



VENDÉE
LE DÉPARTEMENT

RENCONTRE INTERNATIONALE

LES MÉGALITHES DANS LE MONDE
MEGALITHS OF THE WORLD

9 au 15 Septembre 2019

11 septembre 2019

EXCURSION

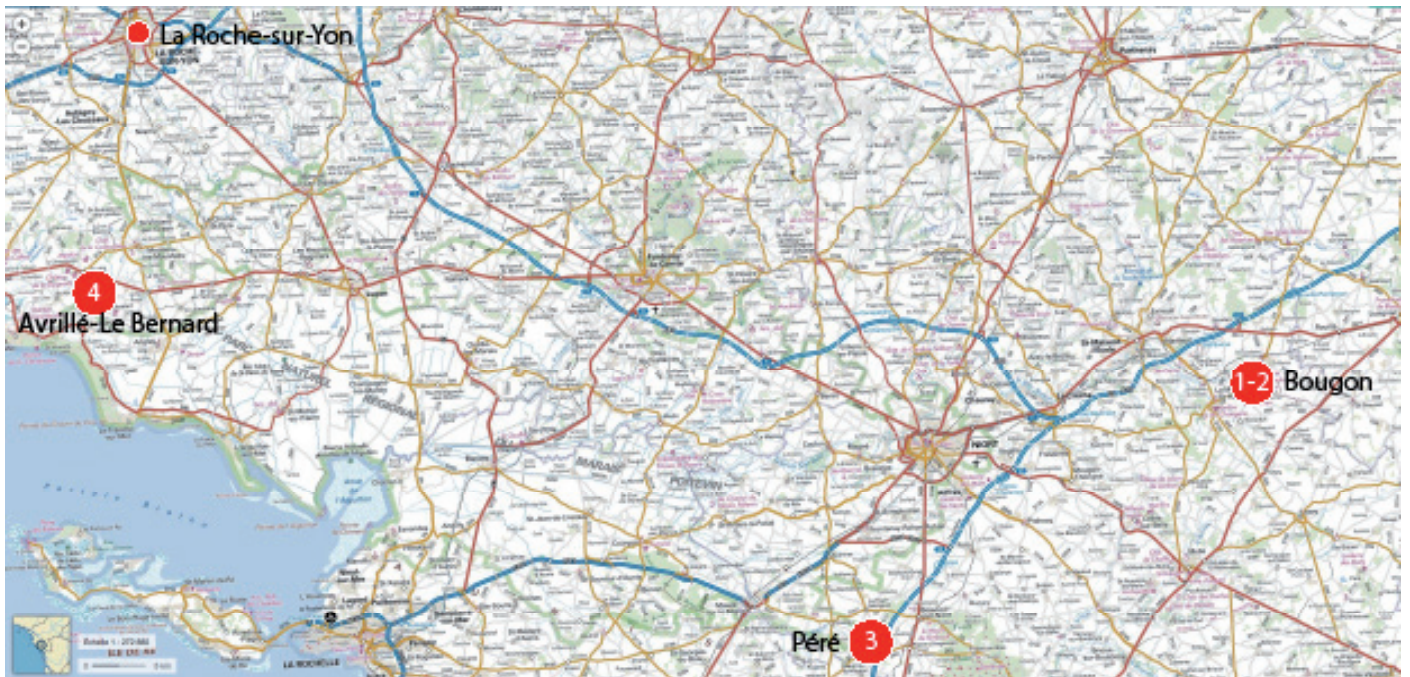
Bougon - Prissé - Avrillé

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Historial
de la Vendée
Les Lucs-sur-Boulogne



11 septembre 2019
EXCURSION
Bougon - Prissé - Avrillé



1. The Tumulus of Bougon Museum

Visit led by Elaine Lacroix

Dominating the two valleys of the Pamproux and the Sèvre Niortaise, the Bougon necropolis has for more than 6,000 years consisted of several dolmens nestled under their majestic burial mounds. From 1840 the scientific interest of this group of mounds was recognised by a local authority who in a pioneering way understood the value of such cultural heritage and put in place the measures necessary for its protection. The history of the conservation and enhancement of this archaeological site is quite unusual and results from the convergence of political, scientific and local synergies.

