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Fraser J.A. 2018. *Dolmens in the Levant*. London: Routledge (Palestine Exploration Fund annual 14). 374 p. By T. Steimer-Herbet[5]

Funerary megaliths in the Levant are a vast subject. Despite the discovery of thousands of monuments since the end of the 19th century, their good visibility and accessibility due to low levels of sedimentation have led to the destruction of a considerable proportion of funeral deposits. Archaeologists have thus been forced to develop an approach relying mainly on morphology and the study of buildings.

The publication reviewed here is the result of research carried out by J.A. Fraser for his doctoral thesis on dolmens in the Near East. The structure of the work resembles that of his thesis; both consist of two parts. The first part is further subdivided into six chapters (1 to 6) and is 176 pages long. The second part also contains six chapters (7 to 12) and is 163 pages in length. Between the two parts are 13 colour plates. The whole is extremely well supplemented, with 23 tables and 195 illustrations, most of which are sourced from archival images.

Fraser uses the chapter 1 as an introduction where he expresses his founding idea: dolmens are monuments belonging to an uncommon funeral tradition among societies in the Levant in the 4th century BC. By the morphological criteria he lists on p. 5, the author considers only a few megalithic monuments in the Levant other than trilithon dolmens to be "true" dolmens. The bulk of his study thus concerns itself with the latter type. This introductory chapter covers problems with the terminology surrounding, and the functions of, these monuments, their chronology and distribution, and his research site in the Wadi ar-Rayyan (Jordan).

In the chapter 2, Fraser presents an excellent summary of his predecessors' work. He reproduces the scientific lines of inquiry followed by archaeologists in the latter half of the 20th century as they sought to assign the monuments to nomadic, semi-nomadic, pastoral, agri-pastoral and finally sedentary societies. The author himself concedes that the attribution of dolmens to nomadic tribes was due to the lack of information about the regions in question. Since the 1990s, several overseas missions have developed projects in collaboration with local institutions about the occupation of areas considered to be peripheral to large urban centres in the Safa, the Leja and the Syrian Golan in Syria, around Irbid, Zarqa, and Madaba in Jordan, and in the Golan and Galilee in Israel. Several theses on the subject have been published: Mizrachi 1992, Steimer-Herbet 2001, Paz 2003, Gibbins 2008, De Vreeze 2010, Bradbury 2011, Fraser 2015. There has been a considerable improvement in our understanding of lifestyles and subsistence in these areas (Philip 2003; Nicolle and Braemer 2012). The findings of this research are well described by the author.

To avoid the dead end of interminable typology used by his predecessors, Fraser choose in the chapter 3 to considerably reduce the field by restricting the study of megaliths to trilithon dolmens, which are, as their name suggests, composed of two upright slabs topped off by a roof-stone. Fraser relies on European author G.E. Daniel's 1958 publication for his typological argument to distinguish between "true" and "false" dolmens. Unfortunately, that he did not refer to the excellent 2011 article by L. Laporte, L. Jallot and M. Sohn, which demonstrates the conceptual difficulties inherent in restricting such a complicated archaeological object as the dolmen to a single definition. Indeed, although excessive emphasis is

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sometimes placed on the difficulty of resolving terminological and morphological distinctions, it must not be forgotten that the very essence of megalithism is to be found in the builders' intentions, that is to say construction of an above-ground structure that follows certain conventions, such as the use of large slabs and a stone covering, rather than in its physical manifestation.

This decision leads to a considerably smaller corpus, reducing the chronological range and its geographical distribution. In the scientific literature, trilithon dolmens that have delivered artefacts are from the EB I (Early Bronze Age I) and are located in a T-shaped area East of the Jordan river in Jordan, in the Golan in Israel and, to a lesser extent, in the Leja in Syria. While the author may have a clear idea of the distribution of the sites in his field of study, the map of the monuments' locations on p. 8 is found wanting: the names of the necropoles and the number of trilithon dolmens in the corpus are missing.

