

# Face Menhirs

& Megalithic Tombs in Corsica





This island has a rich neolithic history like many of the Mediterranean islands including those closer such as Sardinia, Malta and the Balears. In this article we want to give you a first overview of the many impressive megalithic statues or menhirs you can see scattered over Corsica.

You can see a wide variety of carved stelae such as alone standing monolith. Some are left more or less natural and others are skillfully sculptured into human figures. And finally, there are monolith erected in lines to form significant cult sites.

#### ***Development Phases***

At first small monolith about one meter high and without any carvings were put up. In a second step stelae with schematic human shapes were carved. In the third phase our ancestors became more skillful and created naturalistic looking statues with heads and bodies.

The fourth period brought about the first face statues in the southern part of the island. Later during the beginning of the Bronze Age weapons were added. And finally in the north slimmer stelae appeared with face but without weapons.

#### ***Numerous Monoliths***

Corsica has the most menhir type statue

stones with sculptured faces in the neolithic world. In total there are eighty-four face monolith, which you find all over the island even in the mountains up to an altitude of 1,000 meters. Were they gods, shamans or warriors and clan leaders? Research results indicate that they have a strong funeral context.

#### ***Grosjean Excavations & Theory***

This French archaeologist was the most active researcher with regards to Corsica menhirs. In the 1950 ties he excavated the largest and most important site Filitosa. He spent over fifteen years on this subject and put Corsica on the neolithic map. His theory of invading warriors who submitted local inhabitants 4,000 years ago and destroyed the Filitosa cult site came recently more into question.

Recent research with newer technologies came to different conclusions. The menhirs were erected about thousand years earlier and this we have reflected in this article. Nevertheless these invaders were the builders of the numerous towers on the island.

#### ***Menhir Types & Locations***

Simple unhewn menhirs are found on the island at three locations in Capu di Locu, Pieve and Pietro di Tenda. They represent

a minority of all monolith on the island. The so-called statue stones were carved with a human faces plus other attributes and are typical for Corsica. These were erected at numerous sites such as Filitosa, Isola, Santa Naria, Valle, Torre, Capula, Castaldu, Tavera, Nuvaella, Nativu, Calenca, Rinicciu, Sagone and Cambia.

But the most interesting sites are those with various menhirs positioned in lines like at Apazzu, Palagghiu, Stantare, Rinaiu, Pacciunituli and Pinza a Verghine. In total there are twenty-five sites with one or more lines of menhirs. They are all situated in the southern part of the island.

#### *Famous Menhir Lines*

The most impressive and complex menhir site in the whole Mediterranean region is Palagghiu near Sartene with over 250 statue stones erected in seven lines. In Stantare for example a total of fourteen monolith were lined up. Another monolith line was erected at Pinzau a Verghine.

#### *Important Filitosa Site*

It is situated close to Sollacaro on the west coast near the river Tavano as well as the neolithic settlements of Basi and Calanche. In the vicinity the ancient fortifications of Cuntorba and Calzola-Castellucciu were built. Our ancestors have erected numerous menhirs in this sacred place, which seemed to have been the most important ritual cult site on the is-

land for them.

#### *Filitosa Today*

The menhirs today stand erected in a half circle. But we do not know if this was also the initial layout. Unfortunately, they were broken intentionally already about 3,000 years ago. The reason for this destructive act is unknown. But following the Grosjean theory this was done by invading warrior tribes who arrived by sea. It falls into the same period when Egypt was invaded by the so-called sea people.

#### *Moving of Menhirs*

Unfortunately, many menhirs were moved over time and even used as building material. As they have been taken out of their initial erection sites and prehistorical context, it is difficult to establish their precise purpose and dating. Some statues were moved to museums such as in Sartene.

Two menhirs were even integrated in the outside church wall of Santa Appiano de





**Sagone.** Possibly this was done as an indication, that the church is stronger than heathenistic idols. Some were also found in private homes. How many were sold to collectors and left the island is unknown.

#### ***Menhir Details***

Most menhirs were made of granite, which is the main stone type found all over Corsica. Its mountains consist to eighty percent of granite. Just five stelae were hewn out of schist, lime and sand stone. The average size of statue stones ranges from two to three meters in height.

They are smaller than those in the menhir rich region of Bretagne in France, but they are of the same size than those in the Evora region of Portugal. The latter are the oldest examples in Europe with an age of 8,000 years. That is about two thousand years older than those in Corsica. The Santa Naria statue is with four meters the tallest in Corsica.

#### ***Typical Features***

The islands neolithic monolith are known for their multitude of individual faces. They seem to have distinctive and very expressive facial features with different forms of eyes, mouth, noses, chin and even ears. Some stones are skillfully carved with round heads, necks, shoulders and body.

