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# 'Very Like a Whale': Menhirs, Motifs and Myths in the Mesolithic–Neolithic Transition of Northwest Europe

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*This article suggests that the rare motif on Breton menhirs often interpreted as an axe (of 'Mané Rutual' type) or an axe-plough, could be the representation of a whale, and that if so, this might be a mythic creature. The character of myth and narrative is considered. It is mooted that Late Mesolithic people or their immediate descendants could have been responsible for the erection of such menhirs. The juxtaposition of the suggested whale motif with versions of animals with curved horns on the broken menhir of La Table des Marchand and Gavrinis raises the possibility of alternative or competing myths and creation stories. Other representations of natural creatures in the Mesolithic and Neolithic in Europe are briefly noted, and the possible importance of myth in the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition of northwest Europe is discussed.*

The title of this paper comes from *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene II). Hamlet is trying to confuse Polonius by comparing the shape of a cloud in rapid succession to a camel and a weasel. When Hamlet then suggests, 'Or like a whale?', Polonius wearily agrees, 'Very like a whale'. Without trying to mete out to readers the same treatment as suffered by Polonius, I want to suggest that the rare motif on the Breton menhirs normally seen as an axe of Mané Rutual type or more recently an axe-plough could be a representation of a whale. If this no doubt controversial suggestion can be entertained, it is worthwhile to consider whales as mythic creatures in the context of the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. Decorated menhirs, or at least some of them, are normally ascribed to the Early Neolithic in Brittany, which may represent some kind of fusion, it is often suggested, between indigenous and incoming population in the fifth millennium BC. In this context, drawing prominent attention to a great creature of the sea might most plausibly be ascribed to indigenous coastal people or their immediate descendants, and this raises interesting questions about the dating of menhirs. The semi-representational style of some motifs, not only on menhirs but also in other Breton monuments, indicates at the least, a powerful symbolism at work and other motifs may also have a mythic dimension (whether or not the whale identification is correct). This possibility is raised particularly by the menhir, later broken and incorporated into La Table des Marchand and Gavrinis, which had on it not only the axe-plough or whale, but also two animals with curved horns, an axe, a crook and two other small crescentic motifs beside the axe. Since the axe-plough or whale motif normally occurs on its own, and since curved-horn animals occur only on this menhir, we must consider not only the possible importance of mythic creatures, but also alternative or competing myths and stories. In the light of the weakness of models for the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition which are based on economic or demographic pressures, the significance of myth in the changing of worldviews may have been considerable. Representations of natural creatures may be one of the few ways by which such dimensions of change can be more closely understood. The approach of this article is deliberately speculative.

## The Mané Rutual-type motif

There are several recurrent motifs in the 'megalithic art' of Brittany, including prominently the axe (Twohig 1981; cf. Péquart *et al.* 1927). The axe motif occurs many times, principally within passage graves



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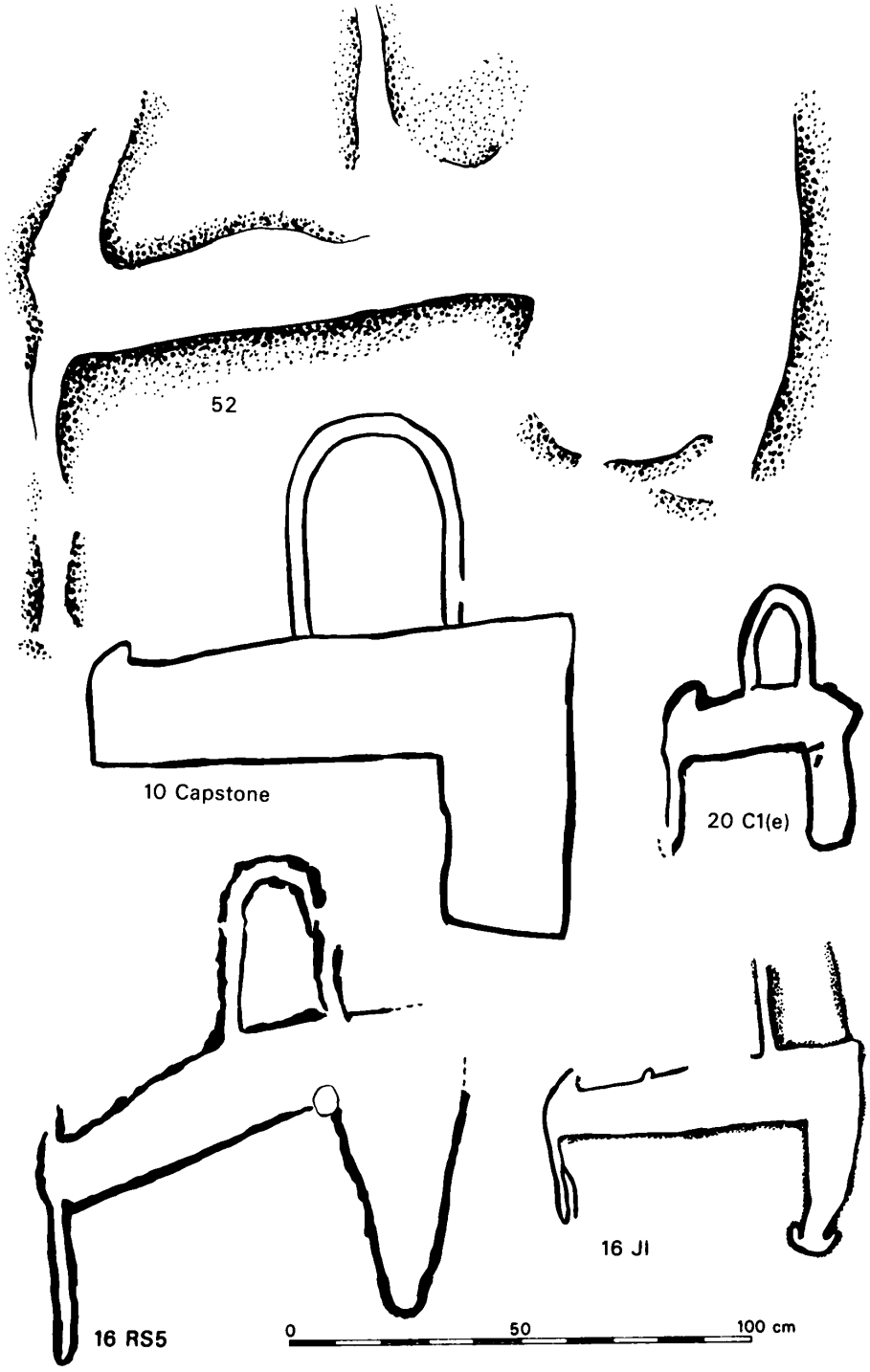


**Figure 1.** *Motifs of Mané Rutual type; 52) Le Grand Menhir Brisé; 10) Kercado; 20) Penhape; and 16) Mané Rutual (from Twohig).*

and related monuments but also on menhirs. Some Breton motifs appear abstract, but others are semi-representational and rely on side view. The axe motif conforms to this and has both haft, generally uniformly thin and with a curved end, and transverse blade. When it is possible to judge orientation, it seems to be the usual case that the axe is represented upright, with the blade at the top and pointing left, though cases of facing right also occur.

The Mané Rutual 'axe' occurs at only five or possibly six sites: at Mané Rutual (where it occurs twice), Penhape, Kercado, Le Grand Menhir Brisé, La Table des Marchand/Gavrinis, and perhaps Dissignac (Figs. 1–3). All these locations are coastal or near-coastal, and with the exception of Dissignac (which may well be doubtful: Twohig 1981, 60) are clustered in the Morbihan (further details are given below). The motif is rather different in form to the normal axe, though it is part of my argument that it too is semi-representational (but note also Elkins 1998). The motif varies somewhat in detail from site to site, and even the two from Mané Rutual are not identical, but there are strong recurrences. Orientation appears normally to be horizontal, with a thinner, upright piece or member to the left, a central part of varying thickness, and a much thicker or heavier element or part to the right, with a semi-circle on top. The differences can best be appreciated by comparing the two types of motif on the La Table des Marchand/Gavrinis (hereafter abbreviated as TMG) menhir (Figs. 2–3). The axe is nearly vertical, its blade faces left and the hook at the end of the haft faces right, while the haft is here relatively substantial but of uniform thickness. There is a small basal semi-circle or loop on the haft. In life size, this was about half a person long.



