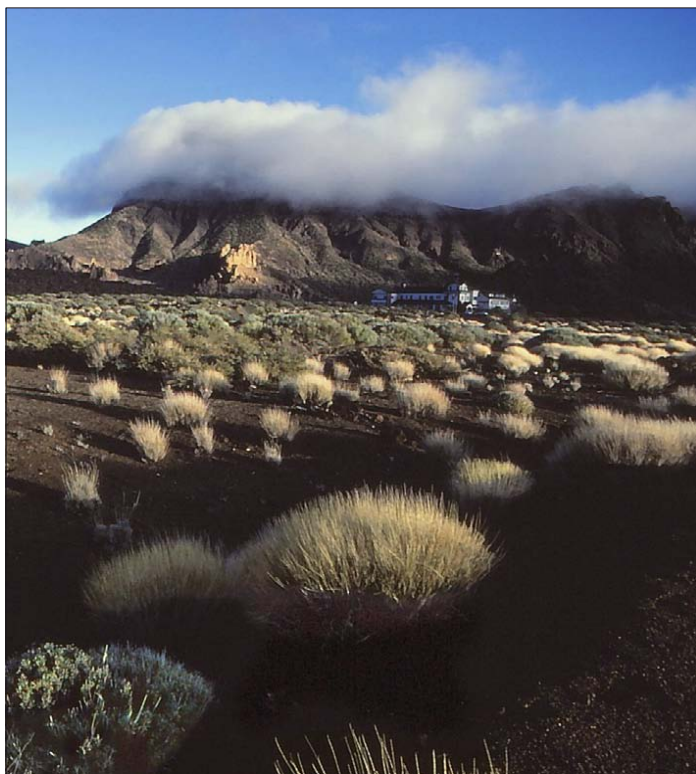


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Mark Milburn

What we do not know – queries about ancient Saharan stone structures and enigmatic rock art

Although it is well-known that very few monuments, especially those in western parts of the Sahara, have yielded dates after excavation, the complex and enigmatic architectural details of a number appear worthy of mention. Even though modern knowledge cannot always be improved immediately, it may be that information and thoughts of to-day may assist others in the distant future. Equipment available is likely to improve as time goes by. During my active time in the desert, roughly between the early 1970s and 1990, I possessed neither GPS nor satellite telephone. However useful they are nowadays, such gadgets can be viewed by border authorities as likely to endanger the safety of the state and best confiscated from visitors on entry.

There have been a number of failures to obtain datable material from stone structures. Following enormous efforts made in Ahaggar to collect this by Heddouche and his group (2012), their finds failed to be dated in Europe recently. This was more than a tragedy, since considerable work and enthusiasm had been involved. It is depressing, after excavation of even a single structure, when no dating of finds is possible. With almost twenty samples submitted to Mannheim, a total lack of dates obtained was a bitter pill for the diligent Algerian team (Heddouche, 2012). Scientists should be grateful that the group took so much trouble to collect material from stone structures.

We should now briefly recall that some structures are quite large and it is thus difficult to know exactly where to look for a burial within them. If one is found at all, this may be only after some days of careful work spent shifting large numbers of stones. A tumulus in a prominent position on a circular paved platform can appear most inviting. However it may already have been savaged by treasure-seekers or another later burial may have been added. Animals sometimes burrow into inviting stone masses and their activities can contaminate earlier human remains. This may have happened in the tumulus of a huge West Saharan goulet (gully) structure, some 360 metres in long, seen 2005.

Goulets ("Gully" in English). These fascinating and enigmatic long goulets are found mainly in Algeria (Tassili de l'Immidir; Heddouche, 2012, 157, no.2). They appear to be commonly orientated to E or SE and the tumulus is large. A small black triangle in a figure shows the direction of north). Fig.1 shows a model from W. Sahara: those in Immidir are similar in plan, with no stone ring at either end; a length of ca. 60 m is normal.)

Far away and to west of the Empty Quarter are longer models with a lower tumulus (see also Fig. 1). There may be a short area of dark paving stretching about eastwards from the tumulus on each side of the corridor. (This is shown only within the north side of the long Goulet in Fig.1.) But such is not always the case. There may be a lone stone ring to west of the monument and another, or even two in line, outside the east end. The purpose of these rings is unknown and they may not be contemporary with the Goulet (Heddouche, in litt.). One such ring (see below) was investigated by Gobin (1937: 146) and revealed no human contents.