Various experts believe they were made to represent the deceased. It surprised archaeologists to find rests of red hematite coloring on some stones. This suggests they were painted too.

#### ***Engraved Backs***

Even the back sides of statues were decorated with engraved horizontal or curved lines which might indicate rip bows. A central vertical line possibly shows the vertebrae. In one of the pictures, you can see a rather special shoulder feature, which some experts interpret as hard leather pads worn by warriors as protective gear.





### ***Menhirs with Weapons***

Only in the southern part of the island statues with engraved arms were erected. What is the reason for this distinction? Experts believe it has to do with the living conditions. The south was fertile and here farmers had to defend their territories.

And then there is the invader theory we pointed out before. In the north settlers were pastoral shepherds and poorer. A landscape with little interest for newcomers. The weapons engraved on monolith were swords and daggers. Some swords are over one meter long. Similar stelae



we have seen on the Arabian Peninsula. Please see comparative pictures in this article.

### ***Additional Items***

Some statues show additional features such as helmets and protective gear fixed with leather straps and belts. Even a loin cloth was proposed by one expert.

But the most extraordinary item seems to be a pair of bull horns fixed to deep holes on both sides of helmet carrying warrior statue stones. There is no similar discovery in the megalithic menhir universe. Yes, some were possibly adorned with real



necklaces but there is no proof thereof.

### *Dating of Menhirs*

The first megalithic stelae were erected about 6,000 years ago and the last about 3,000 years later. That time span includes around 100 generations and the work and look of those statue stones changed with different rituals over time.

Statues with faces became common about 3,800 years ago. And engraved weapons indicate clearly these menhirs were created with the start of the Bronze Age.

### *Place of Erection*

In neolithic time the place of megalithic structures always had a special importance. But not really here. Because monoliths were not found at important locations for example connected to water like springs, rivers, or at the coast like in other parts of the neolithic world.

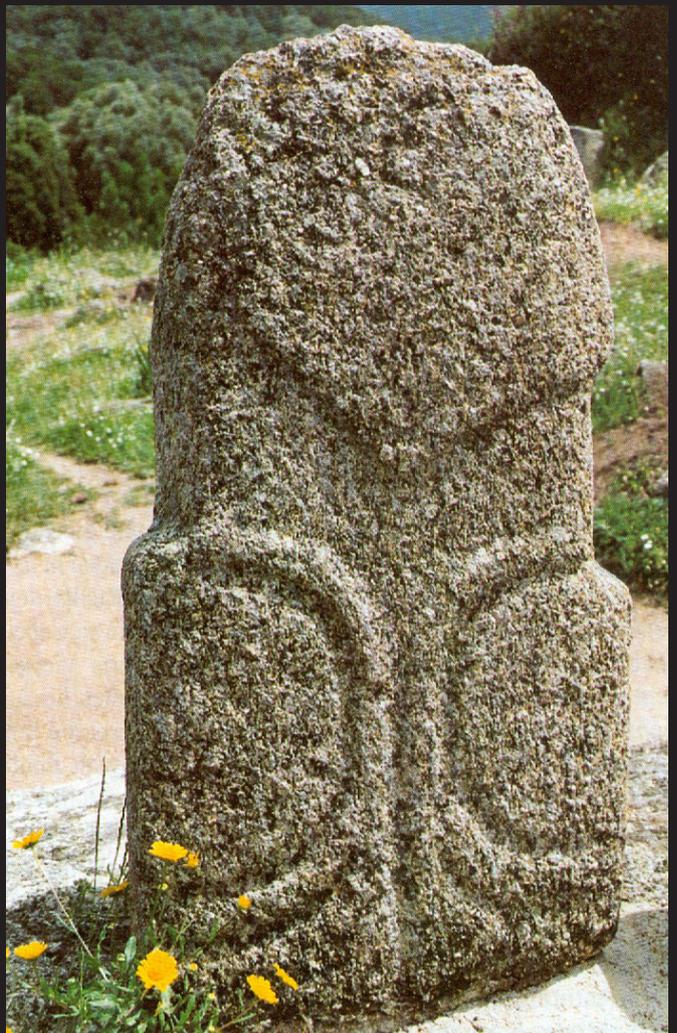
Nor were they placed on top of mountains, near passes or viewpoints. In Corsica they were erected close to ancient routes and near burial grounds. Were they territorial markers? Experts believe their main purpose was twofold for ancestral and funeral rituals.

### *Burial Connection*

Menhirs were representing important deceased leaders or warriors and served as ceremonial cult site for family and clan members. Good examples are the statues of Capo di Locu near Belvedere Campomoro where a stone box grave was found plus further menhirs. This highland site was most definitely an important cult place. Near the Palagghiu line of monolith a megalithic tomb is situated. The connection is clear.

