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Megalithism in the Middle East

Abstract: Seven thousand years ago, the Middle East witnessed the emergence of new funerary rites. Previous traditions of burying the dead directly in the earth, in jars, or in an ossuary, were replaced with a new practice of inhumation inside megalithic tombs. This change can be observed in the societies living in the Akkar Mountains, the Jaulan plateau, the Jordan River valley, al-'Ula and Khaybar, the Jawf, the Hadramawt, and the Dhofar, to mentioned but a few particularly relevant areas. The monuments, called dolmens or tower-tombs, are elevated constructions comprising a chamber constructed of regular megalithic rock slabs, with a partial or complete tumulus cover. Recent systematic surveys conducted in the region of Homs, in the Leja, the Harra, and east of Jafr have renewed our perspective on the distribution of megalithic tombs in the Levant. Until the 2000s, it was thought that the megalithic necropolises were distributed alongside a narrow north-south axis, following the Rift ditch from the middle of the Dead Sea to Aleppo, alongside the Jordan, the Litani, and the Oronte rivers. Today, we know that the societies practicing megalithism occupied very varied landscapes, extending from the forests of the Syrian Jaulan to the steppe region of the Sabatayn desert in Yemen. The conditions that determined their settlement patterns appear to be the presence of grazing land for pastoralism or, ideally, for olive, fig, and palm trees, the presence of flint, lapis lazuli, obsidian, and salt mines and, of course, the availability of rock slabs suitable for the construction of the tombs and sometimes houses. Other than this access to resources, megalithic societies seem to have favoured communication axes that facilitated economical exchanges with the urban populations of the shorelines or the major rivers. These megalithic groups, which remain relatively unknown to the public, therefore played a major role in the formation of oriental societies.

Keywords: *Early Bronze Age, dolmen, tower-tomb, standing stone, anthropomorphic statue, sanctuary, megalithic art, pastoralism, goods, exchange*

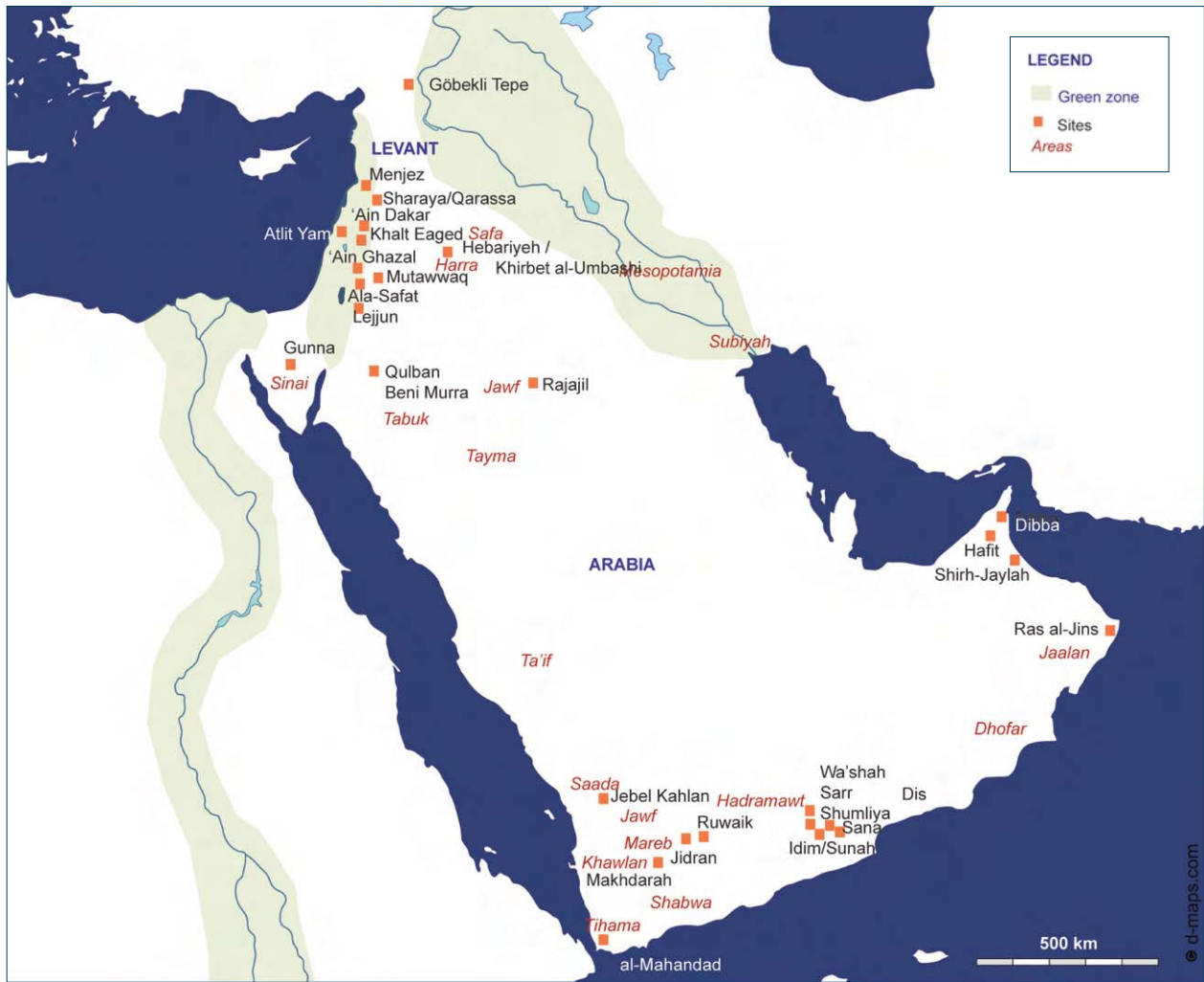


Fig. 1 – Location map of the sites mentioned in the text (© T. Steimer-Herbet).

1. Introduction

The first megalithic manifestations in the Middle East date to the Neolithic period, as attested by the sites of Göbekli Tepe, Turkey (Schmidt 2015), ‘Ain Ghazal, Jordan (Rollefson 1998), Atlit Yam, Israel (Galili *et al.* 2013) and on hundreds of *Massebot* sites of the Negev, Israel (Avner 1982). Stone, in the shape of an upright monolith, was a component of Neolithic rites as early as the 9th millennium BC, but it was not until the end of the 5th millennium BC and during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC, the Chalcolithic period (5000-3980 BC) and the Bronze Age (3900-2000 BC), that communities started using massively stone to construct platforms, sanctuaries, and tombs. These ritual architectures, both commemorative and funerary, appear almost simulta-

neously from the Sinai to Oman, Turkey, and Yemen (Fig. 1). They are relatively unknown to the public, both locally and internationally. Built from stones and raw or slightly worked rock slabs, their construction implies the intervention of highly skilled builders and techniques specially developed to manipulate the large blocks (Steimer-Herbet & Besse 2020). These ostentatious structures, sometimes monumental, are ‘megalithic’ (Fig. 2). Boulestin (2019) contests this attribution due to the weight of the rock slabs (less than 15 tons). It is worth remembering, however, that the true essence of megalithism is not to be found in the numbers, but in the intent of the builders, which was to create a monument standing above ground and respecting common codes such as the use of large rock slabs and stone covers.



