

Megalithic art*

Symbolic pictures

One of the three or four main concentrations of decorated megalithic* monuments is to be found in Brittany. The oldest phase of this art form is mostly to be found in the Morbihan, but Barnenez is also a fine example, with several decorated slabs. All of these decorations are pregnant with highly symbolic value, the main points of which have been successfully identified.

For example, with just one exception, only the triangular blade of the “axe” appears, showing clearly that this is intended to be a symbol – no doubt of destructive power and control over the plant world – rather than to designate a tool.

Principal motifs

The “idol with hair radiating outwards” is thought to symbolise a great goddess of fertility and death. The “U-shaped sign” is thought to represent bulls’ horns, symbolising a bull-like god. “Zigzags” have been interpreted as a representation of water (fertility worship) or a snake, an animal with complex symbolism. There is also a “bow”. This rare sign could represent a hunting weapon or, given its position at the entrance to the chamber, a signal warning against any intrusion into what could have been the most holy place in the monument.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Cairn: a stone monument covering burial places.
Dolerite: a hard rock often used by Neolithic men as axeheads.

Dolmen (“stone table” in Breton): a chamber, sometimes with a burial passage, bounded by horizontal stones.

Dry stone: stones placed on top of one another without mortar.

Megalith: from the Greek “mega” (big) and “lithos” (stone), meaning a large stone.

Neolithic: the period from 5 000 to 2 000 years B.C, during which man became sedentary.

Rubble: construction stone which is easy to handle because of its light weight and regular shape.

Tumulus: an artificial mound covering one or several tombs and made from a mixture of stone and earth. Depending on the proportions of these materials, they are called mounds (earth) or cairns (stone).

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.

Tours accessible to disabled visitors.

Information.



Bookshop-Giftshop

The guide to this monument is available in the 'Itinéraires' collection in the bookshop-giftshop.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Grand cairn de Barnenez
29252 Plouezoc'h
tél. 02 98 67 24 73
fax 02 98 79 51 58
barnenez@monuments-nationaux.fr

www.monuments-nationaux.fr

great cairn of Barnenez

Neolithic* funeral architecture

The largest mausoleum in Europe

The cairn*, built between 4 500 and 3 900 B.C., is 75 metres long and 28 metres wide, and



Aerial view

features eleven burial chambers. It is made up of two monuments from different ages: the later, secondary cairn* was built

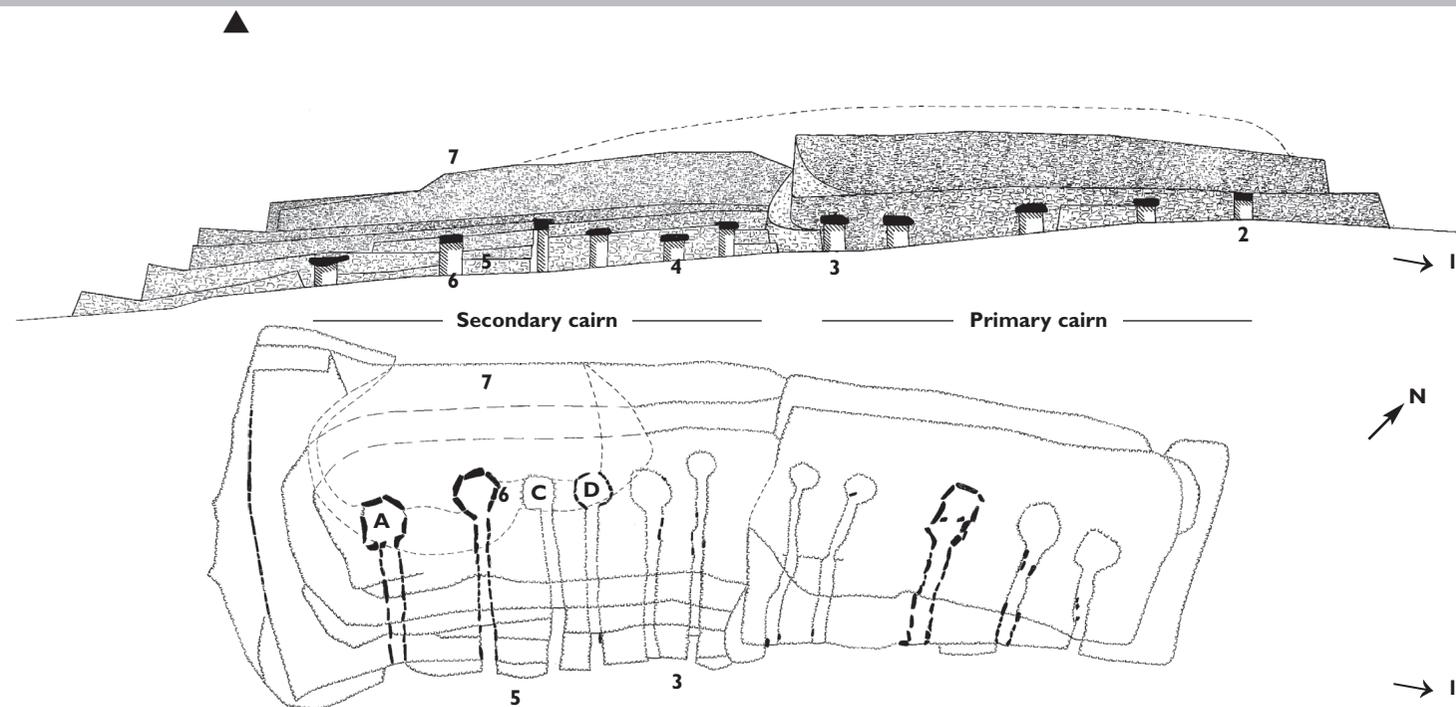
against the first – or primary cairn*.