### *Cauria Complex*

This is another excellent example of funeral importance. The two lines of statues at Stantare and Rinaiu are close to the dolmen tomb of Fontanaccia. The lines



are exactly orientated to the east and the rising sun at Stantare falls first on the faces of these stelae. The line here includes two of the special statues with deep holes on the side for fixing bull horns to their heads. This might be part of the warrior gear or might even indicate a deity as this divine animal is often representing gods on earth.

### *Only Female Statue*

At Castaldu near Ciamannacce in the central mountain area the only statue with female features was found. Unfortunately, its head was broken off and is missing. What intrigues experts this statue is armed with a sword and crossing straps on the upper body. That raises the question if female fighters also existed at the time in Corsica.

### *Megalithic Developments*

The first burials in Corsica were placed in caves about 6,000 years ago. A thousand years later this funeral practice was given up for unknown reasons. Possibly religious beliefs changed and new rituals came into use. Invading new tribes on the island might also have brought about changes.

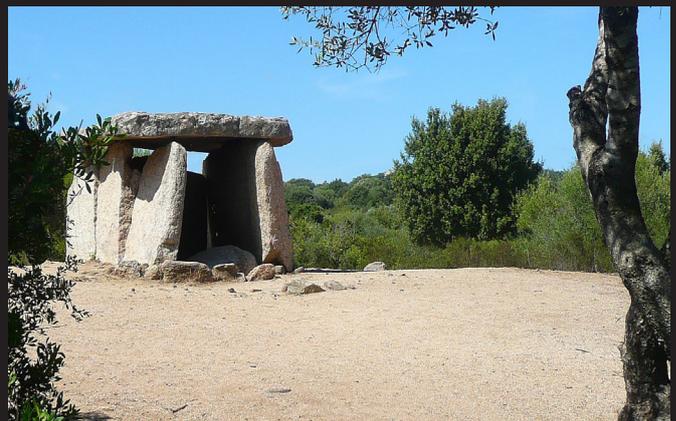
### *Stone Box Graves*

About 5,000 years ago our ancestors changed their funeral practices and started to use stone box graves. These were erected with flat stone plates in a box shape about three meters long. The first stone boxes were dug in two meters deep, but later this effort was given up and the top plates were placed even with the ground level.

In the southern part of the island two funeral areas with fifteen stone box graves each were discovered. Interestingly the first menhirs were placed within the box grave at the top end like grave markers. Later they were erected in proximity.

### *Dolmen Graves*

The first megalithic dolmen graves came



into use in Corsica around 4,500 years ago. We have seen many of this type of burial structures in various countries. They really are very similar in form and size. And they are rather simple built but nevertheless impressive structures through their massive top stones.

In Corsica there are over one hundred dolmens most situated in the south, of which half are still in situ. But why did our ancestors use this rather odd form of funeral structure? It took them many efforts and lots of man power to erect them. Some stones weighted more than a few tons.

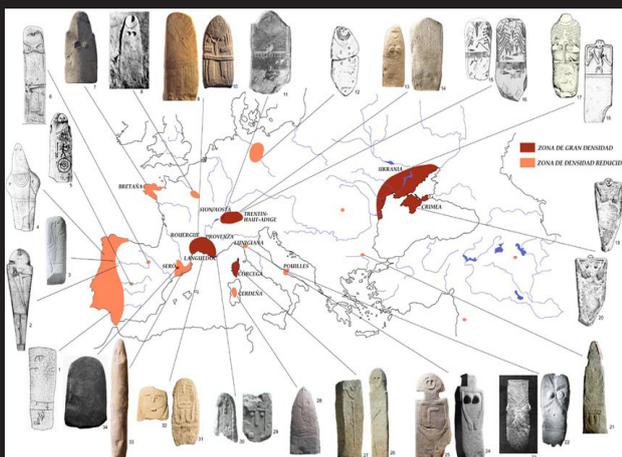
Were all dolmens covered with earth? And were the huge flat top stones possibly used as cremation platform? As Corsica is an island, we can assume with certainty that this funeral structure was imported. For comparison, please see pictures from very similar dolmens in Portugal.

We hope to compare the megalithic structures in Sardinia soon with Corsica and see if any close connection in ancient cultures existed. But a first glimpse has shown interesting similarities as you can see from the pictures on the following page from Portugal and Saudi Arabia.



*Picture Credits*

*We thank the local authorities, museums and photographers to make available some of their pictures and graphs.*





**These comparative pictures show very well the similarities of monoliths across Europe. The pictures above are from Saudi Arabia and the pictures below from Portugal.**