A - History

On the cadastral map of 1819, the “tumulus”, not yet identified as funerary structures, had been referenced and drawn in ink at a place called “les chirons”. They divided between different plots of land belonging to various owners where among a group of oak trees goats came willingly to eat the scrub that was growing on this stony type of ground. Watercolours painted in 1845 and 1875 show mounds of earth and stones, in places devoid of any vegetation.

1) *Discovery and the first excavations*

It is to three local scholars, Arnault, Baugier and Sauzé, during excavations undertaken in 1840 on behalf of the Society for Statistics, Sciences, Arts and Letters of the department of Deux-Sèvres, that belongs the credit for identifying the archaeological value and the funerary character of “tumuli”. The first research was conducted on the westernmost tumulus that was later designated “tumulus A”.

Excavations were subsequently undertaken at all of the monuments, with greater or less success, between 1840 and 1845. Nearly a century later, in 1960, the reconstructed cemetery was classified as a historical monument.

2) *Recent excavations*

In 1972, following a joint initiative of the President of the General Council of Deux-Sèvres, supported by the Higher Council of Archaeological Research (Ministry of Culture) Jean-Pierre Mohen (Curator at the National Archaeological Museum) resumed excavations in collaboration with Chris Scarre (University of Cambridge). Their work followed that carried out by Claude Burnez in 1968, and the project of fieldwork continued for 12 years.

B - Presentation

In 1840, shortly after the discovery of tumulus A, the French Society for the Conservation and Restoration of the Historical Monuments of France held an archeological congress in Niort, and voted the sum of 100 francs “intended to ensure the conservation of this ‘tumulus.’” While today this seems a minimal sum, the reasons given in the speech accompanying the granting of this funding are interesting: “this tumulus is exposed to the degradation that many visitors may entail. The great interest which it presents, whether by its great antiquity, by its construction, or by the objects which it contained, and the progressive disappearance of monuments of this type on our soil, make it desirable that the conservation of this one be assured by the purchase and enclosing of the land.”

This double desire was achieved in 1873 by the purchase of all the relevant parcels of land by the department of Deux-Sèvres for the large sum of 5910 francs. The reason for this purchase was therefore the scientific interest of the site and the recognized value of the tree cover.

A guardian was appointed in 1888 to protect the tumuli, and the position passed down from father to son. We owe to them the excellent state of preservation.

1) *The museum*

Nearly a century after the discovery of the tumuli and following the work led by Jean-Pierre Mohen and Chris Scarre, the department of Deux-Sèvres wished to reaffirm their interest in this heritage and decided to dedicate to it a museum of prehistory, more specifically focused on the Neolithic period.

The museum was inaugurated in 1993 and is classified as a Museum of France.

Devoted to prehistory, it is the gateway to the megalithic necropolis and forms part of the network of museums of civilization. It is currently the only museum which within an area of nearly 24 ha has a museum, an archeological site and an experimental park dotted with places for active displays and reconstructions.

The museum is heir to a strong territorial identity linked to the presence of the burial mounds, and it develops and highlights the themes inspired by the proximity of the site that it protects.

The collections held here come from the various campaigns of excavations carried out on this site and also from the excavation of other megalithic and non-megalithic sites. They also include donations from private individuals.

The museum is also a place for conservation and study of the collections, under an agreement with the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs. As such, it holds objects from rescue excavations taking place throughout the department.



2) A priority: *public interpretation*

Since its construction, priority has been given, in addition to its curatorial role, to interpretation for the public and thereby to the transmission of this important cultural heritage. It is in this context that a team of professionals is seeking, through all of the activities and active displays that have been developed, to offer an approach to prehistory under various guises, whether they be scientific, sensitive, artistic or fun.

2. The megalithic necropolis of Bougon

Visit led by Chris Scarre

Bougon has an important place in the history of megalithic research, being first explored as early as 1840. Excavations carried out in 1972/1980, relatively long ago in terms of current research techniques, nevertheless contributed to the knowledge of this type of architecture.