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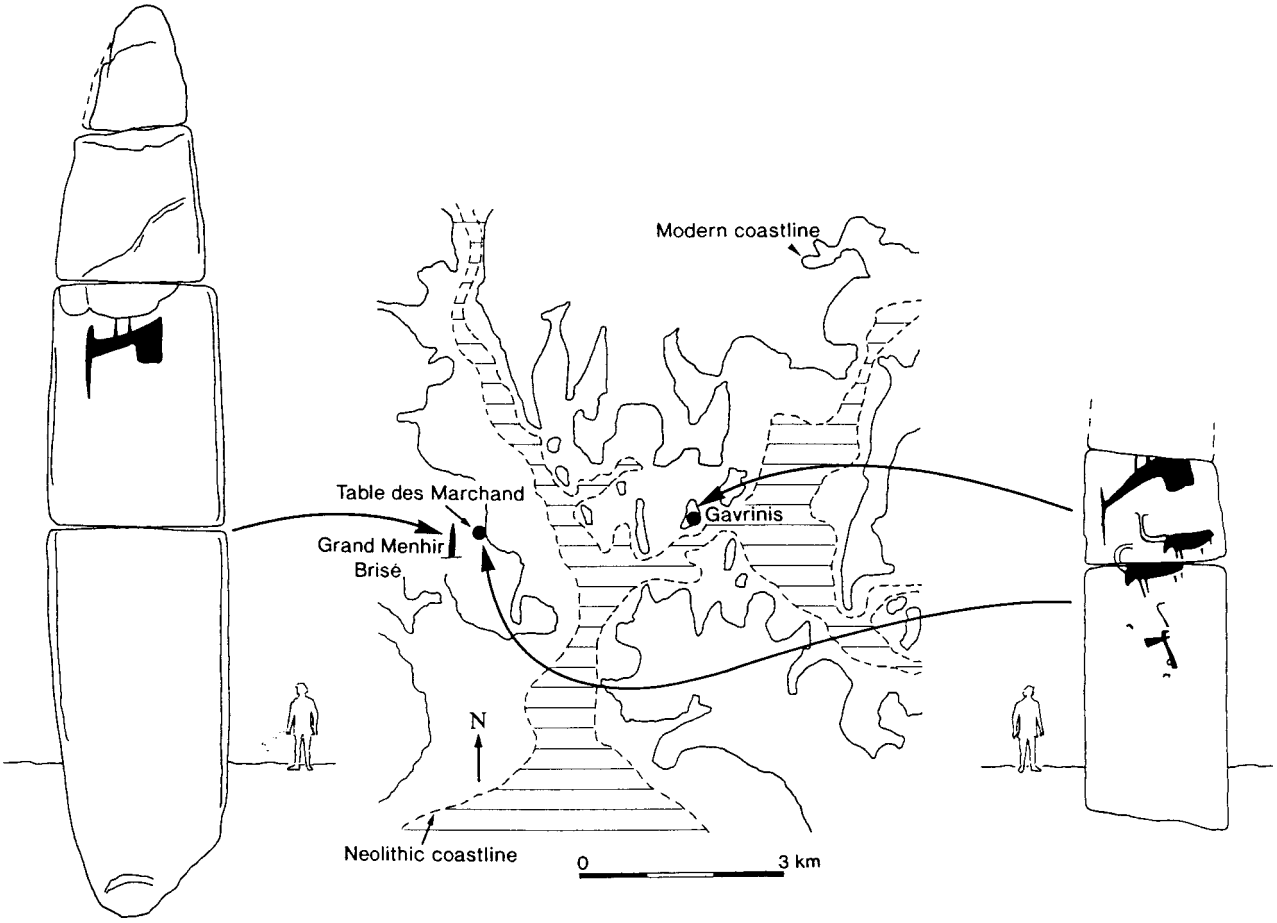


**Figure 2.** *Location and restored views of (left) Le Grand Menhir Brisé and (right) the* menhir *from La Table des Marchand and Gavrinis (modified after Scarre).*

The other motif is more or less horizontal, though with more angle to it than some of the other examples. The left vertical element is thin, the thickness of the central part steadily increases to the right, and the right part is massive. The top semi-circle is only partially preserved. The motif stretches across much of the stone, roughly equivalent to the length of a person. The equivalent motif on Le Grand Menhir Brisé is also very large but slightly less massive.

Elizabeth Shee Twohig sensibly noted that 'this is one of the most unusual carvings in Breton megalithic art. Its interpretation as an axe is not absolutely certain' (1981, 60). There is one element in common between the two motifs, the loop or semi-circle, but on axes these occur on one or other side of the base of the haft (e.g. Twohig 1981, fig. 4), and the differences on the TMG menhir have already been described. Others have referred to the Mané Rutual motif as an axe-plough (e.g. Bailloud *et al*. 1995; Kinnes & Hibbs 1989). Though this case has not been closely argued, it does not really take account of the semi-representational style, and seems to rely on the association with animals on the TMG example and the general notion of a 'package' of Neolithic agriculture. However, I do not lightly dismiss it.

The case for the whale identification is as follows. The style is in some way semi-representational. The motif portrays something other than the normal axe. Scale as such is not important, but going by the TMG example and also that of Le Grand Menhir Brisé, there is some sense of relative size, according to which this is the biggest representation in the repertoire. Its occurrence was coastal or near-coastal, and the definite occurrences form a small, localized distribution. The motif, seen best on the TMG menhir and Le Grand Menhir Brisé (as restored[1]), 'looks like' a whale, seen from the side. The other examples are admittedly at the least more schematic (see Twohig 1981, fig. 5), but it is not necessary to the central identification suggested here that they should all be identical, nor need any overlap between motifs necessarily be excluded; the possibility of devel-



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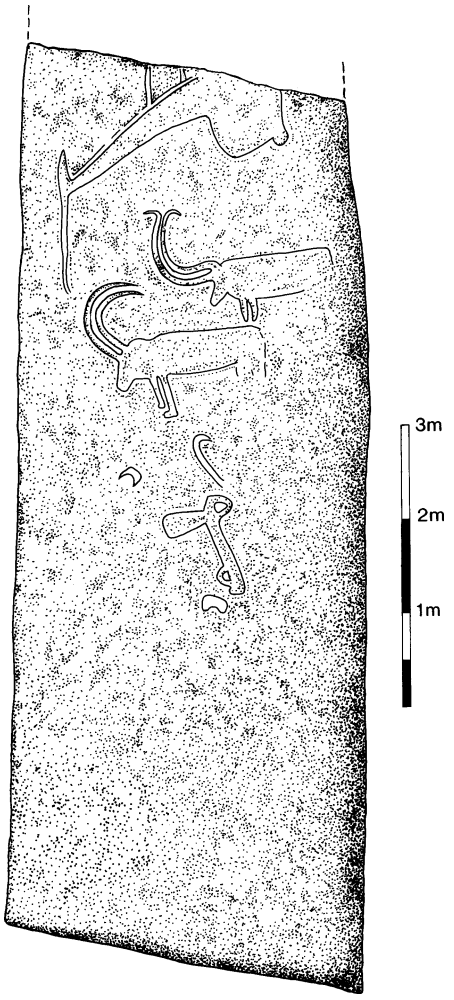


