# Megaliths from Easter Island to Indonesia

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# Introduction

Have all regions of the world produced megalithic architecture in one form or another and at various periods of time? The answer seems to be obvious, as it appears that many societies are endowed with monuments regularly built with large blocks of stone. However, the concept of a kind of universal movement, which could be taken advantage of to support the notion of cultural evolutionism, is inconsistent. A world tour of megalithisms offers other perspectives, including the recognition of the diversity of the means and motivations involved. From this perspective, the island worlds of the Pacific and Indonesia offer some of the most interesting perspectives. In these regions, ethnographic records, some of which are first-hand, provide much better-defined cultural contexts than for fossil megaliths. Indonesia and Micronesia both offer examples of still extant megalithic practices, while in East Polynesia, monuments were still being built until the dawn of the 20th century.

These regions are also among those with the densest megalithic constructions. In Indonesia, all aspects of the landscape (valleys, plateaus, mountains) are occupied to some extent by thousands of stone vaults. The density of monuments on Easter Island is also surprising, with more than 250 constructions for an area of barely 165 km$^2$. On the island of Yap (Federated States of Micronesia), more than 15,000 large stone discs (*rai*) were imported from the Palau archipelago, and the *marae* of French Polynesia, of varied sizes, mark all the coasts and valleys (**Fig. 1**).

It is hardly possible to establish transregional typologies for all these constructions, as each island or sector of the same island has its own traditions. Yet none of these insular lands can be considered as an isolate. Even across the largest of the oceans, the Pacific, early contacts between archipelagos are now being demonstrated. Rather, megalithism seems to be a means of expressing, among other motivations, territoriality and identity, particularly through funerary practices where one-upmanship is rarely absent.

These different observations raise questions about the very definition of megalithism. In Indonesia, vaults and standing stones are unquestionably megalithic in the strict sense of the term. However, recent studies show that these monuments are sometimes accompanied by much more ephemeral complementary structures. In East Polynesia, altars of worship can be seen as authentic megalithism, but also as small constructions, or even as partial vegetal structures. The study of megaliths cannot, therefore, be limited to an architectural category in its own right since it is only a means of expression that cannot be separated from different materialities which respond to the same functionalities. Polynesian megalithism, for example, is about monumentality, the essence of which is broader than the mere use of large stones. Finally, everywhere in the vast area under consideration here, the landscape is itself sometimes construed as a monument – a sort of

**Fig. 2 –** Bas-relief of a woman and an elephant under the waterfall of Cawang, Pasemah plateau (Sumatra) (Photo: T. Steimer-Herbet).

natural 'megalithism'. The 'sacredness' of the landscape is then brought to light by sometimes substantial human developments, for example at Nawarla Gabarnmang on the Arhem Plateau (Australia), at Ava Ranga Uka A Toroke Hau in the centre of Easter Island (Rapa Nui), at Nan Madol or Levu in Micronesia, or on the Jambi and Pasemah Highlands in Sumatra (**Fig. 2**).

The anthropomorphism of many of the standing stones is also a remarkable feature of megalithism in Indonesia and the Pacific. In some regions, the figurative character of stelae or menhirs is unquestionable. Elsewhere, it is suggested by the cultural context, and thus by elements normally unattainable by archaeology alone. In some cases, this can go as far as recognising the spirits or forces that inhabit the raw material, or even their personalisation.

In this chapter, we also find examples of 'ephemeral' megalithism where the performance of constructions is amplified by regular dismantling and rebuilding, and where the sacredness of the place takes precedence over the longevity of the constructions. The phenomenon has been particularly well illustrated in East Polynesia where it seems to validate the stratification of society, as much as to account for the generational shelling of

the ancestors, or to maintain the economic system through sequences of retribution and obligations. It is also a question of maintaining the intrinsic strength of monuments.

Finally, the often-presented thesis of the necessity for hierarchical societies to construct megaliths is only partially confirmed here. Clearly, a large part of Indonesian megalithism is the consequence of economic changes, due to the development of international trade movements which led to the emergence of an elite and unprecedented wealth. Megalithism is thus a means of expressing these new social orders. In Polynesia and Micronesia, the hierarchical nature of societies is hardly in doubt either. However, here the context may justify the desire to build megalithic monuments, but where architectural complexity or the formal scale do not in any way require such a social structure. The case of Sumba, in the Sunda Islands, is exemplary in this respect, with two different approaches to megalithism, one that can be described as elitist, while the other is much more egalitarian. The latter case demonstrates that there is no need for strong stratification, nor for coercive power, to organize the construction of a dolmen. Systems of workforce mobilisation also require relationships and solidarity between groups, rather than the force of a more individual and centralized power. The relations between social structures and monumentality become more complex, requiring the abandonment of simple unequivocal relations between architectural developments and group organisation.

As can be seen, although this vast region does not form a megalithic province in its own right, Indonesia and the Pacific participate fully in debates and offer insights that are now indispensable, both on the functions and motivations of large stone architecture, and on the interactions between monumentality and social structures, building techniques, the value of standing stones or integration into landscapes that sometimes take on a monumentality assumed by monument builders.

Nearby Oceania or Melanesia is undeniably the forgotten province of this volume. The reason for this is certainly not contempt for a region of the world that has been undergoing cultural developments since extremely ancient times (more than 40 millennia at least). Be that as it may, megalithism in the strict sense of the term is not the most remarkable feature of Melanesian societies, where monumentality was first expressed through plant elements. In addition, the interest of Melanesians in the traditional era in preserving their buildings was often relegated to second place in relation to their efficiency.

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