Fig. 2 – The necropolis of Ruwaik (Photo: T. Steimer-Herbet).

The megalithic monuments of the Levant and Arabia have been victims of their visibility. They have yielded few artefacts and studies have focused on their morphology and spatial distribution. Despite numerous losses due to urbanization or agriculture, intact monuments still number in the tens of thousands. Their morphologies, just like their roles, are very varied. As such, the wish expressed during the *Rencontres Internationales sur le Mégalithisme dans le Monde* to paint a full picture of megalithism in the Middle East, is a significant challenge worth taking on. Stone, as both a material and a communication tool (Steimer-Herbet 2001, 2018), is the common denominator behind all these multiform and multifunction megalithic monuments. The communities who erected them imposed meaning on this use of stone. Guilaine observes *‘the feelings of litholatri: stone [for him] was identified as the material of important events, of important people,*

of common behaviour, of kinship transmission, of beliefs’ (Guilaine 1994: 226).

Following a short history of the research of megalithic monuments in the Middle East, I will present a description of the monuments that will allow us to decrypt the intentions behind the acts of the builders and provide insight into their beliefs.

2. History of fieldwork

After the Second World War, research on megalithism developed in the Middle East within the rigid framework of administrative boundaries defined by the new larger powers (Fraser 2018). Megalithic monuments were quickly abandoned by scholars due to the lack of exceptional discoveries. Archaeological research focused on the study of the great civilizations which, according to the larger

public and their leaders, developed between the 3rd millennium BC and the 8th century AD. The main preoccupations of the time, through until the 80s, are perfectly summarized by Demoule: ‘*history begins with established states, their religion, their armies, and everything else is consequence. The trajectories that led to their existence are not a problem, not even a research topic*’ (Demoule 2020: 49). Thankfully, from the 1990s the work of archaeologists such as Cleuziou (1999) in Gulf countries, Zarins (Zarins *et al.* 1979) in Arabia, and Helms (1981), Avner (1982), Betts (1988) and Braemer (Braemer *et al.* 2004) in the southern Levant used new approaches to develop alternative models. Indeed, the Classical models validated in the fertile areas of the alluvial plains of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile, are not applicable to the human societies that lived in arid and semi-arid areas. These groups developed megalithic architectures as early as the 5th millennium BC that remain the only trace of an elaborate and stable symbolic system that honoured both the dead and the living (Steimer-Herbet 2004). Several theses on the topic are available: Mizrachi 1992; Steimer-Herbet 2001; Paz 2003; Khalidi 2006; Giraud 2007; Gibbins 2008; Abu-Azizeh 2010; de Vreeze 2010; Bradbury 2011; Gregorička 2011; Cable 2012; Munoz 2014; Fraser 2015. Our knowledge of modes of subsistence, the distribution of necropolises, as well as funerary and cultural practices has been considerably ameliorated. A certain homogeneity in the architectural models adopted across the whole of the Middle East led to several attempts to geographically de-partition research on the topic. These include concepts of relationships between the communities of the oriental coast of Arabia and those of the Indus (Cleuziou 2005), between the occidental façade of Arabia and the Levant (Steimer-Herbet 2004), and more largely from Sinai to Oman and Yemen to Iraq (Zarins 1992; Orchard 2008). Unfortunately, local politics mean large-scale studies are almost always impossible and it must be mentioned that the immense Saudi territory is still largely *terra incognita* from a scientific point of view. There are therefore major obstacles in our global perception of the megalithic phenomenon in the Middle East.

3. Megalithic trajectories in the Middle East

In the Middle East, there is not one but several ‘megalithisms’. The Indonesian doctrine of *Pancasila* ‘*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*’ (unity in diversity), corresponds well to a potential definition of the megalithic phenomenon in the region. These ensembles form a mosaic of ‘megalithic cultures’ that can sometimes be interwoven, as shown by the photograph of a dolmen at the margins of a tower-tomb necropolis at Jebel Jidran in Yemen (Fig. 3a). This monument is imposing, with a chamber composed of orthostats and a cover slab and, in the background, a myriad of small points each corresponding to a tower-tomb (Fig. 3b) built of drystones and with corbelled covers (Braemer *et al.* 2001, 2003). Megalithism in the Middle East is also a long-term phenomenon, enduring over 2000 years with phases of abandonment and revival; the evolution of megalithic architectures is not linear.

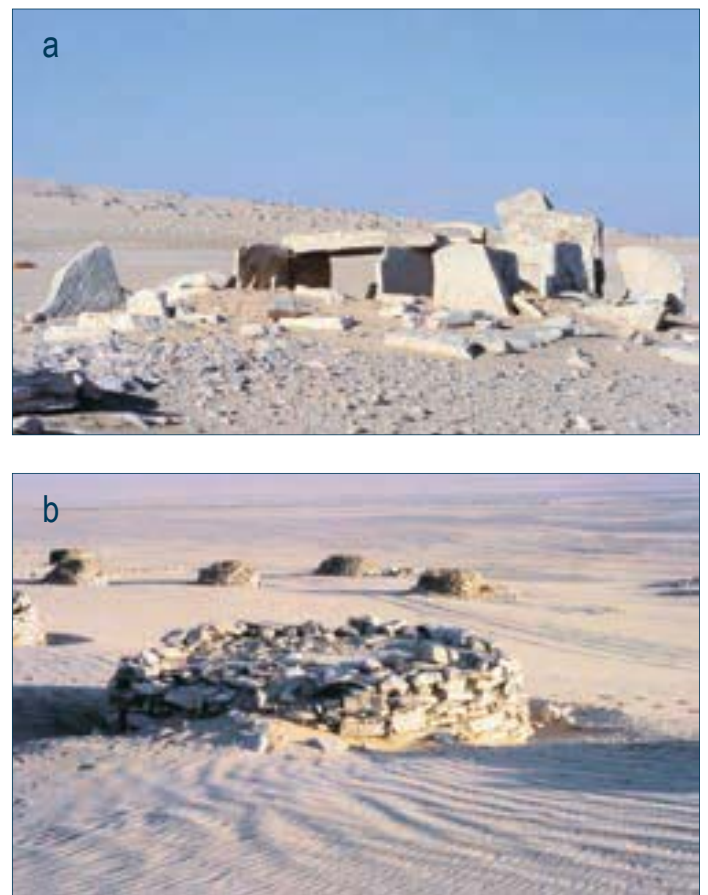


Fig. 3 – Jebel Jidran, Yemen: a. Dolmen ; b. Tower-tombs (Photos: T. Steimer-Herbet).

