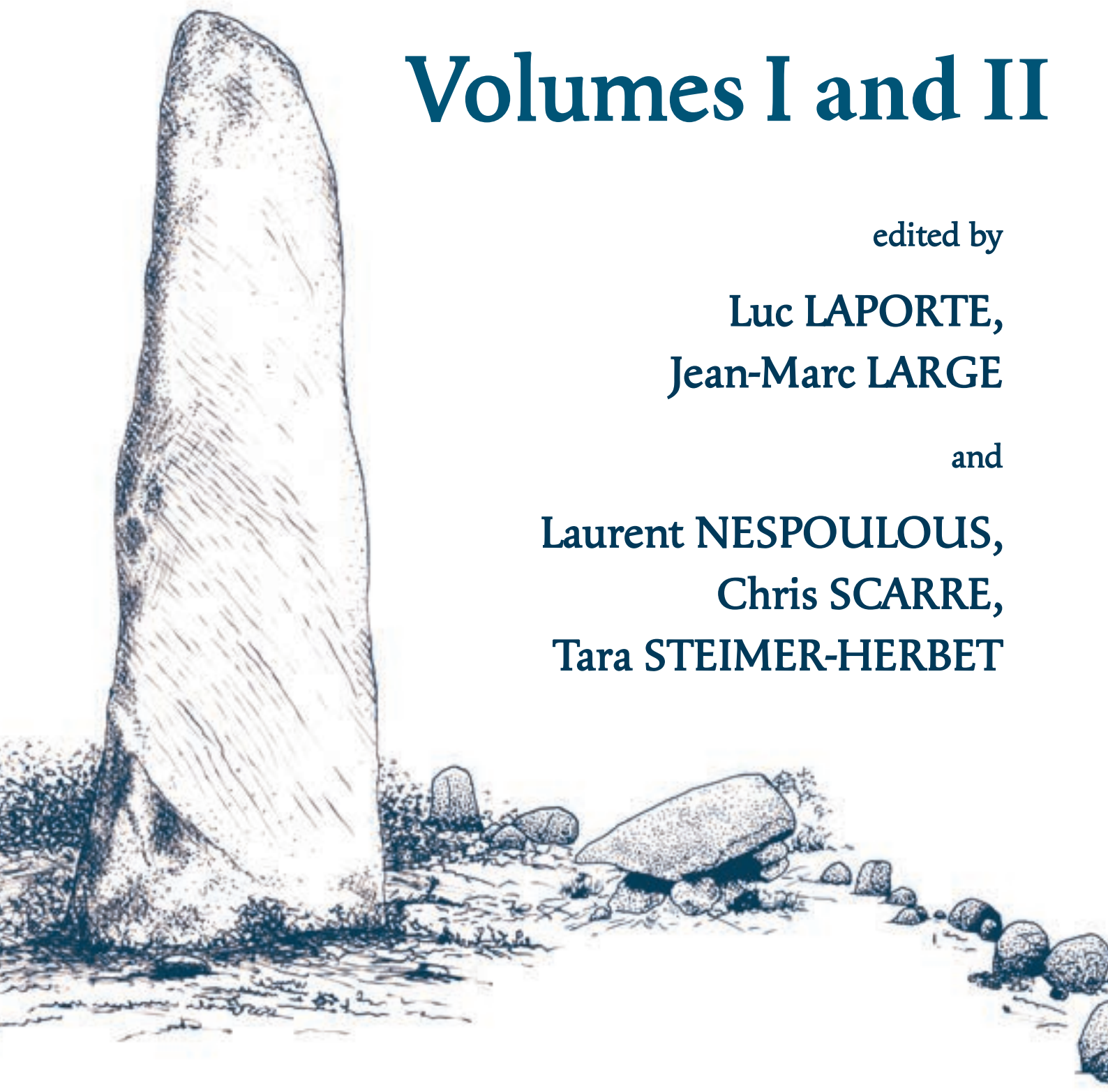
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54

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On the Atlantic shores. The origin of megaliths in Europe?

Abstract: The megalithic monuments of Europe are some of the oldest in the world. Despite the wide diversity of forms throughout the continent as a whole, it is the Atlantic façade that contains almost all of those megalithic monuments that are thought to be the oldest. Defining the precise geographical contours of the Atlantic façade, however, requires the inclusion of some more continental areas, both in France and in the Iberian Peninsula. The origin of these Atlantic megalithic monuments has been debated for many years; the question takes a different form, however, depending on whether the problem is approached from the point of view of the very first stone monuments, or from the idea of mobilizing very large stones to create architecture, or whether it is the symbolic and social changes associated with new funerary practices that are considered. The question of chronologies is, here, of paramount importance, although the problem of recycling, with megaliths erected more than once on the same site, must not be ignored.

Keywords: *megaliths, Neolithic, France, Spain, Portugal*

European megaliths are one of the oldest manifestations of this type in the world. During the Neolithic period, megaliths were built in Europe from central Sweden to southern Portugal and from Orkney and Ireland to the island of Malta (Joussaume 1985; Fig. 2; Laporte & Bueno Ramírez 2016: 229). Despite a very wide diversity of types throughout the continent, the Atlantic façade brings together almost all forms of the oldest megaliths, built during the 5th millennium BCE, as noted by the archaeological community at the Bougon symposium in 2002 (Joussaume *et al.* 2006) and confirmed since by numerous publications (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2016a; Furholt & Müller 2011; Laporte 2015a; Scarre 2011, among others). However, accurately defining the geographical extent of the ‘Atlantic seaboard’ requires the integration of several continental areas, both in

France and in the Iberian Peninsula, since the division of Neolithic Europe between the Linearbandkeramik and Mediterranean cultural groups is now perceived as more permeable. The potential contribution of Mesolithic traditions must also be taken into account.

The question of the origin of these megaliths has been debated for a long time but the answer depends on whether it is approached from the perspective of the very first stone monuments, or of the first mobilization of very large stones to create architecture, or from the angle of the symbolic and social changes associated with new funerary practices. The question is also very different depending on whether the focus is on Great Britain and Ireland, the west of France or the Iberian Peninsula. It is now accepted that the first British and Irish megalithic

monuments are a little more recent. Their relationship with the monuments of northern and western France is dealt with in another article in this volume (Scarre & Laporte, this volume, p. 1253). We will concentrate here on the Atlantic coast of France and on the Iberian Peninsula. Other manifestations, specific to the northwestern limits of the Mediterranean, are dealt with by J. Guilaine, this volume, p. 1281.

For the last 30 years, discussions concerning the oldest megaliths in Europe, whatever their origin, have faltered with regard to three points in particular: the sometimes prior presence of collective burial practices in the same territories, in the context of hunter-gatherer societies; the antiquity of certain standing stone structures in relation to megalithic burial chambers, and their relationship to the advent of the Neolithic period; and the emergence of the first funerary monuments, in distinct forms depending on the geographical areas concerned. The same ambiguity surfaces each time: the available data and the resolution of the chronologies do not always allow us to prove the local existence of a strict causal link between the recurrences that emerge from studies over a long period of time. We will deal with each of these points after a few brief historiographical reminders.

1. Brief historiography

The oldest archaeological excavation reports on megaliths in Europe date to 1685. They concern work carried out on a monument in the Netherlands and, independently but in the same year, on another in western France. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Swedish archaeologist Montelius proposed a classification of megalithic ruins, henceforth attributed to the 'Polished Stone Age', which distinguished 'dolmens', 'passage graves' and 'gallery graves'. This classification was based exclusively on the arrangement of the large stones forming the sepulchral area and was defined largely by the absence or configuration of access structures. Even today, this approach contributes to structuring of the seriation applied throughout northern Europe.

This same author situated the origin of European megaliths in 'the East' (Montelius 1899), in keeping with diffusionist theories, which were widespread at that time. The first inventories already showed

strong disparities in the distribution of these megalithic ruins (Martin *et al.* 1880), with areas of concentration that served as anchor points for megalithic 'routes' used to explain the expansion of the phenomenon across Europe (Fergusson 1872); maritime movements along the Atlantic coast were frequently cited, among others. Indeed, a proposal outlined by Montelius (1907), applying his own classification to Brittany, was based entirely on such routeways. At the same time, and shortly after the discovery of Troy, Siret (1893) presented the results of his excavations at Los Millares (Andalusia) and Almería as the fruit of a Near Eastern colonization, also testified by the presence of *tholos* tombs (Fig. 1).

The perimeters of the Mediterranean Basin were at that time considered to be subject to external and civilising influences. Faidherbe (1869) had already carried out several excavations on megalithic ruins in Algeria, on territories recently colonized by France. In the same year, Galles (1869) published a cautious comparison between the shape of these North African dolmens and the megaliths he had excavated a few years earlier in the region of Carnac, in Brittany. Diffusionist theories underpinned the study of megaliths for a long time, in some places until the late 1960s.

A century later, the rudimentary assemblages of very large stones composing the *antas* structure in Almería were thus presented as pale 'indigenous' copies of masonry constructions with a circular chamber and regular walls, as were the *tholoi*, which characterized the cemetery of the fortified city of Los Millares, in southern Andalusia (Almagro & Arribas 1963). However, excavations carried out by Leisner & Leisner (1951) at Reguengos de Monsaraz (Evora), Portugal, had already demonstrated that such *tholoi* were unquestionably later than the megalithic chambers built with orthostats. The *anta* / *tholos* sequence of Farisoa, (also in Evora), made this very clear. Bosch Gimpera (1932) also positioned the oldest megaliths on the Atlantic coast with subsequent expansion towards the southeast of Spain.