The easterly ring of two positioned to east of a long goulet near Tifariti had an eastern border of highly-complex construction. Some layers of stones were arranged to form an uneven pattern and there was no single line of stones composing the border. Far to east of the exit to the corridor was a single low standing stone of unknown significance.

The enclosure (French "enceinte"; see Fig. 2) consists of two bordered segments with empty terrain within them. The broad end of such segment tends to face about west, contrary to the easterly orientation of regional goulets. I once saw a standard tumulus erected on one segment; however this looked like a later addition. Similar tumuli can also stand on the masonry of a goulet. It is tempting to ask whether enclosures may have contained female burials. However we do not know why some long goulets possess an area of dark paving stretching away eastwards from the tumulus, while others lack this feature.

So far as is known, such long goulets do not occur far southwards (compare Vernet et al., 2016). One example excavated in the Tiris region of West Sahara (Sáenz de Buruaga et al., 2014) was the only one seen in that southerly region. However it produced human remains which could not be dated. Such structures appear northwards within former Spanish territory and in Morocco at least as far north as Tata.

In the far west near maritime Tan-Tan there are long goulets of inferior construction, of which some appear not to obey similar rules of orientation to those of West Sahara. In the area of Oued Chebika are structures appearing as low platforms, whose general appearance may allow classification as mere degenerate forms built en masse by populations whose customs and practices differed from those further east (?).

Smaller round goulets appear among those described above (except perhaps not in the Algerian areas known to Heddouche) which are simple round patterns of small stones laid out on the sand (Monod, 1948: 17, No. 31 / see here Fig. 3). There exist also compact and well-built examples some 10 m in diameter and up to 1 m high. Their corridors can be orientated towards west or east.

There has been confusion between the nature of long goulets (found mainly to west of the Empty Quarter) and keyhole monuments ("monuments en trou de serrure"; Fig. 4) in S and SE Algeria, plus a few in Fezzan and N Niger Republic. It should be clearly stated that no keyhole monuments are known to west of the Empty Quarter, regardless of published remarks to the contrary.

Groups of low standing stones. Current knowledge of the prehistoric use of such complexes appears to be nil. The material located within their precincts may well contain changes visible to-day, such as erection of head and foot stones marking historic burials.

In 1973 at Bir Moghrein I was intrigued by numerous small standing stones near a large square monument and of four high pillars (with one on the ground) in a line running roughly north to south. At the time I presumed that the small stones represented the head and foot stones of historic burials. Much later I learned that R. Mauny had queried their function, but could still tell him nothing of use.

A fine complex was partially-published by Catalan researchers (Soler et al. 1999: 142). It is roughly square in shape with stones mostly about chest-height. Around the SW margin are stones arranged to cover historic burials and the photo is taken from about south (Fig. 5). In 2009 many photos were surreptitiously taken in company with an Irish journalist, in spite of being forbidden to do so by a national dignitary currently in a position of supposed authority.

Another group of lower standing stones was seen near Lemqader, Mauritania, in 1973 (Monod, 1948: Fig.57) close to carvings on a stone pillar (Monod, 1948: Fig.53). No investigation was attempted. An association of tall thin pillars with fields of low standing stones (seemingly at Bir Moghrein) appears possible. There exist a number of tall pillars standing quite alone in West Sahara. At least two may have been displaced due to current beliefs, one at Dakhla (Nowak et al., 1975, Abb.185) and another in the NE part of West Sahara (Bashir Mehdi Bhaya, in litt., October 2009).

There exists a fascinating report by Gobin (1937:143), who dug away sand around low standing stones adjacent to four large tombs in the Zemmour near Bir Moghrein. The sand was too shallow to contain a body and the stones themselves were too close together to mark historic graves.

Straight or curving line of standing stones placed upon or to about SE of a single low tumulus with a single highest stone in the centre of the line. These are often partially-destroyed and a diagram is preferable. See Fig.6 (compare Nowak et al., 1975, Abb. 156, Bu Lariah). A good many have probably gone down in literature as mere standing stones or menhirs, due to the single

tumulus often being very low and barely visible. Some of the standing stones will probably be lying on the ground or even missing. Historic builders of graves may also have been at work. Clear E or SE orientation may thus be unclear.