**Figure 3.** *The two main parts of the menhir from La Table des Marchand and Gavrinis (after Le Roux).*

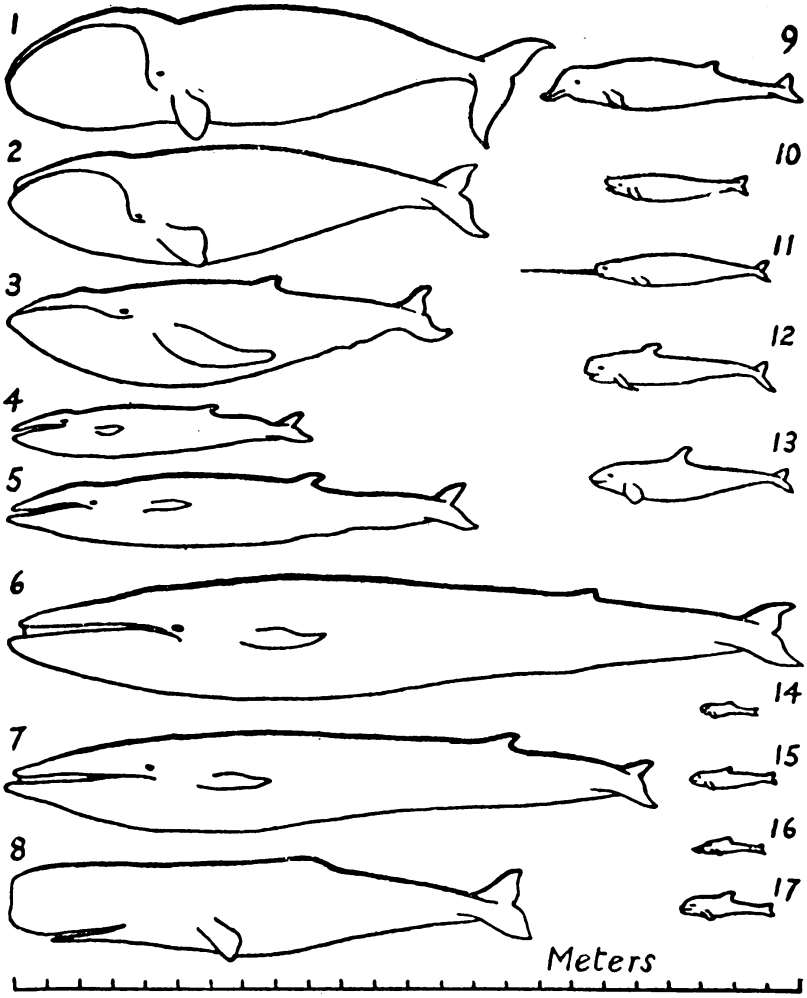


**Figure 4.** *Whales commonly found in European waters (from Clark). 1–7) baleen whales; 8–17) toothed. (For full listing, see Clark 1947, 96.)*

opment of the motif over time is mooted below. The central visual impression or intuition can be rationalized in terms of, on the one hand, the proportions of a whale — thin tail, body of increasing size as it approaches the head, massive head (Fig. 4, after Clark 1947, fig. 1) — and, on the other hand, the difficulties both of seeing so large a creature as a whale in the first place in one go and then of representing it (Fig. 5). It might be going too far to suggest that the top semi-circle is a version of the spout, though it is at least in the right general place on the back of a whale, and there is the problematic overlap with axe haft loops. In the case of the TMG menhir there is the rare but indisputable representation of four-legged animals with backward-curving horns, and it is therefore not in itself implausible that other creatures could be represented within this style. Coastal people in northwest Europe in both the Mesolithic and Neolithic would surely have seen whales, and encountered them both at sea, even if they did not purposefully hunt them, and occasionally as beached casualties on land (cf. Clark 1947). A portion of vertebra from a large whale forms one side of one of the burial cists at Téviec in Brittany and there are also teeth from a small whale (Péquart *et al*. 1937; Clark 1947, appendix 1). More occurrences are known in the west Baltic Mesolithic (e.g. Clark 1947, fig. 6; Andersen 1995, 53; 1989, 37; note also sharks at the Early Ertebølle site of Yderhede on the northern tip of Jutland: Enghoff 1995).

*Brief site details*

*Mané Rutual* (Twohig 1981, 171, figs. 105–6). Passage grave on the Locmariaquer peninsula (Figs. 1 & 6–7).



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Two stones have the relevant motif. In Twohig's notation, that on J1 is on the passage-facing surface of an orthostat near the inner end of the passage. That on RS5 is on a 'slab' above an orthostat two along from J1. L'Helgouach (1983; and see Twohig 1981, 171) suggested that the enormous capstone RS6, 10 m long and with a vast 'buckler' motif, originally stood upright as a menhir (Patton 1993, fig. 3.15).

*Penhape* (Twohig 1981, 175, fig. 123). Passage grave on the Ile aux Moines in the centre of the Gulf of Morbihan (Figs. 1 & 8). The motif is on orthostat C1 at the junction of passage and chamber, on the outer face and not visible from inside the monument. There is another motif on the other face, visible from inside. The tentative suggestion by analogy that this might be a dagger (Twohig 1981, 175) is unconvincing.

*Kercado* (Twohig 1981, 166–7, figs. 91–4). Passage grave a little inland from the sea near Carnac (Figs. 1 & 9). Six orthostats and the capstone are decorated. The motif in question is the only one on the underside of the capstone. The other motifs on the orthostats are abstract and geometrical 'ladder' or 'spider's web' designs. Could the capstone, at least 5 m long, be another former menhir?

*Dissignac* (Twohig 1981, 178, fig. 132). Double passage grave near St Nazaire (L'Helgouach 1976). The possible motif in question is with others on what is suggested as the capstone for chamber A (Fig. 10). The motif is set in amongst those of hafted axes. It does not in my view resemble the others of Mané Rutual type.

**Figure 5.** *A 10 m long sperm whale stranded on a New Zealand beach in 1996; it died of internal injuries after being battered by heavy seas. (Photo: Popperfoto/Reuter).*

