

# OUR MEGALITHIC PAST

## Astonishing stone circles

by Thomas Kummert  
[www.ancient-cultures.info](http://www.ancient-cultures.info)  
[www.paleolithic-neolithic.com](http://www.paleolithic-neolithic.com)



### **Our Megalithic Past**

The first question which immediately came to my mind, when I saw these astonishing monolithic granite structures, was “Who on earth built these enormous circles with hundred or more huge stone pillars”? Sure it must have been our ancestors thousands of years ago! But when exactly did they do that and how did they achieve this enormous effort? It must have taken a lot of stone masonry skills, many strong men and a long time to prepare these

massive rocks, transport and erect them. But for what purpose did they take all the trouble to construct such an impressive megalithic monument? This article will shed some light on these and more questions. It will discuss a few interesting theories and conclusions about our ancestors and their astonishing activities during the Neolithic Period some 7,000 years ago.



*Almendres circle with over 100 menhirs*

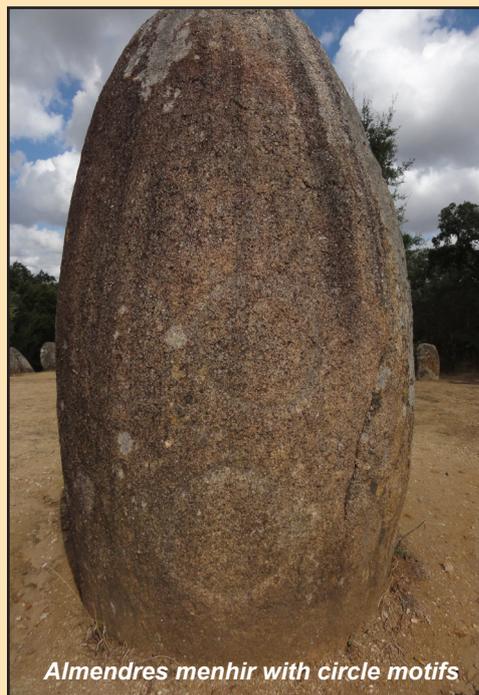
### The Big Picture

*Homo neanderthalensis* had died out by 25,000 BC and *homo sapiens* was now the only surviving human species. With the so-called “Neolithic Revolution” around 9,000 BC everything changed. It was not an uprising, but a technological revolution after men used stone tools for more than two million years. The hunter-gatherer societies settled down, built houses and started farming. Certain plants were domesticated as well as the most useful animals. Men also learnt to build boats, women started weaving and pottery production was already wide spread. With those pottery kilns our ancestors were able to increase temperature to smelt their first copper. This all happened in the “Fertile Crescent” in the Near East and farming had spread from there to Europe by 5,000 BC. It is no surprise that the megalithic structures, we are looking at, were erected during that time.

### Evora Area

Situated approximately 140 km southeast of Lisbon. This area was inhabited in Prehistoric times, because of its important water resources feeding three rivers: Tejo, Sado and Guadiana. Men always lived and hunted animals close to water. Here

semi nomadic groups became more agro-pastoral communities and finally settled in the area permanently. Animal domestication and herding now played a dominant role, as did domestication of plants and subsequent farming. This is evident through the many milling stones found. Producing ceramics and polished stones was a further development. At that time our ancestors started the first construction of megalithic stone circles for ritual cult and social assembly purposes. Portuguese archaeologists also use the Welsh word “cromlech” for these megalithic circles. They are reflecting the profound ideological changes brought about by these hunter-gatherer societies.



*Almendres menhir with circle motifs*

Phenomenal and therefore unique in Europe is the high density of these sites in really close proximity to each other in the Evora area. These structures were built 4,000 years earlier than the most famous circle at Stonehenge in England. It all started here in modern day Portugal, because these megalithic circles were built between 6,000-4,000 BC. So they are the oldest orthostatic monolithic circles erected in Europe.