The Bougon site covers an area of less than 2 ha and offers the following:

- a group of monuments in an exceptional state of conservation owing to the presence of a guardian since 1888 as well as a museum built in 1993.
- tombs dated among the oldest of those of the Atlantic facade.
- a varied range of monument types.
- evidence for the evolution of architectural forms, in one monument at least.
- an overall duration of activity of about 2000 years.
- a small number of individuals per funerary chamber (average between 4 and 20 individuals), except apparently for tumulus A.

The monuments constituting the Bougon cemetery were built in the course of the fifth millennium BC but the site continued to be frequented until the middle of the third millennium.

The cemetery appears divided into two parts by a structure labelled 'D' for which no specific funerary purpose has been demonstrated.

The later monuments are located in the higher, westernmost part of the site, with most of the older monuments in the eastern part.

Tumulus A

Built at the end of the 5th millennium BC, this monument was reused during the fourth millennium. It consists of a large circular tumulus about 40 metres in diameter, edged to the south by a triple row of concentric façades. It contains a large megalithic burial chamber 7.80m x 5m x 2.25m high, accessed by a 9m-long passage. The orthostats forming the burial chamber are perfectly smoothed and squared and are arranged alternately with panels of drystone walling.



Tumulus B

This structure is 36 m long and 8 m wide and contains two small dolmens on its western side built in the fifth millennium BC. One of the two dolmens had two phases of deposition, including a level composed of carefully selected bones. On one of the slabs of dolmen B, a hook pecked in relief in the surface of the stone is visible. The eastern end of the tumulus contains two drystone cists which had no recorded contents.

Tumulus C

This monument is one of the largest and most complex of the necropolis. It is composed of two structures attributed to the fourth millennium BC which were subsequently covered by an outer cairn to form a single circular monument.

Tumulus C1 is 35 m in diameter, 4 m high and edged by a drystone kerb. Partially explored, like tumulus A, it covers a small carefully constructed cist of six slabs (floor, walls and capstone), on its western side. Three hooks similar to that of the B1 are carved on the side slabs. The current entrance to the cist appears to be the result of a later modification.

Tumulus C2 is a large rectangular platform 40 x 20 m built in a second phase contiguous to the circular tumulus. It is not currently known to contain a burial chamber. Inhumations are, however, associated with the final phase when C1 and C2 were buried beneath a larger cairn. Indeed, double and triple burials combining children and adults were laid along the north and south face of C2 at this time.

Structure D

This is a sinuous wall about 2 m wide and 35 m long, which the excavators thought could be attributed to the Neolithic. Oriented north/south, it seems to separate the necropolis in two parts.

Tumulus E

Along with the tumulus F0, this monument yielded the oldest radiocarbon dates of the Bougon cemetery, from the beginning of the fifth millennium. It is in the form of a quadrangular monument 22 x 10 m, surrounded by a double drystone wall, and contains two passage tombs. The roofing of the two chambers was not identified and may have consisted either of corbelling or a capstone slab.

The two burial chambers were lined internally by vertical slabs set in sockets that formed the chamber walls. The reuse of one of the two chambers was marked by an architectural reworking of the internal space, which then changed from a circular to a quadrangular plan.

Tumulus F

This is the longest monument in the necropolis, consisting of a trapezoidal cairn 72 m long, 12 m wide at the south and 16 m at the north. It consists of three chronologically distinct parts:

- at the southern end, tumulus F0, a round structure containing a circular chamber covered by a corbelled vault. This may have been built in the first half of the fifth millennium and was reused in the third millennium.

- tumulus F1: a long structure composed of quadrangular sections together connected by the longitudinal façades. Two individual burials were placed along its side.

- at the northern end, tumulus F2: this monument had suffered significantly before its discovery. It consisted of a chamber 5m x 5m across and 2 m high. The restoration that has been undertaken poses real problems for the interpretation of this monument. One slab has a hook, like those in B1 and C2. A long passage gave access to the chamber, and the remains recovered from the chamber belonged to the fourth millennium BC.



