

# Megaliths of the Vera Island in the Southern Urals

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# Introduction

Megalithic monuments are one of the most prominent phenomena of Antiquity, not simply because they stagger the imagination of people with their size, and make them wonder how they were built. In scholarly discourse, the megalithic phenomenon has given rise to a huge number of problems associated with the reconstruction of social structures and beliefs of ancient societies, the problem of the formation and spread of cultural phenomena, etc. Megaliths are primarily a European phenomenon. Therefore, the discovery of a megalithic complex on Vera Island in the Southern Transurals is not only a problem for Ural archaeology but it introduces some significant additions to general megalithic studies. There are two main opposing positions on megaliths: diffusion of the megalithic tradition from a single original centre and its independent formation in different regions under the influence of similar conditions that arose from the development of the Neolithic agricultural economy. It is clear that the Ural megaliths, found in a forest zone where there was no farming and separated by a huge distance from any European megalithic area, conflict with both these basic theoretical positions of European megalithic studies.

Megalithic monuments were discovered on Vera Island in 2001, and their excavation was undertaken between 2004 and 2010. The discovery was a big surprise, both for those of us directly involved and for our colleagues, although, in reality, it should not have been.

Chelyabinsk-based archaeologists had been investigating menhirs in the steppe zone of the Southern Transurals for many years. Since 1982, many objects have been studied by A.A. Rube, A.D. Tairov, I.E. Lyubchansky, S.A. Grigoriev, A.V. Epimakhov, A.V. Kostyukov, F.N. Petrov, L.Yu. Petrova, V.A. Kupriyanov, E.L. Polyakova (Gavrilyuk *et al.* 2006; Petrov 2006; Polyakova 2006). Thus, we appreciated the antiquity of these objects almost immediately. However, the Transural menhirs were poorly distinguished from a significant series of steles of the Eurasian steppe zone of various periods and were relatively small monuments. Thus, they did not allow us to speak of the discovery of a new megalithic culture in the Urals.

Later, the dolmens of the Middle Transurals were discovered. For many years, local historians and tourists, who unsuccessfully tried to attract the attention of archaeologists to these monuments, were engaged in

seeking them out. In the 1950, the first to pay attention to these unusual objects was A.A. Bodrykh, a geologist from Verkhnyaya Pyshma, who walked through the taiga, searched and drew dolmens, correctly identifying their great antiquity and connection with megalithic cultures. At the beginning of this century, geologists V.G. Nepomnyashchy, G.N. Kuzovkov, and V.G. Shikhov joined these searches (Bodrykh 2004; Nepomnyashchy 2004; 2005). Finally, since 2004, the research group of the 'Adventurers Seeker Team' Travel Company (A.V. Slepukhin, N.Yu. Berdyugina, S.S. Galin, V.O. Petrov, M.Yu. Demina, and O.A. Shvetsova) has been involved; over four years they found more than 200 dolmens and other objects of this tradition in the difficult conditions of mountainous taiga. In 2007 and 2008 V.D. Viktorova investigated five dolmens of the Middle Urals, excavated one of them and found Eneolithic materials (Viktorova 2010).

We should not forget earlier work on the identification and study of such a vivid phenomenon as circular Eneolithic sanctuaries in the Urals (Potyomkina 2001; 2011; 2014; Rafikova 2008; Fedorov and Rafikova 2010). Formally, they do not belong to the megalithic monuments, but they accompany them everywhere and are an integral part of the megalithic perspective.

In addition to the study of megaliths on Vera Island, we excavated settlements. The purpose of this book is to provide a primary synthesis of this material and its systematization, which allows us to isolate the main problem areas and carry out further work within this framework. Further, our task is to show the place of the Ural megaliths within general megalithic studies. Our use in this book of the experience of European colleagues is also because, in their long years of research and based on it, they have formulated various axioms which are quite applicable of solving the problems that have arisen with the discovery of megaliths in Ural archaeology.

Finally, there has been a growing understanding in archaeology in recent years that the problems of cultural genesis and the functioning of cultural types were directly connected with social structures. In the Eneolithic of this region these processes were significantly different from what we see in the subsequent period of the Bronze Age. This explains our interest in social issues and the related problem of reconstructing ideological systems.

