

Notes on Old Stone Constructions of West and Central Sahara

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RESUMEN: El presente trabajo trata acerca de la tumba de TIN-HINAN, HOGGAR, y la describe presentándola en relación con los «monumentos en capilla» de Négrine, Tafilalet y Oeste del Sahara.

Además, incluye comentarios sobre la rareza de las tumbas rectangulares con habitaciones interiores. Se hace una razonable exposición de los «monumentos fusiformes», conectados con la tradición del tránsito por barco a la vida futura.

La tumba de TIN-HINAN combina características de los monumentos en capilla o habitación con aquellas otras de «monumentos de deambulatorio complejo».

SUMMARY: This work deals with the tomb of Tin-Hinan, Hoggar, and describes it as presenting a relationship with the «monuments à chapelle» of Négrine, Tafilalet and West Sahara which also have very large chambers.

It also includes a commentary on the rarity of rectangular tombs with interior chambers. It proposes a reasonable explanation of the «fusiformes monuments» as being connected with a tradition of a journey by ship to the after-life (this being suggested by their very shape).

The tomb of Tin-Hinan combines characteristics of the «monument à chapelle ou à chambre» with those of a «monument à déambulatoire complexe».

A recent work dealing with the tomb of Tin Hinan, Hoggar, clearly showing the burial-chamber in the south-west corner of that complex structure, is not necessarily to be taken as indicating a preoccupation with the south-west¹. We make this statement, which is more in the form of a question, simply to place it on record, since we know of no explanation for the small stone circles or square «boxes» tacked onto the south-west perimeter of the border of certain monuments of Western Air². A prior visit to Adrar Tiouéïne (2249N 0414E) revealed also a circle tacked onto the rear part of the southern «arm» of an east-facing «monument plat

à bras», in low sandy hills, just to east of the main massif, which may reflect the same idea: this Hoggar circle could have been added later, i.e. by a different people, although it is not proposed to offer any opinion on such a possibility in the case of the circles and «boxes» of Air.

Further away, in Scotland, for instance, the Ciava group of stone constructions shows a definite interest in the south-west quadrant of the compass³.

Most interesting too are the remarks of Camps in respect of an apparent relationship between certain aspects of the tomb of Tin Hinan with «monu-

¹ G. CAMPS: *L'âge du Tombeau de Tin Hinan, Ancêtre des Touareg du Hoggar*, Zephyrus, XXV, 1974, pp. 487-516.

² M. MILBURN: *On small dry-stone cairns of parts of Arabia, Algeria and Western Air*, Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, London, forthcoming.

³ H. A. W. BURL: *Stone Circles and Ring-cairns*, Scottish Archaeological Forum, vol. 4, 1972, pp. 31-60.

A. S. HENSHALL: *The Chambered Tombs of Scotland*, Edinburgh, Vol I, 1963, p. 28. Scottish chambered tombs and long mounds IN Colin Renfrew (ed.): *British Prehistory: A new outline*, London, 1974, pp. 137-163.

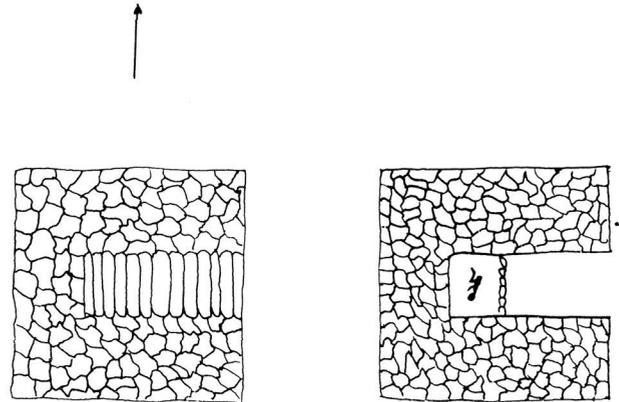
ments à chapelle» of Négrine, Tafilalet and West Sahara⁴. Noting that such chapels occupy a larger and larger space within the edifice as one penetrates deeper into the Sahara, we learn that, at Bir um Garn and at et Mreïti, both in Mauritania, it is a large chamber, occupying half the surface of the construction itself, that plays the part of chapel⁵.

It is precisely this tomb at Bir um Garn upon which we feel it necessary to comment, without—unfortunately—being able to clarify some of the current mystery surrounding past activities in the area. Suffice to say that it was visited—and apparently excavated—by Gobin, during the winter of 1935-1936⁶. Du Puigaudeau and Sénones then later visited and also excavated, prior to publishing their own detailed account in 1947⁷. We ourselves were shown the site in late 1973, by pure chance, at a time when we were unaware of the above-cited publications. Noting, however, that the monument had been excavated, we rapidly obtained the account of du Puigaudeau and Sénones through the kindness of our colleague A. Simoneau.