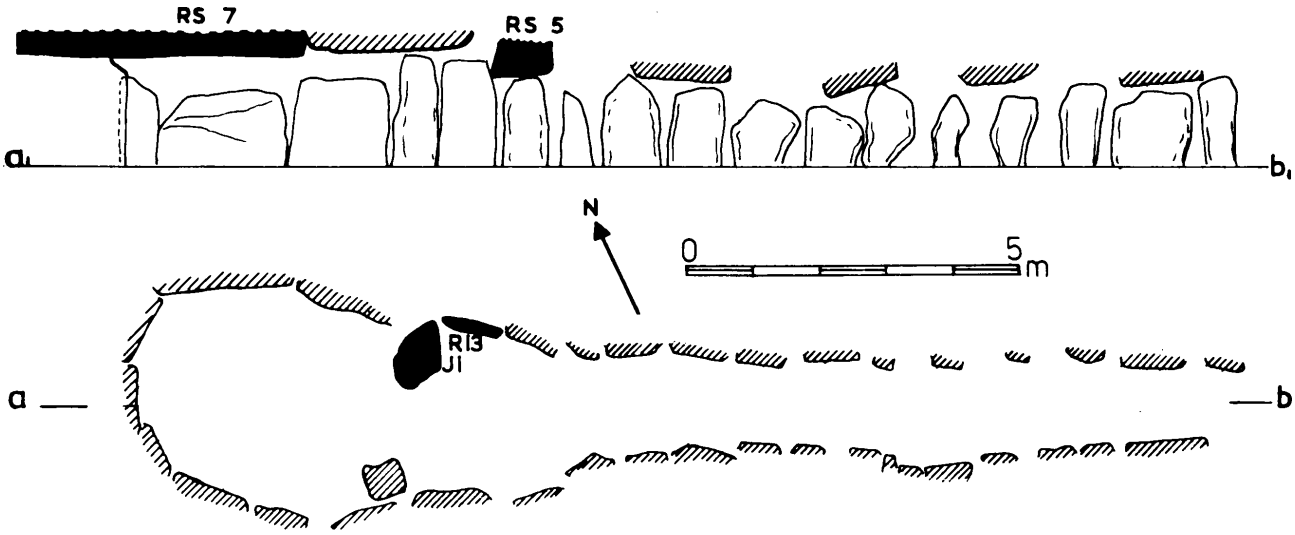


**Figure 6.** *Plan and section of Mané Rutual (from Twohig).*



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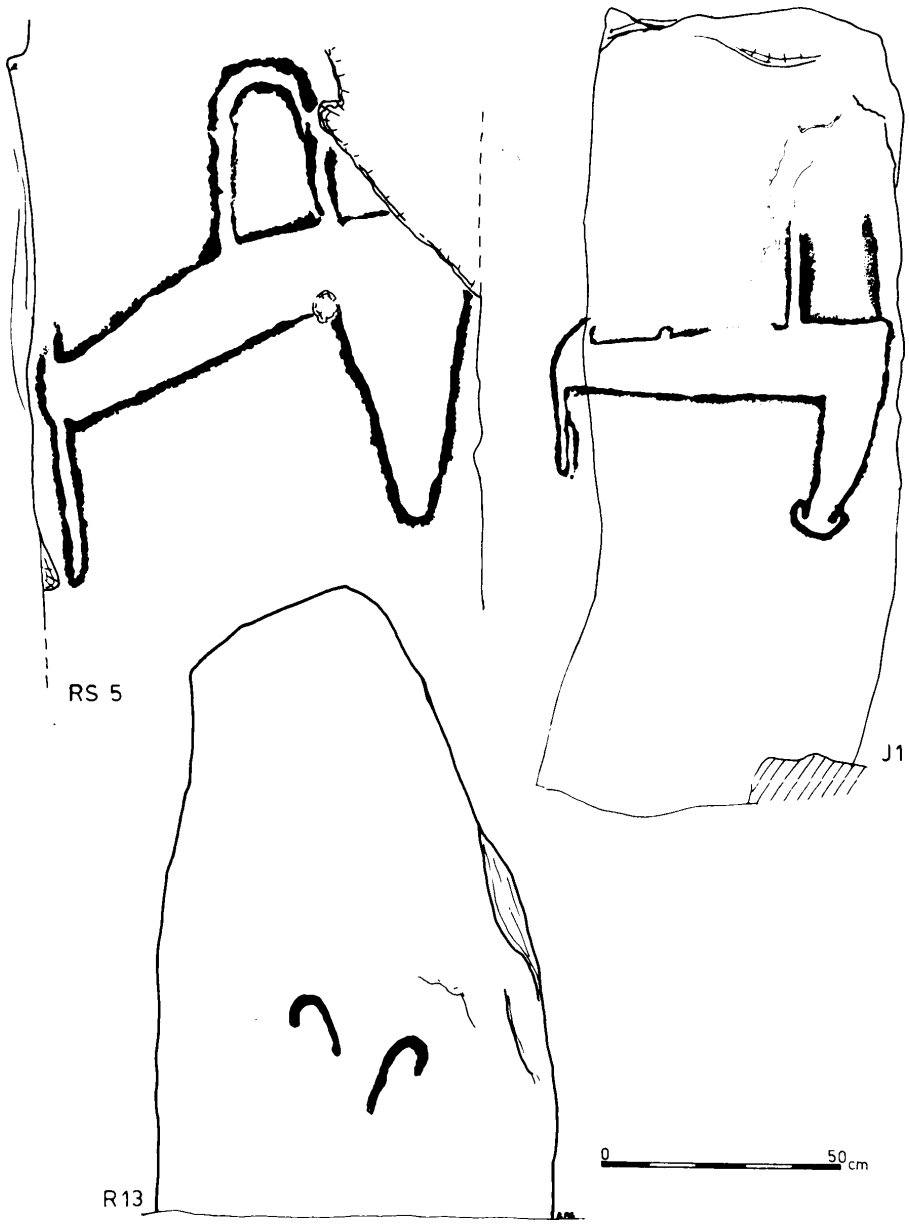


**Figure 7.** *The Mané Rutual motifs (from Twohig).*

*Le Grand Menhir Brisé* (Twohig 1981, 190, fig. 171; Boujot & Cassen 1993a; Bailloud *et al*. 1995). Menhir at Locmariaquer close to the passage grave of La Table des Marchand and the long cairn of Er Grah (Figs. 1 & 2). Now lying broken in four pieces, but originally about 20 m (long or high, depending on whether it originally stood upright: Hornsey 1987; Kinnes & Hibbs 1989) and at least 250 tonnes or more in weight (Kinnes & Hibbs 1989, 163). The motif is on the upper surface of the second largest fragment, and would therefore have been about 12 m above ground. The motif is correspondingly bigger than the previous examples. This and the TMG example are in my view much more free in style than the previous examples: 'very like a whale'. Might the stylization of the others, together with their placing on orthostats or capstones (with the possible exception just noted of Kercado) suggest some difference in date?

*La Table des Marchand/Gavrinis* (Le Roux 1984; 1985; Le Roux *et al*. 1989; Bailloud *et al*. 1995). La Table des Marchand and Gavrinis are passage graves, at Locmariaquer and in the Gulf of Morbihan respectively. The lower part of the former menhir went to be the capstone at La Table des Marchand, with the motifs showing, and the upper part a distance of about 3 km to Gavrinis, as a capping stone with the motifs invisible both from inside the monument and probably from its top (Figs. 2 & 3). It has been supposed that the top part went to the Er Grah long mound close by to La Table des Marchand, but this appears impossible from detailed measurements (Serge Cassen pers. comm.). Note that there is now also excavated evidence for a dismantled stone row close to Le Grand Menhir Brisé and La Table des Marchand. It is possible, since it has decoration on its back face not visible from the inside of the monument, that the famous end stone, C4, in the chamber of La Table des Marchand was originally also a free-standing menhir. It has recently been suggested that the motifs on the back face could represent the stars, earth and the 'chthonian world' (Boujot *et al*. 1998, fig. 6 & 205).

### Other creatures on the La Table des Marchand/Gavrinis *menhir*

Even if the whale representation is rejected, it is worth taking a close look at the other creatures, whose



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identification as four-legged and horned beasts is obviously much easier (Figs. 2–3). Although the TMG menhir has been referred to over and over again, there has been little detailed discussion of the identity of the animals. Are both of the same kind, and are specific species depicted? The most obvious difference lies in the horns. These presumably rule out their identification as deer. The tips of the horns of the upper animal are slightly hooked, while the curve of the horns of the lower animal is more semi-circular. It is possible that one could represent cattle and the other a sheep or goat (as argued by Bailloud *et al*. 1995, and by Kinnes & Hibbs 1989, 163), but this is not absolutely clear. Simply on the basis of the shape of the horns, the best resemblance is with sheep or goats. If so, this is a representation of something new in the fifth millennium BC in northwest Europe: a novel species, of domesticated status. If cattle are in a general way also depicted, something new may also be represented in that increasingly there is little osteological evidence for sustained local domestication of cattle in central and western Europe (e.g. Arbogast 1998; Serjeantson forthcoming), though initial DNA analysis may permit the possibility that some local domestication took place (Bailey *et al*. 1996). Locally, there is good evidence that cattle were of great interest, since a pair of slaughtered animals were found in a depression or pit in front of the south façade of the primary phase of the Er Grah long mound (Tresset & Vigne forthcoming). One interpretation of the scene on the former menhir has been of a bovid, an ovicaprine and a massive axe or axe-plough, 'a clear evocation of food production in its process of clearance, cultivation and pasturage', with the crook motif standing also for cereal crops (Kinnes & Hibbs 1989, 163).