It should be understood that only the first steps have been taken in the study of this problem. But already these have posed many questions about the local Eneolithic. Obviously, without their solution, further study of the Ural megaliths will be difficult. Nevertheless, in recent years, much has been done to understand the chronology and periodization of this era, and we believe that gradually these questions will be solved, and others will take their place, which is characteristic of the wonderful infinity of the scientific process. But unlike Hegel's 'bad infinity of reproduction', this process leads us each time to a new level in understanding reality.

A large role in study of the island and its protection in 2008-2011 was played by the Vera Island Foundation (director, L.V. Ivasko). As finance for the work was either absent or extremely sparse, only this Foundation provided the chance to carry out the works that are reflected in this book. The authors are grateful for this and to the former director of Foundation, numerous friends of Foundation, in particular to the touristic business of the lake. Our special thanks to Alexander Scherbakov (Ural-Trade Company) and the Administrations of the Chelyabinsk region and the city of Miass for their help in organizing and conducting expeditions. The greatest assistance in administrative work with this archaeological complex and with its preservation was provided by the specialist of the Center for Protection of Monuments of the Chelyabinsk Region, Nikolay Menshenin. The study of materials was carried out within the framework of the state program of the Institute of History and Archeology, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences

We are also grateful to colleagues in Ufa, N.S. Saveliev and V.G. Kotov, who took an active part in surveying the island in 2006, and subsequently the latter was a constant visitor to the island, studying the technique of processing stone blocks and sculptures in megaliths and on other sites. In the preparation of this book, we received invaluable financial support from the Fund for the Promotion of Preservation of Cultural Heritage 'South Urals' (Chairman, G.Kh. Samigulov). We would like to express special thanks to the editor of published texts, James Hargrave. Without his careful work this book would be impossible.

Finally, we are grateful to our friends who participated in these excavations, for whom the island became an integral part of their life. We are grateful for this work and for the wonderful atmosphere that they created.

#### *What is a 'Megalith'?*

As this book is devoted to the megalithic monuments of the Urals, we cannot ignore the question of what is understood by the term 'megaliths' and how the objects

found in the Urals correspond to it. At first sight, the question is rather simple. The term is formed of two Greek words: μέγας (*megas*) – 'great, large, big', and λίθος (*lithos*) – 'stone'. Thus, this term means any construction made of big stones. However this is too broad and raises some problems. There has been repeated discussion in scientific literature (Daniel 1958, p. 18; Midgley 2008, pp. 23-27). For example, it would include huge Egyptian pyramids formed of massive blocks, and we can continue with an ever-expanding list up to the present. But, besides the strict etymology of the term, there is a narrower scientific/academic usage which embodies only constructions erected before the birth of the first civilizations, i.e. constructions of barbarous cultures. Even this leaves us with a series of problems: what should we understand by 'big stones'. If we take a menhir of 5-10 m in height, we have no problems, but what of one that is a mere 50 cm high? Similarly, if we take a chambered megalith whose walls are formed from small stone blocks, the massive capstones weighing several tons clearly qualify it for inclusion. But what of cases where the covering in the form of a vault made from the same small blocks, or perhaps was wooden? These contradict the strict etymology of the term, but they fit precisely into a cultural megalithic context of a particular area. Therefore even structures from small stones are considered as megaliths.

One more aspect of the problem is the settlements left by the builders of megaliths. Of course, there are unique objects with stone walls (made from rather small stones) among them, such as Skara Brae on the Orkney Islands, but it is a rarity. Nevertheless, other settlements without masonry reflect the megalithic cultures; without studying them the entire megalithic problem is insoluble.

And if we add to the discussion a situation known for Europe of causewayed enclosures or long barrows, which had appeared earlier than the proper megalithic tradition but then was included within it, and the use of large stones in these constructions...? Therefore, even at an early stage, these constructions are considered within the megalithic problem, although the use of the term in this case is not always strictly pertinent.

Proceeding from all of the above, it seems requisite to distinguish proper megaliths (including constructions without massive stones), monuments of megalithic tradition and monuments relating to megalithic problems.

