

Megalithic art in the Levantine Rift Valley: the case of the Menjez megalithic monuments in the Akkar (Northern Lebanon)

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Abstract: The discovery of engraved art brings to light new aspects of megalithic monuments in the Levant. During the 4th millennium BC, the inhabitants of Menjez invested significant time in inhuming their dead in megalithic monuments. The study of 12 tombs in that locality yielded 63 pictograms. The description of these signs and their distribution within the monuments enables us to define the scenery established by their creators through careful placement of the rock slabs forming these megalithic tombs. Parallels within the Middle East bring to light cultural and religious codes shared by megalithic builders in the whole region and, in particular, the role played by snake iconography.

Key words: Megalithism, Lebanon, Early Bronze Age, snake, carving.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 5th millennium BC, some of the communities that inhabited the Levant and Arabia adopted specific forms of stone architecture as a way to honour their ancestors. Under the guise of heavily codified constructions, the builders and those who commissioned these megalithic tombs proved very inventive, in terms of both construction methods and monument shape. While dolmens and tower-tombs are the better known forms of such monuments, thanks in part to their resistance to erosion, there are also examples of wall tombs, tumuli, and cists (STEIMER-HERBET 2004). Building these tombs called for mastery of two techniques. First, assembly of large rock slabs, and second, construction of dry-stone walls. As such, funeral chambers are built of orthostates or dry-stone walls and are frequently associated with annex structures linked to funerary rites, such as raised stones, walls, and enclosures.

The doctoral thesis of one of the authors focused on megalithism in the Levant and Arabia (STEIMER-HERBET 2001), for which she described a relatively homogenous geographical distribution of the two great tomb types (Fig. 1). In the Levant, in areas under a Mediterranean influence, where agriculture and arboriculture were possible, dolmens with rectangular chambers covered by rock slabs were the predominant type identified. In Arabia, in desert and semi-desert zones where pastoralism and hunting constituted the main modes of subsistence, tower-tombs with corbelled vaults seemed to prevail. Recent data suggests that while at the scale of the Levant and Arabia this distribution appears homogenous, the

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case-by-case analysis is less absolute. Isolated dolmens have been described within or close to tower-tomb necropolises, such as at al-Makween in Saudi Arabia or at Jebel Jidran in Yemen (STEIMER-HERBET 2001, 57-59). Isolated or clustered tower-tombs, meanwhile, have been found on the margins of dolmen necropolises in the Leja in Southern Syria (STEIMER-HERBET 2007). Hybrid monuments have also been identified. In the Golan (Israel) and in the Safa (Syria), some dolmens possess a square or rectangular chamber associated with a corbelled vault (BRAEMER *et al.* 2004; EPSTEIN 1985).



Fig.1 : Map of megalithic tomb distribution in the Southern Levant (©Project Menjez).



The tombs of the megalithic necropolis of Menjez, in the Akkar in Lebanon, are a good example of such hybrid architecture. These tombs were studied between 1958 and 1969 by Reverend Father Maurice Tallon. Over a hundred megalithic tombs and a few settlements were excavated. The main aim of these investigations was to describe these monuments in terms of architecture, and to date them. Several articles were published, showing drawings of the tombs and photos of the artefacts found within them (TALLON 1965, 1964, 1959, 1958). These included rich ornaments, bronze and obsidian bracelets, cornelian pearls, and seals. These artefacts originate from the end of the 4th and beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. In 1995, one of the authors of this paper studied the ceramics discovered by Father Tallon (STEIMER-HERBET 2000; STEIMER 1996) and confirmed their chronological attribution: these monuments belong to the protohistory of the Levant, as attested by a Chalcolithic ceramic bowl and numerous Early Bronze Age I and III vases (3800-2200 BC).

The first investigations carried out by the Jesuit fathers R. Mouterde and M. Tallon were quick to reveal the difficulty of categorizing these monuments (TALLON 1965, 1964, 1959, 1958; MOUTERDE 1940). R. Mouterde wrote, in 1940, “ *Au premier regard, on serait tenté d’y voir des dolmens, comme il en existe en Palestine, en Transjordanie, en Galilée – et comme on a cru à tort en reconnaître en Syrie centrale; mais on y cherche en vain les grandes dalles de couverture qu’évoque dès l’abord le mot de dolmen* ” [“*At first sight we are tempted to call them dolmens, like those found in Palestine, Transjordan, and Galilee – and like those wrongly identified in central Syria; however, the great rock slab covers associated with the term dolmen are nowhere to be found*”] (MOUTERDE 1940, 111). In 1995, the study of the funerary artefacts conducted by T. Steimer-Herbet led to the re-examination of Tallon’s notebooks. The descriptions of the monuments made with them did not help to establish the type of cover that they might have had. In the article published in Syria in 2000 (STEIMER-HERBET 2000), the author proposed to classify these tombs as ‘funerary cabins’. According to the descriptions made by Father M. Tallon s.j., the monuments did not present any sign of covering, and the accepted hypothesis was that the roof of these tombs was made of organic matter. A recent in-depth study of the architecture of the Menjez tombs carried out in 2018 revealed a different possibility in the reconstruction of these tombs’ roofs, as will be described below. In terms of building archaeology, it appears that the megalithic tombs of Menjez are between the dolmen and the tower-tomb.

This article stems from a restoration and recovery project targeting the megalithic tombs of Menjez. The project was led by T. Steimer-Herbet from the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in collaboration with the Lebanese Prehistory Museum, the Château-Musée of Belesta, and the municipality of Menjez. It resulted from a call for projects by the British Council (CPS552-17) (STEIMER-HERBET *et al.* 2018). Twelve megalithic tombs were re-examined, 50 years after Father M. Tallon s.j.’s discoveries. Fieldwork took place in July and August 2018. Just like other megalithic monuments of the Levant and Arabia, the megalithic tombs of Menjez are built of rough stone, with a few fine adjustments. The builders and those who commissioned these tombs used topography, monumentality, and all other funerary artifices at their disposal to stage their dead (including megalithic chambers, enclosures, and raised stones). There is one characteristic, however, that distinguishes Menjez’s megaliths from others: the presence of engraved signs.

Symbolic approaches, looking at architectural choices, the building phase, the presence of engravings (visible or not) and their remarkable staging - all are precious insights into the



messages carried between the dead and the living. This is particularly visible in the case of snake representations (STEIMER-HERBET *et al.* 2018). The megalithic monuments of Menjez, thanks to the application of new analysis techniques, are therefore a prime location at which to examine this relationship between the dead and the living.

Using 3D images, an in-depth study of the architecture of the monuments and the stone slabs constituting them, as well as taking photos by night with a low-angle light, allowed for the discovery of megalithic art in 11 round or square megalithic tombs and one elongated megalithic multiple tomb.