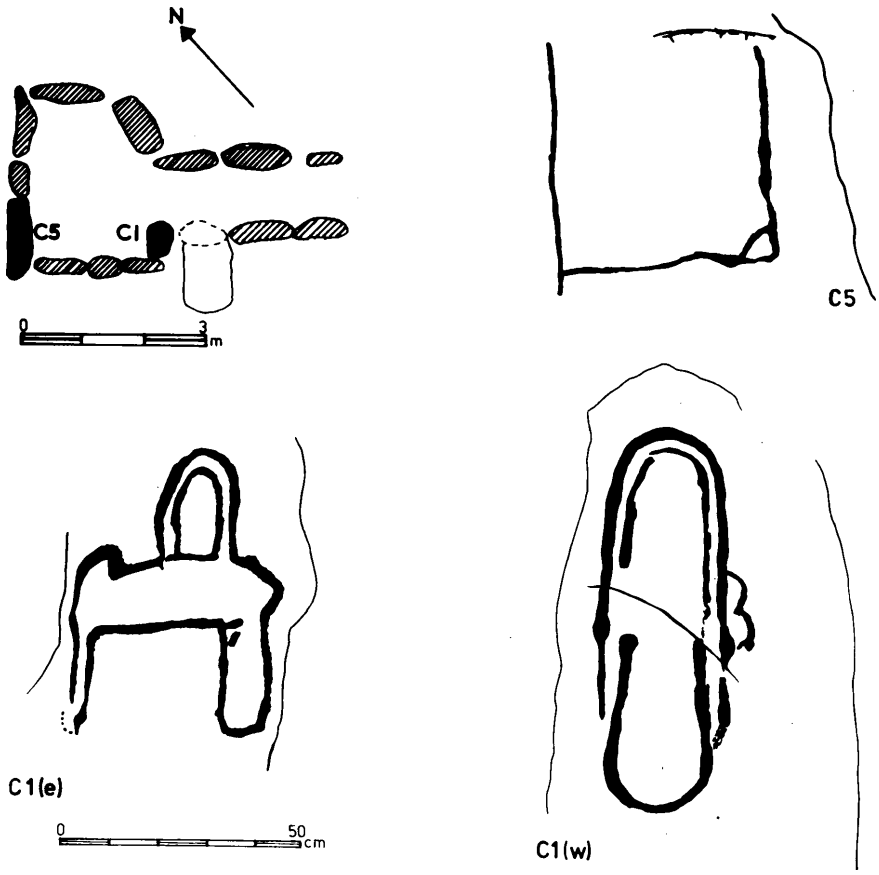


**Figure 8.** *Plan and motifs from Penhape (from Twohig).*

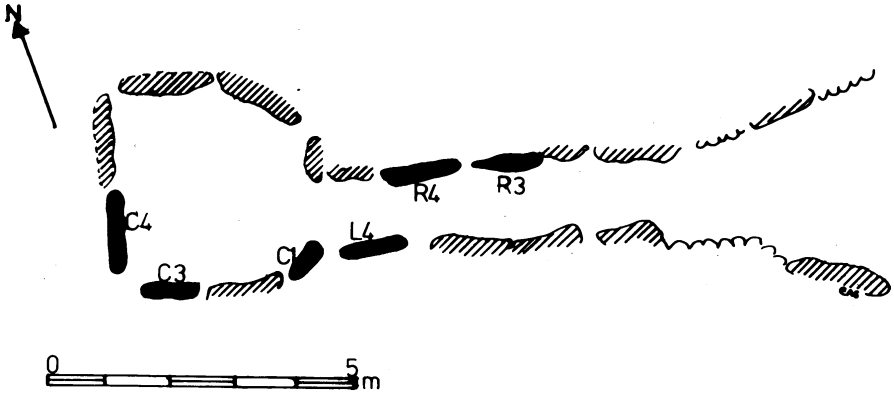


**Figure 9.** *Plan of Kercado (from Twohig).*

## Creatures of myth

Throughout Breton 'megalithic art' there are clearly powerful symbolisms at work. The axe might be represented also in the form of menhirs as well as by the axe motif itself (Bradley 1990; Thomas & Tilley 1993), and both could be taken to stand for associations of the artefact as novelty and in terms of personal prowess and identity. The symbolic importance



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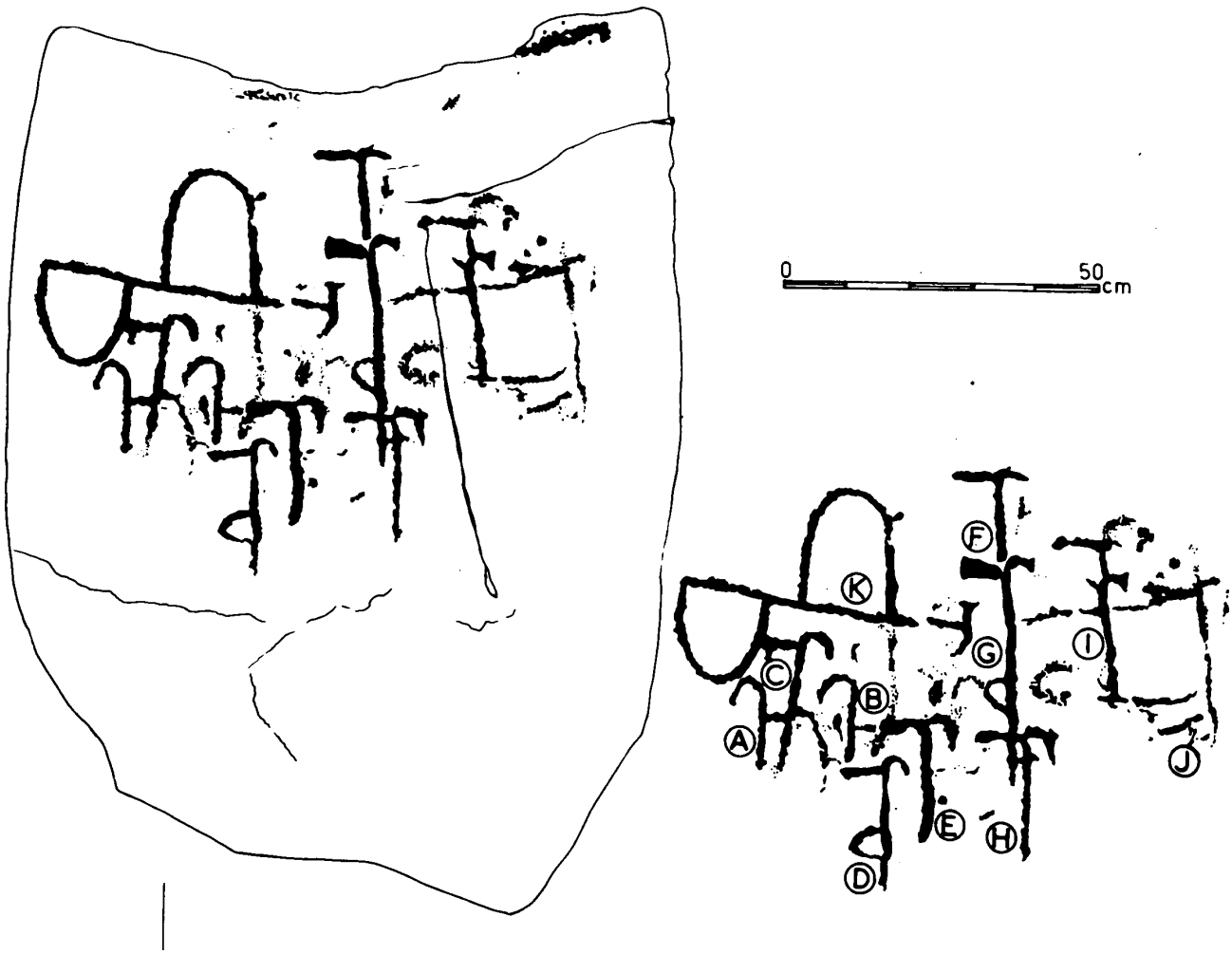


**Figure 10.** *Capstone from Dissignac. The possible Mané Rutual-type motif is number K (from Twohig).*

of the axe is confirmed also by finds of jadeite and other axes in the cists of Early Neolithic monuments (Boujot & Cassen 1993b). It has also been suggested that the buckler motif is a representation of the human body (Thomas & Tilley 1993, 257–9), that the crook-boomerang and axe motifs, among others, were part of a pattern of male gender representations (Cassen 1999; 2000), and that, as already noted, the motifs on the back face of the Table des Marchand chamber end stone could be symbols of star, earth and underworld (Boujot *et al*. 1998). In this light, the suggested whale and the possible new animals could stand for land and sea, or old and new. Powerful and recurrent though these metaphors may have been (see Tilley 1999), I want to suggest that there was a further mythic dimension to this symbolism, which archaeologists (at least those concerned with the European Neolithic) have up till now largely ignored (compare Tilley 1991, ch. 9), and that the creatures in question in this area at this time were part of myths and creation stories. The argument can be supported in a general way by analogy (cf. Whittle 1997, 143; Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998), but there are two archaeological considerations as well. First, symbolism alone may not be powerful enough satisfactorily to make sense of the central place of motifs, both representational and abstract, in the monumental architecture of Neolithic Brittany and elsewhere. Secondly, the layout of motifs down (or up) the TMG menhir strongly suggests to me some kind of linear narrative. It may be that the shape of the stone helped to determine such a layout, but it would have been possible for motifs to be placed on opposing faces or even on the sides. As is explored below, it is even possible that this is a composite narrative, since the 'whale' motif occurs elsewhere on its own, but I believe that the arrangement sets out some kind of narrative involving a whale or whales, four-



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legged horned animals, a crook and an axe.