The presumed origins of the population may be of interest: Around 3.000 years ago the Sanhadja, a people preceding certain Berber groups, began emigrating from the north to the north-east of Africa. During their advance the black population living in the Sahara was expelled southwards until reaching occupation of the whole territory. For many centuries the inhabitants of the Western Sahara had to cope with other peoples in order to control routes leading across the desert from north to south. Thus in the ninth century they took control of Aoudaghost (S. Mauritania), the centre of the trans-desert route, until they lost it at the end of the same century to the Soninke, a group native to modern Ghana (Soler et al., 1999: 153).

One excavation by nomad troops (De Azcárate, 1943: 28) found traces of burial. It was suggested that there might be negroid elements among the human remains. This appears possible, not only due to the supposed existence of black inhabitants prior to the southward advance of the Sanhadja "around 3.000 years ago," but also since we know not know when black slaves began to be employed, some of whose descendants may have found their way into elaborate burials.

Coming now to a theory not previously offered, it may be that, at some unknown moment in time, it was realized that a paved flat structure was just as visible from the sky as one rising a metre or more above ground-level. This may be shown by a complex near Adrar Ahnet. The north arm of a crescent and the south arm of an adjacent flat bordered V-monument were seen to intersect, although in such a way that it was not clear which actually crossed over the other. Knowing that there are crescents up to several metres high in Niger, with one dated to ca. 4.720 BP and V-monuments in Libya dated to the second millennium BC, this could go some way towards supporting my theory (Fig. 7).

Choosing now to compare the outline of certain features of a keyhole monument (Fig. 4) viewed from above with those of a cup, rings and groove carving (Fig. 8), I wonder whether connexions in prehistoric thought may have come into being in relation to these two shapes? The corridor of a keyhole monument is supposed to have been aligned towards the rising sun at the time of death. May something have flowed towards the distant horizon from the keyhole? Or was the reverse direction a current belief? Compare Fig. 4 with Fig. 8.

The single straight grooves or "gutters" (Wikipedia) running in a bevy of

directions from cup, rings and groove carvings in Europe, Britain and the southern Sahara might also have been aimed towards something of which we are ignorant: or did that "something" flow inwards towards the cup from a currently undefined source? Such thoughts have occurred since being invited to offer a text for the Festschrift of Prof. E. Ripoll Perelló (Milburn, 1990).

The significance of carvings of the cup, rings and groove variety has interested a number of people. I once asked a rock art expert for an opinion on conspicuous damage to two carvings at the point where each groove/gutter exits or enters the rings. This correspondent assumed that spirals were involved and provided interesting thoughts about them, although without mentioning my problem even once. Finally I had to trust my own opinion!

In broad relation to the above, one can read that "... the full value of rock art sites, and their comparisons with other sites, usually only emerges once images have been documented and studied, to reveal an understanding of sequences, associated human activity and in some cases beliefs and traditions" (Denyer, June 2007:1). I do not believe that such remarks can apply to enigmatic carvings of cup, rings and groove type. Even a recent bevy of English-language books on rock art may be of little help. These are Bahn & Franklin, ed, (2012), with 27 essays, Darvill et al. ed., (2014), with 20 essays and Bahn, Franklin, Strecker and Devlet ed., (2016), with 29 essays.

It is suggested (Darvill et al., 2014: 1) that "Most of the work being done in different parts of the world appears to be ad hoc, with minimal communication on such matters among teams and with the wider archaeological community."

Bednarik (2013-2014: 67) has concluded that "Archaeology and rock art science have no choice but to pursue different paths to understanding." As for myself, having looked at complex problems involving stone structures and certain types of rock art, it is clear that modern Mankind has a long way to go to reach a state of comprehension.