From a purely typological point of view, the list of megalithic funerary monuments is long and refers to local specificities: wall tombs, tumuli, dolmens, tower-tombs. The most frequent architectures are dolmens and tower-tombs (Steimer-Herbet 2004). Two occupation areas can be observed: in the region encompassing the Arabian Peninsula, the Sinai Peninsula and the Southern Levant, a predominance of tower-tombs is apparent whilst in occidental Levant and Turkey dolmens clearly dominate; overlapping zones are also present (Fig. 4).

Megalithic tombs known locally as *Dirm*, but which we qualify as tower-tombs, still existed in the region of Saada in Yemen (at least before the conflict that currently ravages local archaeology). Their numbers are most imposing in the Jebel Kahlan, where over 100 tombs are distributed on terraces overlooking the Wadi Kahlan, at an altitude of around 1900 m above sea level (Steimer 1998, unpublished report).

Similar clusters are situated to the southeast in the Jawf and the Hadramawt (Cleuziou *et al.* 1988). They exhibit a circular shape, with a diameter of 4 to 4.6 m. Most have been damaged by pillaging, and their preserved height is around 1.1 m (Fig. 5a). The best-preserved tombs of Yemen are found at the site of Makhdarah in the Khawlan and measure up to 2.8 m high. The construction techniques include a double wall of sandstone slabs 0.60-0.80 m long and 0.30-0.40 m wide, for a thickness of 0.15-0.20 m. The internal chamber is circular and covered with a corbelled roof. We distinguish between tombs with ‘tails’ – lines of circular stone piles extending from the tomb – and those without. At Jebel Ruwaik, radiocarbon dates on bones indicate the age of the tombs with tails to be around 2916-2601 BC (Pa 1898, 2 sigmas) (Steimer 1999; Braemer *et al.* 2001). The majority of the tombs of the Jebel Kahlan are associated with architectural elements taking various

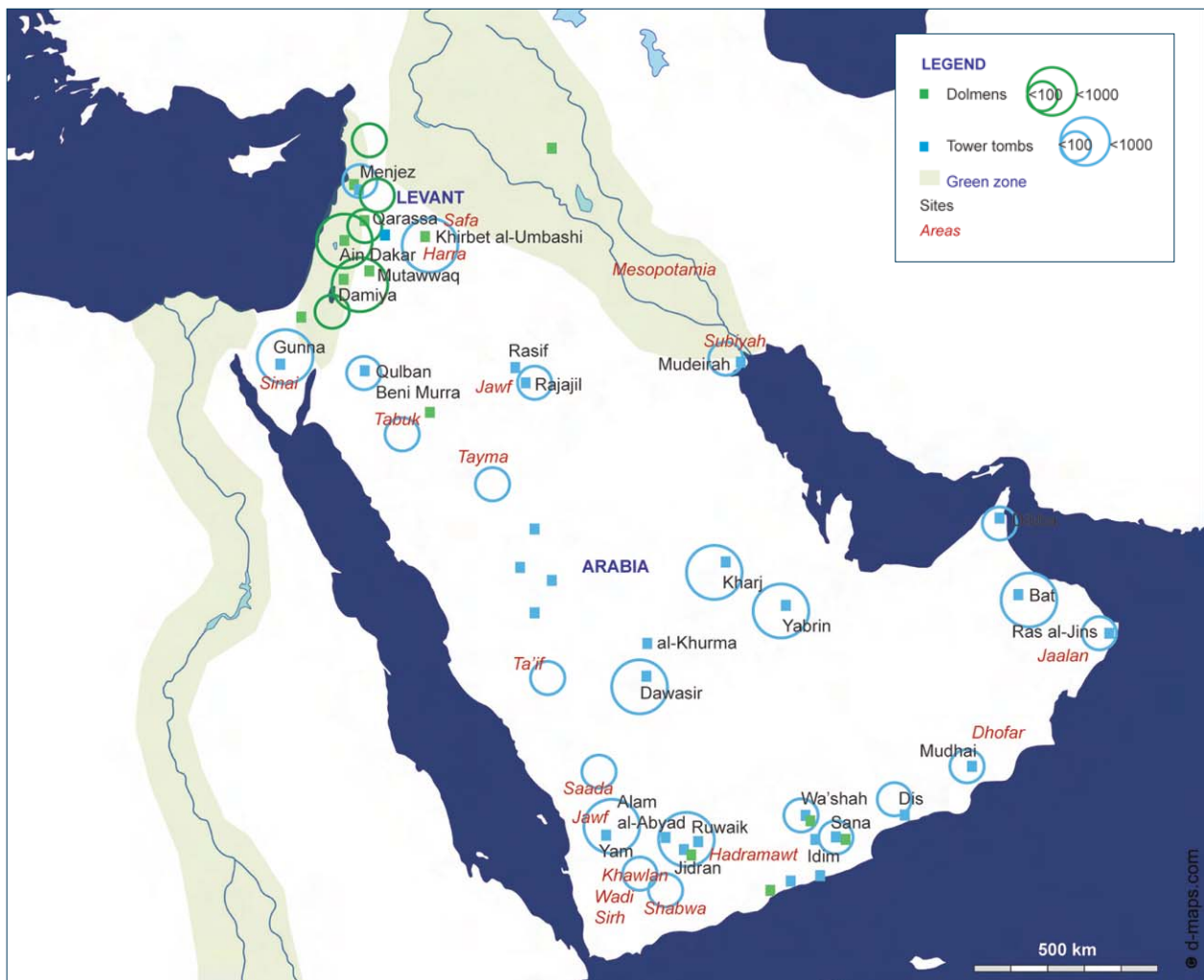


Fig. 4 – Distribution map of tower-tombs and dolmens (© T. Steimer-Herbet).

forms such as tails or low walls. Just as with several other necropolises (Jebel Jidran, Jebel Ruwaik, Jebel Makhdarah), each tomb can be associated with two, three, sometimes even four tails (De Maigret 1996; Steimer 1998, 1999, 2001). One structure, observed only on the Jebel Kahlan, is exceptional in that its tail comprises 12 circular stone piles linked by walls, the entire ensemble measuring 24 m.