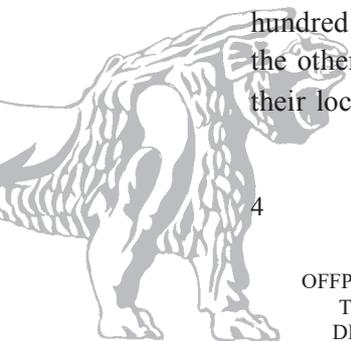
3D data was acquired using photogrammetry, according to a procedure established to provide an in-depth analysis of megalithic architecture (COUSSEAU in press). The aim is to realise a photographic capture of the monument (Sony Alpha 6000) starting from the ground and then from above, to cover all perspectives. Computer software (Agisoft Metashape) identifies reference points in the photographs, using different images with the same point in them to assign spatial coordinates to each point. These points form a point cloud, in essence a numerical model of the object photographed – here, the megaliths. Various computer treatments can then be applied to document the various aspects of the monument's architecture. To bring to light the engraved signs, the methods used were those that have been applied to western European megalithic art for decades (ROBIN 2009). The rotating low-angle lighting technique, coupled with photographic documentation, is the most efficient to make engraved signs visible on rock. A prerequisite, however, is that the environment be dark, hence why in Menjez these investigations were carried out during the night. These techniques allowed us to investigate, document, and study the presence of engraved art on all architectures.

Through the description of these engraved signs, of the tombs bearing them, and the formers' location within the latter, we propose possible interpretations of the signs' function. Integrating this architecture and its symbolism within the Near and Middle Eastern context allows us to explore the religious universe of these protohistoric megalithic societies.

THE MEGALITHIC TOMBS OF MENJEZ

Father M. Tallon had recorded over a hundred tombs in the modern village of Menjez. Today, due to changing cultures and new constructions, only 40 are still visible. For the project 'Valorisation and protection of Menjez's megalithic monuments', the selection of tombs to be preserved was subject to constraints. They had to be situated on land belonging to the municipality, easily accessible to the wider public, their state of preservation had to be good, and they had to present a particular interest for the visitor. The tourist itinerary established for the Heritage House of Menjez currently includes 11 tombs. A twelfth tomb was studied, but because it is situated on private land, it is not currently accessible to visitors. This twelfth tomb is bigger and more complex, and it presents an atypical form and engraved elements that mirror those of the other tombs, hence its inclusion in the descriptions below.

The 12 tombs studied originate from the seven necropoles situated at Djabouriyeh (Nr 6), Fazaa (Nr 37), Hfayane (Nr 36), Khrayeb (Nrs 7-8-8b), Kroum Metowmeh (Nrs 9-10), Qana Maabour (A), and Watta (Nrs 1-2-3) (Fig. 2). These tombs are good examples of the hundred tombs excavated by Father M. Tallon. To this day, we do not know whether any of the other tombs among the 40 visible bear engraved signs. Vegetation has covered them, and their localisation on private land means they are more difficult to access.



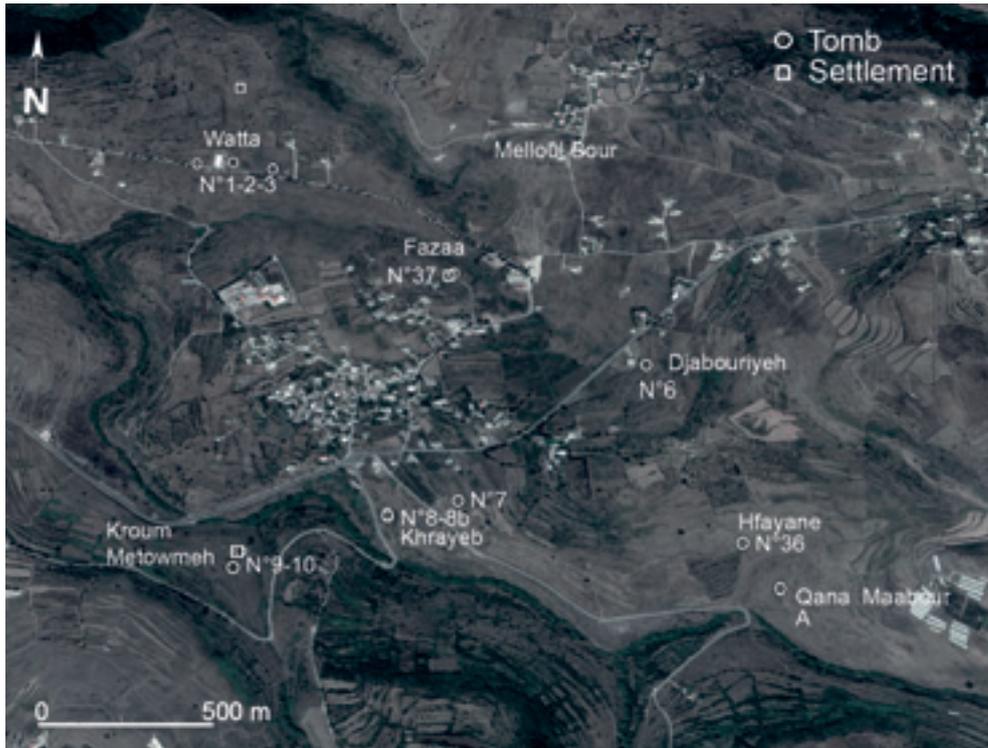


Fig. 2: Map of Menjez with the localisation of the 12 tombs (©Project Menjez).

Eight types of megalithic tombs were identified. These have circular, quadrangular or rectangular funeral chambers, with external semi-circular or circular wall called ‘crowns’. Three of the seven types have no enclosures (types 1-2-3, Fig. 3) while the other five do (types 4-7, Fig. 3). As such, despite their apparent uniformity, there exists a diversity in forms. Among the tombs studied, there is an elongated structure, 28 m long, that is not a classic type of megalithic monument, and contains three chambers: two oval and one circular and its current state seems to be the result of different architectural phases (Fig. 3: Tomb A; Fig. 4: 11). This monument has no known typological parallel in the Levant (STEIMER-HERBET *et al.* 2018). Within the Menjez area, another specimen exists at the place called Bustan el-Beik, but it has been damaged by recent pillage and is no longer accessible.

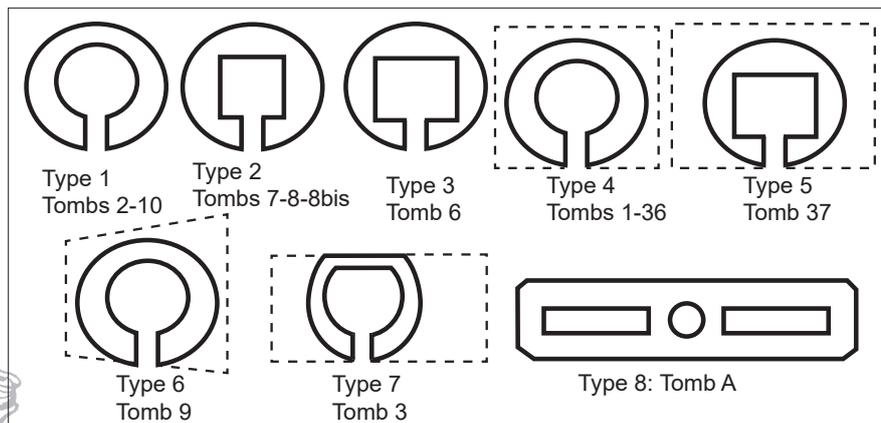


Fig. 3: The eight megalithic monument types found in Menjez (©Project Menjez).