In the chapter 3, Fraser manages to settle a question that has divided researchers, *i.e.* whether dolmens first appeared in the Levant during EB I or during EB IV. By drastically reducing his corpus to include only trilithon dolmens, the author succeeds in demonstrating that the dolmens containing artefacts from EB IV in the Golan (Epstein 1985) were not "true" dolmens but above-ground tombs made of laid-out stones. That being said, the chronological references used by the author for the trilithon dolmens in the Golan are uncertain. These have not delivered artefacts, but Fraser attributes them to BA I by morphological analogy with the one dug up in Jordan at 'Umayri. Here, it is worth noting an incorrectly cited source that crops up in several chapters of the book—the reference to the Qarassa site in Southern Syria. The author cites the material found in the megalithic necropolis in support of his argument to assign the construction of trilithon dolmens to EB I. He cites the discovery of twelve wholes vases from tomb 9 in Qarassa, Syria (p. 41). However, the site did not contain twelve whole vases, but rather a few fragments of objects which were not fully studied as the fieldwork there was not completed. The artefacts display features associated with EB I, but also with EB II and III. What is more, the structure is not a trilithon dolmen but an above-ground tomb with an oval-shaped chamber and a corbel arch covering (Steimer-Herbet 2010; Steimer-Herbet and Besse 2017).

The chapter 4 gives an inventory of "true" and "false" dolmens in the Levant. It is illustrated in rich detail and it is a pleasure to follow archaeologists' work and results step-by-step, albeit through the relatively narrow lens chosen by J.A. Fraser.

The chapters 5 and 6 deal with the spatial relationship between trilithon dolmens and inhabited locations. They would have been interesting if only the author had not decided to boil everything down to simple geographic determinism. Indeed, his geological survey tells us that both trilithon dolmens and dwellings are in areas where the rocks are hard and water is accessible. While this link is obvious, it cannot be seen to account alone for a cultural phenomenon. It would have been preferable, for instance, for the author to examine the resources available in hard rock areas and to answer the question of why people who built trilithon dolmens chose to live there in the first place. Does the geology of those areas give soil allowing for a certain type of agriculture? Does access to water favour a certain mode of subsistence? The author would have been justified in delving deeper into who the builders of trilithon dolmens were. Fraser considers them to be the same individuals as those who lived in the Jordan valley and would have built trilithon dolmens for shelter at the mouths of wadis during EB I. Indeed, the absence of shaft tombs in the areas with trilithon dolmens, in combination with the similarity of items accompanying the deceased, leads Fraser to the conclusion that the same people would choose to bury their dead in trilithon dolmens or shaft tombs as a function of the local geology. However, a study carried out in 2005 in the vicinity of Irbid (Jordan) in partnership with the University of Yarmouk led us to note the presence of both burial methods on a single geological substrate (El-Khouri *et al.* 2006). Fraser relates a similar coexistence at Tell Um Hammad (p. 121) but he struggles to explain it in his findings. If these people were the same, why did they have different funeral rites?

J.A. Fraser describes in the chapters 5 and 6 how research has for decades ignored the relationship between dwellings and megalithic tomb necropoles. Today, it seems obvious that Jebel Mutawwaq (Jordan), Sharaya, Qarassa, and Ain Dakar (Syria) are sites where necropolis and living space functioned together, but this juxtaposition was not well received until only a few years ago. The increase in the number of digs in Syria and Jordan have profoundly altered perceptions of what resources were available under the isohyetal line of 250 mm rainfall. It is now known that there were gardens near Jawa in the 4th millennium BC, with less than 150 mm rainfall per year (Müller-Neuhof 2012), and that in areas featuring dolmens it was possible to cultivate olives, figs, vines, dates and pomegranates. These forms of subsistence have been well documented by J.L. Lovell (2008) in the valleys giving onto the Jordan River. All the evidence points to dolmen builders belonging to flourishing agricultural societies. While Fraser makes the effort to highlight a link between dwellings and necropoles, descriptions of the dwellings' layouts and topographical