A very serious problem is the correctness of more particular terminology concerning one or other type of object; this has been discussed repeatedly in the literature too (Joussaume 1985, pp. 16-17; Pingel 1999, pp. 37-50; Midgley 2008, pp. 26, 27). This situation developed historically in the 18th-19th centuries

when enthusiasts for archaeology and antiquarianism had no aspiration to exact analysis of terminology. Therefore sometimes the term dolmen would be applied, even to such an object as Stonehenge; and the possibilities of the term cromlech were unlimited. Eventually, a common understanding was developed, and terminological disparity does not confuse experts on megalithic structures; they understand what it is about. But for archaeologists working in other fields it is sometimes difficult to understand local variations in terminology. We do not seek to describe the full range of this terminological problem here, and will just describe terms that occur repeatedly in this book to assist the non-specialist reader in understanding what, actually, is being discussed.

### *Main Types of Megaliths*

The simplest type of megalithic monument is the menhir. The term comes from Breton, from *men* ('stone') and *hir* ('long'), describing any long upright stone. In addition there is the term 'stele', which is understood as a flat slab with images or signs. But the situation becomes complicated again by the tradition of use of this term: there are anthropomorphic steles which are not always flat, but whose shape had to reflect a person in stylized form. But if such steles have images of a face or parts of clothes, they are considered as statue menhirs (Twohig 1981, pp. 128, 129; D'Anna et al. 1997, pp. 179-193). The criteria for classification are not always clear, but this is not significant for our island as we deal only with the proper menhirs.

As menhirs were often arranged in groups, these groups can be described by the term 'menhir complex', unless they are circular groupings ('stone rings') or in long lines ('stone row/alignment'). The term popular in the Urals of 'alley of menhirs' can be applied to the menhir rows at Carnac, but to the Ural structures it is inapplicable, as paired rows are here unknown.

A considerable number of megalithic monuments can be described as 'chamber tombs', which is understood as any megalith with a closed space and ceiling. The main chambered types are dolmens, passage and gallery graves (Kaelas 1994, pp. 600, 601).

The commonest term is 'dolmen', from the Breton *taol maen* ('stone table') and, in principle, describes constructions of vertically set stones covered with one or several stones. Subsequently, however, this began to be used sometimes to describe also similar constructions consisting of separate stone blocks

or horizontal boulders, although the strict use is the correct one. There are also numerous regional terminologies which, in addition, are connected with certain typological distinctions. These are portal tombs in Ireland, *dyss* in Sweden, *Hünengrab* in Germany and *Hunebed* in Holland. In Portugal the term *Anta* is used, which is often translated as dolmen, but the real situation is more diverse: for example, the well-known Great Dolmen at Zambujeiro (*Anta Grande do Zambujeiro*), though it is made of massive vertical stones, is in reality a passage grave.

These passage graves are one of the brightest and most widespread types of megalithic monument. They have rectangular or round chambers to which a passage leads. Often they are covered with mounds, and in western France one mound can cover several such tombs. The length of the passage and form of the burial chamber differ: for example, cross-shaped chambers are known. The covering of a passage grave is often vaulted, but there are also ceilings of horizontal slabs.

The second widespread class is the gallery grave (*allée couverte* in France). They differ from passage graves in that the burial chamber has the same width as the passage and the entrance into the construction is situated on the narrow side. Often they are similar to an extended dolmen, which can be explained by the genetic connection of these constructions. But gallery graves commonly (but not always) have an antechamber separated from the burial chamber by a small partition. Often these constructions are cut into the soil. They too have many regional variations. For example, the wedge tombs of Ireland differ in that their width and height taper, hence the name as the resultant form resembles a wedge. Transept tombs have lateral chambers adjoining the central one. There is a specific type of gallery grave in France, the *hypogée*. Like the French *allée couverte* they are cut into the surface, but their walls are not lined with stone because they were made usually in bedrock, more often chalk. This makes them comparable with the rock-cut tombs of the Mediterranean. Cists (small stone boxes) and cairns (stone mounds) are known too.

All of these several types had regional differences reflecting the continuous interaction of the bearers of different traditions. This resulted in a variety of forms of megalithic tradition.

We can now turn to describing the most significant megalithic complex of the Urals, that on Vera Island.