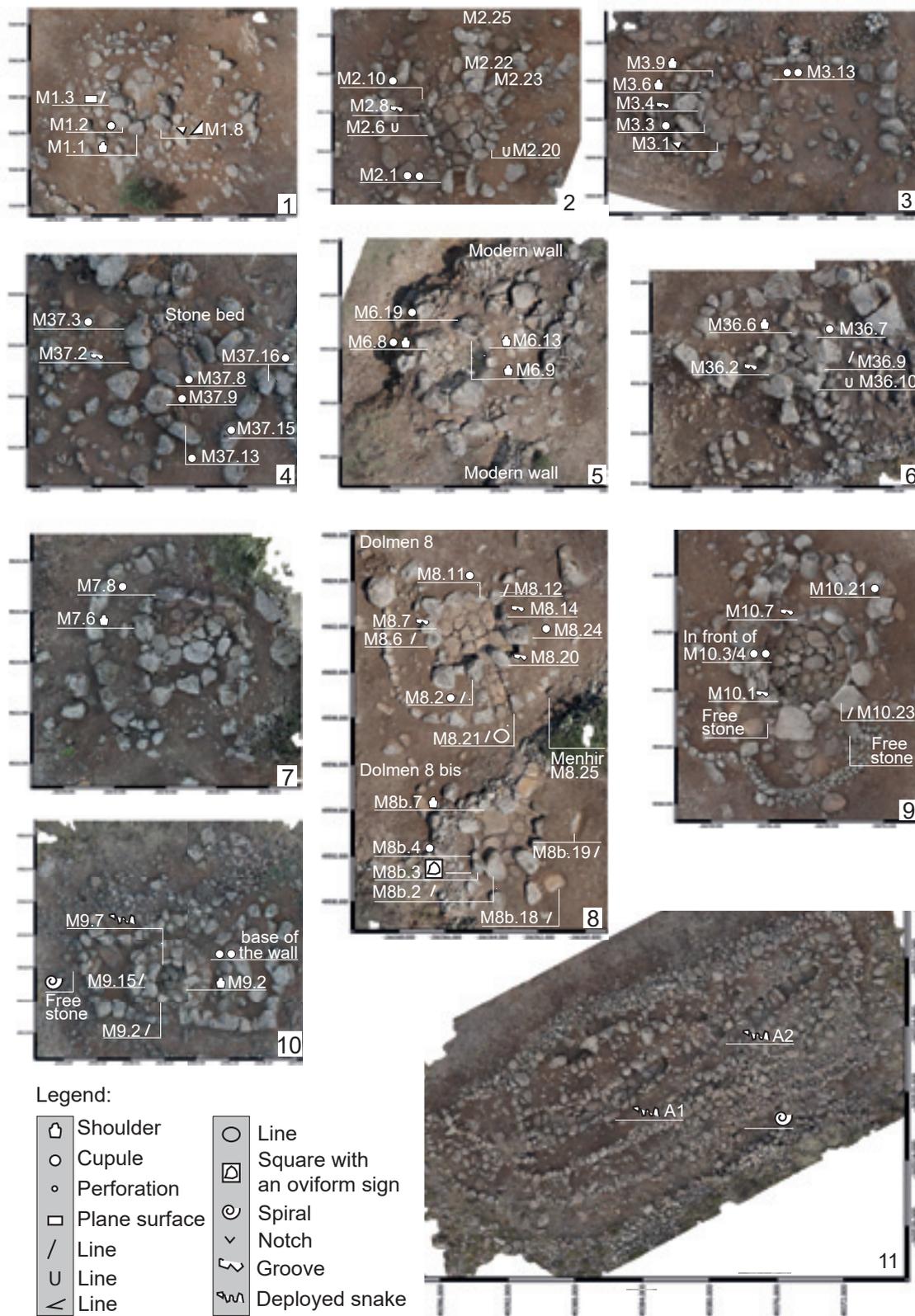
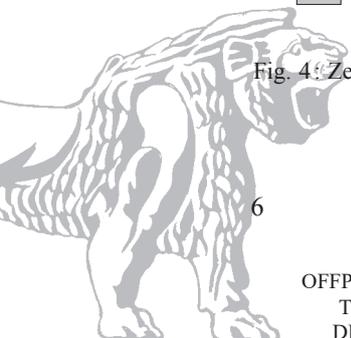


Fig. 4: Zenithal photos of tomb types. 1. Tomb 1; 2. Tomb 2; 3. Tomb 3; 4. Tomb 37; 5. Tomb 6; 6. Tomb 36; 7. Tomb 7; 8. Tombs 8 and 8bis; 9. Tomb 10; 10. Tomb 9; 11. Tomb A (©Project Menjéz).



In the Levant, megalithic tombs found alongside the Rift Valley tend to be rectangular ‘dolmens’, with the crown taking shapes that vary by region (STEIMER-HERBET and BESSE 2017; STEIMER-HERBET and ZUOBEE 2014; STEIMER-HERBET 2010; STEIMER-HERBET and CRIAUD 2008; STEIMER-HERBET 2004a; 2004b). In Menjez, however, the chambers are either circular, in a semi-circle, or quadrangular (Figs. 3-4). They are placed within a circular or semi-circular crown. The presence of enclosures built around these tombs, quadrangular, rectangular, or trapezoidal in shape, is a novelty. From a typological point of view, the Menjez megalithic monuments have many features in common with the tower-tombs of Harra in Syria and those of Arabia. The ideology behind them remains the same: build stone tombs above ground so that they are visible from afar (STEIMER-HERBET 2000).

The tombs are built using basalt stone slabs, a raw material abundant in this region of Lebanon. The topographic distribution of the monuments is repetitive. They are built on flats, slopes, or slope ruptures. The basalt outcrops readily furnish the building material for the monuments. Generally speaking, monuments are placed several dozen metres apart. In Khrayeb, however, two monuments (8, 8 bis) are in juxtaposition (STEIMER-HERBET *et al.* 2018).