The area has more than ten large circles, over 800 dolmens and around 450 megalithic villages. In addition, there are more than 100 single menhirs some rather large ones too. What about Neolithic rock art, which normally is found in these contexts too? Yes, an extraordinary rock engraving sanctuary was found nearby, which unfortunately has been flooded by the Alqueva Dam. But in a separate article I will cover the multiple and much older rock engravings along the Coa River in the Duro region in northern Portugal.

A surprise is, that also a few *tholoi* tombs were discovered in the region. *Tholoi* are beehive shaped tombs, which were very common in the Near East and on the Arabian Peninsula. I have seen them at Jebel Hafit on the Emirati Oman border, but they were also found at the little known site Umm an Nar in Abu Dhabi and at famous Tell Halaf in Syria on the border with Turkey. But we will cover the intriguing subject of megalithic burials later on in this article.

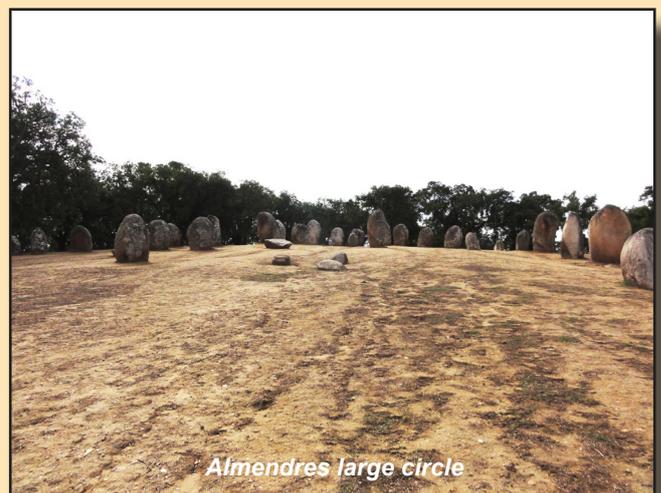
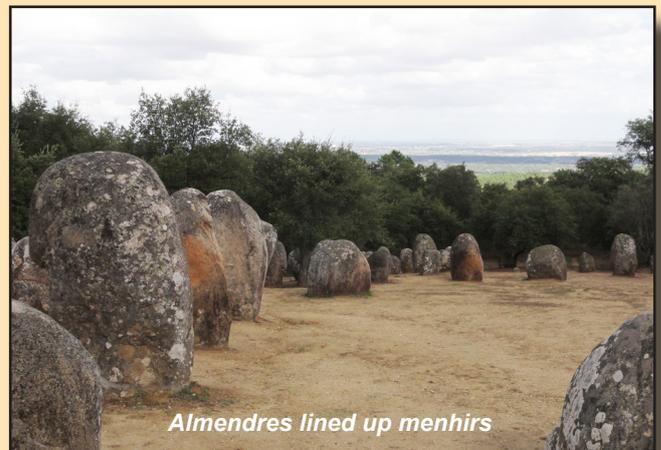
### What is a Cromlech?

They are circular megalithic stone structures erected of numerous single standing or orthostatic menhirs built in carefully selected locations, mainly on slopes close to hill tops with good views. Their precise reason is still uncertain, but they are assumed to be multi-purpose sites for ritual, social, astrological or fertility cult. In Europe these circles can be square, rectangular, linear or circular. In the Evora area they are all circular or elliptical, except Xerez, which is square. Some sites are constructed with a double row of granite menhirs and various sites have also linear positioned monoliths in their center. Granite is readily available in the Evora area and all menhirs are skillfully sculptured, some even engraved.

It certainly needed a great number of men to finish such a huge project with large monoliths weighing several tons, even if it were done in phases. Just to give an estimate, some of the larger menhirs could weigh around twenty tons and more. The smallest monolith used are between one to three meters high, the tallest is about five meters high. But in France the two biggest menhirs were found with ten meters weighing about 150 tons and even a twenty one meter tall example with 280 tons. The latter was erected in 4,500 BC but willfully pushed over and broken only 500 years later. Is that proof of early hostilities between tribes?