Further north, from the 1930s onwards the work of the Péquart (Péquart *et al.* 1937; Péquart & Péquart 1954) on the Mesolithic cemeteries of the Breton islets of Tévéc and Hoëdic argued for a local,

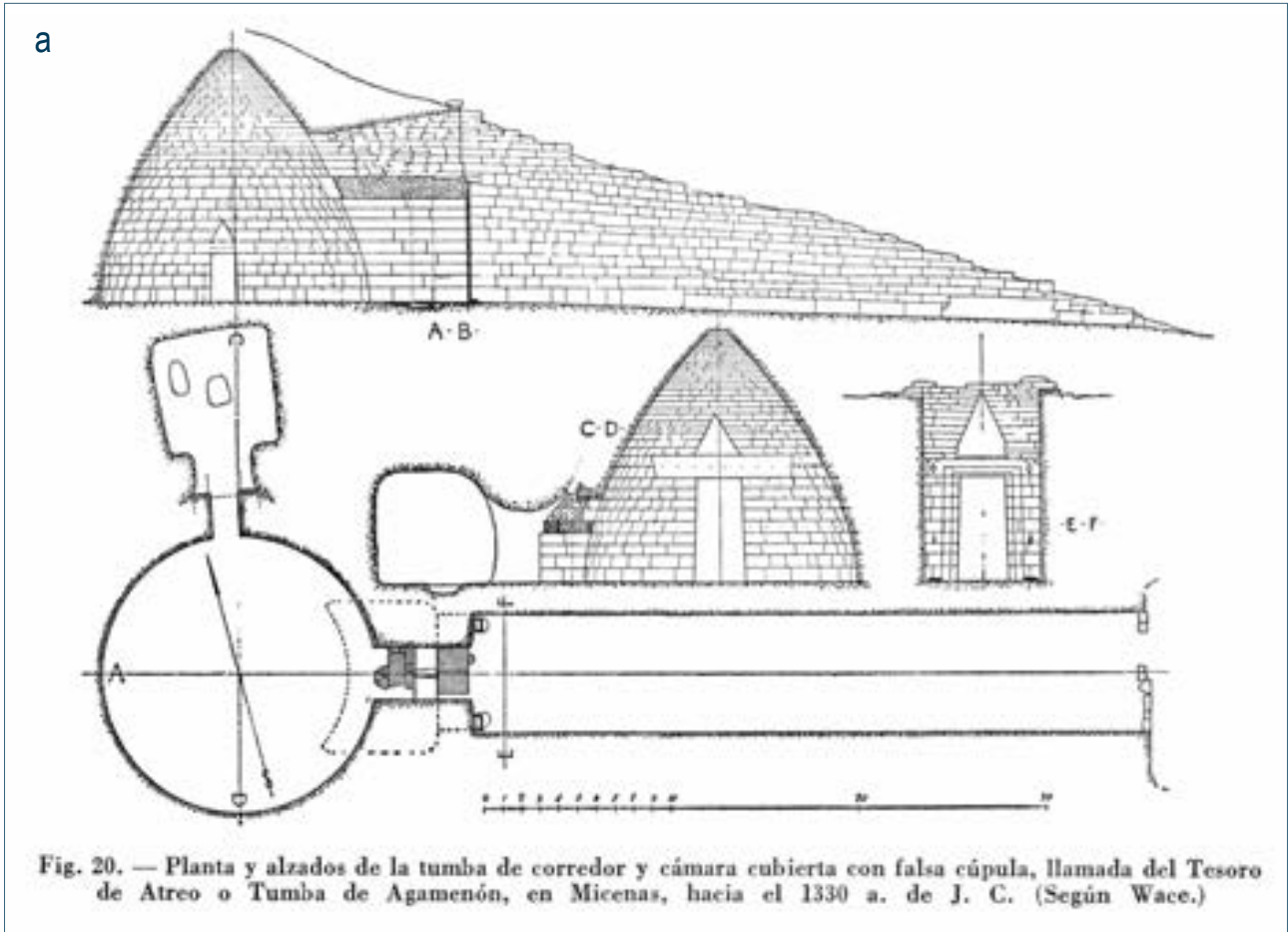


Fig. 1 – Historiography - Ex orient Lux: comparisons proposed by Almagro & Arribas (1963) for the *tholos* of the southern Iberian Peninsula: a. Treasure of Atreia in Mycenae (p. 223); b. Tomb at Dimini, in Thessaly (Pl. CXXXXIV, 1); c. Tomb of Kephala in Crete (Pl. CXXXXIII, 4).



Fig. 2 – Historiography - A local origin? Archaeological excavations by the Péquart couple on the islet of Téviec, in Morbihan (France), in 1928 and 1929 (Photos: St-J. Péquart, Museum of Natural History Paris, Melvan collection).

European origin for Atlantic megalithism (**Fig. 2**). In the 1960s, burials unearthed in the shell midden of Muge in Portugal (Roche 1957) were also interpreted as the graves of hunter-gatherers, locally resisting the advance of Neolithic culture until a rather late stage, as though, at this far end of the Neolithic world on the Atlantic coasts of Europe, the idea of building megaliths was the result of such a confrontation (Whittle & Arnaud 1975). This was a pattern that seemed to be reproduced even on the Danish coast. The attribution to the Neolithic period of most of these megaliths was hardly questioned.

Until the 1950s, the duration of the entire Neolithic period was believed to be somewhat short, perhaps less than a millennium, and its chronology was believed to be rather late. Megalith building and the Neolithic period were considered part of the same horizon, the terms for which were sometimes confused. In the 1960s, the first radiocarbon dates, particularly those obtained in Brittany for the monuments of Carn and Barnenez (Giot 1960, 1987), marked a turning point. They demonstrated for the first time that these megaliths were more than 2000 years older than the pyramids, stimulating a cycle of regional, even regionalist studies in Europe that had begun many years previously.

The duration of the Neolithic period was further extended by several millennia with the calibration of radiocarbon dates in the 1980s. From then onwards, the terms 'megalithic' and 'Neolithic' had to be strictly dissociated against a background of locally enhanced periodization. At the same time, a synthesis published by Joussaume (1985) offered a renewed overall vision of these megaliths on a European scale and beyond. In Brittany, the discovery of the reuse of two fragments of the same stele for the construction of two distant megalithic chambers, at Gavrinis and Locmariaquer (Le Roux 1985), raised the question of the anteriority of certain structures of erected stones (L'Helgouach 1983).

In Portugal, Calado (2005) subsequently proposed associating some standing stone structures with an early Neolithic, an interpretation supported by the chronology of megaliths with reused stelae in the Iberian Peninsula (Bueno Ramírez & Balbín Behrmann 1992). In the centre of the Paris Basin,

the superimposition of Passy-type funerary structures on the site of houses locally attributed to the last expansions of the VSG culture (Mordant 1997) led to the dissociation of the emergence of the first funerary monuments and the first developments of megalithism. In Brittany, excavations of the Villeneuve-Saint-Germain (VSG) culture house at Haut-Mée revealed a spatial association with the wedging pit of an isolated standing stone (Cassen *et al.* 1998, 2019: 577). The chronology of major Carnac-type monuments was also revised (Boujot & Cassen 1992). The presence of some Early Neolithic elements underlying many megalithic funerary monuments was then reported in Bougon, western France (Mohen & Scarre 2002), on the Spanish Meseta (Zapatero & Delibes 1996), and in Galicia, northern Portugal (Abad Gallego 1993; Cruz 1995; Domínguez-Bella & Bóveda 2011; Vaquero Lastres 1999).

At a European scale, the anteriority of megaliths built on the Atlantic coast was established at the end of the 1990s (Müller 1997) and the beginning of the 2000s (Joussaume *et al.* 2006). A decade later, the refinement of radiocarbon chronologies through Bayesian analyses (Whittle *et al.* 2011) definitively dated the megaliths in the British Isles. Like those in northern Europe, they are the result of a later neolithization. The extension of the method to all the radiocarbon dates available for megaliths in Europe led Schulz Paulsson (2017, 2019) to propose three successive waves of megalith expansion across Europe, through maritime routes. This interpretation, as well as the assumed return to diffusionist theories, leads us back to the work of Montélius.

2. The Mesolithic period and megaliths

The appearance of the oldest megaliths on the Atlantic coast of Europe was frequently attributed to Neolithic populations who were derived, at least in part, from hunter-gatherer ancestors, previously established in these same regions. This was perhaps due to the rudimentary character attributed to such constructions at that time, but also probably to the totally foreign character of these traditions within the 'package' of the first Neolithic settlers, both the LBK and Cardial cultures. However, no truly megalithic construction in Europe can be directly linked to Mesolithic populations, apart from a few

structures (and sometimes even stone cists), dated to the Upper Palaeolithic (van Berg & Cauwe 1996). Arguments are thus based on the idea of an indirect, very long-term transmission of much more general cultural traits.

One such frequently raised argument concerns the early practice of collective burials (Cauwe 1998; Schmidt *et al.* 2018). Another relates to the particular staging of the burial of a few individuals, sometimes involving a large quantity of boulders (Laporte *et al.* 2011: 293). Yet another argument highlights a certain form of continuity in the repertoire of symbolic representations used in prehistoric cave and open-air parietal art (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2015a: 67-69; Bueno Ramírez & Balbín Behrmann 2021). In the Paris Basin, Passy-type monumental funerary structures were constructed by the Cerny culture in which Bailloud (1964) thought he could identify some remnants of their hunter-gatherer past.

