

The Megalithic Monuments of Switzerland

Abstract:

I will give a short survey of the megaliths which I do not consider the simplest forms, the widespread stone-cists and stone-cist necropolises of Switzerland. These larger megalithic monuments are only concentrated in the western and south-western region of the country. Remains of 3 dolmens are known in the region of the Jura and near the town of Basel. Most important are the dolmens one on a triangular platform of Sion-Petit Chasseur with stele with rich anthropomorphic decoration, and the menhirs of Sion-Chemin des Collines in the Rhone-valley in the Wallis, the alignment of Lutry-La Possession near the Lake of Genève, the alignment of Yverdon-Promenade des Anglaises south and the new finds of megalithic structures on the north-shore of Lake Neuchatel. These recent investigations brought new evidence to light, which provides now a better basis for understanding the Neolithic society's economic structures and complex symbolic activities in Switzerland. Amateur and specialist astronomic interpretation has been attempted at the standing stones of Planezzas, Muotta Falera in the Swiss Alps.

Key Words: Archaeology, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Megalithic Monuments, Switzerland

Presentation

Switzerland has a long tradition of archaeological research. In summer 2004 the country and its neighbouring region in Germany celebrated 150 years of "Pfahlbauforschung" or "Lake-Side Research" with museum exhibitions and lectures dedicated to this theme. The winter 1883/84 was extremely cold and the water level in the Swiss lakes was extremely low. People made very extraordinary finds of trunks, bone, stone and ceramics and aroused attention in the scientific world. Ferdinand Keller, at that time president of the "Société des antiquaries", began the era of scientific prehistoric research work in Switzerland.

In our country the archaeological survey and the excavations are the task of regional governments, the so called "Kantone". The level of research is dependant on the resources available in each Kanton, so varies throughout the country. Only archaeological excavations concerning the national highways are supported and paid for by the Swiss government.

Geographically, to the present day known megalithic monuments are only concentrated in the western and south-western region of our country: The remains of 3 dolmen in the region of the Jura and near the town



Fig. 1. Dolmen of Courgenay



*Fig. 2.
Allée couverte of Auvernier, recon-
structed in front of the museum*



Fig. 3. Dolmen VI of Sion-Petit Chasseur

of Basel, the dolmen and the alignment at Sion-Petit Chasseur in the valley of Wallis, the alignment of Lutry-La Possession near the Lake of Geneva, the alignment of Yverdon-Promenade des Anglais south and the new finds on the north-shore of Lake Neuchatel. An exception are the standing stones of Planezzas – Muotta Falera in the Swiss Alps in the region of Graubünden. Stones with petroglyphs, mostly abstract signs and cup marks are widely distributed all over Switzerland.

I will give a straightforward description of what we can establish about distribution, function and dates of Swiss megaliths. I will mention the problem of interpretation only in a marginal way, in the “status questionis” after Colin Renfrew. Also I do not consider the simplest forms, the more widespread stone-cists “Type chamblandes” and stone cist necropolises in Switzerland.

The megalith monuments began to spread across the regions of Europe in the 5. Mill. BC, in Switzerland the first megalithic buildings appear about 4500 – 4000 BC.

Scarce remains of dolmens are known in the region of the Jura and near the town of Basel: The dolmen of Courgenay, Laufen and Aesch (fig. 1) were erected at the end of the 3. Mill. They are simple rectangular chambers, build with slabs, often with a “port-hole”. We think that they were covered by earth mounds. I shall not dwell on the details of



Fig. 5 Menhir-Statue with anthropomorphic decoration of Sion-Petit Chasseur



Fig. 4 Alignment at Sion-Chemin des Collines

design and construction. Skeletal fragments of several individuals are found in all the dolmens, so we have to deal with collective burials. In front of the museum in Neuchâtel the "Allée couverte" of Auvernier (fig. 2) is reconstructed, it was first excavated in 1876.

Discovered in 1961, the megalithic buildings of Sion-Petit Chasseur (fig. 3) are unique in Switzerland. The excavation of the site, Petit Chasseur I and II, with 11 dolmen and stone cists, 9 menhirs and a complex stratigraphy of the archaeological layers took twelve years. The accidental death of the first excavator O.-J. Bocksberger in 1969, also left gaps in the documentation. From 1968 to the completion of the excavation was carried out under the Département d'Anthropologie de l'Université de Genève, guided by A. Gallay. In dolmen XII, the oldest of those excavated, a minimum of 90 individuals were discovered. The most important, dolmen VI, was built of four slabs and two "antennas", all slabs had dimensions of at least of 2.50 m x 1.50 m. This younger dolmen was erected on a triangular platform of stones, 16 m long and 6 m at the base. The orientation is north-east / south-west. The interpretation of this extraordinary platform is very difficult, the archaeologist interprets the construction to redirect the flows of water around the site. The oldest burials are also found in the dolmen VI with undecorated ceramic and flint daggers. The literature, with ten phases recorded, suggests complex dynamics of reutilisation and disuse. Later in the same region new stone cists were built. During the Bronze Age, the Bell Beaker Culture people used these dolmens again, rich grave gifts were found, in form of necklace beads and pendants, axes and daggers. These people removed everything from the dolmen, placed the skulls outside and cremated the other bones in a hearth. The whole necropolis later was covered with several cairns in small stones of the moraine. The whole occupation of the necropolis at Petit Chasseur took place between 3200 – 1600 BC.

