



BULGARIAN MEGALITHS – PRESENT STATE AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

A first attempt is made to provide a global picture of the megaliths in Thrace (South East Europe); also the problems related to their dating are explicated. The location and the conventional (indirect) dating of the menhirs and dolmens mainly in Bulgaria, but partially also in Greece and Turkey are summarized. The necessity of direct dating – preferably by luminescence means – is discussed. International collaboration is proposed for creating a full and precise picture of the Thracian megaliths within the chronological framework of the pan-European (Mediterranean) megalithic region.

KEYWORDS: megaliths, Thrace, Bulgaria, luminescence dating, OSL

I. INTRODUCTION

There is not a universally accepted conventional terminology about megaliths; therefore we propose here our version. Accumulating technological skills the ancient people living in the South East part of the Balkan Peninsula passed from the rock-cut to megalithic monuments of two basic kinds. The menhirs are found as isolated vertically planted stone blocks. Their derivatives are combinations of numerous menhirs fixed separately into the ground in the form of 1D straight alignments, 2D grids or circles (cromlechs). Each combination of this kind has been designed and then accepted as a *united* architectural and sacral object (Fig.1).

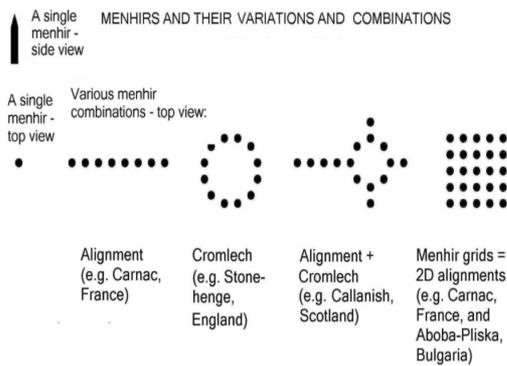


Fig.1 Menhirs and their variation and combinations

The dolmens are constructions where some stone blocks support a big covering plate horizontally positioned over the ground. They differ by the arrangement of the supporting elements. In this sense three basic constructions are known - table, camera and cylinder. They are developed into various derivatives - two cameras, eventually dromos, long dolmens or corridor graves, megalithic temples of Maltese type etc. (Fig.2).

The European megaliths are concentrated in three main areas: A/ West Europe (Scandinavia, Denmark, Germany, France,

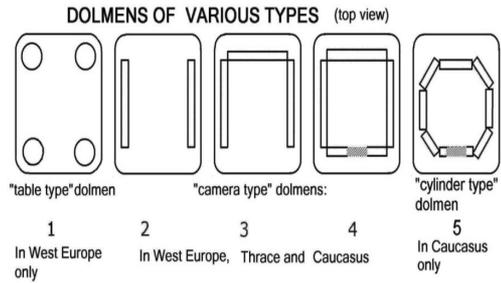


Fig. 2: Dolmens of various types

Spain, Portugal, Balearics, Malta, South Italy), B/ South-East Europe (Thrace – Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey) and C/ East Europe (West Caucasus – South Russia). The Balkan/Thracian megaliths are practically unknown in the specialized international literature and in Internet. Here we describe this group exclusively and try to give a schematic location map. Most information is presented about the Bulgarian objects (Fig.3).

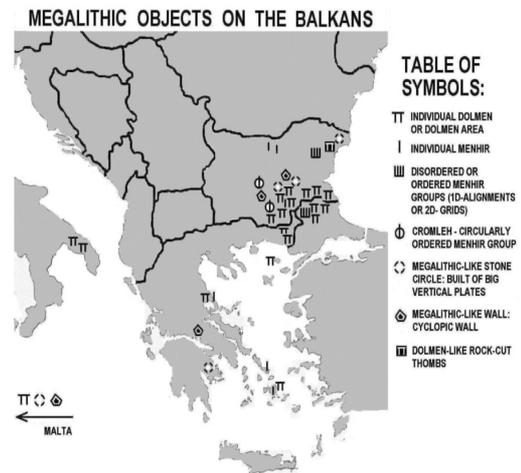


Fig. 3: Location of megaliths on Balkan Peninsula.

2. MENHIRS IN THRACE. CONVENTIONAL DATING

The menhirs in Bulgaria are studied since 1884 by K. Irechek, K. Shkorpil, St. Mihailov, V. Beshevliev, D. Mitova-Dzhonova, R.

Rashev (Rashev 1992). In the beginning of XX c. the menhirs were about 800. Today not more than 150 are preserved, mostly thrown down and/or moved from the original positions (*our expeditions, 2009*). We observed 3-4 individual menhirs (2 near Svishtov, and 1-2 in Sakar mountain). Several irregular and ordered groups are situated mainly around Shumen. The ordered groups are very curious – the menhirs are arranged on the terrain as 2D-rectangular grids (Shkorpil 1905). Such arrangement is extremely rare. Similar structure is known from the literature to be located in Brittany, France (Bernardini 2005). At least two cromlechs survived till now in Bulgaria: 1 near Plovdiv (discovered by G.Kitov in 2002, today half-destroyed already) and 1 in East Rhodope mountain (discovered by G. Nehrizov in 1998, still preserved in good condition). Four megalith-like stone circles (they are not cromlechs!) are known in Bulgaria today: 1 north from Varna (Hristov 2009), 1 near to Yambol, 1 in Sakar mountain and 1 in East Rhodope. These circles are built not by layer-over-layer dry masonry but by vertical planting of big stone plates which come in contact by their *lateral* edges only. The most impressive example of such kind of objects is the famous Grave Circle in Mycenae.