Collective cemeteries are now attested in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula during the Mesolithic period, as well as in the Levant, in Catalonia, and on the Atlantic coast of Portugal where they were previously known. New studies particularly concern the burials of Muge, interspersed within mounds resulting from a progressive accumulation of shell waste and other materials (Fig. 3). The burials in these shell middens accumulated over a long period extending from the 8th to the 5th millennia BCE (Bicho *et al.* 2017). A continuous sequence between the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic periods seems convincing for recently documented sites such as Cabeço de Amoreira, in which collective burials were part of social practices for millennia.

Similar observations are beginning to be characterized on the Cantabrian coast, where Canes Cave contains a succession of burials dated from the 7th to the 5th millennia BCE, with the possibility of expanding the extent of these discoveries during new excavation campaigns (Arias *et al.* 2009, 2013; Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2018a). New discoveries have also been made in the Levant region, near the shores of the Mediterranean. The funerary deposits of El Collado, Valencia, include 14 individuals dated between the 10th and 8th millennia BCE (Gibaja *et al.* 2015; Terradas *et al.* 2016), and burials at the Corona Site, Alicante, have chronologies from the

8th and 7th millennia BCE (Fernández-López de Pablo *et al.* 2013).

Growing documentation also confirms that important Mesolithic and Neolithic sites, traditionally associated with the prehistory of the Taje estuary (Peyroteo 2016), also existed elsewhere on the Iberia. Most revealingly, funerary customs, shown through material assemblages, link the Mesolithic to the Neolithic in continuous diachronic use, sometimes in the same burial sites. The natural caves of Romangordo (Cáceres) in Spanish Extremadura were used for sepulchral deposits between the second half of the 8th and the 4th millennia BCE (Cerrillo & Gonzalez 2011), as was the cave of Nerja near Malaga (Jordá & Aura 2008) in the 8th millennium BCE, other sites in the bays of Cádiz and Málaga (Ramos Muñoz 2006) between the 7th and 6th millennia BC, and that of Cerro Virtud near Almeria in southern Andalusia (Montero *et al.* 1999) in the 5th millennium BCE.

The custom of being buried with other individuals during public ceremonies with certain objects displayed was not specific to megalith builders, nor to the 'maritime' populations of the Iberian Peninsula. In western France, in Charente, Mesolithic burials are attested in Peyrats Cave in Agri (Boulestin 1999), which experienced a long period of ritual activity until the end of protohistory. They were even identified in the burial deposits of Artenac Cave, the eponymous site of a cultural group from the end of the Neolithic period (Bailloud *et al.* 2008). The collective burial in Bélestat Cave in the Pyrenées is attributed to the beginning of the Middle Neolithic and has often been evoked as an example of a possible continuity of funerary practices between Mesolithic and Neolithic collective burials (Claustre *et al.* 1993).

Sometimes, the staging of funerals also involved the mobilization of large masses of stones. The stone structures rising above the Mesolithic burials of Tévéc and Hoëdic in Brittany are now interpreted along these lines (Boulestin 2016). The radiocarbon dates associated with these burials have been largely revised (Schulding & Richards 2001; Marchand 2014), and today, their links with the oldest Breton megaliths seem very distant (Marchand 2017). Similarly, at Auneau, in the centre of the Paris Basin, an individual deposited in a seated position was

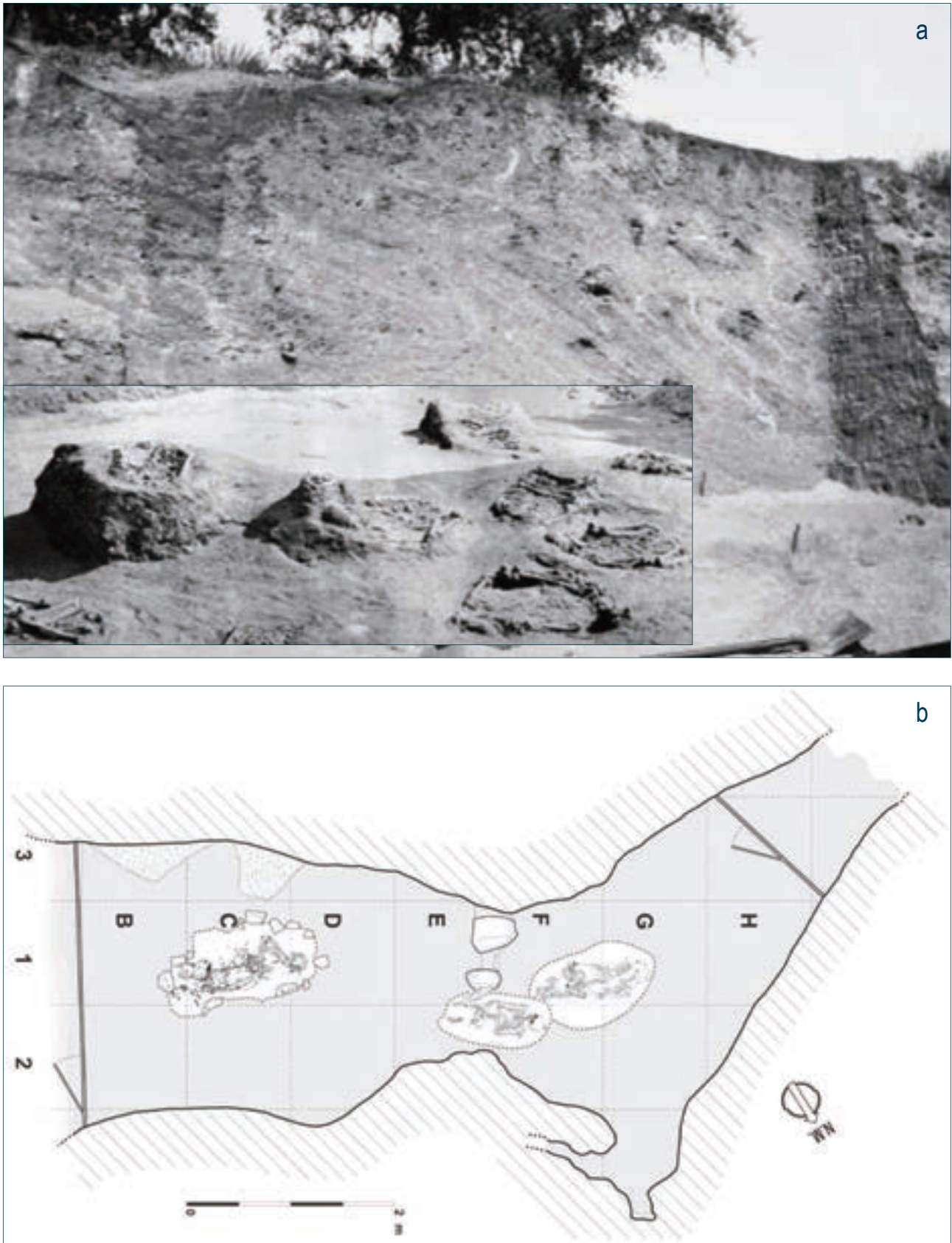


Fig. 3 – Last hunter-gatherers. Mesolithic sepulchral practices in the Iberian Peninsula: a. Shell middens and graves of Muge in the Tagus estuary, Portugal (After Jackes & Lubell 2016); b. Burial cave of Los Canes in Asturias, Spain, containing several burials from the 6th millennium BCE (After Arias *et al.* 2013).

covered by more than 300 kg of rock in a Mesolithic burial dating from the 8th millennium BCE (Verjux & Dubois 1996).

At Pontcharraud in Auvergne, several individuals deposited in an extended position and placed side by side were partially covered by a single stone slab (Fig. 4); this multiple burial is attributed to the end of the Early Neolithic or the beginning of the Middle Neolithic (Mohen 1989: 173). In the centre of the Paris Basin, Malesherbes-type slab burials date from the middle of the 5th millennium BCE. These belong to the Cerny culture group (Verjux *et al.* 1998). They are single or double burials overlain

by a very large stone slab moved horizontally, somewhat like the cover slab enclosing the burial area of a dolmen. In fact, the cover slab is sometimes the only megalithic element of a passage grave, as in chamber III of tumulus C of Péré at Prissé-la-Charrière (Deux-Sèvres, France), where it rests entirely on dry-stone walls (Laporte *et al.* 2021).

