Sion Petit Chasseur

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and decorated, of painted and incised motifs that occurred on pottery and pintaderas, and of rare cave and rock art. The Grotta di Porto Badisco in southern Apulia is a decorated Neolithic cult cave that contains two long corridors and one short corridor of restricted galleries that were painted in ochre and guano. The designs compare closely with those on Serra d’Alto- and Ripoli-style painted pottery, having zigzags, cross-hatching, and mazelike patterns. Some figurative images also suggest hunting scenes, and the complex is dated across the mid–Late Neolithic. Idols and figurines were made throughout the Neolithic in Italy, with examples from sites such as Passo di Corvo in the Middle Neolithic and Arnessano (Taranto) and Grotta Pacelli (Bari) in the Late Neolithic. Rock art in the Alpine areas seems to have commenced in the Neolithic, although it was principally a Bronze Age and Iron Age phenomenon. Images from Val Camonica, Mont Bego, and other areas of the Maritime Alps represent animal and human scenes, constructions, patterns, suns, and so on, suggesting aspects of prehistoric cosmology.

See also Sion-Petit Chasseur (vol. 1, part 4).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


SION-PETIT CHASSEUR

The Petit Chasseur site in Sion, in the southern canton of Valais, Switzerland, was the subject of systematic excavations from 1961 to 1992. This archaeological field has yielded one of the most complete cultural sequences of the Valais area and even of the whole Alpine region for the Neolithic period and the beginning of the Bronze Age. The occupations date to the beginning of the Neolithic period, the fourth millennium B.C., up to the Iron Age, around 500 B.C. But the international renown of the site owes itself to the megalithic necropolis (four dolmens and nine cists), chronologically tied to the end of the Neolithic period, where an impressive set of twenty-eight anthropomorphic stelae have been excavated (fig. 1).

CHRONOLOGY OF THE NECROPOLIS

The megalithic necropolis is made up of thirteen monuments, designated MI through MXIII, which have various shapes and variable dimensions. The cultural horizons involved are the Valaisian final Neolithic period, which is not well known, the civilization of Bell Beaker ceramics, and the Early Bronze Age. Nine phases of occupation can be distinguished.

Phase 1. Construction of dolmen MXII. This triangular-based tomb did not yield any anthropomorphic stelae. The furniture belongs to the Valaisian final Neolithic period.

Phase 2. Construction of dolmen MVI. The material of this triangular-based tomb belongs to the final Neolithic age. The anthropomorphic stelae of this era belong to type A.

Phase 3. Dolmens MI, MV, and MXI. These three tombs do not have bases but still have side entrances. The funeral furniture belongs to the civilization of Bell Beaker ceramics. The stelae reused in the constructions are of types A and B.

Phase 4. Desecration of dolmen MVI. The old burial remains of the dolmen are removed to make way for new Bell Beaker burials.

Phase 5. Small cists. The Bell Beaker societies construct a number of small cists (MII, MIII, MVII, MVIII, MIX, and MX), including only type B stelae.
Phase 6. Desecration of graves and burials of children. The last type-B stelae are erected at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (fig. 2). Slabbed altars are arranged in front of monuments MVI and MXI. The old graves are systematically pillaged and desecrated, the funeral furniture scattered, the human bones gathered together and burned. A woman still lies in dolmen MXI. A few children are buried in a flexed position, either inside the old chambers (MV) or outside in small adventitious chests (MVI and MXI). The numerous traces of fire that can be found at the site appear to be related to a ritual to “condemn” the funeral area.

Phase 7. Cairns and jar burials. The necropolis continues to be sporadically visited during the Early Bronze Age, but the dead cease to be buried there. The monuments disappear gradually under piles of stones, around the edges of which are placed large jars as offerings.

Phase 8. Hut. Still in the Early Bronze Age, a hut is constructed at the location of the necropolis.

Phase 9. Graves in open ground. Funerary activity resumes at the end of the Early Bronze Age with a series of burials in extended position in open ground at a time when most of the monuments have disappeared, covered over by deposits.

**STELAE: TYPE A AND TYPE B**

Practically all the fragments of stelae discovered at Petit Chasseur have been representations of anthropomorphic personages possibly of rank, probably all males, given the abundance of representations of weapons. Two sets of stelae are distinguished. The first set, called type A, has a relatively plain geometric decoration, but it does have numerous representations of copper daggers with triangular blades and half-moon shaped handles, frequent in the Remedello civilization. Remedello is a Late Neolithic group, located in northern Italy, characterized by large necropoli with individual tombs. The artifacts include copper or flint daggers, polished or copper axes, and cups, tronconical jars with incised decorations. One stela also includes a pendant made up of two disks with nested circles. This set is related to a period of the Valaisian final Neolithic period, between 2700 and 2450 B.C., about which there is still not a great deal of information. It is not known whether or not this type of stela dates back to an older period, since dolmen MXII has not yielded any incised slabs.