Over the years, it was covered in vegetation and forgotten.

Excavations and restoration

It was not until 1850 that these mounds of earth and stones were identified as tumuli* at the conference of a learned society. In 1954, the monument was bought by a civil engineering company and used as a quarry. However, the scientific community campaigned for its preservation and there were successive archaeological campaigns from 1955 until 1968: coordinated work during excavations, consolidation and restoration work led to this enormous mound of stones regaining its original appearance, described as a “Megalithic Parthenon” by André Malraux in 1959, at which time he was in charge of the then recently created Ministry of Culture.

* Explanations overleaf.



1 The reception building houses a large-scale model which provides a better understanding of the way the Barnenez monument is laid out. The cairn* is located on a hill on the Kernéléhen peninsula overlooking the Bay of Morlaix from the north. Visitors approach the monument from the eastern corner.

The primary cairn*

2 The primary cairn* has five passage tombs which are not accessible to visitors. This trapezium-shaped mound is made up of a large amount of stone rubble* made from dolerite*, a local rock, giving it a darker appearance than that of the secondary cairn*.

3 The main facade, facing south-west, is of remarkable composition. The most monumental entrance, the entrance with the biggest dolmen*, is in the middle, framed by two more modest openings: an early manifestation of symmetry, one of the principles of classic architecture.

The secondary cairn*

4 The secondary cairn* is built against the western end of the primary cairn*. It extends the latter's shape and houses six more tombs. This cairn* was no doubt built a few centuries later and has roughly twice the volume of the other. Such an extension was perhaps not envisaged from the beginning, as it is on an increasingly steep slope down towards the Bay of Morlaix. The builders

were aware of the stability issues arising from this layout and overcame these by controlling the internal loads within the mound of stones. The rubble* used here, almost exclusively granite, comes from the deposit on Sterec Island, one kilometre to the north, as do most of the large slabs of stone.

5 The facade, which is very slightly concave, forms a sort of rudimentary forecourt, from which all the tomb entrances are visible.

6 The passage tombs, like those in the primary cairn*, are not accessible to visitors for safety reasons. Their passages vary in length from 5 to 14 metres and give onto relatively confined polygonal or circular spaces: the chambers. The passage and chamber walls are made up of low dry stone* walls, topped with vertical slabs. Most of the tombs demonstrate mastery of an amazing technique known as the "corbelled dome", whereby a remarkably stable roof could be built using only flat stones. Several of the chambers roofed in this way over 6 000 years ago were still intact when they were discovered.

7 The quarry. The sudden interruption due to conservation measures of demolition work on the cairn* has left exposed a complete "cross-section" of adjacent chambers on the northern facade, and also shows how most of the dolmens*, which are now free-standing, were once central to this piece of monumental architecture.