The term ‘collective burial’ encompasses a wide variety of practices (Schmitt & Déderix 2019). Recent developments in palaeogenetics point to family burials in several burial areas within such passage graves in western France (Cheronet *et al.*, this volume, p. 1260). However, it would be risky

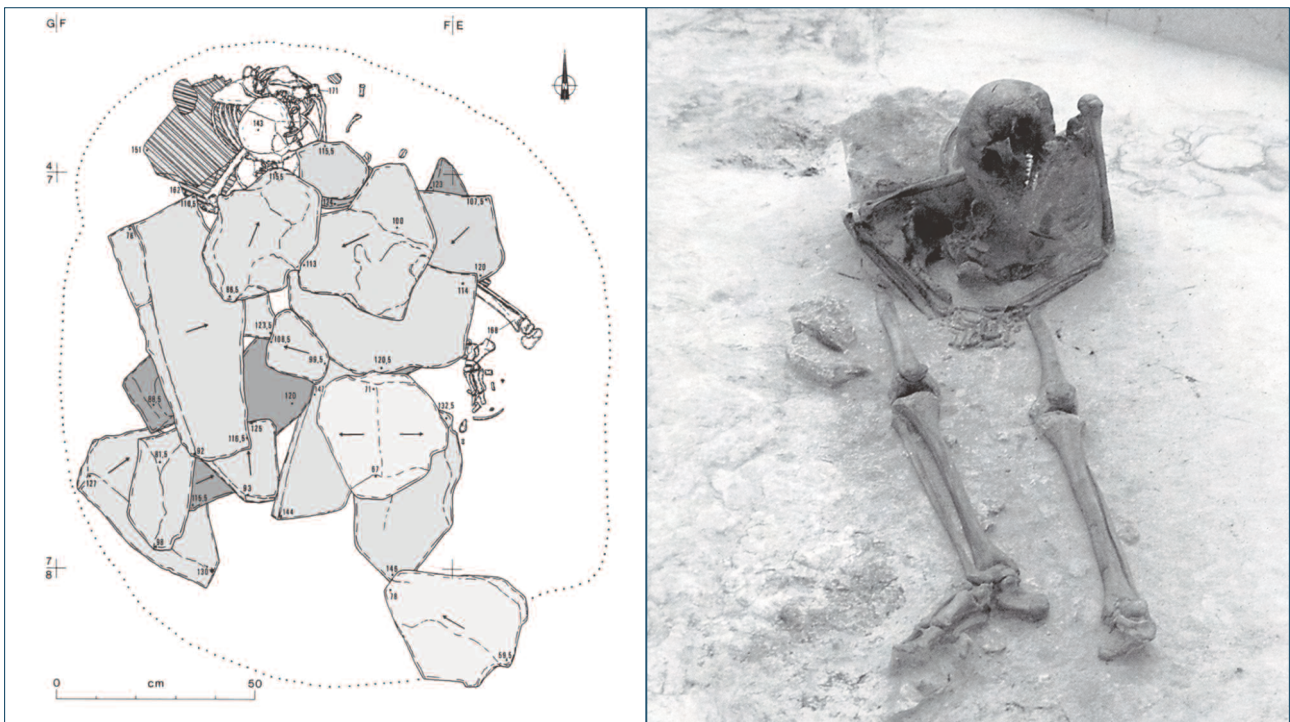


Fig. 4 – Last hunter-gatherers. Displacement of large masses of stones for the funerals of a few, in France: a. Mesolithic burial of Auneau, 8th millennium BCE (After Verjux & Dubois 1996); b. Grave 31-37 of Pontcharraud 2 near Clermont-Ferrand, Auvergne, in the early Middle Neolithic (After Loison 1989: 173).

to transfer these practices to much older periods too hastily. Also working in France, Chambon (2003) introduced an additional element of discontinuity when he suggested distinguishing Late Neolithic collective burials from those of the Middle Neolithic, citing an example in Normandy on the westernmost margins of the Paris Basin, where a small number of individuals were merely laid out side by side in the same megalithic chamber.

What remains is the continuing idea of corpses deposited successively on the floor of underground cavities (Laporte *et al.* 2011). The symbolic repertoire of some of these burials does not appear to reflect an abrupt break between the burial practices at the end of the ice ages and those of the first farmers (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2019). This can be observed on the Iberian Peninsula but may, of course, be more difficult to accept for colleagues studying the burials of northern Europe, where such elements of continuity are lacking. Very recent developments in the palaeogenetics of western Europe report similar disparities, albeit through totally distinct mechanisms, in the transmission of a heritage passed down from the last hunter-gatherers in Neolithic populations (Rivollat *et al.* 2020).

3. First farmers and megaliths

For Joussaume (2003), the emergence of megalithism in Europe was less related to the collective nature of funeral deposits and more to the fact that the dead now took their place on the ground that the living walked upon, within elevated constructions reserved for them. This was not the case among the earliest farmers in western Europe but is not surprising as the latter were absent from the whole Atlantic coast of Europe. The possible existence of Epipalaeolithic or Mesolithic populations beyond the coastal fringe of the Iberian Peninsula was even ignored for many years.

The interior of the Iberian Peninsula, where megalithic constructions are less common, was for many years – until at least the 1980s – considered practically devoid of human settlement during late prehistory. Previously, only the region of the Levant was believed to have been home to pioneering Early Cardial Neolithic settlements, similar to the south

of France (Guilaine 1980: 54-55). New discoveries on the coasts of southern Spain and Portugal – at first only a few scattered sherds – began to suggest the existence of an Early Neolithic as presence on the coasts of central-western France (Joussaume 1981).

The extent of the wave of continental colonization was also slow to be acknowledged; its expansion to the tip of Brittany, through some of its later developments, was little accepted until the 2000s (Tarrête & Le Roux 2008: 11, 24). Twenty years later, in France as in Spain and Portugal (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2016a: 163; Carvalho *et al.* 2003; Diniz 2001; Fábregas *et al.* 2019; Sanches 1997), all regions are known to have experienced at least some interaction with the various groups of the early Neolithic, during a period that lasted longer in the south of France and in the north, west and south of the Iberian Peninsula. Each time that knowledge advances, the position of the oldest known megaliths has to be renegotiated locally against the new backdrop.

3.1 In the west of France

On the Atlantic façade of France, the oldest standing stone structures were erected at least as early as 4700 cal BC, which is the more recent of two charcoal dates from the fill of the wedge for a standing stone erected in Beltz, in the Morbihan (Hinguant & Boujot 2009). On the island of Hoedic (**Fig. 5**), a row of standing stones is associated with an ancient floor that yielded pottery from the Cerny group (Large 2015). Independently, in the Yonne department in the centre of the Paris Basin, the oldest Passy-type structures are dated to around the same period (Pillot & Lemerrier 2014). In central-western France, two similar dates on human bones come from small circular burial chambers built of dry stone in the Bougon Necropolis (Mohen & Scarre 2002). It has been suggested that the bones could be relics, placed there at a later stage (Chambon 2003). The earliest dates for burials in stone cists, both in Switzerland and on the edge of Poitou in France, certainly predate the middle of the 5th millennium BCE (Soler 2007).

The various elements that contribute to the form of many megalithic monuments seem to be implanted

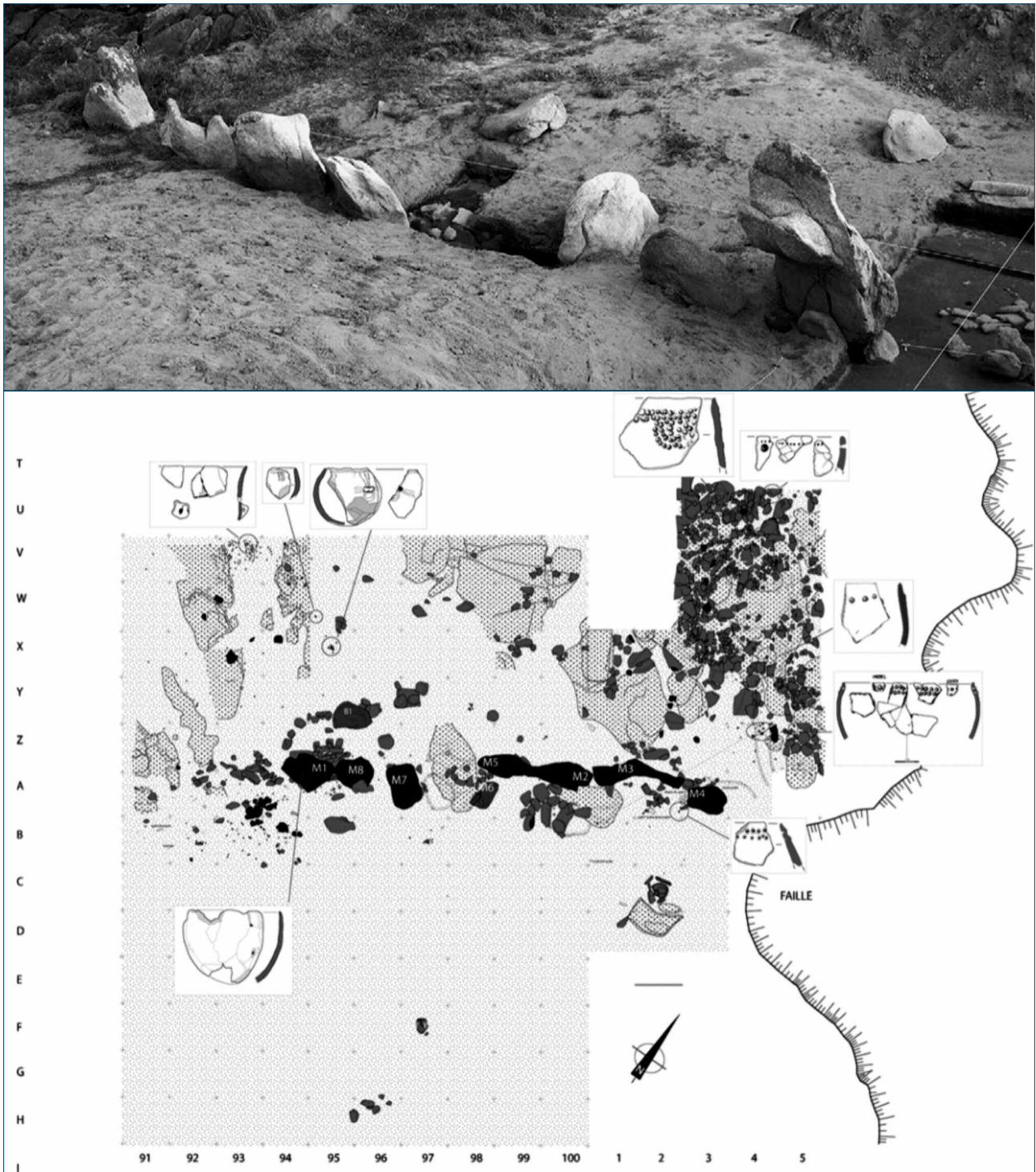


Fig. 5 – First farmers and megaliths in western France. Alignment of standing stones of Douet, at Hoedic (Morbihan), with wedge pits associated with a former floor containing pottery attributed to the Cerny group (4700-4300 cal BC) (After Large & Mens 2008).