Vestiges of Humankind near this vast necropolis are numerous. Several settlement structures in caves have been found, with lithic industries of quartz, rock engravings (transcripts by García & Rachad 1989), as well as South Arabian inscriptions and engravings representing camels. Surveys in the Saada region uncovered several similar necropolises in the Wadi Mourer and the Wadi Nushur.

In the Sinai, several tower-tomb necropolises have been identified (Jebel Gunna, 'Ein Huderah, Abu-Halil, Jebel Hadid, 'Ein Umm Ahmad, El 'Abar, Jebel Sainte-Catherine, Wadi Hbar, Wadi Hebran, Wadi Nasb, Wadi Sawawin). Tower-tombs in the Sinai do not have tails but they all have openings. Those of Jebel Gunna (Bar-Yosef *et al.* 1977) are formed by two monolithic jambs and a lintel (**Fig. 5b**). They are different from the tower-tombs of Jebels Makhdarah, Ruwaik and Jidran in Yemen, which are narrower and elongated. In Yemen, while the openings possess lintels and a threshold slab, the jambs are made of small flat stones (Steimer-Herbet & Besse 2020). The orientation of the tombs is particularly interesting; all tombs from Sinai and Yemen are oriented west, or at least towards the western quarter of the horizon (Bar-Yosef *et al.* 1983; Braemer *et al.* 2001). This distinguishes them



Fig. 5 – a. Tower-tomb of Jebel Kahlan (Yemen) (Photo: F. Braemer); b. Tower-tomb of Jebel Gunna (Egypt, Sinai); c. Tower-tomb of Hebariyeh (Syria); d. Tower-tomb of Dibba (Fujeira) (Photos: T. Steimer-Herbet).

from the tombs of the oriental façade of Arabia, the openings of which face east.

An original feature of the tower-tombs of tower-tombs of Hebariyeh (Harra, Syria) is the grouping of circular and quadrangular structures. The Hebariyeh area has previously been the topic of an article inventorying several hundred tombs (Steimer-Herbet 2011) situated near a village dated to the end of the 3rd millennium BC and discovered in the 90s by a French-Syrian mission (Braemer *et al.* 2004). This rich site gives us a few indications of the relationships between the settlement and the necropolis. Quadrangular tower-tombs, like that of the necropolis of Khirbet al-Umbashi, are linked to megalithic settlements dating to the end of the 3rd millennium BC (Ly-6027, 2491-2134 BC). Circular tower-tombs seem to be anterior since they were built over the Chalcolithic settlements. They are also linked to camping grounds (stone circles) and enclosures. Tower-tombs with tails, which are also frequent in this region, are more isolated from the visible domestic structures. In numerous cases, they are associated with kites (gazelle traps). We observed examples of tails elongating the main trap wall, and sometimes tails interrupted by the trap wall (Steimer-Herbet 2011: Fig. 7c, 8a, b) (**Fig. 5c**).

Through the variety of their construction and in their large numbers, the tower-tombs of the oriental façade of Arabia play a major role in the megalithism of the Middle East. At Dibba (Fujeira), the tower-tombs are named Hafit after the eponymous site of Jebel Hafit, located to the south of the current oasis of al-Aïn (Bibby 1966). They are built on the first terraces overhanging the intersection between the Wadi Zanah and the Wadi Fay, at an altitude of 200 m. In 2003, 58 monuments were registered in the area (Steimer-Herbet 2003, unpublished report). All are dated between 3200 and 2700 BC (Frifelt 1970). The diameter of the tombs varies between 4 and 8 m. They are formed by two concentric walls built around a circular or oval chamber. The internal cladding presents a slight overlap towards the centre in order to achieve a corbelled cover. The preserved height of the monuments of Dibba does not exceed 2.5 m (**Fig. 5d**). The best-preserved construction at the Wadi al-Ayn reaches a height of 6 m, while a tower-tomb of Shihri-Jaylah described by Cleuziou is 8 m high (Cleuziou 2002b: 19). Twenty-seven of

the tower-tombs of Dibba have entrances facing the south and southwest. This is remarkably different from the usual orientation of the tower-tomb necropolises of Oman, the entrances of which are almost always oriented to the east (Cleuziou 2001: 19). The technique of tomb building is rather complex at Dibba since they are often built on steep slopes. Foundations must therefore compensate for the incline and necessitate the use of complex scaffolding. According to the predictive model of Giraud for Ras al-Jins (Oman), tower-tombs are localized near natural resources such as springs, mangroves, coasts, or oases (Giraud 2012). This is the case for the necropolis of Dibba, which overlooks an oasis occupying the coastal plain at the output of two wadis in the Gulf of Oman.

From the Jordan Valley to the Oronte, megalithism is so abundant that it is difficult to choose only a few determining examples among the rich necropolises. In this part of the Levant, dolmens constitute the best-known and most studied model (Stékélis 1961; Epstein 1985; Steimer-Herbet 2001; Fraser 2018). The necropolis of Khalt Eaged, in the north of Jordan, was discovered in 2005, 35 km to the west of the modern town of Irbid (Steimer-Herbet 2005, unpublished report). This site, which includes 16 well-preserved sandstone dolmens, is threatened by agricultural activities. The state of preservation of the monuments is exceptional considering the vast majority have been pillaged for their material, and often only a few orthostats and sometimes the cover slab remain. The dolmens at Khalt Eaged are distinct in having a circular drystone wall covering the chamber (**Fig. 6a**). This observation resolves a question that is several decades old regarding the possibility of a tumulus covering the chamber. In their pitiful state, many dolmens, including those of Ala-Safat, Jebel Mutawwaq, Kufr Yuba (Jordan), Aïn Dakar, Qarassa (Syria) to name but a few, exhibited only one or two base walls, either concentric, quadrangular, or in a half-circle. A more detailed examination of well-preserved dolmen architectures allows us to imagine funerary chambers covered on their external side by a drystone wall. One of the dolmens of Khalt Eaged has two contiguous funeral chambers, which is not exceptional in this area; other such dolmens are found at the site of Marajem (Nicolle *et al.* 1999). At Ala-Safat (Stékélis 1961) and Tell al-'Umayri (Dubis & Dabrowski 2002), dolmens

with multiple levels were found. At Khalt Eaged, the necropolis is set in the middle of vast cultivated fields, prompting the hypothesis that the settlement component that must have been located nearby but has been destroyed over time (Steimer-Herbet &

Besse 2017). Houses in this area tend to be rectangular or to have double-apses. The settlement-necropolis relationship is well documented for the site of Jebel Mutawwaq and Sharaya (Polcaro *et al.* 2014; Steimer-Herbet 2006) where double-apse