### Interesting Motifs Engraved

The motifs engraved on a few monoliths are quite varied and include crosiers, circles, lunar shapes, wave lines, spirals, symbolic signs like fish hooks and





*Portela do Meio circle with 40 menhirs*



*Large menhirs at Portela do Meio*

even faces. But crosiers are the most common in the Evora area. They are also found on menhirs in Brittany in France. Those decorated with anthropomorphic symbols are actually the first three dimensional representations of a human figure. In this case it can be assumed to be the first personification of a divinity. They are most certainly not the representation of an important tribal chief, as these circles were not burial sites.

**Almendres**

This is the largest megalithic

circle complex in Europe, situated close to the village of Guadelupe. It has two jointed circles, one larger and the other smaller in diameter. Today there are still about 100 menhirs in situ, but in antiquity this impressively large double row circle consisted of over 200 monoliths. Situated on the top slope of a dominant hill facing east, it offers far reaching panoramic views. This ritual cult site was built in three phases and used for over 2,000 years. During the Early Neolithic Period about 5,000 BC the small circle with two or three rows was erected

with small menhirs. Over time or a few hundred years later the larger circle with a double row of larger monoliths was attached on the upwards slope to the small circle. Later around 4,000 BC the smaller circle was changed to a horse shoe shape like an atrium for ritual and cultural purposes.

Of the surviving 100 monoliths four were engraved. No. 48 is decorated with a schematic figure and no. 56 with a face and lunar necklace. Of the other two no. 57 has a composition of thirteen crosiers and no. 58 is engraved



*Portela do Mogos circle in mids of a cork oak forest*



*Portela do Meio site*

with three solar signs typical for the Late Neolithic or start of Chalcolithic Period. This was the time when copper production was a new technology used. The solar signs are related to a new religious cult with a female divinity, the great Mediterranean mother goddess, always depicted with large sun like eyes.

Almendres was also used as a site for social assembly and was linked to astral observations, as well as to fertility cults for better harvests. This proves a single tall menhir, erected close by at Monte dos Almendres. It is positioned exactly at the point of the summer solstice and is engraved in shallow relief with a shepherd's crosier. The phallic shape of some monoliths can be further used as example. More so, as these were in antiquity reshaped to their phallus look. Another interesting fact are the various grinding stones found at the site. These might have been used for ritual thanksgiving purposes or to produce trance producing liquids for dancing ceremonies of shamans.

### **Portela do Meio**

This is another but much smaller cromlech with today 40 granodiorite menhirs erected in elliptical form. The circle is measuring twelve by fifteen meters in east west alignment. Five monoliths in the interior space form a north south axis and include a large centrally positioned menhir. Some of them are decorated with motifs such as crosier shapes and anthropomorphic compositions including a face with half-moon collar. This ritual site was used



*Fertility phallus symbol menhir*

up to 3,000 years until 2,000 BC based on artefacts found in situ. But possibly the site was not permanently used and experienced periods of abandonment.

### **Vale Maria do Meio**

For this circle 30 menhirs were erected in a horse shoe shape again in an east west orientation. The open horse shoe points to the east. One larger monolith was positioned in the center of the circle on the west side. Only two menhirs were engraved at this site. The reliefs show motifs like circles, horse shoes and crosiers. The shepherd's crosier is the most common engraving motif for this early culture. This might be well explained by the agro-pastoral communities living in the area at the time.

### **Portela de Mogos**

This small secluded cromlech site is my favorite. It is not indicated by any sign and I only had its approximate position from a hand drawn map. Sure it lied on private grounds. But by law all owners must make

these historical sites available to the public and some dislike that. So signs become unreadable or disappear at all, gates are closed or aggressive bulls roam the property. In this case I took a chance, climbed the fence and followed what seems to be an overgrown foot pass. And after a few hundred meters in the forest there it was. The scenery in between the trees could not have been more romantic and triggered immediately my imagination of a dancing and singing small Neolithic group.



Portela do Mogos

**Dolmen Burials**

These Neolithic communities also started to build the first megalithic tombs or dolmens at the time. The first simple burials in antiquity are documented already to have taken place around 95,000 BP by *homo neanderthalensis*.