As for analogy, people often communicate by telling stories. There has been some recent interest in writing narratives about people (e.g. Spector 1991; Tringham 1991), and the likelihood that people also told stories in this period has been strongly argued (e.g. Whittle 1996a, 210; Edmonds 1999, *passim*). There has been far less effort to consider what kind of stories might have been in question. Stories include myths, and the one specific example offered by Edmonds in his recent account of the Early Neolithic in southern Britain has to do with ancestral myth based on the melting of glacial ice (1999, 11–13). The imaginative reconstruction is plausible enough, though its form sounds too like an inclusive summary of late glacial and early postglacial environmental history (but note the Tikigaq story that the Bering Strait was once all land: Lowenstein 1993, 28), and lacks the often fragmented, indirect and tangential quality of myth as recorded in ethnography. In his discussion of Scandinavian rock art, Tilley was able to identify a mythical dimension and its constituent creatures and figures, though he stopped short of suggesting the form or content of mythic narrative (Tilley 1991, ch. 9). There are many ways of telling the world into existence. Many stories have human figures at their centre, the first person or persons to do such and such. The example is quoted by Eliade (1968, 194–5) of the Aboriginal Karadjeri origin myth which features two brothers who walk, talk and name things, and so bring the world into existence, and general features of the Aboriginal Dreamtime have often been referred to in discussions of this kind (e.g. Tilley 1994, ch. 2). The Karadjeri example is of extra interest because the brothers come out of the earth, first as dingos before turning into human giants, and later transforming themselves into water snakes. Another example of creatures at the heart of origin myths is the role of the ancestral anaconda in founding the society of the Tukanoan Indians of the Pirá-Paraná river in northwest Amazonia (Hugh-Jones 1996). In a different vein, a Malay Chewong myth tells how inappropriate behaviour (eating offal) caused a dog masquerading as a man to be unmasked and to return to its primary identity (Howell 1996).

There is also a rich ethnography from the Northwest Coast of North America for the importance of whales, both in the maintenance of social order and hierarchy and as points of origin or at least reference in creation myth. Among the Skagit, for example, whales, along with a range of other creatures, were regarded as shaman spirit helpers (Carlson 1999, 42). Among the Nuu-chah-nulth of the Pacific side of Vancouver Island, whales were important economically and socially, since the high chief controlled whale hunts and even the killing of the whale, and preparatory and celebratory rituals surrounding the whale hunt were extremely complex and prescribed in form (Arima 1988; Arima & Dewhirst 1990). The Nuu-chah-nulth respected animals as equals or even as superior beings, and thought that animals had once been humans (Arima 1983; MacDonald 1981).

The lives of the Tikigaq people of Point Hope, Alaska, were also closely bound up with the whales which migrated past them (Lowenstein 1993, and references). Here again the spring and autumn hunts were highly ritualized or ceremonialized, though in a less hierarchical social setting, and belief about the total natural setting including whales and the land strongly influenced the whole of Tikigaq existence. Central was the myth that the point itself, low and jutting into the strait, had once been a whale whose death, having been lured by song at the hands of a primal shamanic harpooner in mythic time, had made what followed possible; the whale lived on as the peninsula or point, part body and part spirit. Just one short excerpt from the land-whale story, from a section about how the shaman or Raven Man was made, gives a little of the character of the story telling (Lowenstein 1993, 3):

> Things were upside-down then.
> People were animals.
> Animals were people.
> People walked on their hands.
> Snow was seal oil.
> Seal oil was caribou fat.

Before the drama of the final harpooning, there is a long account of how Raven Man acquired his wife, which may appear tangential to the main narrative, but serves to embed the account of the first hunt in a recognizably correct set of social and ritual relationships. Another short excerpt gives an idea of the primal moment (Lowenstein 1993, 8):

> *Asatchaq:*
> The whale-float went round.
> And the mask on the float
> Sang back to Raven.
> *Samaruna:*
> The animal surfaced.
> The *whale* came up dry.
> It rose in the water.
> *Astachaq:*
> Dry land ! *Nuna !*
> It was dry land.
> It was Tikigaq.



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One may note also in passing the power of the idea of the whale in more recent times, from the Leviathan of Hobbes and the maritime symbol of the Dutch (Schama 1987) in the seventeenth century to the Great White Whale of Herman Melville in the nineteenth century.

Cattle and sheep might seem conceptually rather tame by comparison with such a powerful creature as the whale, but is worth remembering at this point the enormous importance given to cattle in the Neolithic of western Europe, not just for subsistence purposes, and worth noting the rich ethnographies of cattle keepers (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1956; Lienhardt 1961; Kuper 1982; Crandall 1998; note also the cattle myth of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*). Dinka myths, for example, were focused on the creation of people and their first separation from Divinity, but the myths include lions, oxen and dogs; cattle were regarded by the Dinka as gifts from Divinity, and clan-divinities included a wide range of creatures (Lienhardt 1961). Although cattle were the most precious thing possessed by the Nuer, there is no evidence that they were venerated or regarded as guardian spirits (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 249). The ancestors of clans, however, were thought of as having possessed cattle herds (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 258). Cows were usually dedicated to spirits, whereas oxen were sacrificed in acts of substitution as a means to sanctification of social undertakings and to overcome evil (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 261 & 270).

The key distinction at this point in the discussion might be between a creature from the sea, powerful, elusive, part of the natural surroundings and perhaps part of the natural order of things, and creatures of the land, vigorous and important in their own way, but subject to a different relationship with people and part of a different history.

**The character of myth and narrative**

Earlier anthropologists sought to generalize about the character of myth as a making sense of the *status quo* or present (see Tilley 1991, 139–40). Eliade, for example (1968, 57), drawing on Baumann, called attention to what he called paradisiac myths in Africa which related to the primordial paradisiac epoch, to the days when people knew nothing of death, understood the language of animals and lived at peace with them, did not have to work and lived off the riches of the land. One of the roles of shamans was to recapture the joy, spontaneity and freedom of that first time (Eliade 1968, 59–61). Some of these paradisiac myths became myths of origin, which explained the origin of death itself (Eliade 1968, 57).

Others have suggested that myth itself may be the focus for or means of contestation (Weiner 1996). Myth may interpret rather than simply represent (Weiner 1996, 388). Because myth is told as story, in language, tellings allow alternative versions, and because myth is such a powerful but ambiguous form of communication, people may seek in certain circumstances to rework myths to their advantage. This important insight has to be put into context. There may be long periods when myths do indeed remain static. Tikigaq social existence, for example, may have endured in a form recognizable in the land-whale myth for a long period, between about AD 600–800 when harpoon and drag-float technology was introduced, and the arrival of commercial whalers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Lowenstein 1993, ix). Given the nature of Tikigaq social relations (cf. Douglas 1996, 60, 147) it may be that the land-whale myth remained also — if not unchanging, then at least agreed. On Vancouver Island and elsewhere, however, in a more hierarchical social situation, for example among the Nuu-chah-nulth and others, the chiefs manipulated things to their advantage. As seen above, the whale hunt among the Nuu-chah-nulth was certainly highly prescribed in form, though belief in the general nature of relations between people and their natural surroundings seems to have remained widely agreed.