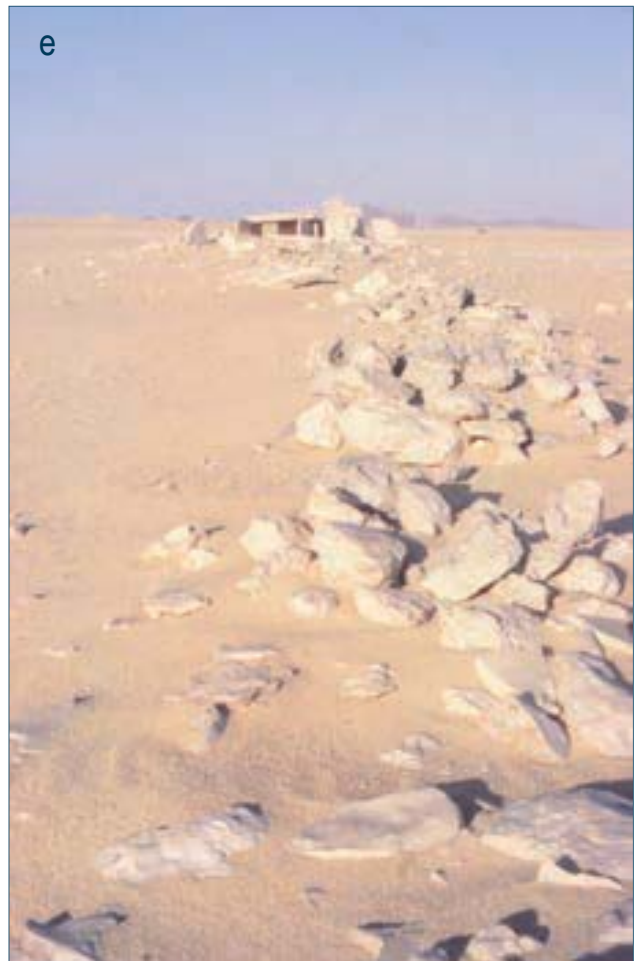


Fig. 6 – a-b. Dolmen of Khalt Eaged (Jordan) (Photo: W. Abu-Azizeh); c-d. Dolmen of Ain Dakar (Syria); e. Dolmen of Jidran (Yemen) (Photos: T. Steimer-Herbet).

houses have been dated to the Early Bronze Age I (3600-3150/3100 BC).

The dolmens of Aïn Dakar, Syria (Steimer-Herbet & Zuobee 2014) are at the heart of a region that is extremely rich in megalithic monuments: the basalt plateau of Golan, where the initial appearance of dolmens has been highly debated, with important chronological gaps. Some researchers (Dajani 1967; Paz 2005) place the start of megalith building during the second half of the 4th millennium BC, in the Early Bronze Age Ib (3300-3050 BC) while others argue the construction period started during the 3rd millennium, during the Middle Bronze Age IV (2300-1959 BC) (Epstein 1985; Kochavi 1989). Excavations in Jordan and Syria have yielded new chronological indications attributing the first use of these dolmens to the Early Bronze Age (Dubis & Dubrowski 2002; Polcaro *et al.* 2014; Steimer-Herbet & Besse 2017). It is worth mentioning that for dolmens just as for tower-tombs, all necropolises were not in use simultaneously. There is a certain arrhythmia in territory occupation, with phases of abandonment and of the revival of activities that are linked to resources and intracommunal relationships. Some tombs and necropolises could have been reused over several millennia, while others were sealed or abandoned. Of the 400 monuments described by Schumacher in 1885, only 75 are still standing today (Steimer-Herbet 2005, unpublished report; Steimer-Herbet & Zuobee 2014). Few monuments still have their cover slab. Funeral chambers are mostly rectangular and trapezoidal, although a few are oval or square. All chambers are surrounded by one to three circular walls. One of the best-preserved examples reaches a conserved height of 1.5 m and it recovers the cover slabs of the chamber. Seven chambers have a clearly visible entrance, one of which is a pierced rock slab (Fig. 6b). All are oriented towards the east. At Ala-Safat (Jordan) the majority of chambers with portholes open towards the north (Stékélys 1961). The orientation of openings in the dolmens varies considerably from one necropolis to the next but also within each necropolis. The patrons of the tombs privileged an orientation to the north or the east, a choice too heterogenous to suggest any underlying beliefs. It is also important to mention enclosures and funerary tails. At Aïn Dakar, but

also at Qarassa, several megalithic monuments are grouped and encircled or linked by a wall.

Similarly, at the foot of the Jebel Jidran and in the Wadi Sarr (Yemen) two dolmens have a wall –in this area are termed ‘tail’ (Braemer *et al.* 2003). Dolmens are rare in the Yemen. Only six were found by the French and American missions surveying in the Hadramawt (al-Mudarra, Jebel Jidran, Wadi Wash’ah, Wadi Sana, Wadi Sarr, Wadi Shumlya). These dolmens are contemporary with the tear-shaped or trapezoidal stone platforms that appear at the same time as rock engravings, in the middle of the 5th millennium BC (McCorrison *et al.* 2011: 3-6). They are found on the lower terraces near the wadis. The chambers of the dolmens are rectangular, surrounded by a circular or quadrangular wall. Only the dolmens of Jidran and al-Mudarra still had their cover slab at the time they were recorded. While no dolmen has been excavated in the Yemen, McCorrison observed that those located in the Wadi Sana and Shumliya are built on the same alluvial levels as the stone platforms. The associated surface artefacts were dated to the 7th, 3rd and 1st millennia BC (McCorrison *et al.* 2011: 8). Geometric designs, made by a pointed stone tool, decorate the rock slabs of the Jebel Jidran and Wadi Sarr dolmens (Fig. 6c; Braemer *et al.* 2003; McCorrison *et al.* 2011). In the Wadi Sana, the vestiges of an enigmatic structure, recently broken into several pieces, had a rock slab with similar designs dated to the 5th millennium BC thanks to a hearth within which the rock slab fragments were found (AA81816 - 4586-4334 BC).