K. Shkorpil and St. Mihailov considered the menhirs as very old pre-historic monuments similar to the West European megaliths (Rashev 1992). The modern official opinion (G. Feher, V. Beshevliev, R. Rashev) relates them to the early Middle Ages VII-VIII c. (Rashev 1992). No attempts have been made so far for direct dating of the Bulgarian menhirs, e.g. C-14 or luminescence, to mention the major of the absolute dating methods available.

Numerous menhir fields exist in North West Turkey nearly to Edirne (Fol 2007). They contain about 1000 menhirs (Sahinsah 2009). We have no data about their dating. About 5-6 individual menhirs exist also in Greece (Moutsopoulos and Dimitrokallis 1977).

3. DOLMENS IN THRACE. CONVENTIONAL DATING

The dolmens in Bulgaria are studied since 1890 by K. Shkorpil, St. Bonchev, G. Bonchev, V. Mikov (Venedikov, Fol, 1976, 1982), recently also by G. Nehrizov, D. Agre. According to Bonchev 1901 and Shkorpil 1925 more than 800 such objects are observed in the beginning of XX c. Unfortunately, our expeditions in 2006 and 2008 (Kolev et al 2008, Tsonev et al 2009, Gonzalez-Garcia et al 2009) concluded that no more than 120 of them survived in a relatively acceptable condition. Most of them are concentrated in three typical regions: Strandzha Mountain (about 50), Sakar Mountain (about 40) and East Rhodope Mountain (about 20). Another 5-6 dolmen-like objects are spread out over some non-typical regions: East Balkan (Kotel, Omurtag, Kazanlak) and Central Sredna Gora mountain (Strelcha, Kazanlak).

The commonly accepted conventional dating based on typological observations on pottery finds, bronze fibulae etc., leads to the assumption that the Bulgarian dolmens have been built in the period XII – VI c. BC (Venedikov, Fol, 1976, 1982). No attempts for direct (physical) dating of these objects have been ever made.

Several dolmens are known also in Greece (20-30 objects spread in East Rhodope Mountain; Dimini; Samothraki isle, Fol 2007; Naxos isle, Moutsopoulos and Dimitrokallis, 1977). A noticeable number of dolmens is located in Turkey (about 300 objects in Strandzha Mountain, north from the Lalapasha parallel; estimated according to Sahinsah 2009). The dolmens in Samothraki, Dimini and Naxos play a specific role: they trace a very curious *possible* migration trajectory of the ancient dolmen builders from West Europe towards the Balkan Peninsula.

We have no data about the dating of the dolmens in Greece and Turkey.

4. PROBLEMS IN DATING OF THRACIAN MEGALITHS

The first problem is connected with the sense of the conventional (indirect) dating. The Thracian dolmens are dated by the artifacts from their last use as funeral places. However, the artifacts date the last use but not necessarily the building itself. In addition, not every dolmen has been used as tomb.

The second problem arises when comparing the prevailing constructions of the three main dolmen groups in the Mediterranean. The West European dolmens are the oldest (XL-XX c. BC) and they really include the most primitive constructions – the table-type dolmens (Balfour 1997). The Caucasian dolmens are dated to XXV-XV c. BC and they include the most sophisticated constructions – the cylinder-type dolmens (Markovin 1978). In Thrace there are neither table-type nor cylinder-type dolmens, there are only the standard camera-type dolmens. This intermediate construction type leads us to the expectation of a respective intermediate dating. However, the conventional dating gives XII-VI c. BC. Here we see a contradiction between the logic of the constructive development (from simple to complex structures) and the indirect dating.

The third problem is connected with the beginning of the written history. The ancient Greek chronographers documented the Balkan region since VII-VI c. BC. Although they described in detail Thracian rock-cut sanctuaries (the more primitive objects), they didn't mention the megalithic buildings in Thrace (the later and more advanced structures) at all. This strange situation requires a clarification by more precise dating of the Thracian dolmens.

Concerning the Balkan menhirs, they cannot be seriously dated in the conventional manner at all – the artifacts are too scarce to support serious conclusions.

5. FURTHER STUDIES OF THRACIAN MEGALITHS

The only direct method suitable to date the megaliths seems to be the luminescence technique as developed and applied by I. Liritzis and colleagues either by thermoluminescence (TL) (Liritzis et al., 1997) or more recently by optically stimulated luminescence use (OSL) (Liritzis et al 2007; see also a review by Liritzis, 2011). The dolmens in Bulgaria are built mostly from granite and gneiss plates – both are quartz bearing rocks (Kostov 2008), and rarely from schist or marble plates. Therefore luminescence dating can be used for studying the underground surface of the in situ survived stone blocks. As a result we expect Thracian megaliths to be incorporated into the pan-European megalithic framework in a satisfactory precise manner.

International collaboration is needed for a detailed and successful examination of the Balkan megaliths as a united group. Menhirs must be examined together with the dolmens. Urgent measures have to be taken to restore and to popularize the Balkan megalithic area, to develop it as an attractive tourist destination. Only a good interregional activity can explore these impressive monuments and introduce them into the world cultural heritage. Joint expeditions on the terrain accompanied by GPS localization, accurate measurements of dimensions and orientations, review publications in English language and periodic workshops, allowing the regular data exchange between Balkan scientists, creation of a common map and on-line catalogue of the Balkan megalithic objects could support the fast realization of such program.

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