Myth is made active through narrative. Another recent discussion, though not specifically about myth as such, has stressed the multiple and overlapping forms of narrative, which those few archaeologists who have dealt with this theme so far have also largely missed (Bloch 1998). Bloch seeks to counter the view that 'an examination of narratives will directly reveal a particular group of peoples' concepts of the world they inhabit' (Bloch 1998, 102). Based on his experiences among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar, he has suggested that there are various narrative ways of evoking the past and of representing the passage of time, that no one kind of narrative may dominate, that different types of narrative are relayed appropriate to the context, and that narratives are not knowledge in themselves but discussions of varying kinds about what is known (Bloch 1998, 110). Drawing on this, we could suggest that even if motifs on menhirs can be seen as part of mythic narratives, of recurrent style and context, they are not in themselves likely to represent the totality of contemporary belief about the past. The variety of representations of other creatures in other contexts, noted also further below, may in general support this argument, and in the specific and rather local



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Breton case under consideration here, there are again other creatures which must have been important but which are not represented on menhirs or in monuments. Red deer antler, for example, is very important in the graves of Téviec and Hoëdic (Schulting 1996, and refs.), and there is no reason why deer should not also be considered as possible mythic creatures at the threshold between human life and death. This approach also again opens the question of contested narratives and myths.

**Who raised and decorated the *menhirs*, and who took them down?**

It has been argued that megalithic monuments could be seen as 'instruments of conversion', part of an ideological superstructure deployed by incoming farmers to persuade indigenous people of the virtues and advantages of adopting agriculture (Sherratt 1990; 1995). Apart from the other problems posed by this argument (for example, the assumption that agriculture was a dominant element in Early Neolithic subsistence in northwest Europe — Bradley 1993, 15–16 — or the assumption that monuments can be considered as a single whole with a common purpose), the whale identification proposed here raises different possibilities. If the whale representation can be entertained, it suggests, like red deer antler in the graves of Téviec and Hoëdic, a concern of indigenous, coastal people. It has been seen above how fluid and varied narratives can be, and there can be no certainty that such a motif was not a re-working of something first of concern to others. At face value, however, it might serve to identify those responsible for the initial construction of at least some menhirs as either Late Mesolithic people or their immediate descendants. The coincidence in the Morbihan area of middens with elaborated graves and menhirs with the Mané Rutual motif is striking. This is not to claim that all menhirs were the work of such people. Others are decorated with other motifs, and some were left undecorated, as inland around Saint-Just (Burl 1985). This emphasizes the local nature of the phenomenon under discussion. As noted above, the menhir itself in general might stand for the idea of the axe, though it could just as well stand for the earth itself, or be a translation into incorruptible stone of timber or trees (cf. Whittle 1996b, 25; Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998). The TMG menhir might be seen, as already hinted, as a composite and even contested narrative. To a whale myth could have been added another about horned animals under human control, guided by the crook and related to the idea of prowess represented by the axe. One might even suggest that the orientation of the creatures on the TMG menhir is significant in this respect, with the 'whale' going one way, and the animals another. This might be the place to note again the two small crescentic motifs on this menhir. They have a general resemblance to boat-shaped or 'navicular' entoptic phenomena, and occur in southern African rock art, where it is argued that they indicate one of the ways in which San shamans broke through into the spiritual realm (Lewis-Williams 1995). Here could be a third dimension to the TMG menhir (and perhaps the backstone of La Table des Marchand), though presumably much more limited than in the case of Irish passage graves (Dronfield 1995), or indeed of the Breton passage graves themselves, whose abstract motifs on internal surfaces contrast strongly with the public statements of menhirs and could also be interpreted as having to do with altered states of consciousness (Sherratt 1995).

Many menhirs were left standing. Others may have been dismantled and refashioned as orthostats and capstones, but if they were originally undecorated this would be very hard to trace. The menhirs decorated with the motif in question here, do however seem to have suffered special treatment, either by being broken and dismantled or by being incorporated into later structures. It might even be argued that the more representational the motif, as on Le Grand Menhir Brisé or the TMG example, the more decisive the action. What went where from the TMG menhir could also be significant. The lower portion with axe, crook and part of the lower four-legged animal went into La Table des Marchand, and the motifs were visible on the capstone. The middle part with the upper four-legged animal and the 'whale' went to Gavrinis, but was placed as a capstone with the motifs on its upper face and therefore invisible from either the chamber or the top of the cairn (Le Roux 1984; 1985).

The wider context in which this was all played out can briefly be considered, though it may be as useful to concentrate on the specific conditions and circumstances of the Morbihan area. The date of the beginning of the Neolithic in northwest France remains unclear. Téviec and Hoëdic appear to have been in use around 5000 BC, but may have continued in use later as well (Schulting 1998, fig. 8). There are close formal links between the treatment of graves in Téviec and Hoëdic and that of cists in the *tertres tumulaires* (Heudier 1948, 7; Boujot & Cassen 1993b; Thomas & Tilley 1993), while the idea of the long mound and the longhouse-long mound link have



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become more prominent in recent years in the Paris basin with the discovery of Passy-type enclosures (Duhamel & Prestreau 1991; Boujot & Cassen 1993b). At Balloy-Les Réaudins there is exciting new evidence for the placing of Passy-type mortuary enclosures directly on top of former longhouses of *Rubané récent* date (Mordant 1997). The chronology of the Villeneuve-Saint-Germain and Cerny groups remains incompletely fixed, but these could be placed in the earlier and mid-fifth millennium BC respectively, and the radiocarbon dates from Les Fouaillages on Jersey (Kinnes 1982) remain a useful cross-check on this. A Villeneuve-Saint-Germain presence can now be documented in eastern Brittany at Le Haut Mée, Ille-et-Vilaine (Cassen *et al*. 1998). It may be possible to see passage graves being built by 4000 BC, if not considerably before, even if some of the radiocarbon dates first obtained were either based on inappropriate samples or derive from older contexts. South of the Loire, there is also evidence for monument construction in the mid-fifth millennium BC (Scarre *et al*. 1993), and there is in general a good case for significant influence from the Cardial complex (Roussot-Larroque 1989; Sherratt 1990; Scarre 1992).

Within this broader context, which may be of more concern to us than it was to particular people in particular places in northwest Europe in the fifth millennium BC, how might change have taken place? It has often been mooted (perhaps first by Case 1976) that some sort of fusion took place in Brittany between indigenous and external people, but this is an outcome rather than a process in itself. The site of Le Haut Mée importantly brings a Neolithic presence of *Bandkeramik* tradition closer to Brittany, but as on the north European plain, juxtaposition did not necessarily lead immediately to absorption or acculturation, and there is as yet no overwhelming evidence for rapid or continued increases in Neolithic site numbers, such that a population pressure model would become convincing. Nor is there any evidence to suggest a collapse or significant change in indigenous resources, as was suggested for the western Baltic at the end of the fifth millennium BC (Rowley-Conwy 1985). Stable isotope analysis indeed suggests that the diet of the users of Téviec was derived from land as well as the sea (Richards 1998; Schulting 1998). We remain, unfortunately, largely ignorant of Early Neolithic diet in Brittany.

These considerations suggest that what people thought about themselves, their natural surroundings, the land and its creatures, and their past, may have been the key to representations of identity. The menhirs in question are only dated by their later incorporation into passage graves. It is possible to envisage many scenarios for the sequences of change in the fifth millennium BC. Indigenous people in and around the Gulf of Morbihan may have continued to live out their lives in accordance with old ways, but could have reinforced their own identity with attention to mortuary rites and then menhir construction, in the face of the encroachment of different ways of doing things brought indeed by people from the outside, from the Paris basin or from south of the Loire, or from both directions. (This is not to claim that all menhirs were necessarily the result of identical processes.) It has been estimated that a substantial number of people would have been necessary to drag and then erect Le Grand Menhir Brisé (or attempt to do so), perhaps up to 3000 (Hornsey 1987), but in the light of recent experiments at dragging and re-setting concrete blocks equivalent in size and weight to the largest trilithon uprights at Stonehenge, a smaller team may well be possible (Richards & Whitby 1997). There is little good evidence for significant densities of population in Late Mesolithic Brittany, and the smaller figure is compatible with this observation. The narrative on the TMG menhir could be an attempt to absorb new animals, or animals newly treated within indigenous myth. Other claims for monument construction in the Late Mesolithic have been either rather general (Clark 1980) or poorly supported by the dating evidence (Burenhult 1984). The force of existing, local, ritual, mortuary and mythic traditions could be a perfectly good explanation, irrespective of wider process, for the continued importance of the Morbihan/Carnac area from the fifth into the fourth millennium BC.