Dolmens can be distinguished from tower-tombs by their morphological traits and differing building techniques. Dolmens have a rectangular chamber, orthostats and a cover slab; tower-tombs have a circular chamber, orthostats, dry walls and a corbelled roof. The reality, however, is not so simple, and the monuments of Menjez in northern Lebanon are a good example. In this village, on a small territory of 5 x 5 km, ten clusters of megalithic tombs (87 in total) were found by Reverend Father Maurice Tallon between 1959 and 1969. An in-depth study of the building techniques of 11 monuments yielded no fewer than seven different morphologies. The chambers are circular, oval, quadrangular, with or without enclosure, and all open to the south. Several

bear evidence of a corbelled cover (Steimer-Herbet *et al.* 2018, 2019). During the 4th millennium BC, inhabitants of Menjez adopted the techniques of tower-tomb builders to cover chambers of various shapes (Fig. 7). These tombs are characterized by a rich iconography of engraved signs on the rock slabs. Bas-relief in the shape of snakes decorate chamber walls, while other enigmatic figures such as lines, circles, 'U', 'V', or triangles are found on corridors or exterior claddings. Recent discoveries also include engravings with anthropomorphic shapes in a megalithic context, on the cover of a dolmen of the Golan (Sharon *et al.* 2017).

To date, over 20 000 dolmens have been described in the Middle East. The highest known concentration is in the Golan and neighbouring areas (Irbid, Zarqa, Jordan Valley, Mount Nébo, Leja, Homs' Gap). On the occidental façade of the Arabian Peninsula, the number of tower-tombs is about equivalent to the number of dolmens, at around 25 000. To these must be added the 100 000 structures of the Sultanate of Oman.

4. The patrons of megalithic monuments

During the 5th millennium BC, communities experienced important social changes, which are manifest in their behaviour towards their dead. Rather than inhumations directly in the ground, they now chose funerary architectures above ground. Whether in Arabia, in the Levant, in the Balkans, or in Europe, this rapid change in funerary rituals represents a truly societal phenomenon. People invested considerable time and resources to raise these monuments. Their builders respected various codes and despite the poor quality of some rocks managed to obtain the required result, and this occurred over large geographical areas.

The latest studies conducted on tomb location insist that they are built close to oases (Cleuziou 1996; Gebel 2013), on hills at the very heart of the desert, near mangroves on the coast, all prioritizing access to resources (Harrower 2008; Giraud 2010; Cable 2012). Communities developed ingenious water-trapping systems, irrigation systems, and wells (Braemer *et al.* 2004; Gebel 2016). All these

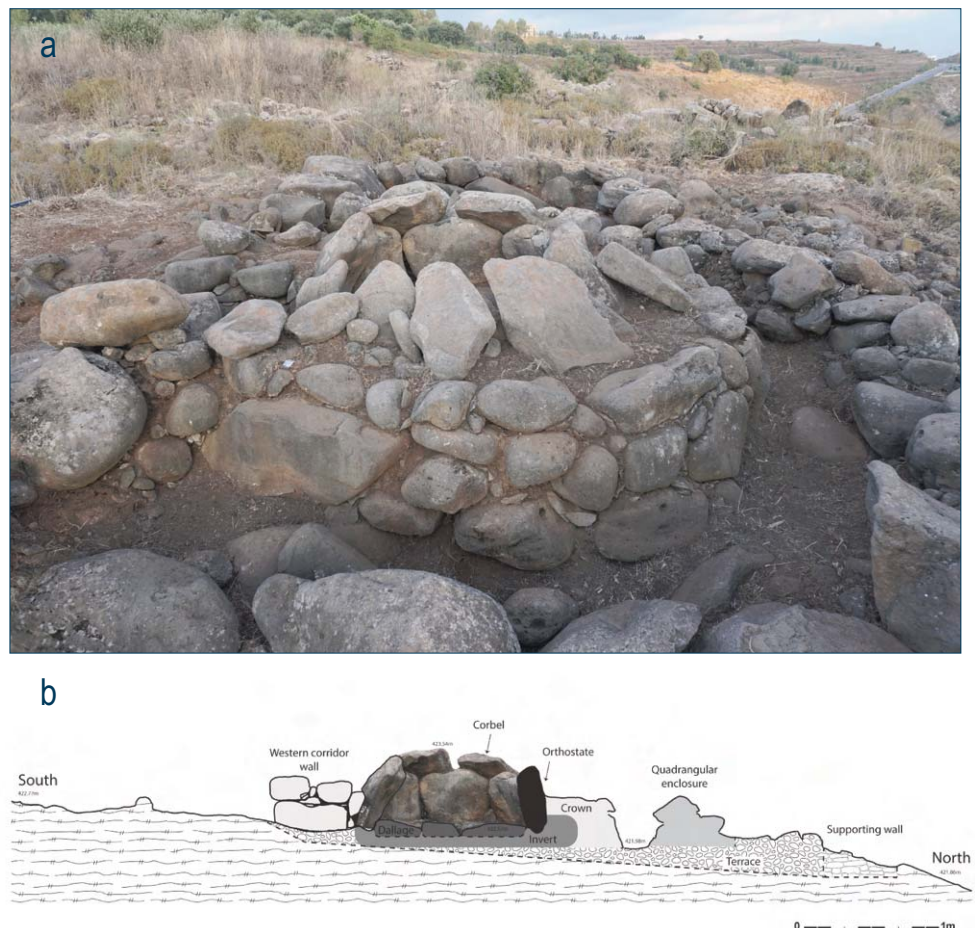


Fig. 7 – Megalithic tombs of Menjez (Lebanon):
a. The monument of Kroum Metowmeh (Photo: F. Cousseau);
b. 3D cross-section of the monument of Kroum Metowmeh.

subsistence modes are described in ‘*Megalithic genesis: construction of a cultural identity for better goods situation*’ (Steimer-Herbet, volume I, p. 83).

This hold on territory also translates into the clustering of dolmens within funerary enclosures, which is probably related to family alliances or dependency systems. Another observed behaviour is the use of multiple funeral chambers, either with shared walls, or with several chambers within a single monument. This clustering phenomenon has been observed in both dolmen and tower-tomb necropolises and it appears that this tendency occurs towards the end of the megalithic period (Braemer *et al.* 2004; Steimer-Herbet 2004). Another interesting element is the presence of numerous walls found within necropolises. At Qarassa in Syria, systematic recording revealed that the necropolis was organized and structured through a system of sectioned areas (Steimer-Herbet & Besse 2017). Walls were also observed in Jebel Mutawwaq in Jordan (Polcaro *et al.* 2014) and are synonymous with a strong structuration of the funerary system. Furthermore, tower-tombs with tails form continuous lines. The deceased therefore shape the landscape in significant ways (Swauger 1966: 106-107; Cleuziou 2002b; Mortensen & Thuesen 2004: 109-110; Philip 2011).

5. Places of worship and human representations

Within this ‘megalithic landscape’, it is difficult to translate material constructions into the potential ideological and religious intents behind them. There are, however, a few buildings, interpreted by their discoverers as communal houses, temples, or sanctuaries, that deserve to figure in this inventory.