in distinct places both in the north of France and in central France, from the second quarter of the 5th millennium BCE onwards (Laporte *et al.* 2011). It has been suggested that this is the result of increased social competition, something which is also reflected in the establishment of long-distance exchange networks for prestigious goods – towards the Alps and towards the Iberian Peninsula – which were particularly active until the third quarter of the same millennium (Pétrequin *et al.* 2017; Querre *et al.* 2019). The (early) discoveries of a concentration of such prestigious goods on the shores of the Gulf of Morbihan has, however, focused attention on one particular aspect, promoting an excessively unilinear periodization of funerary architecture against a background of somewhat circular reasoning (Laporte 2010, 2019).

On the scale of the whole of western France, several discoveries in the past ten years confirm the idea of a polythetic genesis where each of the above-mentioned elements only gradually combines with the others, and in a different way in each place.

For example, dated between 4700 and 4550 BCE, the very large building on wooden posts at Beurieu, in the Aisne, monumentalizes the trapezoidal plan of the LBK culture houses (Colas *et al.* 2018). In Normandy, at about the same time, monument 29 at the Fleury-sur-Orne necropolis shows a similar plan bordered by lateral quarries, except that it is built mainly with mud walls, or clods of grass (Ghesquière *et al.* 2015, 2019). Neither site is directly associated with a burial area. On the other hand, in Brittany at La Croix-Saint-Pierre (Saint-Just, Ille-et-Vilaine), two pots with deformed mouths were collected in a probable burial pit that was initially dug in the centre of a small circular construction on posts, and secondarily buried under a tumulus crowned by a stone carapace (Briard *et al.* 1995), as at Souc'h at Plouhinec in Finistère (Le Goffic 2006). Such pottery with deformed mouths is attributed to the beginning of the Middle Neolithic, between 4700 and 4300 cal BC.

Small circular funerary huts and monumental houses with a very elongated layout appear in the same chronological horizon as the construction of the first rows of standing stones erected on the Morbihan coast. Depending on the location, some of these edifices are in wood, others are built

with mud walls, and perhaps others with dry-stone walls. Malesherbes-type slab burials, or 'boulder graves', mentioned above, are contemporaneous with these structures. Initially, different forms of burial chambers were then integrated into equally diverse monumental architectures (Laporte *et al.* 2002: 209-211). The internal volume of the small, circular dry-stone constructions with corbelled vaults, surrounded only by the masonry strictly necessary, for example the first phase of chamber F of Barnenez (Cousseau 2016), is hardly different from that of a wooden hut (**Fig. 6**).

In the case of some cists, also built of wood, raw earth, or stone – for example, the open-ground grave of Croix-Saint-Pierre – the funerary function of holding the bodies of several persons in succession may have pre-dated the monumentalization of the site (Scarre & Laporte 2021). This does not mean that the funerary area was devoid of any access structure, nor does it posit that it was provisional or perennial, as we demonstrated at Prissé-la-Charrière (Scarre *et al.* 2003; Laporte *et al.* 2021). The use of stone as a building material indicates above all a concern for durability, regardless of the nature of sepulchral practices. The presence of a covered access or passage extends this concern for durability to the entire monumental mass. In Normandy, one of the exclusively dry-stone passage graves of the necropolis of Condé-sur-Iff (Dron *et al.* 2016) was built in around 4450 cal BC. It is thus contemporaneous with the Passy-type structures recently excavated during rescue archaeology in the neighbouring necropolis of Fleury-sur-Orne (Ghesquière *et al.* 2019).

Some sepulchral areas built above the ground include standing stones, some of which may have been reused, interspersed within dry-stone walls. The construction of a few other such funerary areas, sealed only by a large cover slab, may perpetuate a tradition of moving very large slabs of stone during the funerary rites of a few individuals (**Fig. 7**). All the technically possible combinations, which produce so many regional styles, were implemented. Sometimes, these individual elements lost their own significance and the construction becomes a very large stone cist with orthostatic walls. This is the image that many want to retain of the (passage)



b

Different types and sizes of mounds associated with different types of graves

**Monumentalization
« separated » from burial features**

Fleury 29 / Beaurieu

Standing stones

Monumentalization for the staging of funerals

Cist

Graves under Boulders

Funerary sequence preceding monumentalization

Access, or closure, is primarily linked to the diversity of funerary practices, not to the monumentalization in itself

Funerary practices integrated within the monumentalization process

Durability of the monumentalization process induces the integration of a covered access linked to particular funerary practices

Fig. 6 – First farmers and megaliths in the West of France. Multiple combinations: a. Passy-type monuments at La Jardelle in the Vienne, some with a buried stone cist and an access ramp (Photo: J.-P. Pautreau); b. Different associations between monumental structures, with or without associated funerary structures, and different architectural forms of the burial chamber, built above ground (According to Briard *et al.* 1995; Cousseau 2016; Ghesquière *et al.* 2019; Soler 2007; Verjux *et al.* 1998).

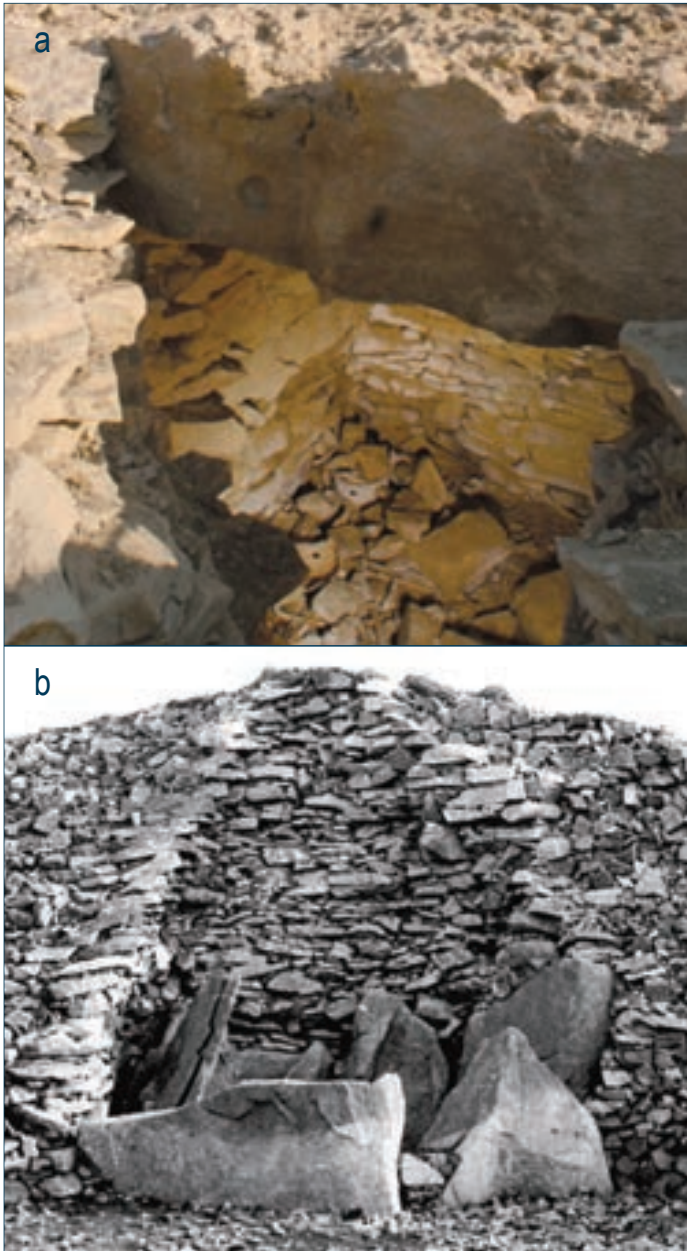


Fig. 7 – First farmers and megaliths in western France. Cover slab and standing stones along the walls of a stone burial chamber: a. Chamber III of tumulus C of Péré at Prissé-la-Charrière (Plaine d'Argenson, Deux-Sèvres), where the cover slab is the only megalithic element capping walls built exclusively of dry stone; b. Standing stones along the walls of chamber A of the great cairn of Barnenez in Plouézoc'h (Finistère) [Photographs: P. Aventurier and Archives of the Archéosciences laboratory (UMR 6566, Rennes)].

graves in the west of France, although it is the result of a process of multiple additions that did not stabilize until the last third of the 5th millennium BCE (Laporte *et al.* 2011).