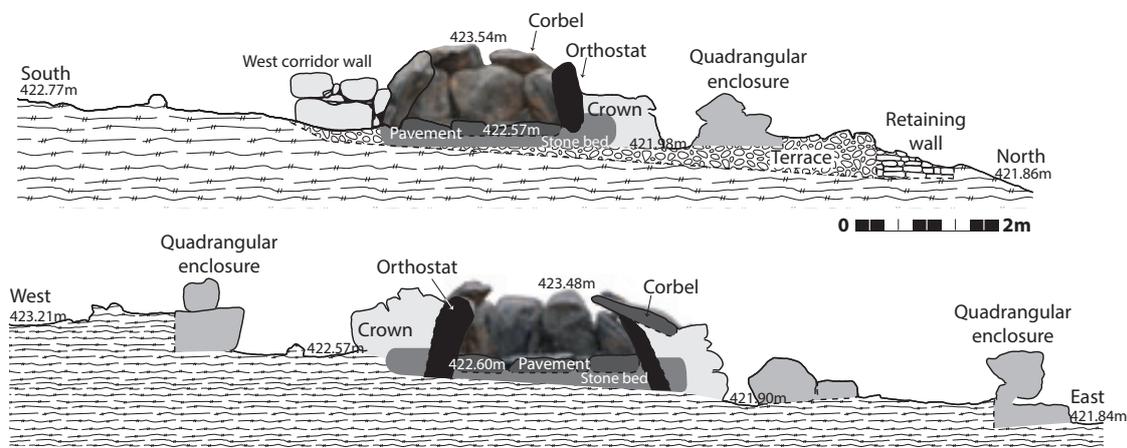


Fig. 5: View of dolmen 9 at Kroum Metowmeh (©Project Menjez).

All tombs have an access corridor, usually oriented towards the South. Inside, raised stone slabs with an average height of about 1.6 m mark out the space dedicated to the dead. These stones rest upon a pavement, itself placed upon an invert, with the biggest stones maintained by smaller blocks. The orthostates lean upon this pavement, implying an order of construction: first the pavement, then the tomb itself (Fig. 5). The enclosures are built of massive blocks, and it is possible they were erected later on (Fig. 3:4-7; Fig. 4: 3, 4, 6, 10).

A few tombs bear vestiges of great stone slabs used as corbels and prompt us to imagine a corbelled cover (Fig. 5). The basalt blocks in Menjez are rounded, which makes it difficult to cover a space two to three meters in diameter using this method (Fig. 6 top and centre). Another possible form of cover would be a dome (Fig. 6 bottom). The case of tomb 7, with an area of 14m², must have been a serious challenge for the builders. Numerous pillages might explain the absence of the flat stones that might have been used for the corbelled vaults, which were probably reused in other constructions.

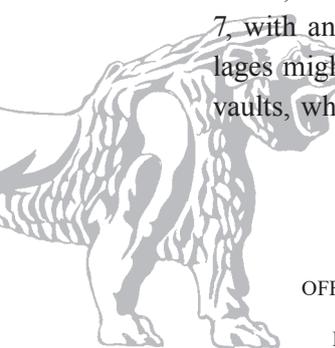




Fig. 6: Proposed reconstruction of the tomb covers of Menjez, based on the 3D models of tomb 9 at Kroum Metowmeh (©Project Menjez - Virtual-Archéo).



The funeral practices associated with these tombs are relatively unknown. No complete skeleton has ever been found in the Menjez megalithic monuments, and the few human vestiges recovered are heavily fragmented. Only a few teeth are still preserved at the Prehistory Museum of Lebanon. The deceased were accompanied by jewellery, pearls of cornelian and steatite, bronze and obsidian bracelets, and objects such as a make-up pallet, seals, a polished axe, and obsidian arrowheads (STEIMER-HERBET 2000; TALLON 1965).

SIGNS AND PICTOGRAMS : A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

Sixty-three signs, pictograms and sculpted snakes were found on 57 stones (Table 1, in annex). For each we identified:

- monument number;
- tomb type (chamber shape, crown, enclosure shape);
- type of sign (square, triangle, line, circle, cupule, notch, groove, spiral line, undulating line snake);
- technique used to create the marking (bas-relief, matter removal, engraving, percussion);
- stone location within the monument (chamber, corridor, enclosure, corbel);
- visibility of the sign when the tomb was in use.

Of the 12 megalithic monuments studied, all possess engravings. Some are more richly provisioned than others, especially tombs 8, 8bis, 9, 10, 37 and tomb A.

Cupules are the most frequent sign. These are found either by themselves or in groups of two or three, and are present on 23 stone blocks in 11 tombs. Shallow and deep lines are present on 20 ornate blocks in eight tombs, forming parallel or V-shaped signs. Deep engravings were used to form one circle, three U-shapes, one cross, and one triangle. Six blocks have grooves, often present in pairs. One large engraving made of deep lines forming a square with an oviform in the centre covers an entire face of a stone block in tomb 8bis. Two monuments, particularly developed architecturally, bear sculpted snakes: tomb 9 has 2, while tomb A has 3 (Fig. 7).

Concerning the technique, our observations enable us to distinguish between three methods (Fig. 8). The first is matter removal, used for the grooves located on the side of the small blocks (spines). These could have been done using lithic or wooden tools. The second method is percussion, usually done using a lithic tool. It is through this medium that the 23 cupules were formed. Circular in shape, their diameter oscillates between 4 and 13cm, for a depth proportional to their diameter. The largest reaches 9 cm deep and the smallest, 2 cm deep. Deep lines in the shape of a 'U', circle, cross, and triangles are also made through percussion, the depth of the line never exceeding one centimetre.