3. The megalithic necropolis of Péré at Prissé-la-Charrière

Visit led by Luc Laporte

The Péré necropolis at Prissé-la-Charrière has two elongated monuments arranged in parallel along an east-west axis. Tumulus C has a trapezoidal shape, wider and higher at its eastern end. Bordered by lateral quarries on both sides, it is one hundred metres long. It is the only one of these two monuments that has been the subject of archaeological excavations. These have revealed, to date, the presence of three burial chambers. Two of them were served by a covered passage. One had remained inviolate since the Neolithic. Not all were built at the same time. Different sequences of construction are spread over a fairly short period between 4350 and 4250 BC, during the Middle Neolithic. Some sherds of decorated ceramics recovered from the old soil attest to a frequentation of this place since the Early Neolithic. Initially, at least two distinct monuments stood at this site: a circular cairn eight metres in diameter containing a passage tomb, and a quadrangular monument 23 m long and 9 m wide, surrounded by a deep peripheral ditch. There is no evidence to indicate that one of these two monuments preceded the other. Each has a sequence of its own. The quadrangular monument, surrounded by drystone walling, covers a cist located one-third of the way along its length. Human remains of at least three individuals were recovered there. In front of the entrance of the cist, facing east, stood two large posts at the foot of which some ceramics seem to have been deposited. The open access to this small burial space was then sealed by the building of the monumental later construction. Behind an orthostat, in the drystone structure that encloses and encircles the cist, the presence of a small deposit of artefacts and some human bones suggest that this monument may not have been the first burial feature erected in this necropolis. The circular cairn contained a quadrangular chamber served by a covered passage, and entirely built of dry stone. The chamber is covered by a slab whose weight is estimated at about two tons. It is unclear whether there are other monuments, today still sealed under tumulus A, to add to this.

The construction of the long tumulus C corresponds to a much more ambitious project. This incorporates at least part of the previous necropolis. The ground plan of this new monument delimits a trapeze whose elongated sides now extend over a hundred metres long. To the west, the earlier quadrangular monument was widened five metres to the south. To the east, vast terraces with access ramps outlined the structural volumes of what became the eastern end of the monument. During temporary stoppages of the building work, stabilization bases were installed to prevent any deterioration of the walls. They are frequently associated with layers of clay that prevent the harmful effect of rainwater infiltration. At the same time, a new passage tomb was built halfway between the circular cairn and the eastern facade of the quadrangular monument. The chamber, lined with vertical slabs, has a more megalithic character than that of the previous monument. The upper part of the previous structures was then partially levelled to the north, allowing them to be better integrated into the volume of the new architectural project. Detailed study of the drystone building techniques demonstrates the ingenuity of the Neolithic builders in raising the walls of this new monument a little higher. Rings, buttresses and relieving arches structure the upper parts of the construction. They form a network of cells whose plan seems anarchic at first. Reinforcements, bonded joints and vertical chains reinforce the structure. This is vocabulary from classic architecture manuals that applies here in a remarkable way. Fills of earth or stone alternate in a combination that reflects a perfect, intuitive, control of the pressure loading necessary to ensure the stability of the building. Once completed, the structure was 3.50 m high and 19 m wide at its eastern end.

At the very top, a platform two metres wide runs along the lengthened axis of the monument. At the foot of the external kerbs, a bench 50 to 70 cm high strengthened the construction. In the lateral quarries to north and south, the steps carved in the limestone create vanishing lines that also contribute to create perspective effects. Subsequently, only the chambers of the two passage tombs remained accessible, at least occasionally. In each of the two burial chambers, the evidence observed attests to a collective burial practice. By the end, each had received human remains of at least six individuals, and probably up to seven or eight, if we take into account the pairing of displaced or disturbed bones in the chamber itself. By their order of magnitude, such numbers only correspond to a very small part of the population whose efforts must have been coordinated to achieve the construction of such monumental works. At least some of the bodies, strongly flexed, could have been deposited in a sitting position against the walls of the chamber. Genetic analysis indicates that one of

these people was of a maternal lineage descended from the very first Danubian settlers; those who brought the invention of agriculture and livestock to the plains of continental Europe. Others, however, present a distinct genetic heritage that could equally well derive from the still poorly known hunter-gatherer populations already present on the Atlantic coast, or perhaps also from farming settlers following a more southern route. The grave goods are restricted to a few personal ornaments, some arrowheads, and some pottery placed on the floor of the chamber. The latter includes a bowl with deformed mouth and thickened base, and a vases support. For the latter, the chemical analysis of the organic residues sampled on the dish surface suggests use as an incense burner. On the other hand, children who died in infancy seem to be treated differently.