At Sion-Petit Chasseur (fig. 5) in connection with the dolmen XI, some stele with rich anthropomorphic decoration were discov-

ered, showing collars and belts in connection with the cult of death. These stele can be divided into two types. At the beginning they were standing in front of the dolmens. These statue-menhirs were broken in the Bronze Age and the fragments incorporated into the new constructions of the dolmen XI. A great quantity of small fragments of the statue-menhirs and pottery were found in the excavation of the different archaeological layers.

Near to this necropolis at Sion-Chemin des Collines (fig. 4) an alignment of nine menhirs was discovered, covering 28 m in length. The menhirs indicate the human form very schematically, with only one showing any anthropomorphic depiction. Normally, areas with megalithic tombs also have menhirs and there are many examples of specific connections between menhirs and tombs. We think there is a connection between the dolmens of Petit Chasseur and these menhirs, but this has been conclusively proven.

At Lutry-La Possession (fig. 8) the alignment of 24 menhirs was discovered 1985 situated horizontally in a moraine area near the Lake of Genève. The menhirs have been re-erected in a straight line of 15 m, which ends in a curved semi-circular line of 6 m in a direction towards the lake. These also indicate the human form very schematically. Only one of them is a menhir-statue, which shows an abstract engraving. The stratigraphy dates the site to the Neolithic and the holy place was still in use in the Bronze Age.

The 45 megaliths of the alignment at Yverdon-Promenade des Anglaises (fig. 6-7) all more or less show an anthropomorphic form but are undecorated. Some of these have the head clearly separated from the body. The dimensions vary from small stones of less than 1m in height to larger ones of 2m and more. The highest one measuring 4.50m. They are dated to the middle Neolithic time. The menhirs were discovered in 1975 in the region of the old lake shore, most of them were covered with soil or hidden under other stones. They were re-erected in 1981 in two straight lines to form two alignments and

Fig. 8 Alignment at Lutry-La Possession



Fig. 6 Alignment at Yverdon-Promenade des Anglais



Fig. 7 Alignment at Yverdon-Promenade des Anglais



Fig. 9 Menhir-Statue of Bevais/Treytel-A Sugiez

Fig. 10 (below) Alignment at Planezzas-Muotta Falera

three half circles upon the old foundation. The area near the lake extends about 100 m and today is used as a public park. Some prehistoric settlements close to the stones have been excavated and can be dated from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age.

At Corcelles-près-Concise 4 menhirs have been known for a long time. A story is told that the magnificent tent of „Karl dem Kühnen“ in the battle of Grandson in the “Burgunderkrieg” was erected between these stones. The battle of Grandson 1476 is very important in the establishment of the “Eidgenossenschaft” or Swiss Confederation. These places mentioned are only partially excavated.

Close to this site, recently in connection with the construction of the highway A5 on the northern side of Lake Neuchâtel five new unknown megalithic sites were found and excavated with modern archaeological methods also. The whole region was surveyed. The main sites are Saint-Aubin- Derrière la Croix and Bevaix – Treytel-A Sugiez. (fig. 9).





Fig. 11 Alignment at Planezzas-Muotta Falera

Fig. 12 "Stone of the sun" with astronomic interpretation



In Saint-Aubin – Derrière la Croix a Megalithic complex was excavated. That could be dated in two phases, the first in the middle of the 5.Mill. the second at the end of the 4.Mill. Hearths with thermal stone debris and remains of plants and corn were also identified. This impressive menhir-statue was dated to the end of the 3. Mill.

In Treytel - A Sugiez 12 menhirs were found, they could be re-erected in a north-south alignment. Two of them are menhirs-statues with anthropomorphic decoration. Again, the site has two phases of settlement.

At Bevaix - Les Murdines 2 menhirs were found and have been dated to the Bell Baker period.

These recent investigations brought new evidence to light, which provides now a better basis for understanding the Neolithic society's economic structures and complex symbolic activities in Switzerland.

The attraction of these Megalithic structures is always great. Not only scientific archaeological research but also a great deal of amateur astronomic interpretation has been discussed and published. Especially at the standing stones of Planezzas, Muotta Falera (fig. 10-12) in the Swiss Alps, recently amateur and specialist astronomic interpretation was attempted. At the site of Alp Falera a Bronze Age settlement was found but the megalithic area is only partially excavated. Some of the menhirs have been re-erected today and the site is used by the village as a tourist attraction.

Inge und Heinz Diethelm
hdiethelm@swissonline.ch

All pictures made by Heinz Diethelm

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