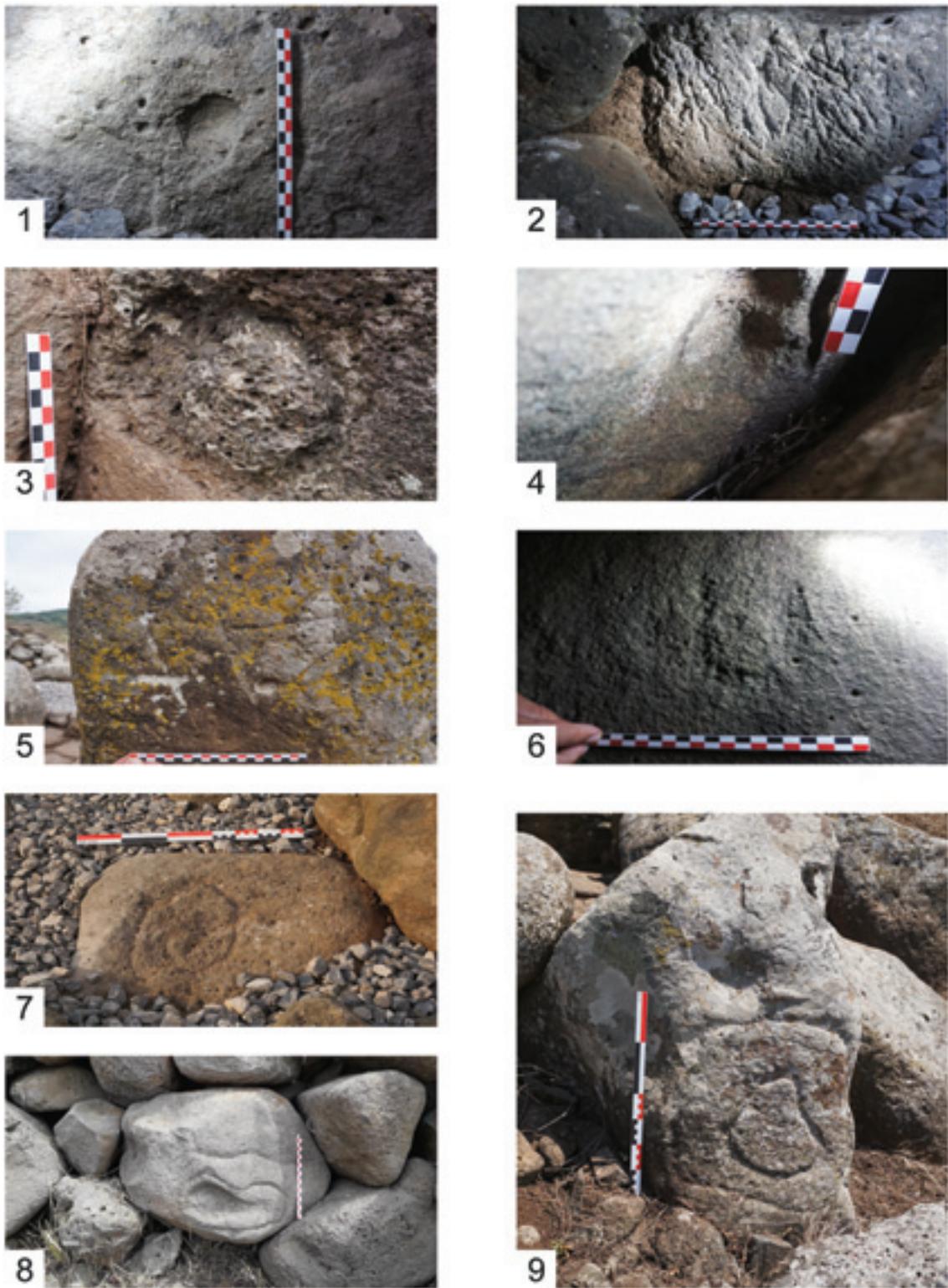
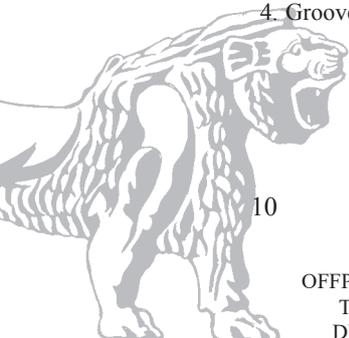


Fig. 7: Photos of sign categories. 1. Cupule of M1; 2. Fine lines of M10; 3. Deep lines making up a circle in M8; 4. Grooves of M2; 5. Cross and triangle of M8; 6. «U» of M2; 7. Engraved spiral on M9; 8. Snake on structure A; 9. Deep lines on M8bis (©Project Menjez).



The same can be said for the four snake representations, made of bas-relief or deep lines. The third method - engraving - was carried out using a fine point made of flint, obsidian, or quartz, a metal tool, or a hardwood associated to an abrasive, siliceous material. This technique was applied for all parallel and V-shaped lines in our corpus.

The discovery of the bas-relief snakes of dolmen 9 and tomb A were particularly important in terms of sign identification, since it strongly suggests that the undulating lines or engraved spirals can be interpreted as snake pictograms.



Fig. 8: Photos of the techniques used to create the signs. 1. Matter removal on the M10; 2. Percussion on the M10; 3. Engraving on the M7 (©Project Menjez).

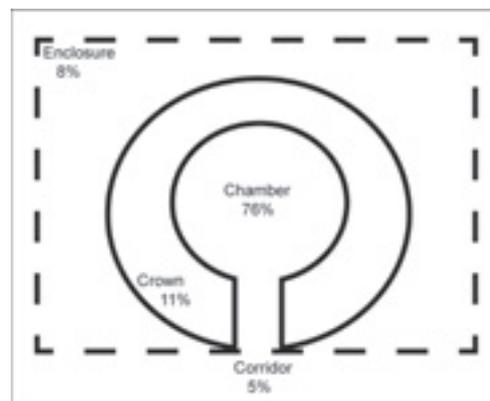


Fig. 9: Schematic representation of the location of signs within the monuments (©Project Menjez).



THE STAGING OF SIGNS AND THEIR FUNCTION

The staging of the signs inside the Menjez tombs is significant. Seventy-six percent of them are within the funeral chamber, on the orthostates forming the limits of the chamber, or on the stone blocks of the pavement. The corridor bears only 5% of the signs found, the crown 11%, and the enclosures 8% (Fig. 9).

36 signs would have been visible when the tombs were in use, while 20 signs were placed on the non-visible sides of 20 blocks. At the end of construction, these signs could not be seen by visitors but would have been known to the builders and those who commissioned these tombs. It is possible that some of the signs were engraved on the blocks during a previous phase/era, and that they were re-used by the tomb builders. It is impossible to distinguish reused blocks from those engraved for a tomb, but it must be noted that the blocks bearing engravings are specifically staged within the funeral chamber. It is worth noticing that the sculpted snakes and snake pictograms are also staged in a particular way: in front of the monument entrance or at other focal points inside the funeral chambers (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Photographs of the 3 snakes within the monument chambers. 1. Dolmen 9; 2-3. Elongated structure A1 and A2 (©Project Menjez).

Aside from snake representations and pictograms interpreted as snakes, no other category of signs were prominently staged. Signs occupy various places on the blocks: front side, inferior or superior parts, or small surfaces on the side. As far as hidden signs go, they are often on the external side of the stone or the stone summit. They are occulted by monument architecture such as the filling of the outside crown or elements of the cover (corbels). Hidden signs or signs located on the sides of blocks must have been created before the stones were raised, constituting an element of relative chronology.

In a society with no writing, explaining the function of signs is an arduous task for archaeologists. We can discern at least three: utilitarian, ritualistic, or decorative – or perhaps the three combined. The position of grooves on the sides of the blocks could illustrate

a utilitarian purpose. Indeed, these grooves could facilitate prehension of the rocks during construction. The fine parallel lines on isolated rocks could be marks from stone sharpening. Cupules are commonly used as recipients and can be considered utilitarian, but with the possibility of a ritual function in the case of beverages being prepared in them for libations (TERRADAS *et al.* 2013). The position of the cupules on the orthostates' faces is revealing, suggesting that rites preceded rock extraction or the positioning of the blocks. These marks were made on the blocks before they were used to construct the funeral chamber. The time separating their creation and their reuse, however, cannot be precisely determined.

V-shaped lines have interesting stylistic parallels, especially with pebbles decorated with incisions found at the site of Jeftelik, a few kilometres from Menjez. This site is dated to the Natufian period (BALBO *et al.* 2009). Also in the same area, but at Tell Al Marj, it is worth noting the presence of a baked earth seal (test pit KQ 512, square KU 511, UE 9). It is circular in shape, with a perforation to allow suspension at the back, and bears a geometric decor in a grid pattern on its ventral face. The artefacts of Al Marj bear a strong resemblance to the Neolithic sites of the Levantine coast such as Byblos and Ras Shamra (unpublished report, IBÁÑEZ *et al.* 2008).