Their remains have instead been found incorporated within the drystone structure. In reality, the human remains recovered outside the strictly funerary spaces represent almost as many individuals as those whose bodies had been deposited on the floor of the funerary chambers. An individual burial in the open ground at the foot of the monument kerb, at its western end, is probably the last burial event recorded on this site for the Neolithic period. This burial is dated by radiocarbon to the end of the fifth millennium BC.

Begun in 1995, the programme of exhaustive excavations carried out at Péré tumulus C allows us, for the first time in Europe on a monument preserved to such a height, to have a complete and detailed sequence for one of these ‘giant tumuli’ of European prehistory, to borrow the term used in the early twentieth century. Excavations are still in progress. Much later, a lime kiln was built on the south side of tumulus C in the Gallo-Roman era. A medieval burial was also unearthed at the top of its western end.

Of the three tumuli previously reported in the literature, the smallest of them is circular in shape. This is a rabbit warren. The woods immediately to the east of the two long tumuli A and C present an uneven topography that may correspond to an ancient deserted village.

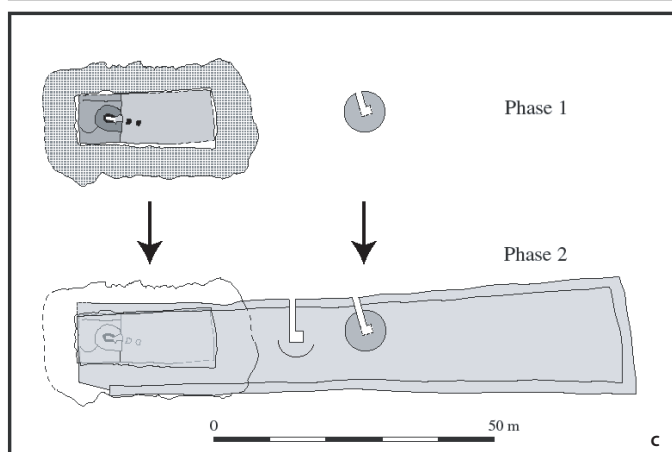


Fig. 1 - Aerial view of Péré Tumulus C (A), which itself covers two monuments of an earlier necropolis (B). Photo Ballonet.com

Fig. 2 - Stone cist (A) within a 23 m long monument at the eastern end of C (D) tumulus. Deposits of human bones, recovered from the dry-stone mass (B) at the back of the orthostats (C), provide ante quem and post quem dates at different stages of a complex sequence. Photo L. Laporte.

