

The megalith* builders

A hierarchical society

Neolithic men were sedentary farmers who lived in villages. Completion of sites of this nature indicates the great sense of organisation of these farming communities.

The hierarchy of Neolithic society is clearly visible in this type of construction: a chief, architects who knew about the resistance of materials and knew how to take measurements, priests who could unite people's efforts, and labourers.

These constructions must have called upon a large number of people, which suggests a high population density in the immediate vicinity.

Technical prowess

The stone blocks were ripped off the granite base, probably using stone spikes. There were no menhir* quarries, rather rational and opportunistic use of piles of rock which were already eroded. The megaliths* obtained in this way could be transported using ropes and wooden rollers. The bottoms of the menhirs* were placed in carefully prepared trenches, the most difficult thing no doubt being to slide in the end of the stone. A foundation ceremony marked the installation of the megaliths*.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Cairn: a stone monument covering burial places.
Dolmen ("stone table" in Breton): a chamber, sometimes with a burial passage, bounded by horizontal stones.

Gin: lifting apparatus often made of three beams forming a triangular pyramid.

Megalith: from the Greek "mega" (big) and "lithos" (stone), meaning a large stone.

Menhir: a Breton word meaning "long stone".

Monolith: work formed by a single piece of rock.

Shield idols: "framed" representation of a divinity.

Offset: a projection from a vertical plane.

Tumulus: an artificial mound covering one or several tombs and made from a mixture of stone and earth. Depending on the proportions of these materials, they are called mounds (earth) or cairns (stone).

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.

Tours accessible to disabled visitors.

Reservation only.



Bookshop-Giftshop

The guide to this monument is available in the 'Itinéraires' collection in the bookshop-giftshop.

Centre des monuments nationaux
 Site des mégalithes de Locmariaquer
 Route de Kerlogonan
 56740 Locmariaquer
 tél. 02 97 57 37 59
 fax 02 97 57 41 62
 locmariaquer@monuments-nationaux.fr

www.monuments-nationaux.fr

Locmariaquer megaliths

Three Neolithic constructions

Gigantic architecture

Since the prehistoric age, the several thousand monoliths* erected in this region 6,000 years ago have formed one of the most spectacular megalithic* sites in the world. The findings of recent excavations suggest that the site was



1805 engraving

developed in several phases. In the 5th millennium B.C., an open arrangement of standing stones was established, with free-standing and aligned stones marking out a sacred place. These giant menhirs* measure between 6 and 20 metres - the record held by the decorated menhir* at Locmariaquer, from c. 4300 B.C. Later, c. 4000 B.C., individual burial chambers appeared, such as the Er Grah tumulus*, followed by collective burials, for example at the Table des Marchands dolmen*.

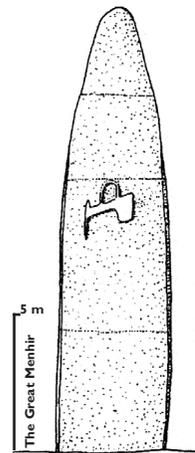
Excavations and restoration

In popular belief, megaliths* have been associated with the invisible world of fantasy and the sacred. Interest in them led to their being preserved from the 18th century onwards, then studied by archaeologists in the 19th century before being restored to their original appearance in the 20th century.

* Explanations overleaf.

The broken Great Menhir*

This monolith*, the largest from the prehistoric age in the West – an enormous block of granite over 20 metres long – now lies in four pieces. It towered 18.5 metres above the ground when it was standing. This 280-tonne block was cut from a



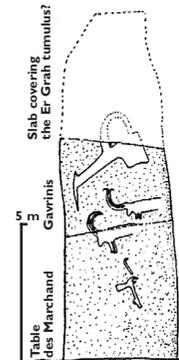
type of granite unknown on the Locmariaquer peninsula and moved several kilometres by Neolithic men, although it is not sure what technique they used to do so. They probably built an earth ramp to lift the menhir* before swinging it into a ditch and hoisting it using levers and wooden gins*, then wedged it with earth and stones. Once standing, it was smoothed all over using quartz hammers. Behind the Great Menhir*, areas of stony ground indicate the positions of 18 other

menhirs*. Erected around 4500 B.C., this row, which forms an impressive rectilinear assembly, was destroyed c. 4300-4200 B.C..

The question of whether these tall pillars fell accidentally or were deliberately toppled remains an open question within the scientific community.

The Table des Marchand dolmen*

Erected c. 3900 B.C., this site was used until the beginning of the Bronze Age c. 2000 B.C.. Archaeological excavations have revealed that the rear slab is older than the dolmen* itself. Erected at the same time as the Great Menhir* alignment, it is decorated on both sides and remained in its



original position when the Great Menhir* row was destroyed, and the dolmen* was built around it; it was therefore necessary to adjust work to its height. The arched shape of this slab and the frame formed by an offset* in the sculpture means it can be classified as a shield idol*, a common design in the region. The passage roof gets higher and higher, perhaps to mark

the approach to the chamber, the most holy place. The crescent-shaped symbols, all around, are thought to signify the spiritual influence of the divinity. The crooks sculpted on the surface, a common feature in Neolithic art, are thought to represent the power of the divinity and maybe also the sacerdotal function of the priests. The “gazelle” engraving in the centre of the stele no doubt dates from the early twentieth century. The ceiling is decorated with engravings: a shafted axe-blade, a crook and the lower part of an ox. Another part of the animal is to be found 4km away, on the roof of the Gavrinis dolmen*. The final part is thought to be the block covering the grave at the Er Grah tumulus*. The three parts may have originally formed a menhir* measuring 14m high.

The Er Grah (or Er Vinglé) tumulus*

This enormous monument belongs to the category of closed-grave burials. These are thought to be the tombs of important people, due to their dimensions and the funerary items found inside. The tumulus* was built in several phases: around 4500 B.C., very small cairns* on top of a few trenches were raised, including those in which the two ox skeletons were found; c. 4200 B.C. came the small burial chamber surrounded by a circular cairn*, followed c. 4000 B.C. by two extensions, to the north and south, comprising low stone walls supporting a mass of grey silt covered by smaller stones, which brought the total length of the monument to 140 metres.



In the 19th century, all that was known of Er Grah was the chamber, which had already been ransacked. The northern extremity, which was used as a quarry (hence the name Er Vinglé, or “quarry” in Breton) has now disappeared. In spite of a one-off excavation by Zacharie Le Rouzic in 1908, the monument, which had caved in in places and was covered in vegetation, was forgotten until 1991. The tumulus* was restored to its original condition the following year.