The undulating lines, the spirals, the snakes, the 'U' shape engravings, the circles, cross, fine parallel lines or V-shaped signs, are as many messages to those that enter the tomb. Apart from the ornamental aspect, it is an entire coherent system of signs that these builders passed on to us. What was their intention when they staged this scenery? What about the importance of the hidden symbols? All over Europe, on similar monuments from the Neolithic, there exists a hidden art – a research axis that has been explored by G. Robin (ROBIN 2011).

Megalithic art of the Near and Middle East is rare, and its descriptions few and far between. We are able, however, to underline some points of comparison. One of the engraved circles of tomb 8 is similar to that identified a few kilometres from Menjez (IBÁÑEZ *et al.* 2010). In the region of Lake Qattina, a Syrian-Lebanese-Spanish team uncovered several elements engraved on blocks. At Khirbat Ghazi 3, three circles are vertically aligned on a basalt monolith. This block was raised at the Northern extremity of an elongated stone structure, about 50 m in length. The circles were made through percussion, and the lines are relatively deep. Also in the region of Qattina, at Mentar Al-Aali, engravings have been observed on the exterior face of one of the southern orthostates of a megalithic chamber. The rock slab is over a metre high, visible from afar and engraved with three schematic anthropomorphic representations – as well as a potential fourth, highly altered by erosion. These engravings were also created by percussion and are rather shallow. The excavators think that the circles are contemporary to the megalithic tombs. The position of the anthropomorphic representations, their style and patina, all indicate that they belong to a phase of posterior use of the tomb. Dolmen 3 of Shamir, in Israel, represents another example of engraving in a similar context (SHARON *et al.* 2017, 13-17). Fourteen complete engraved forms and two additional, indeterminate shapes are located in the South-East quarter of the chamber ceiling. The forms represent variations on a single motif, comprising a vertical line with a downturned arc attached to its upper part (SHARON *et al.* 2017, 13, fig. 11). The monument excavated by



an Israeli team contains artefacts from the Intermediate Bronze Age period. There are similar geometrical models adorning the faces of two dolmens discovered in the Wadi Sarr and the Jebel Jidran in Yemen in 2000 and 2002. The circles, waves, and squares these bear were all created by percussion (BRAEMER *et al.* 2003). There are, contemporary to the dolmens, raised stones made to have an anthropomorphic shape, sometimes with a rich iconography of engravings. These are known as menhir-statues. Those have been found in Yemen in the Hadramawt, in Saudi Arabia at al-Ula (STEIMER-HERBET 2010b; 2007), at Risqeh (KIRKBRIDE 1969) and Mureighat in Jordan (DUBIS and SAVAGE 2001), and at Tell Braq and Maarat El-Noman in Syria (STEIMER-HERBET 2010b; Fig. 11). All bear witness to considerable religious activity, with regional specificity, based around the stone as an iconic representation of the ancestors.

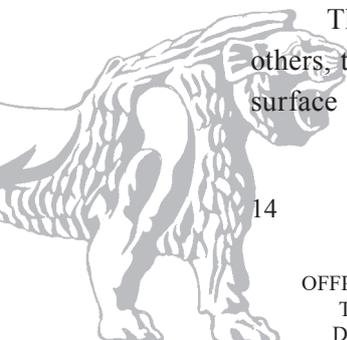


Fig. 11 : 1. Anthropomorphic stelas of Mureighat (©Tara Steimer DGAM Jordan -MAE-CNRS); 2. Stelae of Tell Braq (© Musée du Louvre); 3. Stelae of Maarat El-Noman (©Tara Steimer DGAM Syria -MAE-CNRS).

STONE SNAKES, CLAY SNAKES AND BRONZE SNAKES ; REGIONAL PARALLELS

In Menjez, in tomb 9 of Kroum Metowmeh, the builders carefully arranged a stone block bearing a thick snake in front of the corridor leading to the funeral chamber. This snake deploys over the whole of the superior aspect of the block and its head plunges towards the bottom. Outside of this tomb, on the ground, there is a snake coiled on a block. The same scenario is found on tomb A of Qana Maabour, with snakes as bas-relief on stone slabs, planted in the circular funeral chamber and in the oval chamber to the North, as well as on the outside wall, where a snake appears coiled and topped by an undulating line. These signs are realised through surface abrasion and showcasing natural asperities, such as a mineral vein resembling scales or a natural crack used to evoke the snake's tongue.

The material discovered by Father M. Tallon in the Menjez tombs includes, amongst others, two bronze bracelets with double snakeheads, and fragments of obsidian bracelets, the surface of which forms microdrops resembling snakeskin. Their origins could not be clearly



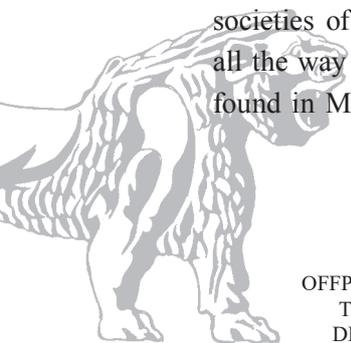
established, and in consequence their chronological attribution is large, from the Chalcolithic to the Middle Bronze Age (3800-1900 BC). A bracelet bearing a double snakehead is mentioned in the publication concerning the Shamir dolmens (SHARON *et al.* 2017). In that instance, the open bracelet with snakeheads was found in a burial cave with ceramic and metal artefacts assigned to the Intermediate Bronze Age period (2350-2000 BC).

It is now established that the snake was a major iconographic element in Menjez during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC. It has also been noted in other regions of the Levant on jars (POLCARO 2019). This is the case at Jebel Mutawwaq in Jordan, where we find a building interpreted to be a temple (3500-3000 BC) near a dolmen necropolis and an Early Bronze Age habitat (FERNANDEZ-TRESGUERRES VELASCO 2008). This location yielded numerous ceramics, including a jar bearing a snake. The particularity of this temple is that it is open in its northern part, with a raised stone. According to Polcaro, snakes are always discovered in sacred spaces such as temples or public spaces linked to power and worship (POLCARO 2019).

Another example can be found in the Jordan Valley, at the Telailat al-Ghassul tell, where a sanctuary dating from the late Chalcolithic (4500-3800 BC) yielded pottery artefacts featuring snakes associated with stylised tree motifs (SEATON 2008). Another site from the same period, Abu Hamid, yielded a rich pottery ensemble bearing snakes (DOLLFUS and KAFABI 1993). Those with overprint decorations endure in Jordan until the Early Bronze Age III (2600-2300 BC), at sites such as Bab edh-Dhra, Khirbet El-Batrawy and Khirbet ez-Zeraqon (POLCARO 2019).