relationships between the two are missing. Yet it is known that the layouts of dwellings are characteristic of their period (chain houses from the Chalcolithic, double-apse houses from EB I, rectangular houses from EB II and III) and that necropoles can be placed either outside the main walls like at Jebel Mutawwaq, Sharaya and Qarassa or sometimes very close to the house, as is the case at Marajem (Jordan), Ain Dakar and Menjez in Lebanon (Steimer-Herbet *et al*. 2019). Fraser mentions structures on p. 151 from EB II and III that could be from EB Ib. It would be good to know the distances between the necropoles.

In the chapter 7, still on the topic of dwellings, he brings up the presence of chain houses from the Chalcolithic (p. 186-187), a state of proximity that we observed at Ain Dakar in the Syrian Golan (Steimer-Herbet and Zuobee 2014). How can one call trilithon dolmens a fixed funeral rite while the types of dwellings change? The chapter 7 belongs to the second part of the book, which is concerned with Wadi ar-Rayyan in Jordan. The chapter is an account of the studies carried out in this rich area, which has been relatively well-preserved from urbanisation and the mass growing of olive trees which has destroyed sites such as Damiyah, Jebel Mutawwaq and Mugheirat.

The chapter 8 is a description of archaeological remains discovered by the author during his research programme starting in 2007 in the Wadi ar-Rayyan. These include megalithic structures from EB I up to settlements late into the 1st millennium BC. This part is particularly interesting because of a series of 12 datings performed on cairns, indicating a spread in time between the 4th and 2nd millennia BC.

In chapter 9, Fraser deploys his methodology to describe and classify the dolmens at ar-Rayyan as trilithon dolmens. The digs in this area did not offer up any artefacts, ruling out discussion of funeral rites. For this reason, Fraser relies on the artefact-rich dolmen at ‘Umayri by analogy. An analysis of the architectural techniques shows that most of the slabs making up the monuments are the same size. Fraser thus concludes that the builders used the same methods of extraction. The author provides very well-documented evidence concerning the techniques used to seal the chambers, confirming that regular access to the tomb was possible and did not present any particular difficulty. We also learn in this chapter that 60% of the trilithon dolmens at ar-Rayyan have additional platform-like structures to compensate for the slope of the terrain on which some of them are built. Certain other examples, built on flatter ground, are also to be found on platforms—in some cases grouped with several tombs—implying that the platforms served a social function beyond their architectonic usefulness. Studies of these additional structures and their morphology in the necropoles at Sharaya and Qarassa in the Leja have yielded interesting results, as different necropoles show preferences for certain shapes (Steimer-Herbet 2006; Steimer-Herbet and Besse 2017). There is much to be learned from considering these annexes as components of the overall dolmen architecture in their own right. They can represent belonging to a family or a particular group of individuals.

The chapter 10 looks at the orientation of the dolmens. This is a typical topic in studying megalithism. As usual, the result is that the megalithic monuments, including the trilithon dolmens, are oriented as a function of the major local topographical features, and it is challenging to understand their variations at a regional scale.

The chapter 11 covers the rock quarries and the slab extraction techniques. There is a prior mention in the chapter 9 of the similarity of techniques used in different dolmens. Just as in Sumba on the Indonesian archipelago, the task of extracting and cutting stone slabs was given to a single family (Steimer-Herbet 2018). This chapter is well supported and mentions flint tools, found within and near the dolmens, which were probably used for extracting, shaping and assembling the slabs. Such information is rare, and crucial to an understanding of the assembly line. Fraser reminds us that trilithon dolmens in the Levant are small monuments; building them would have required between 15 and 40 people. Ethnographic studies on similar cases have shown tribe-scale involvement in tomb construction (Steimer-Herbet 2018).

The chapter 12 plays the part of a conclusion, re-capping the ideas put forward in the previous chapters.

