

**STONE MONUMENTS
A POSSIBLE MEANS OF RESEARCH OF WATER HISTORY**

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Abstract

This text attempts to encourage the study of the plentiful stone structures of Pre- and Protohistoric times in the central and southern Sahara. This could help to provide an insight into the way that Man moved and lived in relation to available seasonal water. Of special note are triliths (low stone "tables") thought to be of historic date.

Key-words: monuments, neolithic, triliths, Ahaggar, Ahnet, Libya, Nigeria, Tenere.

Résumé

Ce texte essaie d'encourager l'étude des nombreux monuments lithiques des ères pré- et protohistoriques du Sahara central et méridional. Ceci pourrait aider à mieux comprendre comment l'Homme s'est déplacé et a vécu en rapport avec l'eau saisonnière disponible. On notera en particulier les trilithes (des "tables" basses en pierre) que l'on attribue aux temps historiques.

Mots-clés : monuments, néolithiques, trilithes, Ahaggar, Ahnet, Libye, Nigéria, Ténéré.

Allowing for the existence of the flourishing neolithic world for some millenia prior to 2.000 BC, it is less clear how humans lived, for instance, in and around the area of the Tenere Tafassasset desert, once the neolithic life-style became impossible. However it seems that they were able to visit certain areas, if only at times when rainfall had left water remaining accessible for some weeks or months.

A certain Hadj Aberma is said to have brought cattle on foot from Kano (Nigeria) to Ghat (Libya) last century, probably about December (BARTH 1857, I). Around 100 years later nomads were recorded up to ca. one hundred km south of In Afaleleh, in N. Tenere Tafassasset, with flocks able to survive for over a month on a juicy plant called *ajerja* (LHOTE 1961). FORNI considers that "the ploughs of the southern Sahara may be post-neolithic" (in. litt., 25 April 93; cf. MILBURN & REES 1984).

Early this century Ahaggar and Ahnet nomads went down to Northern Mali in times of drought, finding water in numerous rock pools there. Around 1930 some three years of drought in Ahaggar reportedly caused no severe hardship, while four to five such years were not exceptional (DEMOULIN 1928). Coming right down to the present day, various texts seen recently suffice to show how drastic the aridity has become and how Man has contributed to it (GARCZYNSKI, in litt., 30 March 1993).

What little we know of the ages of the numerous stone funerary/cult structures of Tenere Tafassasset and many other zones suggests that many are post-neolithic, meaning that they were built only once the desert existed locally. It is puzzling to find various examples well into the Tenere, when coming from the north, unless their presence beside major water-courses (such Oued Tafassasset) probably indicates that people travelled along these to find adequate pasture and, *inter alia*, to build stone monuments, prior to moving back to less-barren zones, once water began to run out (cf. MILBURN 1984).

Some valleys contain quantities of structures and absolutely no sign of stone artefacts. If it is feasible that not even the most ardent tourist "collectors" could remove everything, so that no trace remained, may one assume that people did not live there? May they have visited such valleys at certain times and brought their dead for burial? Here it should be stressed that fragments of grinding-material, such as querns and handstones, should be discounted, even when no other artefacts are present, since they may have been brought in at any time by later populations (cf. CHAMPAULT 1991).

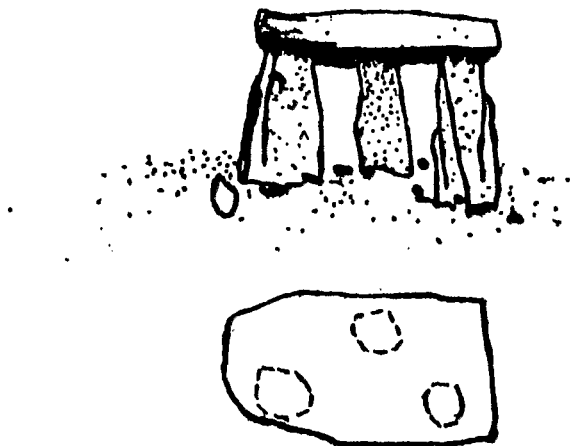
Oued Tafassasset is not the sole water-course with numerous monuments beside it, so that there exists plenty of material which could, in theory, be dated. Some structures are clearly not neolithic and a number show evidence of damage or even partial destruction by water. Others are built close to visible traces of

recent flooding, indicating perhaps either that the thought of eventual damage by water did not matter to the builders or that rainfall patterns have changed drastically, even over a few centuries. In such a context, central Saharan "triliths" (small stone "tables") are relevant; apparently-similar structures have been mentioned in Tibesti and Sudan as used by contemporary peoples for ritual purposes. Only two succinct mentions of rites connected with Saharan triliths are known to me so far. By strange coincidence both cover Tibesti; one mentions the Teda alone (REQUIN 1935), the second cites Teda and Kanembu (PALMER 1936).

The use of three hearth stones is shown among the Tubu "to north of Koutous" (CHUDEAU 1909). These have been said to be termed "muskur" (Teda) and "muru" (Hausa) and at certain ceremonies a large flat stone can allegedly be placed on top of three "legs", thus forming a trilithic "table" (PALMER 1936). Perhaps one may compare the "three-pointed sacrificial altars" of Mali (DESPLAGNES 1907).

Since 1980 I have seen various triliths in Ahaggar in its widest geographical sense, as well as three large stones arranged to form a triangle and lacking the large flat stone on top. Curiously enough, such structures sometimes occurred within the precincts of elaborate (and presumably older) stone monuments or adjacent. No information whatever has been obtained from local populations to date. See Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Trilith (Height can be from about knee-height to about waist height)



Therefore I request from readers any possible information or comments on "triliths" in the Mega-Tchad area, be this by way of rumour, folk-tales or reliable factual accounts.

Stone monuments of imposing architecture, large size and great variety are a notable feature of various desert water-points. It seems possible that a number may have been sited in the full knowledge that water could bring about their destruction; if so, did water play a significant role in connection with cult, superstition or belief?

The suggestion here offered is that detailed investigation and expert evaluation of stone funerary and cult structures may yield information on the availability of water in past times.

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