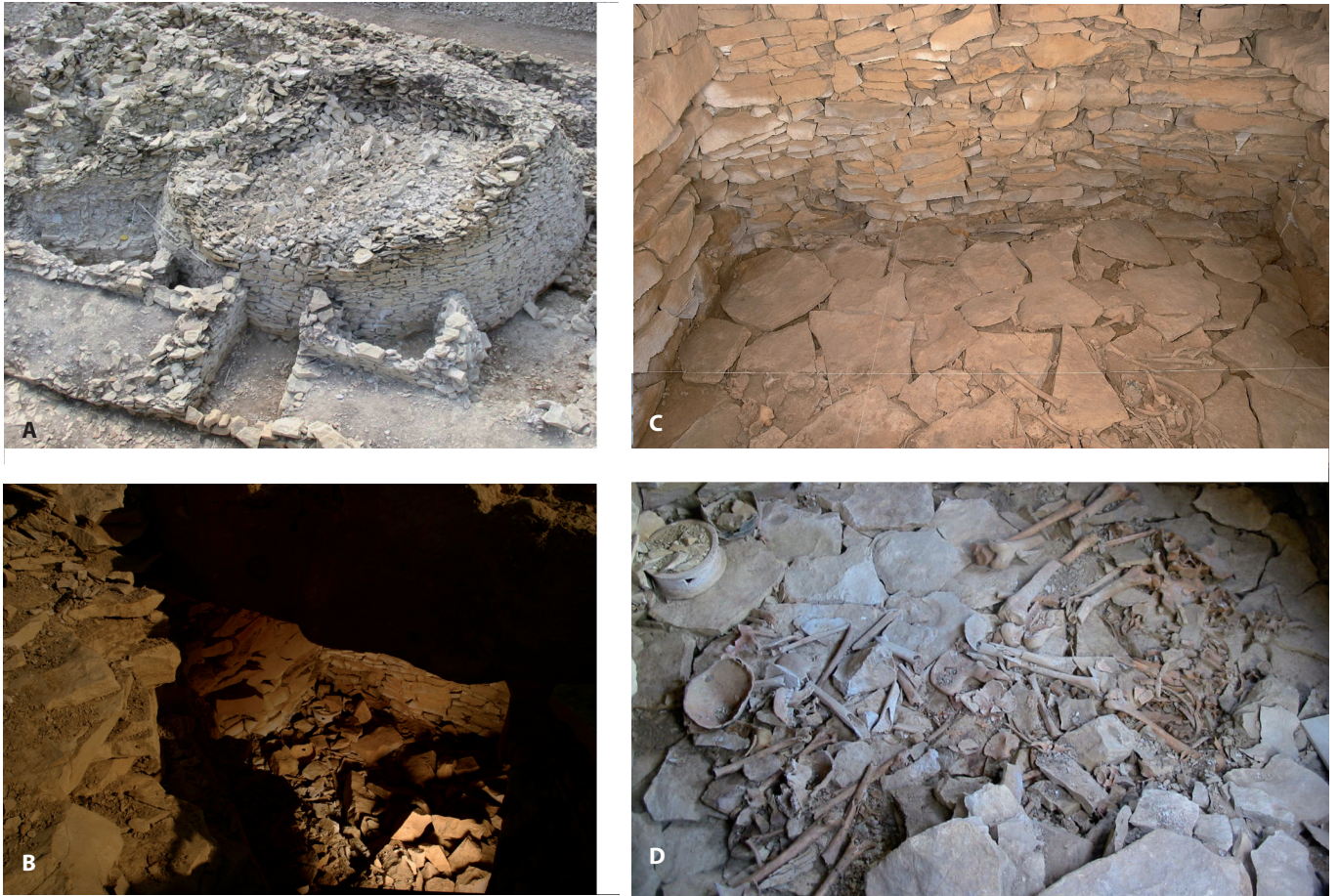


Fig. 3 - Chamber III in its circular cairn (A), at the time of the discovery (B) and during various stages of the excavation (C and D). Photos L. Laporte, C. Scarre, L. Soler and P. Adventurer.