This publication is helpful to archaeologists wishing to work on this topic, as it lists the dead ends and methodological pitfalls to avoid. The review of previous research is the most in-depth aspect of the work and gives the reader an insight into the difficulties associated with archaeological missions to the Near East. On the whole, this vast region is poorly understood to date, with under-resourced studies painting an incomplete picture, making very little progress at a time. Local politics and languages of publication are among the obstacles to research which much be taken into account, highlighted here by J.A. Fraser.

In my view, unfortunately, Fraser’s work does not do justice to megalithism in the Levant. One can approach megalithism from many different angles including monument typology, geographic distribution, geology and so on, but it is important to remember that, behind this stone architecture for the dead, the subjects of interest are in fact the people who created it, organised, motivated and fuelled as they were by their intention to express their beliefs. In *Dolmens in the Levant*, only on p. 285 does the author first mention the builders and their

thoughts ("the dolmen-builders sought to…"). Fraser directs his attention to the object nature of tombs, or more accurately trilithon dolmens, at the expense of their anthropological dimensions. The leitmotiv throughout his book is to distinguish trilithon dolmens from other forms of megalithic tombs. That is not without merit, but he forgets that at the turn of the 4th millennium BC, human societies underwent considerable changes that expressed themselves through attitudes to the dead. From simple burial in the earth, there is a shift to above-ground stone structures. In Arabia, the Levant, the Balkans and Europe all display this transformation of funeral rites, a significant social phenomenon. Groups of people invested considerable time and resources to raise these monuments.

Megalithism in the Levant is a phenomenon covering a long period—over 2000 years, with phases of popularity and decline. The evolution of megalithic architecture is not linear. Fraser is right to critique existing typologies and to emphasise that there is too little evidence to establish typo-chronologies. Many monuments have disappeared, while the material from others has been put to other uses. Given a lack of absolute dating, it is impossible to determine the time between monuments. Despite these gaps in evidence, however, it is important to bear in mind that the multiple forms of megalithic tombs in necropoles, the discontinuity of rites, the variability of orientations, the grouping of tombs, and the phases of neglect or re-use of techniques are all testament to a social and historical complexity that are inaccessible by any other sources and that should not be ignored for the sake of environmental determinism.

The Indonesian doctrine of Pancasila "*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*" (unity in diversity) represents megalithism in the Levant fairly well. Considering the multiple aspects of this phenomenon, of which the Wadi ar-Rayyan and others are part, leads one to the following question: why do societies with varied modes of subsistence and funeral rites choose to adopt stone architecture that requires considerable material and social costs to build? In Indonesia, megalithism appears when the Indo-Buddhist kingdoms arrive on Java and Sumatra at the beginning of the Christian era, and when European merchants arrive in the 16th century in search of exotic foodstuffs. These State-based societies need resources from forests for their provisions and export. Contact between populations is fairly minimal and is limited to exchanges of resources from hunting, forest gathering, mineral extraction and slavery. This contact generated riches that local chieftains sought to spread throughout their communities by funding celebrations and festivals to honour their ancestors' achievements by building dolmens (Steimer-Herbet 2018).

In the Near East, one cannot help but notice that the builders of megaliths live in the shadow of City-States. Contact between these societies is never relayed by written sources, however, several objects from Egypt and Mesopotamia have been found in dolmens (Steimer-Herbet 2000; Lovell 2008). Urban centres have always shown an increasing demand for resources and labour. Megalithic societies were in contact with State-based societies and provided them with what they needed to develop. In the periphery around urban centres and at the crossroads of strategic routes, megalithic societies produced, transported and sold their resources. As history belongs to those who control the written record, dolmen builders and their ancestors making an impact on the landscapes of the Levant remain invisible… especially for orientalists describing societies in the Levant in the 4th and 3rd millennium BC. It is a shame not to pay greater homage to them by having a wider field of view than the narrow one chosen by J.A. Fraser.

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