These structures are usually larger than houses and surrounded by bench seats. Raised stones are found in the middle or integrated into the walls. At Jebel Mutawwaq in Jordan, such a building was found within an Early Bronze Age I village of 450 double-apsed houses. To the side of the building, a stone is raised, with a well, a small altar, and a shallow artificial pool (Fernandez-Tresguerres 2011). Two similar building examples were excavated in Yemen in the 1980s. The first, wonderfully preserved, was found at al-Raqlah in the Khawlan (De Maignet 1996). The second, at Rawk in the Wadi Idim, was

excavated in 2005. Unfortunately, only a few pieces of the structure were left but a radiocarbon date on bones places its construction at the end of the 4th millennium (Pa 2392, 3499 and 3198 BC (1 σ); Steimer-Herbet *et al.* 2007). Similar monuments were found in the Negev by Avner (1982). At Rawk, the excavation yielded two immature individuals buried in the foundation trenches of raised stones, along with obsidian flints and a coud teeth. Five anthropomorphic statuettes were deposited at the foundation level of the building. A metal fragment of a tool was found, probably forgotten when the bench seats were installed (Fig. 8).

Human representations, frequent during the PPNB, seem to disappear for several millennia and then reappear at the end of the 7th and mostly at the 5th millennium BC. Kirkbride excavated the site of Riqseh, on the Jordan-Saudi border in the Wadi Ramm. The discovered remains comprised a large stone circle, 20 m in diameter, with over 200 menhirs-statues delimiting the perimeter. These representations of men and women with schematic faces, clothes, and daggers are exceptional in that they are dated to the end of the 5th millennium BC (4060 BC (Libby’s Half-Life); K1467, 6010 \pm 120 BP; Kirkbride 1969). In the Middle East, other menhirs-statues have been found in the Hadramawt (Yemen), near al-Ulla (Saudi Arabia), Maarat al-Noman and Tell Braq (Syria) and are slightly more recent, dated to the 7th, 4th and 3rd millennia BC (Pirenne 1990; Newton & Zarins 2000: 165, Fig. 8; Steimer-Herbet 2020). Most were found isolated, along axes of circulation such as at Wadi Zabon near Ghail Yamin and Krif Badrid (McCorriston 2011) and Wadi Idim at Rawk and Sunah, and Wadi Bayut at Khushom al-Sanam (Steimer-Herbet *et al.* 2007; Steimer-Herbet 2008). In some cases, these statues adorned the façade of a ritual structure, as at Arf al-Qibali in Yemen (Vogt 1997) or in South-East Jordan in the desert of Jibal al-Khashabiyeh (W. Abu-Azizeh and M. B. Tarawneh, personal communication).

In the Hadramawt, all the menhirs-statues are male. The figures are incised or worked using a hammerstone. Only the upper half of the body is represented; the lower section was probably left unmarked as it was buried in the ground. There are strong stylistic similarities between the figures and rock engravings found in Arabia (Inizan & Rachad 2007; Nayeem 2000). Common anatomical motifs

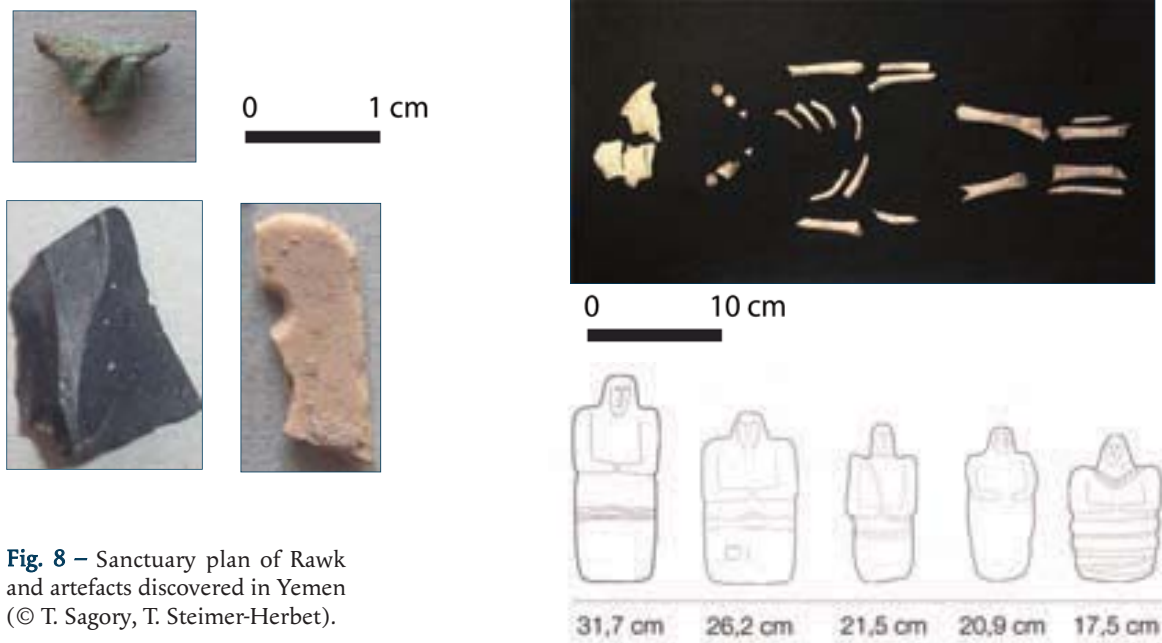


Fig. 8 – Sanctuary plan of Rawk and artefacts discovered in Yemen (© T. Sagory, T. Steimer-Herbet).