These two ladies mention succinctly «les sept puits, le couloir, la petite solle»⁸, a totally different description to that by Gobin⁹, part of whose «Croquis no. 1» we reproduce at Fig. 1. The method of sealing the top of the tomb is worth comparing with that shown by Nowak, for a smaller edifice of Río de Oro, apparently with a fallen menhir nearby¹⁰: note also that the burial of Tin Hinan was covered by large stone blocks¹¹. Gobin in fact shows a tomb layout that agrees completely with Camps' rule covering the existence of a large interior chamber¹².

While we cannot usefully comment on the discrepancy between the account of Gobin and that of du Puigaudeau and Sénones, it is worth stating that

Gobin does not give the locations of the four similar monuments, of which Bir um Garn is only one, excavated by himself, beyond saying that they are in the Zemmour. We may, however, surmise that one of these may be that near the airfield at Guelta



Zemmour, some 90 km distant from Bir um Garn, on which we have elsewhere commented¹³ (fig. 2).

Dimensions are comparable, we detected two interior chambers and there is a small menhir before the doorway, as at Bir um Garn¹⁴. At this stage we should also like to suggest a possible tendency towards a menhir—or menhirs—before the entrance of tombs with non-cruciform or otherwise complex chambers. Camps cites obelisks, always set to the east, in the Fezzan¹⁵.

A further complication is the apparent non-publication of a note written by Gobin in January 1933, covering tombs near the frontier of Libya and allegedly forwarded to the «laboratoire d'Anthropologie du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle» by Professor Lacroix¹⁶. We thank Professor Th. Mo-

⁴ G. CAMPS: *op. l.*, p. 510.

⁵ Cf. G. CAMPS: *Aux origines de la Berbérie*. Monuments et rites funéraires protohistoriques, Paris, 1961, p. 185.

⁶ SGT. CHEF. GOBIN: *Notes sur les vestiges des tombes du Zemmour*, Bull. du Com. d'Etud. hist. de l'A.O.F., 1937, pp. 142-146.

⁷ O. DU PUIGAUDEAU ET M. SÉNONES: *Le cimetière de Bir um Garn*, Journ. de la Soc. des African, tome XVII, 1947, pp. 51-56.

⁸ See DU PUIGAUDEAU ET SÉNONES: *op. l.*, p. 56.

⁹ See GOBIN: *op. l.*, Croquis No. 1 and pp. 145-146.

¹⁰ H. NOWAK: *Steinsetzungen im südlichen Río de*

Oro, Spanische Sahara, Almogaren, II, Graz, pp. 47-65, p. 61.

¹¹ G. CAMPS: 1974, *op. l.*, p. 511.

¹² G. CAMPS: 1961, *op. l.*, p. 185.

¹³ M. MILBURN: *Some Stone Monuments of Spanish Sahara*, Mauritania and the extreme south of Morocco, Journ. de la Soc. des African, tome XLIV, 1974, pp. 99-111, p. 100.

¹⁴ DU PUIGAUDEAU ET SÉNONES: *op. l.*, p. 52.

¹⁵ G. CAMPS: *Du nouveau sur l'archéologie du Fezzan*, Trav. de l'Institut de Recherches Sahar., tome XIII, pp. 189-198.

¹⁶ See GOBIN: *op. l.*, p. 142. P. LAFORGUE: *Tombes anciennes du Sahara occidental* (Mauritanie), Bull. du Com. d'Etud. hist. de l'A.O.F., 1936, pp. 188-189.

nod and Monsieur Guy de Beauchêne for trying to trace this note.

A study of Gobin's «Croquis No. 1» and of du Puigauveau and Sénones' fig. 2, along with photographs taken by ourselves at Bir um Garn in December 1973, indicate clearly the same easily-recognizable hill close to the site, dispelling any doubts which might hitherto exist, as to whether Gobin visited it.

with offshoots in Hank and Dhar Titchitt. It would be useful to know the exact locations of some of the monuments mentioned, also to learn something of the internal aspects of others reported by Spruytte and Vincent-Cuaz, who did not excavate, in the Khatt Atoui¹⁹. In this latter zone we saw, also in 1973, apparently 1,5 km north-west (estimated position) of Agada, a squarish edifice with sides about 5 metres long and 1 metre high. Very much obscu-



In 1948 Monod commented¹⁷ to the effect that rectangular tombs with interior chambers appeared rare, having compiled in 1937 a list of those then known to him¹⁸. From his remarks one detects a zone of dispersion apparently stretching from some 30 km north of Akjoujt through Idjil and right up through Western Hank and Zemmour,

red by drifting sand, the apparent front wall was orientated north-north-east to south-south-west. Four paces in front was a circular stone pile, 30 cm high at the centre, and 80 cm in diameter: 1 metre to north-east from the edge of this pile was a small menhir 1 metre high, with a second menhir to south-west of the pile, 1 metre from it and 80 cm