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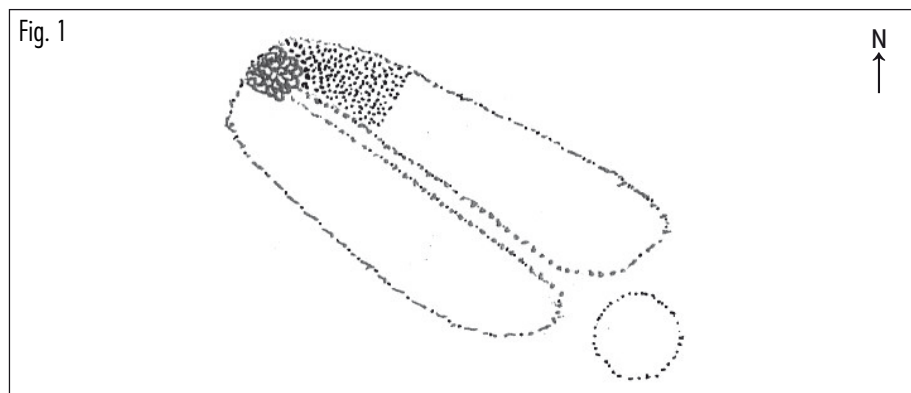


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

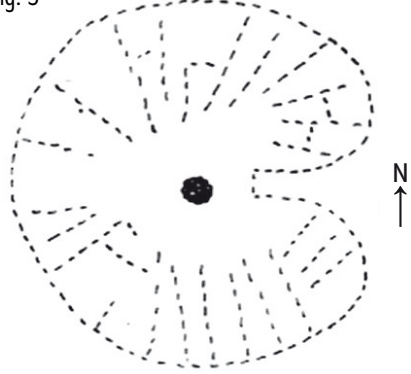


Fig. 4

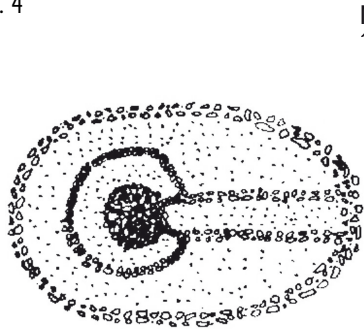


Fig. 6



Fig. 5



Fig. 7

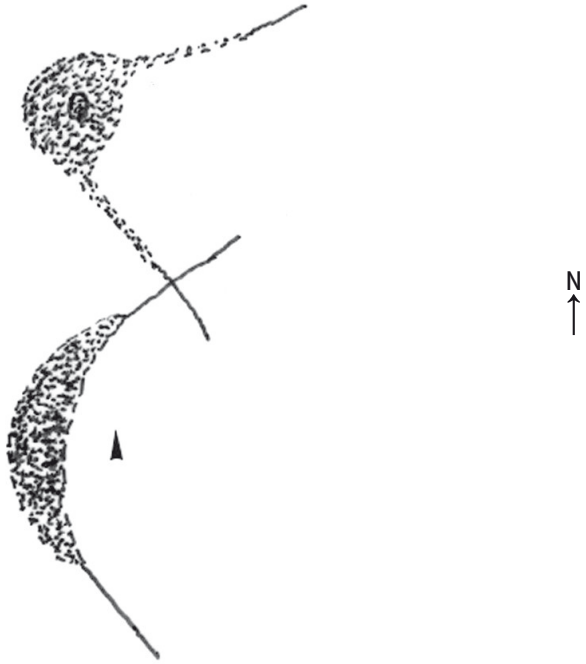
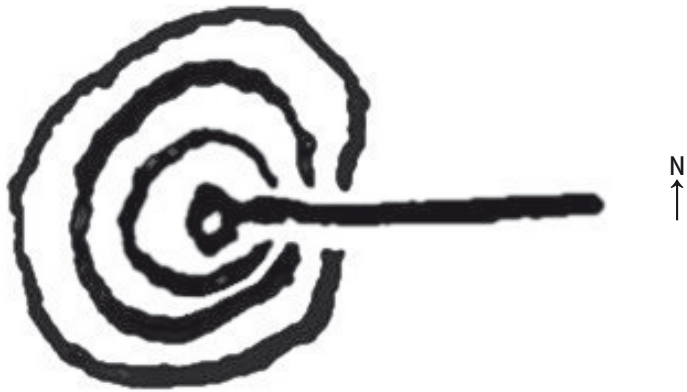


Fig. 8



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