The unilinear sequence proposed for the Gulf of Morbihan is thus only one case among the diversity of interactions observed at the scale of western France, and the idea that there might be a phase of pre-megalithic funerary monumentalism no longer makes much sense (Fig. 8).

On the Morbihan coast, elongated mud monuments and large standing stones erected in the open air are considered to predate the construction of megalithic chambers with upright stone walls, sealed by a cover slab and with covered access. Elsewhere, in Normandy as well as in Poitou and perhaps in the north of Finistère, small circular dry-stone burial chambers were built from at least the middle of the 5th millennium BCE onwards. On the sedimentary margins of the Armorican Massif, elongated monuments surrounded by peripheral ditches were still in use until at least about 4300 or 4200 cal BC (Laporte *et al.* 2018) and even beyond, for example, the Chamblandes cists in central France (Chambon 2016). In the Morbihan alone, recent studies demonstrate the existence of close links between open-air standing stone structures and those erected in the walls of passage graves (Laporte 2015b; Gouézin 2017).

3.2 In Spain and Portugal

As in the west of France, the question of the age of open-air standing stone structures in the Iberian Peninsula cannot be totally dissociated from their presence in megalithic chambers, in the same way as for symbolic representations in the open air or on the walls of a chamber. Such long-term approaches also highlight a certain complementarity in collective burial practices in natural or artificial cavities, and throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Stone is an integral part of the ideological system of the first producers and forms the basis of social pacts, as well as ritual displays over more than three millennia (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2007).

The inventory of these standing stone structures, which are very numerous on the Iberian Peninsula, has been largely completed in recent years in the

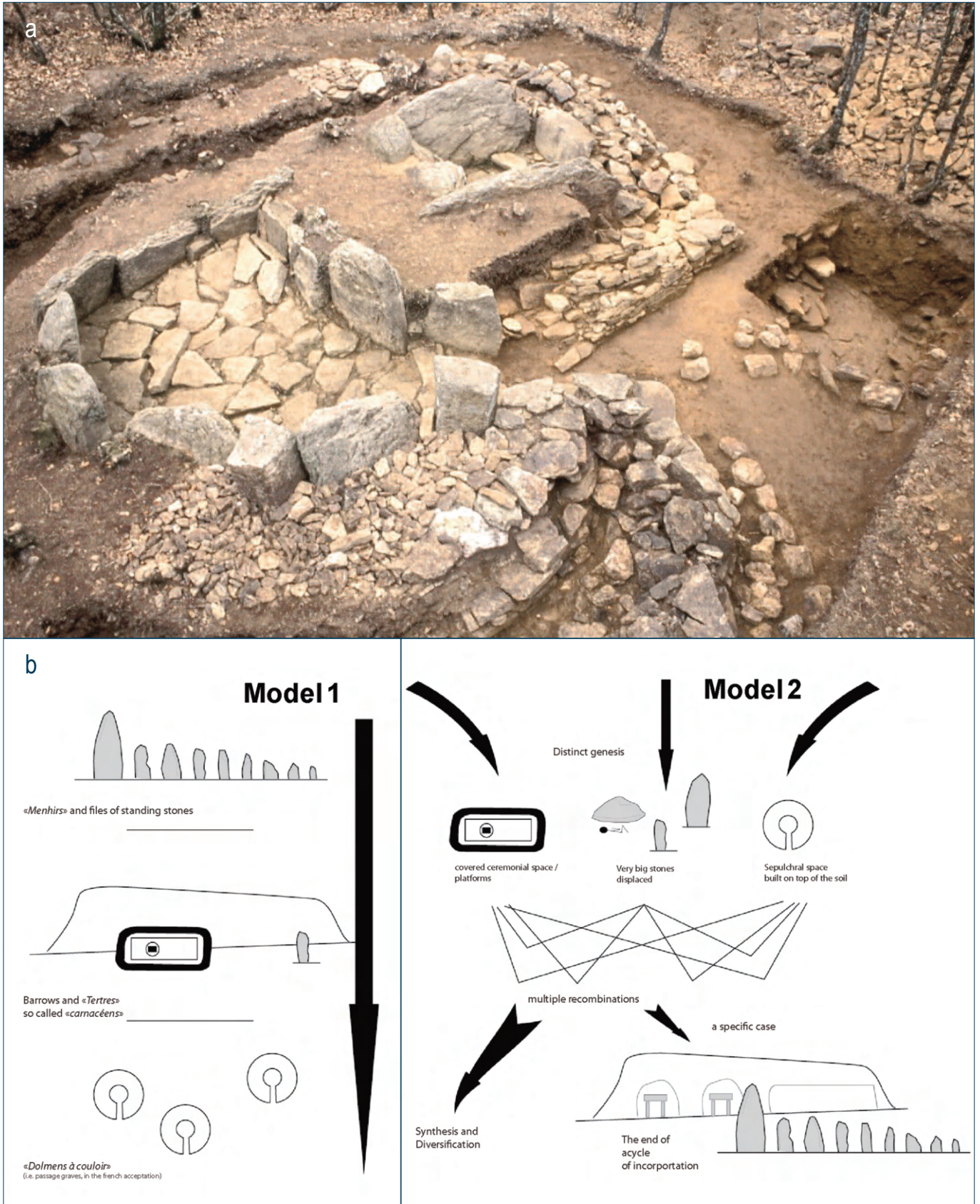


Fig. 8 – First farmers and megaliths in the West of France. A polythetic genesis: a. Passage grave built against the outer wall of the dry-stone massif enclosing a former cist, at Trédion in the Morbihan region (Photo: P. Gouézin); b. What is presented locally as an unilinear model (model 1), for example around the Gulf of Morbihan, is only a specific case in the context of a polythetic genesis (model 2), on a regional scale (After Laporte *et al.* 2014).

Basque Country, the Meseta Norte, Andalusia, and Catalonia. Some were erected in the 4th and 3rd millennia BC (Moreno Gallo *et al.* 2010; Peñalver 1983; Tarrús 2011), and some even until the Iron Age (Rocha 2003). Calado (2005) suggested attributing some of the standing stone circles in Alentejo to the Early Neolithic, to the 6th millennium BC, based on what seemed to him to be a recurrent spatial association between sites with impressed pottery surface finds. This situation is common in southwestern Portugal and was recently confirmed around the collapsed standing stone of Cabezo near Alcántara (Bueno Ramírez & Balbín Behrmann 2020). New radiocarbon dates on charcoal (Fig. 9), collected from the filling of wedge pits of the standing stones of Patalou and Meada (Oliveira 2016), now clarify previous dates with large margins of error (especially OSL dates). As in France, menhirs were erected all over Iberia during the 5th millennium BCE, from the Atlantic coast to the interior and Catalonia, while older dates have yet to be validated. Such structures were subsequently built

throughout the period corresponding to the development of megaliths (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2015c, 2018b).

The reuse of decorated stones in the construction of a new megalithic chamber can stem from the dismantling of an older funerary monument the appropriation of standing stones originally erected in the open air (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2015b: 55-60; Laporte *et al.* 2017). This is the case with many monuments in Galicia, for example, with all the elements of the great dolmen of Dombate (Fig. 10), including two decorated panels (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2016b). In the province of Huelva, the original stele of the Dolmen de Soto must have been 6 m high (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2018b: 198). The structures from which these reused slabs come could not themselves be dated but they clearly predate the constructions into which the slabs were later integrated, some of which date from the end of the 5th millennium (Alberite dolmen in Cádiz, Otoxobaso and Pariburu in Basque Country), and many others from the very beginning of the