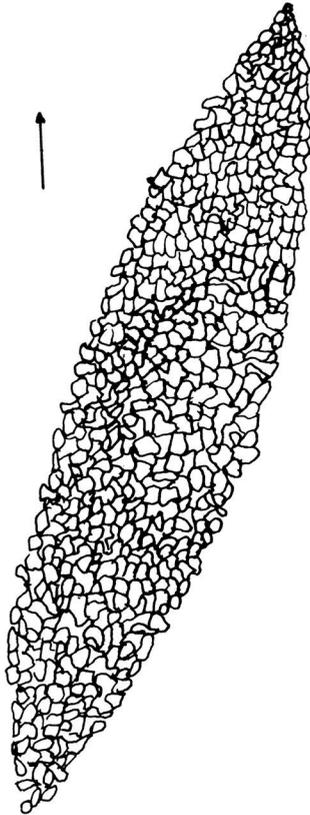
¹⁷ TH. MONOD: *Sur quelques monuments lithiques du Sahara occidental*, Act. y Mem. de la Soc. Esp. de Antrop. Etnog. y Prehist, tomo XXIII, cuad. 1-4, Madrid, 1948, 12-35.

¹⁸ J. CHAPPELLE ET TH. MONOD: *Notes sur la grande*

sépulture d'El Mreiti (Mauritanie), Bull. du Com. d'Etud. hist. de l'A.O.F., 1937 (1938), pp. 507-521.

¹⁹ J. SPRUYTTE ET L. VINCENT-CUAZ: *Note sur les monuments funéraires préislamiques du Nord Khat Atoui (Mauritanie)*, Bull. liais. sahar., no. 24, 1956, pp. 145-155.

high. Spruytte and Vincent-Cuaz have mentioned local square tombs with an entrance, whose orientation is unstated, with menhirs forming an alleyway in front.



Turning now to those monuments known as «fusiformes» in French, (fig. 3) of which we have personally seen very few, the most interesting was at Tit, not far from Abalessa, set to east of the main north-south track and close to a number of small stone towers that we are inclined to attribute to Touareg builders, without knowing whether the «fusiforme» may be contemporary. Some 26 paces long, tumular, with flat paved «arms», it is orientated 355°-175°. The central tumulus is 7 paces diameter.

²⁰ M. MILBURN: *op. l.*, 1974, p. 109.

²¹ J. MERCER: *The Spanish Sahara*, London, 1976, p. 67.

No crescents were observed close by, although we have noted a fusiforme allied to a crescent south of Atar ²⁰, with lone fusiformes near the track from Assa (Morocco) towards Tuizgi Remz and also close to the well at Amgli el Bgar, north of Bir Moghreïn (= Bir um Garn). Both these latter were of the type which rises gradually in height, from the tips of the «arms», until reaching maximum height at the centre. A recent excavation of a neolithic crescentic tomb in Mauritania is also cited by Mercer: such a tomb dug by a French schoolmaster at Cape Blanc had a small entrance leading into a corbelled domed chamber; a crouched skeleton lay on the ground ²¹.

In the absence of any explanation to the contrary, it seems reasonable to suppose, from the shape alone, that fusiformes may be connected with a tradition of a journey by ship to the after-life ²². Such a practice would certainly not infer that the builders were immigrants recently arrived, nor that they were a sea-going people, even though there are increasing grounds for supposing a least a connection, in terms of burial practices, between points as far apart as Central Sahara and certain north European islands.

Returning at length to the tomb of Tin Hinan, we propose to include the statement by Toy, on which the writer feels unable to comment, but which may prove worth examining in future, to the effect that the tomb is reputed to be of similar architecture to some found in Tibesti ²³. One can feel only deep admiration for the way in which Camps describes varying hitherto unnoticed aspects, enabling him to conclude finally the existence of a building that combines characteristics of the «monument à chapelle ou à chambres», like those of Tafilalet and Mauritania, with those of a «monument à déambulatoire complexe», similar to certain Djedars of the region of Tiaret.

Perhaps so expert an examination of remaining evidence, as well as of past opinions, may serve in future as a pattern for the re-appraisal of conclusions respecting a number of Saharan and other constructions, which may in the past have been hasty, if not actually erroneous.

²² L. V. GRINSELL: *Barrow, Pyramid and Tomb*, London, 1975, pp. 80-87.

²³ B. TOY: *The Way of the Chariots*, London, 1964, p. 114.