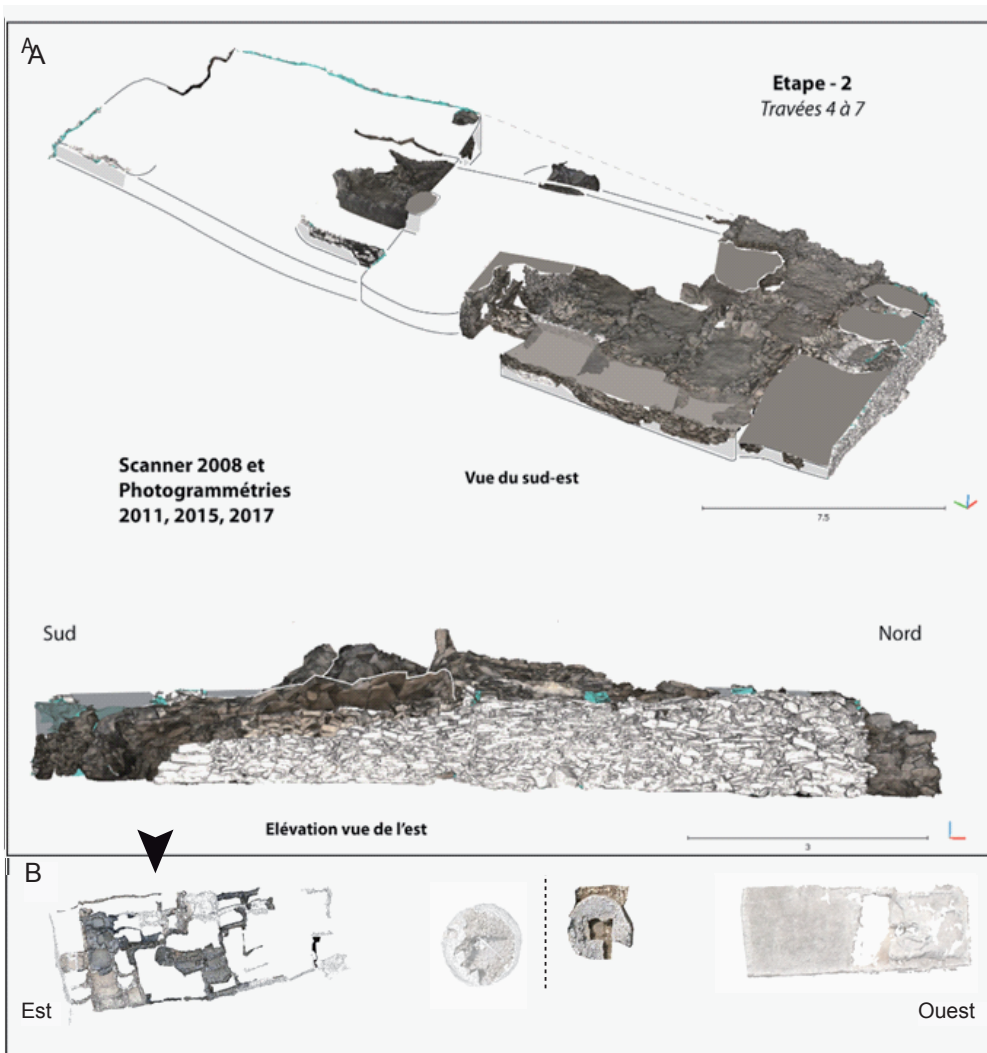


Fig. 4 - The beginning of the construction of tumulus C is a mirror reflection of the previous necropolis (B), with the construction of a new burial chamber and a first monumental massif in the east (A). G. Perazio scanner, photogrammetry F. Cousseau, cutting and assemblage of dot clouds (and DAO) L. Laporte.

4. Avrillé-Le Bernard: a high-point of megalithic monumentality in Vendée

Visit led by Jean-Marc Large, text by Roger Joussaume and Jean-Marc Large

Opening to the south on the Atlantic Ocean and the Marais Poitevin, the limestone plain of Longeville where several dolmens stand, is bordered on the north by the granite massif of Avrillé which has a long succession of small north-south alignments of large menhirs extending over an area of a dozen kilometers.

Several factors must have guided the decision to settle in this territory at the beginning of the Neolithic about 7000 years ago. One of them seems to be ecological, in relation to its geographical and geological situation: primary geology supporting large forests in the north; sedimentary geology suitable for growing cereals in the south; wide, well-sheltered valleys where animals could graze and people settle on the banks of rivers that allowed easy access to the sea, which was 5 or 6 metres lower than it is today. The sources of food supply were therefore multiple (cultivation, livestock breeding, hunting and fishing) in a region with a temperate climate.

This territory was occupied from the Early Neolithic at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth millennium BC, but it was in the Middle Neolithic, especially in its second part (4300-3600 BC) that megalithic monuments of dolmen type, under mounds, and menhirs, alone or in groups, were built.

Many of the dolmens of the limestone plain were excavated and imperfectly restored in the early twentieth century, while many had also already suffered greater or less destruction in previous centuries. Thus the tumuli of stones (the cairns) which originally covered the dolmens, had served for surfacing the roads and in various constructions. It is therefore quite difficult today to establish a typological classification of these monuments. However, as far as dolmens are concerned, there are essentially two groups: the passage tombs with passages of greater or lesser length, and the Angevin dolmens.