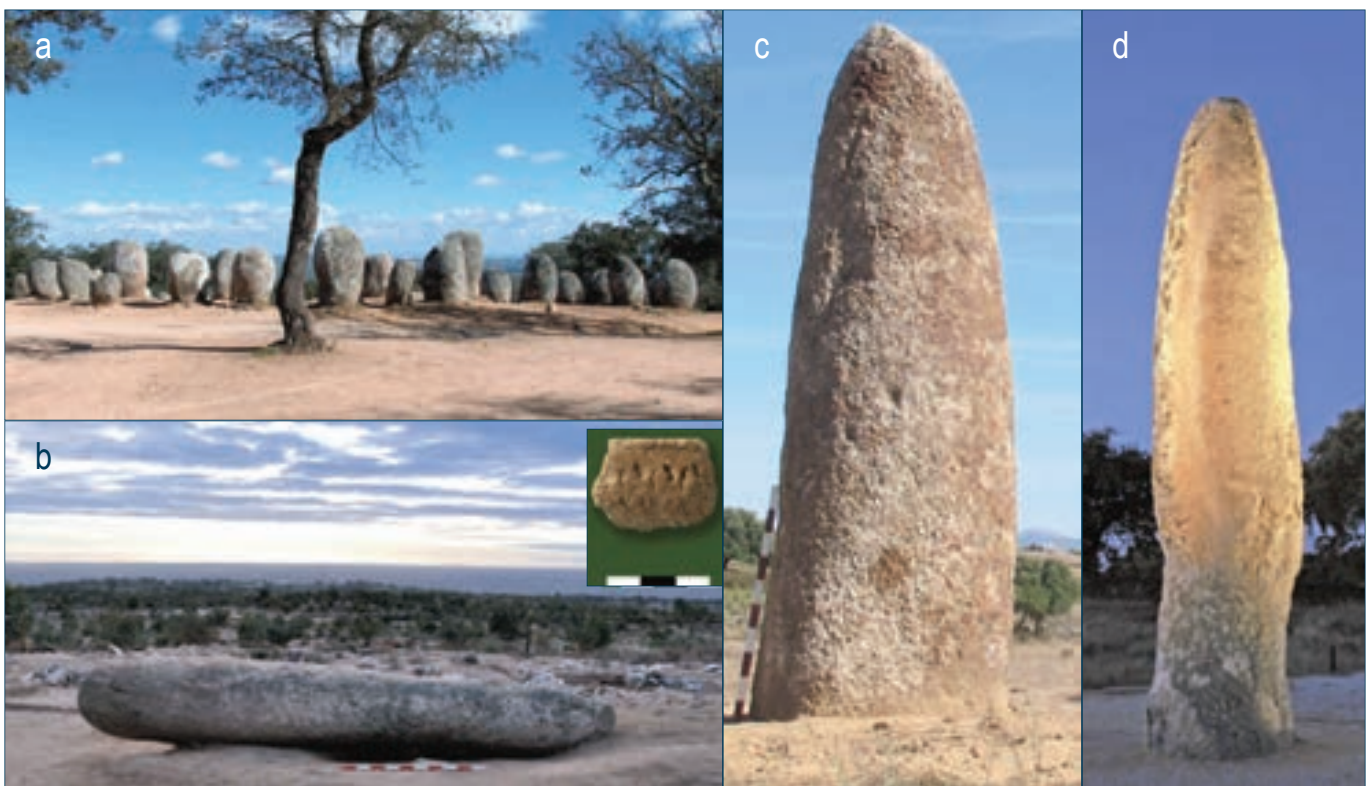


Fig. 9 – First Farmers and megaliths in the Iberian Peninsula. Early Neolithic standing stones: a. Almendres circle of standing stones, near Évora (Portugal), taken as an example by M. Calado (2005); b. Cabezo Menhir in the province of Alcántara (Spain), collapsed on an archaeological level containing Early Neolithic impressed ceramics (Photos: R. de Balbín Behrmann); c. Menhirs of Patalou and Meada (d), in Portugal, where charcoal gathered from wedge pits gave radiocarbon dates contemporaneous with the Early Neolithic, respectively 5240 \pm 30 BP (Beta - 416341) and 6022 \pm 40 BP (Utc - 4452) (After Oliveira 2016b; photos: R. de Balbín Behrmann).



Fig. 10 – First farmers and megaliths in the Iberian Peninsula. Dolmens of Dombate, in Galicia (Spain). The upper photograph shows a first tumulus, enclosing a small dislocated megalithic chamber, and the large tumulus covering it, associated with a passage grave (Photograph: Lestón). The lower photograph corresponds to a detail of the large megalithic chamber built with reused stelae, in particular the truncated cover slab (After Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2016b; photos: R. de Balbín Behrmann).

4th millennium BCE, such as the necropolis of Pozuelo in the province of Huelva, Spain (Linares Catela 2016, 2017), or the monument of Châ de Arcas in Viseu, Portugal.

The same reasoning is sometimes applied to objects deposited in funerary areas (Fig. 11). This is how the presence of San Martin-el Miradero-type bone spatulas, which gave radiocarbon dates between 4900 and 4700 BCE, has been interpreted (Bueno Ramírez 2020a: 212). These objects, decorated with human images, can be found both in the megaliths of La Rioja (Ebro basin), and in those in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula, where circular chambers with a large diameter and a corridor, so characteristic of the Portuguese region of La Beira, are common.

The radiocarbon dates associated with these architectures confirm an attribution to the last centuries of the 5th millennium. There are also several cases in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula, such as the sites of Azután, El Castillejo or Valdemuriel, which yielded dates similar to those obtained for the spatulas (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2016a). In the Basque Country, the confidence interval of the oldest radiocarbon dates associated with the megalithic chambers without corridors, such as Igartza, Otsaarte and Larrarte, extends to the middle of the 5th millennium BCE (Mujika & Edeso 2011: 165).

In Catalonia, where megaliths had previously yielded radiocarbon dates from the end of the 5th millennium BCE (Tarrús *et al.* 1987), large cists covered by