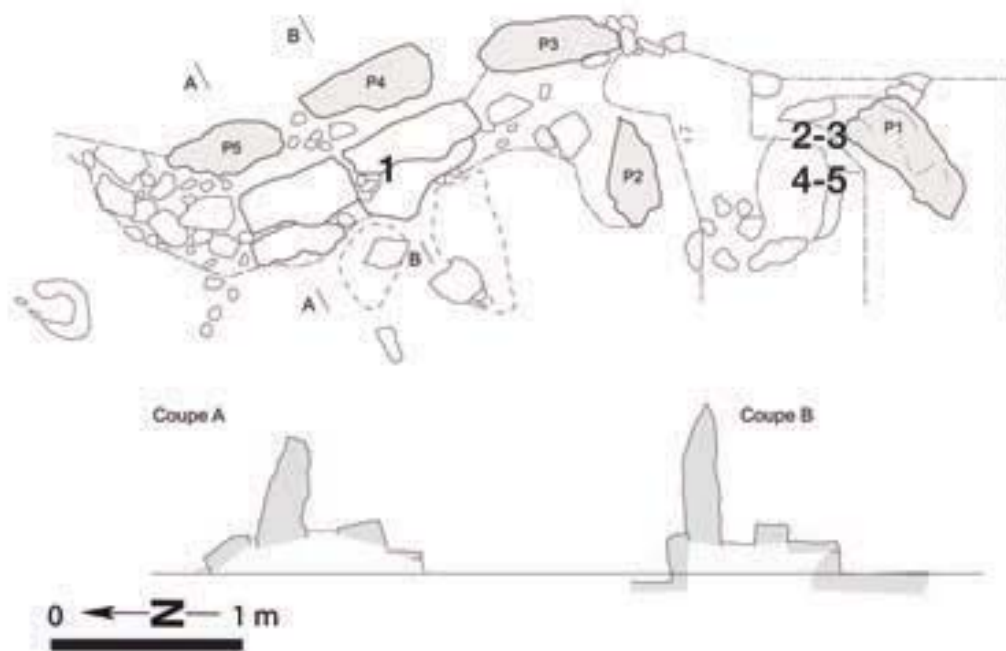
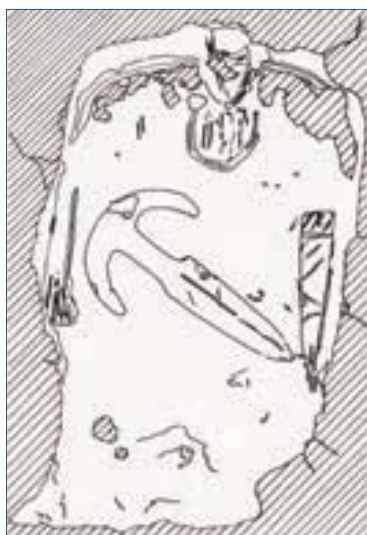


Fig. 9 – Menhirs-statues of the Wadi Idim in Yemen (© P. Lavigne, T. Steimer-Herbet).



include the nose, the brows, and the eyes (T-shaped). The mouth is missing, and the bottom of the face is delineated by a curved line and a beard (which could also be a pectoral muscle). The arms, with or without hands, lie alongside the body. At Rawk, a dagger with a crescent-shaped pommel is represented, probably a status object. It is associated with a sheath of dimensions smaller than the dagger's blade. The belts of the figures are also depicted, often represented by a simple line but sometimes with a fine chevron pattern (Steimer-Herbet 2008; Fig. 9).

Small anthropomorphic statuettes are exceptional discoveries in the communal buildings or near settlements. They are attributed to the end of the 4th millennium BC (Steimer-Herbet *et al.* 2007; Steimer-Herbet 2020). In contrast with menhirs-statues, these small statuettes are sculpted in the round. They all depict a standing individual, arms perpendicular to the body. The body is schematic, while the head and facial attributes are realistic. Incisions, fine pecking, and polishing have been used to shape realistic arms, nose, eyes, brows, beard, anatomical features and ornaments (necklaces, belts, or strings). These statuettes are relatively small; they fit in one hand and can be easily transported. All the statuettes from one region to the next present relatively homogenous faces, but the clothing, body, and the details of the face vary. More specifically, depictions of nudity in the Jawf and overweightness in the Marib are evocative of a true desire for realism.

Raised stones, either isolated or aligned, are numerous. No extensive research has been conducted on this topic in the whole of Arabia and the Levant. Sources mentioning these monuments are succinct, and the stones are very difficult to date. An excellent guide by Scheltema 'Megalithic Jordan' inventories eight sites presenting raised stones dated from the Chalcolithic period to the Early Bronze Age II (2008). The link between megalithic tombs and raised stones is, for now, unproven. At Jebel Makhad (Jordan) and Menjez (Lebanon), isolated stones were found near tombs (Nicolle *et al.* 2001; Steimer-Herbet *et al.* 2019). Extensive alignments are harder to link with necropolises, as is the case for Rajajil, Saudi Arabia (Gebel 2013), Lejjun, Jordan (Chesson *et al.* 2005) and those of Tihama, Yemen (Khalidi 2008).

The alignment of Al-Mahandad in the Yemen valley of Tihama is particularly interesting (Fig. 10). It is part of an ensemble of seven sites, inventoried by Khalidi (2008). Dated to the end of the 3rd millennium BC, they are deliberately set at precise points



Fig. 10 – Plan and photography of Al-Mahandad (Yemen): a. View from north; b. View from south-east; c. Aerial view of alignments and circles (Photos: Y. Guichard).

alongside the principal wadis. For Khalidi, raised stones are always located at geographical, territorial, strategic, and/or symbolic transitions. The stones contribute to fostering a special link between individuals and the territory. At this period, we see an increase in the importation of obsidian from the horn of Africa. These raised stones could be the product of a territorial affirmation (border markings), an appropriation of the landscape (control), or simply a commemoration of the living or the dead. Most functional hypotheses rest upon ethnographical observations. In some tribes, raised stones serve the role of cenotaphs. The individual whose body could not be brought back to family or is inhumed in another place is represented by a stone, as a memory of the deceased and as the symbolic equivalent of a tomb. The stone is therefore perceived as a substitute for an individual. The interpretations of Thesiger are very different; in his book about the Danakil, he argues that the stones are a representation of the body count of the deceased (Thesiger 1996).

6. Conclusion

Megalithic practices appear diverse, varying from one region to the next. They nonetheless form a homogenous ensemble, a shared 'megalithic culture' in the Middle East. Considering the multiple facets of these practices, they only make sense when considering the phenomenon from a global perspective. From an anthropological point of view, this global vision allows for some general characteristics to emerge.

The patrons of megaliths practiced a variety of modes of subsistence within arid environments and diverse goods exchange systems. Megalithism can nonetheless be identified as the common denominator of communities peopling this part of the world. The symbolic role of megalithic monuments is deep; it materializes a space and its transformation into a territory. Its social role, meanwhile, is manifested in the physical difficulty of building such architectures, necessitating an organization with authority. The study of funerary architecture, of the various forms of expression of megalithism with dolmens, tower-tombs, sanctuaries, stone alignments, menhirs-statues, and anthropomorphic statues, offers us an opportunity to access the thought process of the megalith builders.

Despite the fragmented remains, it is obvious from the symbols observed on tombs (circles, squares), on menhirs-statues (chevrons), and anthropomorphic statuettes (squares and lines) that the cultural universe of the protohistoric populations of the Middle East was rich. Megalithic art was not just an aesthetic endeavour but embodied a complex cosmology and reminded the beholder of such. The staging of the representations (snakes, daggers, geometric signs) within identical cultural contexts raises the question of a code of understanding that was shared between communities. This common code was probably the result of material and ideological exchanges between the various megalithic societies.