The Chalcolithic ossuary of Ben Shemen (Israel) contained a clay snake figure, probably one of the first known associations between snakes and deceased individuals (POLCARO 2019). Prehistoric populations could have easily drawn parallels between the natural life cycle of snakes and that of humans. Snakes are animals that regenerate each year, and in many societies, this transformation is associated with the passage between life and death. In Mesopotamia, at Sumer at the start of the 3rd millennium BC, two divinities (Dumuzi and Ningishzida) are associated with or represented by snakes. In Sumerian mythology, Dumuzi is the god of abundance, cattle and plants, and was transformed into a snake by the sun god Utu/Shamah to escape from the demons of Ereshkigals. Ningishzida, god of fertility, is evoked under the traits of a man surrounded by two horned snakeheads (*cerastes cerastes*) (BOTTÉRO and KRAMER 1989).

MCDONALD (1994) sees in the Mesopotamian dishware decorated with snakes a particular use, for the beverage literally called 'snake-wine'. In cuneiform sources, this drink is a medicine bringing together the regenerative properties of the snake and the curative virtues of wine. It was made by boiling wine with snakeskin as well as some of the organs of the reptile. The vine was imported from Anatolia to the Levant during the Neolithic (Zagros mountains of Iran during the 5th millennium BC), and its use is attested during the 5th and 4th millennia BC in the Jordan Valley (MCGOVERN *et al.* 1995; ZOHARY 1995). Wine made the societies of the Early Bronze Age I-II in the Levant rich, as they exported their production all the way to Egypt (MCGOVERN 1998). According to Polcaro, jars bearing snakes like those found in Mutawwaq were used to stock this beverage (POLCARO 2019).



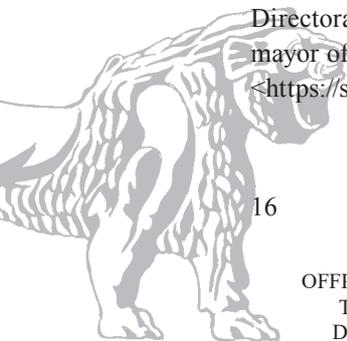
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Systematic surveying in the region of Homs (ARMENDARIZ *et al.* 2011; BRADBURY and PHILIP 2011; IBÁÑEZ *et al.* 2010), in the Leja (STEIMER-HERBET and BESSE 2017; BRAEMER *et al.* 2009; STEIMER-HERBET and CRIAUD 2008; STEIMER-HERBET 2006), the Harra in Syria (BRAEMER and ECHALLIER 2004) and East of Azraq and Jafr in Jordan (MÜLLER-NEUHOF *et al.* 2015) has renewed the distribution map of megalithic tombs in the Near East. We know today that societies practicing megalithism were present as early as the 4th millennium BC, in areas as diverse as the woods of the Syrian Jaulan, the steppic area of the Jordanian Harra, and all the way to the Sinai mountains. In Menjez, in the Wadi Fazaa and at Kroum Metowmeh, we find the remains of double-apse houses, identical to those found in Byblos in Lebanon, in the Leja and the Jaulan in southern Syria, and in the Ajlun in Jordan (STEIMER-HERBET and BESSE 2017; POLCARO and MUNIZ 2016; STEIMER-HERBET and ZUOBEE 2014; NICOLLE 2012; NICOLLE and AL-MAQDISSI 2006; FERNANDEZ-TRESGUERRES VELASCO 2005). These settlements made of dry-stones and the numerous megalithic tombs attest to the presence of sizeable communities as early as the end of the Chalcolithic and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age I. They are linked to the presence of exploitable resources, such as wooden areas and grazing lands, and of course the presence of great stone slabs to build their tombs, and sometimes their houses. Apart from access to resources, megalithic societies seemed to have privileged communication axes, favouring commercial interactions with the urbanised populations of the coastlines, of the Levantine Rift Valley, and of the great rivers and desert zones, during the whole of the 4th and 3rd millennia BC (STEIMER-HERBET and BESSE 2017).

Despite the fragmentation of remains, we have to recognise that the religious and cultural universes of the protohistoric populations of Menjez, like those of the Oronte Valley and the Homs pass, were rich. We have been able to bring to light the predominance of the snake, linked to symbolic thinking. Indeed, megalithic art was not a purely aesthetic endeavour. It incarnates and evokes a cosmogony. Snake representations on stones, bracelets, or jars, in distinct geographical regions of the Levant but in identical cultural contexts, raise the question of methods used to interpret these engraved symbols at the community level. In the case of Menjez in Lebanon and Jebel Mutawwaq in Jordan, the symbolic domain can be interpreted. It stems from a network of material exchanges and/or a common ideology in communities sharing an epoch and a societal order typical of megalithic societies, qualified by Testart as societies with ostentatious riches (TESTART 2014). No doubt, during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, the snake is a specific code found in several local cultures with close economical and religious relationships. In addition to the study of architecture and artefacts, the pictograms observed in the Menjez monuments therefore give us a wonderful opportunity to dive deeper into the symbolic thinking of megalithic builders.

Acknowledgements:

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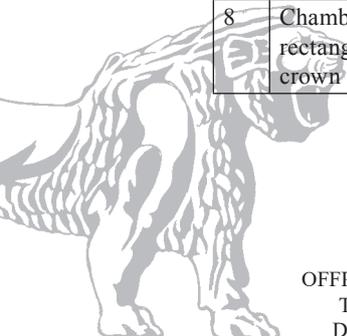


ANNEX

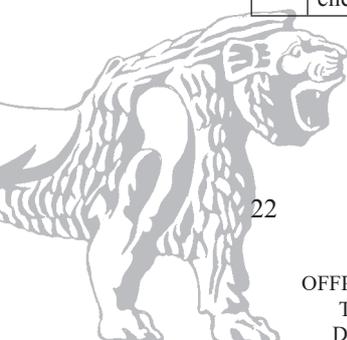
Table 1 : Description of the signs of the Menjez megalithic monuments.

<i>Nr</i>	<i>Tomb - Type</i>	<i>Signs/pictograms and sculpted animals</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Bloc nr.</i>	<i>Visible / Hidden</i>
A	Circular chamber with two alleyways, one on each side - crown	Snake	Bas-relief - vein	Chamber northern alley – raised stone, face to the west	A.1	Visible
A	Circular chamber with two alleyways, one on each side - crown	Snake	Bas-relief - vein	Circular chamber – raised stone, western face	A.2	Visible
A	Circular chamber with two alleyways, one on each side - crown	Snake and undulating line	Bas-relief and engraving – deep line	Crown – western part	-	Visible
1	Chamber circular crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule, 6 cm in diameter	Percussion	Chamber – external side	M1.2	Hidden
1	Chamber circular crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Triangular surface, 15 cm long in a scaled vein	Percussion – Plane surface	Chamber – small southern side of the block	M1.3	Hidden
1	Chamber circular crown circular quadrangular enclosure	«V» shaped line	Engraving (metallic tool?)	Chamber- visible face	M1.8	Visible
1	Chamber circular crown circular quadrangular enclosure	Lines	Engraving	Chamber – orthostates summit, probably hidden by corbels	M1.3	Hidden
2	Chamber circular crown circular	Cupule, 4 cm in diameter	Percussion	Chamber – external face	M2.10	Hidden
2	Chamber circular crown circular	Notches (2) 6 cm and 1 cm long	Matter removal	Chamber- visible face	M2.7	Visible
2	Chamber circular crown circular	Notches (2) 4 cm and 0.5 cm long	Matter removal	Chamber – external face	M2.7	Hidden
2	Chamber circular crown circular	«U» shaped line	Engraving – deep trait	Chamber	M2.6	Visible
2	Chamber circular crown circular	«U» shaped line, or leaning horseshoe	Engraving – deep trait	Chamber – on the small southern side of the block	M2.20	Visible
3	Chamber in a semi-circle – crown semi-circular – quadrangular enclosure	«V» shaped cupule - cavity/ notch	Percussion	Chamber	M3.1	Visible