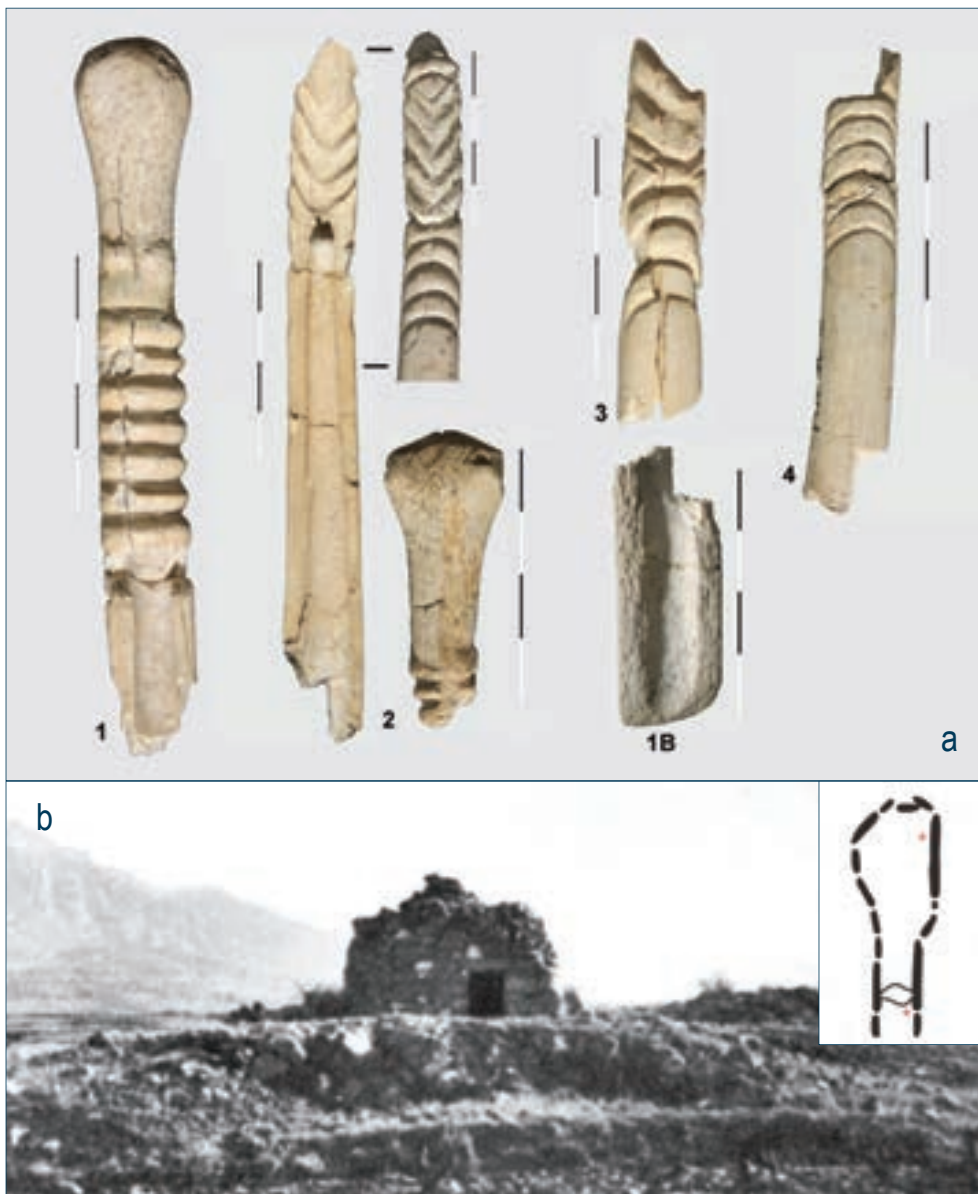


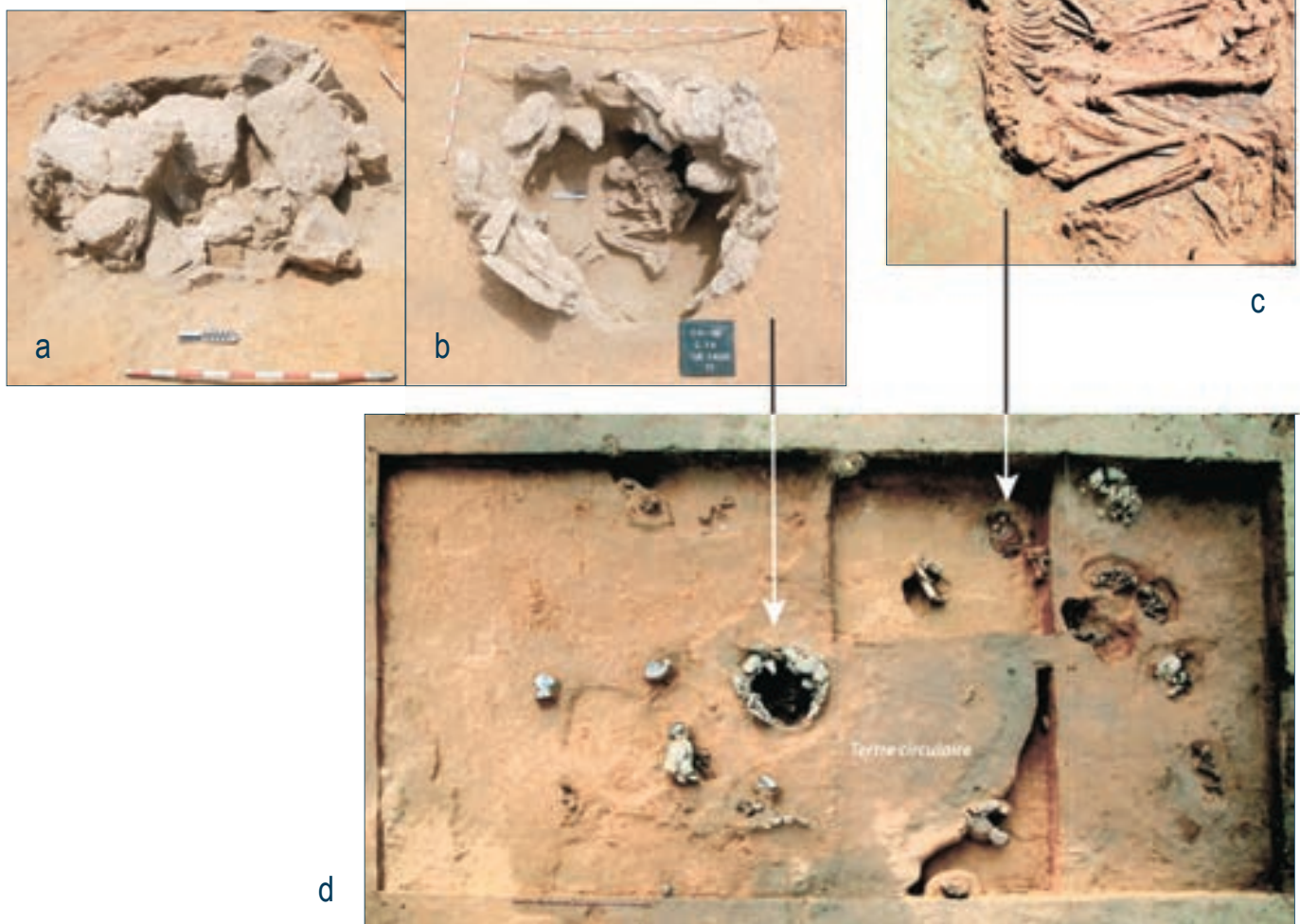
Fig. 11 – Early farmers and megaliths in the Iberian Peninsula. Dolmen of San Martin in Laguardia, in the province of Alava (Spain): a. Decorated spatulas, two of which were radiocarbon dated to the 5th millennium BCE: 5920 \pm 40 BP (Beta-317865) and 5380 \pm 40 BP (Beta-339342); b. The dolmen of San Martin at the time of discovery, and position of the two dated spatulas in the passage grave. Human bones from the same source have yielded four dates, all from the second third of the 4th millennium BCE (After Fernandez-Eraso *et al.* 2015).

a Tavertet-type circular mound are associated with Montbolo pottery (Tarrús & Carrera 2018; Molist *et al.* 2007). They thus belong to the first half of the 5th millennium BCE, and show links with Chamblande-type necropolises, such as the Camp de Ginebre in Caramany (Vignaud 1998), and with some pit sepulchres (*sepulcros de fosa*) in the lower Ebro valley. Much further south are the pits and hypogea of the Campo de Hockey in Cadiz (Fig. 12), where radiocarbon dates on shells have been confirmed by dates from bones (Sanchez-Barba *et al.* 2019; Vijande *et al.* 2015). The grave at Arroyo Saladillo, at Antequera, and the cemeteries of Los Cascajos and Pateranbide in Northern Iberia, repeat similar funerary associations, in architectures and grave goods,

with the same dates (García Gazólaz *et al.* 2011; Oms *et al.* 2016; García Sanjuán *et al.* 2020).

In northern Portugal and Galicia, funerary monuments with megalithic chambers were certainly erected from the end of the 5th millennium BCE, some with chambers accessed by a corridor, and others without, as at da Cruz (1995) previously noted in the Serra de Aboboreira. Dates obtained for paintings in the dolmens of Galicia attest to the antiquity of some of these architectures. Genuine ‘decorative stratigraphies’ have been identified there, as in Antelas, Monte dos Marxos and Os Muiños. Some of the oldest phases have been directly dated (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2007, 2016b; Carrera 2008: 123, 2011: 444; Castro & Vázquez 2007; Fábregas & Vilaseco 2013).

Fig. 12 – Early farmers and megaliths in the Iberian Peninsula. Burial in a cist under the mound of the Campo de Hockey in Cadiz, Andalusia (Spain): details of the cover (a) located above the two central burials (b), and two of the burials in a peripheral grave covered with red ochre (c). General view of the circular burial mound, the central chamber and the peripheral sepulchral pits (d) (After Vijande *et al.* 2015 and Sanchez-Barba *et al.* 2019: Fig. 2).



Another important aspect of research carried out over the past ten years is a consideration of the architectural transformations undergone by these monuments during the Neolithic period. In Galicia, examples of enlargement of the mound are frequently dated to the beginning of the 4th millennium, as in Romea (Mañana Borrazás 2003), Cotogrande 1

(Abad Gallego 2000), Ponte da Pedra (Vaquero Lastres 1999), Chan da Cruz 1 (Patiño Gómez 1985), A Granxa (Chao Álvarez & Álvarez Merallo 2000), and are sometimes associated with a reformatting of the decorative system, as is the case at Mamoá Grande (Chao Álvarez 2000), Monte dos Marxos (Carrera & Fábregas 2002) or Dombate



Fig. 13 – Early farmers and megaliths. Architectures of stone, earth and wood: similar walls, made of dry stone or mud (and sods), which tightly surround the burial chamber, as at Prissé-la-Charrière in the Deux-Sèvres (a) or at Chousa Nova I in Galicia (b), or which structure the monumental mass, as at Petit-Mont in Arzon (c) in the Morbihan or at Cruchaud in Sainte-Lheurine (d) in the south of Charente-Maritime (Photos by L. Laporte (a), M. J. Boveda (b), P. Gouézin (c) and (d) after Burnez & Louboutin 1999).

(Alonso Mathías & Bello Diéguez 1995). The identification of wooden or mud structures in Galicia, as in Asturias, now allows for a more complex interpretation of these architectures (Fig. 13), as well as their reshaping over time (Dominguez-Bella & Bóveda 2011; Rodríguez del Cueto & Busto Zapico 2020).

Architectonic polymorphism define the early megalithic phases of the Iberian Peninsula (Bueno Ramírez 1991).

A similar chronological range from the 5th to the 3rd millennium is also cited for the use of natural caves as collective burials (Pardo Gordo *et al.* 2019; Idearq), with similar objects to those collected in megaliths. Such caves are well documented in the eastern part of the peninsula where no megalithic monuments are known (Salazar García *et al.* 2016). However, the vast majority of the megalithic ruins on the Iberian Peninsula are attributed to different stages of the 4th millennium BCE (Boaventura 2011; Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2007, 2016a; Fábregas & Vilaseco 2013; Linares Catela & García Sanjuán 2010; Mújika & Edeso 2011; Santa Cruz del Barrio *et al.* 2020; Scarre *et al.* 2003, among others). A similar complex of collective graves and standardized deposits was identified in natural caves (Carvalho 2014), *tholoi* (Aranda *et al.* 2021), and hypogea (Boaventura & Mataloto 2013), contemporaneous with some small passage graves (Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 2004; Mataloto *et al.* 2017), and the earliest phase of the large, enclosed sites of Perdigões (Valera *et al.* 2017). At that time, megaliths were being built as far away as the British Isles and northern Europe however this is beyond the chronological framework of this article.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize the very small number of megalithic funerary monuments for which we have reliable *ante quem* and *post*

quem radiocarbon dates available to document each construction stage and each project – sometimes built successively in the same place – for these architectures in inert stone materials. In France, as in Iberia, such firmly dated monuments can be counted on the fingers of one hand for periods before the 4th millennium BCE. Standing stone structures are undoubtedly the simplest expression of such constructions in elevation. They are also the most difficult to date. In the absence of a context layer in a primary position strictly contemporaneous with construction, dates on charcoals from wedging pits provide only a *post quem*. Elements of relative chronology from the rather systematic reuse of some of these stelae in megalithic chambers cannot be too hastily assimilated into a periodization schema. Debates on the oldest megaliths in Europe are thus far from closed.

In Brittany, as in southern Portugal, the attribution of some standing stones to LBK culture or Cardial Early Neolithic groups, is based on rather tenuous spatial associations. In France and in the Iberian Peninsula, the most reliable recurring elements for the construction of such structures seem, for the moment, rarely to occur prior to 4700 BCE. In western France, such stones are only one component of an integration process observed throughout the 5th millennium BCE with multiple combinations similar, perhaps, to the Iberian Peninsula. Here, long-term approaches highlight the complementarity, over several millennia, of symbolic representations exposed in the open air or on the walls of natural or artificial cavities; there is similarly no reason to dissociate the oldest standing stones in the open air from the oldest megalithic burial zones. In any case, the dead (the ‘ancestors’) came to occupy a place in the land of the living that neither the last hunter-gatherers nor the very first farmers more widely in Europe seemed to give them.

Translated from French
by Louise Byrne