Another obvious scenario is that the animal motifs represent an attempt by outsiders to confront indigenous belief. Conversion, if it took place, may have been by these means, by shifts in the style and character of motifs, by the telling of stories rather than by monument construction alone. Once again, change could be sought in very local conditions and traditions, which were not necessarily the same throughout Brittany.

That leaves the probably related question of the circumstances in which these decorated menhirs were dismantled or incorporated into later constructions. Was this because they were too powerful to be left visible, or was it because of their power that people sought to include them, adding strong tradition to new constructions? Some of the details noted so far about the treatment and placing of dismantled stones may support the former, along with the scale of dismantlement in the stone row formerly outside La

Table des Marchand. That might imply a significant scale of incoming population, and this simply remains to be tested in the future, perhaps — if suitable human bone samples can be found — by DNA analysis (see Sykes 1999).

**Animals and myths in some other places**

Animals are good to think with. They behave like people in some respects. They often live in social groups. They mate and are sexually differentiated. They come and go in the landscape. They can be ascribed complex values. They can be seen as partners. They have blood. But they are also unlike people. They have greater strength and speed. They can run and swim in ways that people cannot, and can appear and disappear in the landscape in ways that people cannot match. They can be killed, but the spilling of their blood has different consequences to that of other humans. Foragers might on the whole have regarded animals, or many categories of animals, as an undifferentiated part of their world (but see Descola & Pálsson 1996 for much possible variation). Herders had more ambiguous attitudes, perhaps, valuing and sanctifying animals, taking an intense interest in their categorization, but also having direct control over their movement, and taking great pains over their butchery and the subsequent treatment of their remains. It remains striking how so many motifs of established Neolithic traditions in northwest Europe as a whole, at a time when domesticated animals were clearly of more than purely economic or dietary concern, are abstract rather than semi-representational. With abstraction comes the possibility of secret knowledge and mystification (Bradley 1997; 1998).[2]

In conclusion, it is useful to draw attention again to the many weaknesses of purely economic or demographic explanations for the spread of the Neolithic in Europe as a whole (Whittle 1996a). So much from place to place seems to be to do with how people regarded themselves, animals and other elements of their surroundings, rather than with the workings of a disembodied economy and technology. It has been argued here that shifts in myth and narrative may have been of particular importance, because they are directly experienced by people in telling and listening, but this may seem a largely inaccessible realm. The final aim of this article is therefore to draw attention to a number of other cases where representations may allow more insight into this dimension, and to call for renewed consideration of them.

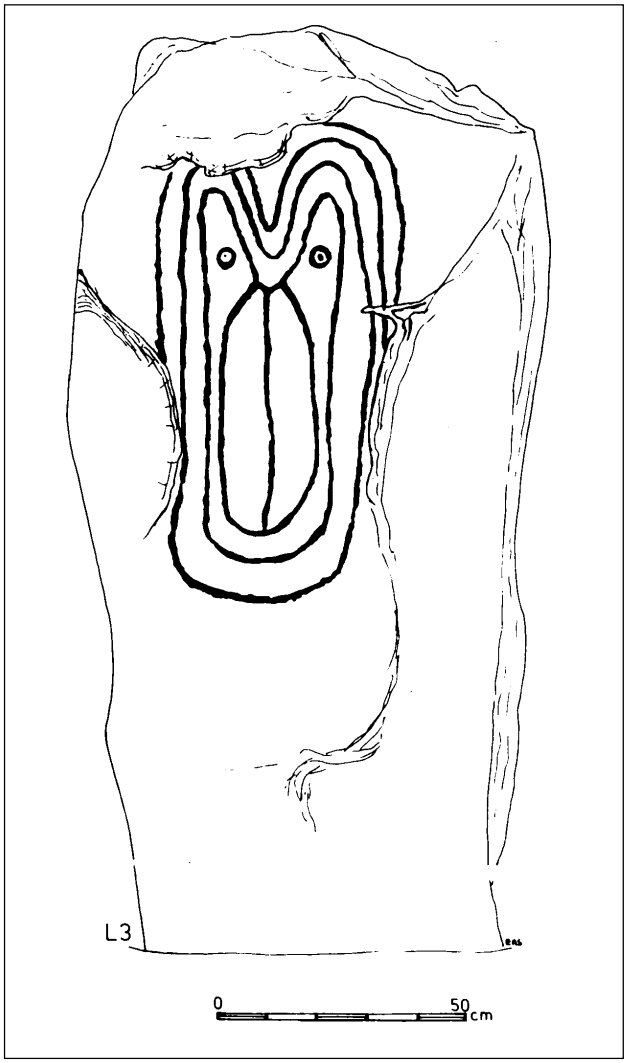


**Figure 11.** *Motif from Luffang (from Twohig).*

The evidence is varied and it is unwise to see too much uniformity, but there are interesting recurrences of representational or semi-representational styles which emphasize natural creatures, before or at the transition to different lifestyles. These largely seem to disappear subsequently, to be replaced either by abstract motifs or by the tradition of anthropomorphic figurines. In the art of Çatalhöyük, for example, whose early phases seem now to be accompanied by a very varied subsistence base, there is a strong emphasis on birds and bulls (Hodder 1998). In the Danube Gorges, there are both abstract and semi-representational motifs carved on boulders, the latter perhaps becoming more prominent as the sequence developed. It has been suggested that the famous fish-like faces of Lepenski Vir could be representations of *beluga* ancestor figures, whose an-



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nual return upriver would have been critical, and in counterpoint to which the souls of the human dead were seen to go downriver; these came to prominence at a time when elsewhere in the region there may already have been Neolithic communities (Radovanović 1997). In the northern Starčevo and Körös cultures of the Carpathian basin there are some relief and incised representations of animals on pottery, which include definite antlered deer, sheep or goats with curved horns, and others of ambiguous identity (Whittle 1998 and refs.). In the southern Scandinavian Mesolithic, there were both abstract and anthropomorphic designs on portable objects in the earlier phase, though very few figurative representations of animals or other creatures, while in the later phase (including the Ertebølle culture figurative) representations more or less dwindled to nothing (Clark 1975, 147–59, 199; Nash 1998). On the east side of the Baltic, however, where the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition can be seen as a very long drawn out process (Zvelebil & Dolukhanov 1991; Zvelebil *et al*. 1998), there was a strong tradition of zoomorphic representation, including elk-head staffs, snake figurines and bird motifs (Antanaitis 1998). Northern ethnography and myth suggest that different creatures were connected with different realms: elk and red deer with the forest, as mother of the world, and with cosmogony, ducks with the birth of the earth, sun and moon, and snakes with the lower world and health (Antanaitis 1998, 60, 63, 65).

The list could go on, but is sufficient to show a recurrent strong interest among foragers or people who had not yet wholly abandoned elements of a foraging existence in representing animals and natural creatures. Many of these may have been mythic creatures. Whether or not the motif discussed here on the TMG menhir can be seen as a representation of a whale, natural creatures and myth have a wider importance which deserves renewed attention.

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**Notes**

1. It should be noted that how to record and represent motifs on the weathered surfaces of geologically old stones is problematic. Péquart *et al*. (1927) used photographs and then some drawings from photographs. Twohig notes errors in this process of transcription, but also the danger of foreshortening in using photographs (1981, 44). A new catalogue is being prepared for Brittany. I owe this point and information to Serge Cassen.
2. Interestingly (and in support of a fusion model for Brittany), there might be some sign of continued representation of natural creatures in the more abstract motifs of the established passage grave tradition. Could the famous motif at Luffang (Fig. 11), for example, be a version of the mouth of a whale (once seen by Keller (1905) as an octopus), and might some of the motifs seen as multiple crooks or bucklers rather be to do with baleen plates?

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