The second set, called type-B stelae, has been attributed to the Bell Beaker period—that is, the period between 2450 and 2150 B.C.—and is very richly decorated, especially with regard to clothing ornaments. The triangular daggers have disappeared and are replaced by representations of bows and arrows. The head, of which there are at least two complete specimens, is now well marked, whereas the anatomical details are reduced to a simple rectangular nose.

**STELAE AND SYMBOLIC THOUGHT**

The functional significance of these stelae remains unclear, and the question of whether these human portraits represent high-ranking persons, divinities who protect those persons, or gods remains unanswered. But the vision of the world partially expressed in the stelae at Sion has comparable representation in the stelae and monumental compositions of Trento, the Camonica Valley, and the Valteline in Italy: patterns, series of personages holding hands, numerous weapons (axes, halberds, and daggers), various ornaments (such as gorgets or double spiral pendants), checker works that could represent textiles, rare swing plows, and figures of animals (including wild species, such as deer ibex, chamois, and boars) are associated in similar anthropomorphic compositions throughout the Alpine Neolithic.

Researchers agree that these associations are the expression of a complex ideology in which the sun plays a dominant role, but archaeology does not offer the means to go much further into the analysis of this type of symbolic structure. The stelae of the Petit Chasseur site nevertheless show that this ideology can be expressed in the framework of a necropolis, therefore certainly associating it with a cult of the dead.

**STELAE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT**

The social context in which the stelae are situated may be inferred from the analysis of the “ritual” associated with visits to the necropolis. The necro-
lis has numerous traces related to the often lively functioning of the graves. The archaeological structures that date strictly from the Neolithic phases show evidence of varied activities, including the construction of grave markers, the erection of stelae, the placing of bodies in the monuments, the smashing of stelae and their reuse, the overturning of graves, the despoiling of graves, the secondary placing and regrouping of skulls, the filling in of graves, and the lighting of fires in front of the monuments.

The erection of the stelae in front of the funerary monuments seems to be related to the social consecration of an eminent person during his or her lifetime on the occasion, for example, of a takeover of power or alliance ceremonies between families. The stelae could also be associated, however, with a funerary ritual taking place at the time of death of that same person.

The destruction of the stelae is more difficult to interpret, but the destruction of the incised effigies can perhaps be seen as a voluntary act that fits into a specific social context. The persons who smashed the stelae to use them as mere construction elements were aware of their meaning since, in the same era, they were carving other stelae that were absolutely identical and erecting them around the graves. Two explanations of these practices seem plausible. The first involves the destruction of the effigy, which, from a ritual perspective, constitutes a radical breaking point that may be related to the natural death of an actual person occupying a high-ranking position in the society. The second involves the destructions associated with the erections of new effigies, which are the expression of tensions existing within the society and the signs of struggles carried out by the various leaders for the control of political power. Thus, in this second case, one can speak of a situation of social death.

This type of explanation lends a certain weight to the idea of a link between the living individual and the stela. The social evolution at the end of the Neolithic period shows the change from egalitarian societies characteristic of the first farmers to societies set up in a more hierarchical manner and organized into chieftaincies. Within these chieftaincies, the individual may acquire a privileged position in the community owing to various strategies aimed at increasing his political power.

In the stelae of Petit Chasseur, one can perhaps see the expression of this change and the sign of the emergence of a warrior elite. These changes, which accompany the appearance of metallurgy in the Alps, foreshadow later developments in the civilizations of the Bronze Age. In western Europe the third millennium B.C. was characterized especially by the very broad diffusion of the civilization of Bell Beaker ceramics from the Iberian Peninsula to Poland. While, on the one hand, the ideology of this cultural group can be discerned through the expression of iconographic representations, the stelae, on
the other hand, seem to be present only in the Alpine environment.

In this context, it is interesting to recall that the memory of the Petit Chasseur necropolis in Sion, and probably the memory of the chiefs that were buried there, was perpetuated throughout the Early Bronze Age. Throughout that period, people continued to visit the sites and place large ceramic jars as offerings around the graves while the monuments were gradually covered over by the soil carried along by the runoff from the dominating slopes. The sites, moreover, were reused as cemeteries around 1500 B.C., in an era when the burial ritual had been completely modified.

See also Bell Beakers from West to East (vol. 1, part 4).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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