The passage tombs seem to have been the most numerous in the plain of Longeville. The most important and most representative is that of the Pé de Fontaine, although it had suffered considerable damage due to early excavations and the German occupation at the time of the 1939-45 war. In its final form it was a large quadrangular cairn 34 m to 35 m which contained two or three funerary chambers on one side with the longest passage reaching nearly 14 m in length. It was built on the highest point of the plain (33 m) at Pé de Fontaine. That is to say, it dominated its surroundings as far as the île de Ré in the south, thirty kilometers away, and the first hills of the Armorican Massif a few kilometers to the north. The other local dolmens (Terrier-Papin, Girondin, Pé-Rocher, Les Créchaudes, Savatole, etc.), which were chamber tombs with passages of greater or lesser length, occupied the surrounding heights and were visible from the Pé de Fontaine. The dominant position and the large dimensions of the tumulus of Pé de Fontaine suggest a certain hierarchy between these monuments, which probably reflects that of society.

The Angevin dolmens with quadrangular chamber and entrance via a porch made of three stones, two vertical supporting a lintel (La Frébouchère and Cour du Breuil) are probably slightly later in date than the passage tombs and belong to the first half of the fourth millennium BC. Their greatest concentration is at the edge of the Loire Valley, in Anjou, in an area between Angers, Saumur, the north of Deux-Sèvres and Vienne, and the southern Vendée. They may correspond to a reorganization of society under the external influences.

Tall menhirs, whose tallest in Avrillé exceeds 7 m in height, form an important cluster around Avrillé. There are isolated standing stones, but they are sometimes in pairs and often in short alignments. All of them seem to have been erected in the Middle Neolithic, the time of the chambered tombs, but none has revealed the secret of its *raison d'être*. In the Bois de Fourgon at Avrillé, however, a short alignment of relatively small stones that had been deliberately felled, yielded artefacts dated to the first phase of the Middle Neolithic and a date of the second quarter of the fifth millennium BC. In addition, its orientation is different from that of other regional alignments. It therefore belongs to a period prior to the alignment of large standing stones.

Other menhirs, generally quite small, appear to have been associated with dolmens under mounds in the plain both at the dolmen of Grand Bouillac at Saint-Vincent-sur-Jard and the magnificent Angevin dolmen of La Frébouchère at Le Bernard. Unfortunately no study has yet been done that could shed any specific light on their function.

As part of the excursion, we will visit the menhirs of Plessis. Three menhirs were still visible around 1840 on the summit of the crest of Plessis. Only two remain, including one more than 7 m tall which was raised in 1978 following its fall some time after work on the field boundary. These menhirs were arranged in a triangle. The first we will see is the 7 m high standing stone. It is granite. On the occasion of its re-erection, a search of its surrounding led to the discovery of its socket dug into the granite sand without reaching the substrate. It had been slid into place from the north and been propped up on three sides. The fourth side contained a stone packing which ensured its stability. The very scanty artefactual assemblage contained little except the use of fragments of millstones as packing stones. The second menhir still visible, also of granite, is smaller, its height 3.60 m. At its foot “engravings” were reported but these are a natural result of a mineralization of aplite in the granite, forming a slight relief.



(2) orthostats, with a length of 7.20 m and a width of 3.50 m. A vertical stone located within the burial chamber has never served as a support: it may have been symbolic. The monument was enclosed within a pear-shaped tumulus like that of the Pierre Folle des Cous at Bazoges-en-Pareds.

The Angevin dolmens in Vendée are mainly located in the contact zone between the Armorican Massif and the sedimentary basins. Fairly similar to the dolmen angevin of Les Pierres Folles at Commequiers, that of La Frébouchère has a number of small menhirs close by. Its proximity to the dolmens of Savatole is certainly not due to chance.

Finally, we will end the visit with the menhir of Camp César, 8.70 m high, including 7 m above ground. It is of granite and was originally one of a set of three menhirs of which two have disappeared. They were arranged in a triangle like those at Plessis. Other sets of menhirs are known in the region, as for example at the Bois de Fourgon. They are generally arranged in a single file oriented north-south, arranged on the crests of interfluves.





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