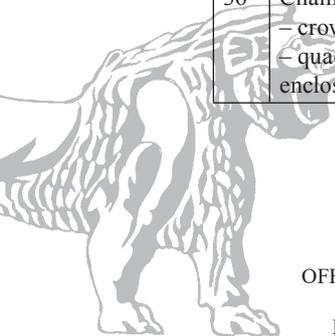
<i>Nr</i>	<i>Tomb - Type</i>	<i>Signs/pictograms and sculpted animals</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Bloc nr.</i>	<i>Visible / Hidden</i>
3	Chamber in a semi-circle – crown semi-circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupules (2), 11 cm et 13 cm in diameter, depth of 9 and 6 cm	Percussion	Chamber – External face	M3.13	Hidden
3	Chamber in a semi-circle – crown semi-circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupules (2) small	Percussion	Chamber – Superior part	M3.3	Visible
3	Chamber in a semi-circle – crown semi-circular – quadrangular enclosure	12 cm notch with a 2cm length	Matter removal	Chamber – Block summit	M3.4	Hidden
6	Chamber quadrangular – crown circular	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber cover – superior corbel	M6.19	Hidden
6	Chamber quadrangular – crown circular	Cupule 10 cm in diameter for a depth of 5 cm	Percussion	Chamber	M6.8	Visible
7	Chamber quadrangular – crown circular	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber – lower part, visible face	M7.8	Visible
7	Chamber quadrangular – crown circular	«V» shaped line	Engraving	Crown? Possibly secondary position of a dolmen block	M7 Bloc within the drystone wall	?
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Circle 10 cm in diameter	Engraving – Deep line	Corridor – Northern extremity of the visible face	M8.21	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber – Inferior part of the visible face, eastern side	M8.11	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber cover, visible face of the corbel	M8.24	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Cupule 5 cm by 3 cm for a depth of 5 cm	Percussion	Chamber – eastern face	M8.2	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Notches	Matter removal	Chamber – northern ridge	M8.14	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Notches	Matter removal	Chamber – southern ridge	M8.7	Visible



<i>Nr</i>	<i>Tomb - Type</i>	<i>Signs/pictograms and sculpted animals</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Bloc nr.</i>	<i>Visible / Hidden</i>
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Chamber – superior part	M8.6	Hidden
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Chamber – western side	M8.20	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Chamber – superior part	M8.20	Hidden
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Corridor – northern lower part of the visible face	M8.21	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	«V» shaped line	Engravings	Chamber – superior part	M8.12	Visible
8	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Cross-shaped traits and triangle	Engravings	Chamber – superior part of the visible face	M8.2	Visible
8b	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Square with an oviform sign in the centre	Engravings – deep lines	Chamber – external face	M8b.3	Hidden
8b	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Cupules (3)	Percussion	Chamber – visible face	M8b.4	Visible
8b	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Chamber – superior part of the block	M8b.2	Hidden
8b	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Crown – outside to the south-east, probably in a secondary position	M8b.18	?
8b	Chamber rectangular - crown circular	Lines	Engravings	Crown – outside to the east, probably in secondary position	M8b.19	Visible
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	Cupule	Percussion	Enclosure western zone – external face	Enclosure block	Visible
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	Cupules	Percussion	Enclosure – external face	M9 Enclosure base	Visible
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	Snake	Bas-relief – using a vein 10 cm large	Chamber – visible southern face, in front of the entrance	M9.7	Visible



<i>Nr</i>	<i>Tomb - Type</i>	<i>Signs/pictograms and sculpted animals</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Bloc nr.</i>	<i>Visible / Hidden</i>
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	Spiral line	Engraving – Deep line, spiral-shaped	Outside the enclosure, free block – placed flat	M9	Visible
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	Lines	Engravings, staking	Chamber cover – superior face of the corbel	M9.15	?
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	«V» shaped lines	Engravings	Chamber – exterior face	M9.2	Hidden
9	Chamber circular – crown circular – trapezoidal enclosure	«V» shaped lines	Engravings	Chamber – western face	M9.2	Visible
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber cover – on the exterior face of the corbel	M10.21	?
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Cupules	Percussion	Chamber pavement, at the bottom of blocks M10.3 / M10.4	M10 Pavement blocks	Visible
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Notches	Matter removal	Chamber – eastern ridge	M10.7	Hidden
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Notches	Matter removal	Chamber -western ridge	M10.1	Visible
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Notches	Matter removal	Chamber cover – on the external face of a corbel	M10.23	Hidden
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	Lines	Engraving	Chamber cover – on the external face of a corbel	M10.23	Hidden
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	«V» shaped lines	Engraving	Chamber – external face	M10.14	Hidden
10	Chamber circular – crown circular	«V» shaped lines	Engraving	Crown? To the east of M10.16	M10	?
36	Chamber circular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	«V» shaped cupules, 9 cm in diameter for a depth of 2 cm	Percussion	Chamber – lower part of the visible face	M36.7	Visible
36	Chamber circular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Notches (3) 7 cm long for a length of 1,5 cm	Matter removal	Chamber – northern ridge	M36.2	Visible
36	Chamber circular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	«U» or horseshoe shaped line	Percussion, matter removal	Chamber – on the entrance block to the eastern side	M36.10	Visible



<i>Nr</i>	<i>Tomb - Type</i>	<i>Signs/pictograms and sculpted animals</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Bloc nr.</i>	<i>Visible / Hidden</i>
36	Chamber circular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Triangle shaped lines	Engravings	Chamber – on the small southern side	M36.9	Visible
37	Chamber circular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule	Percussion	Chamber - external face	M37.8	Hidden
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule	Percussion	Corridor – visible face	M37.9	Visible
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule	Percussion	Crown – north-western face	M37.13	Visible
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule	Percussion	Enclosure – superior face	M37 Enclosure block	Visible
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule 10 cm in diameter for a depth of 5 cm	Percussion	Crown – block summit	M37.15	Hidden
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Cupule 4 cm in diameter for a depth of 2 cm	Percussion	Enclosure – summit of the block, northern side	M37.16	Hidden
37	Chamber rectangular – crown circular – quadrangular enclosure	Notches (2) 14 and 10 cm long for a length of 4 and 3 cm	Matter removal	Chamber – western ridge of the block	M37.2	Visible