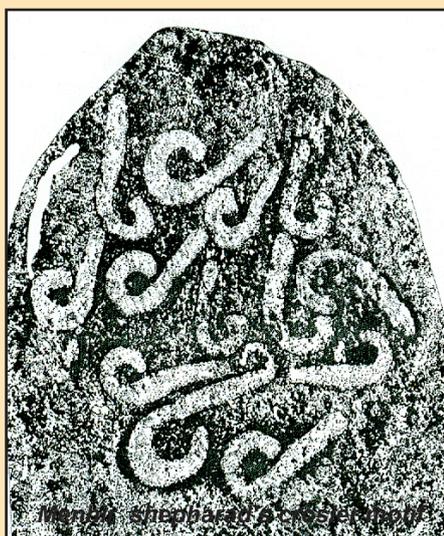
About 30 menhirs were placed in a circle again on a slope close to the small hill top. Certainly these cork oak trees at the time were not there and our ancestors had a fantastic view over the landscape. I imagined with no trees they must have seen the near by cromlech of Vale Maria do Meio. Also here a few monoliths were decorated with various motifs, such as a female face with lunar necklace.

**Xerez**

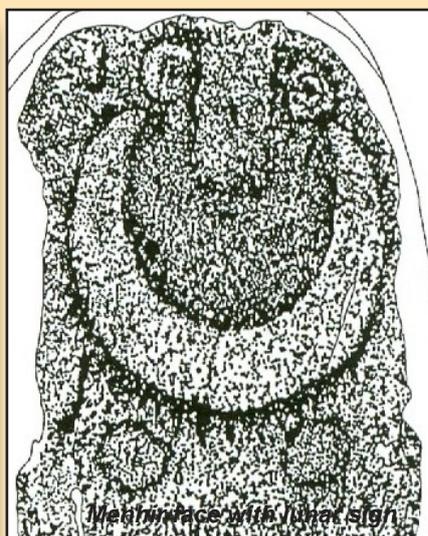
This was the last of the five cromlechs I visited in the area. But it has a sad story with a happy end, very much like Abu

Simbel. The site is situated today close to the beautiful fortified mountain village of Reguengos de Monsaraz next to the Spanish border. Its 50 granite menhirs have been taken from its original site to escape the rising waters of a new dam. This rare cromlech has a square shape and one centrally positioned menhir, which is four meters tall and with only 75 centimeters in diameter it weighs nevertheless around seven tons. The wider area is littered with megalithic tombs and a few taller single menhirs. One the Menhir of Outeiro is nearly six meters tall and shaped like a phallus symbol. Possibly it is representing an agricultural fertility symbol in the open flat fields, where it was positioned in antiquity close to the mountain hide out of Reguengos de Monsaraz.

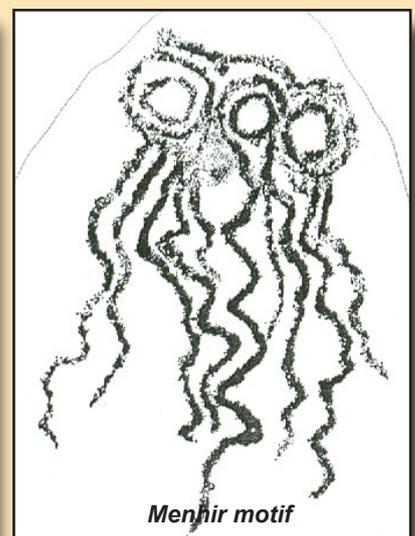
structures only were erected by *homo sapiens* our ancestors around 9,000 BC at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. Corpses were not buried here, but assumed to have been offered to vultures. The Evora area was very busy during Neolithic times, so it is no surprise, that the largest known dolmen was discovered here. As previously mentioned about 800 dolmens, or antas as the Portuguese call them, are documented. A good dozen I was able to visit and investigate. Many others I easily recognized, when traveling at slow pace down the small country roads around Evora. There are certainly many more, as an old farmer indicated to me. He has one on his property, he allowed me to investigate. It was well covered by thick bushes and



Menhir decorated with petroglyphs



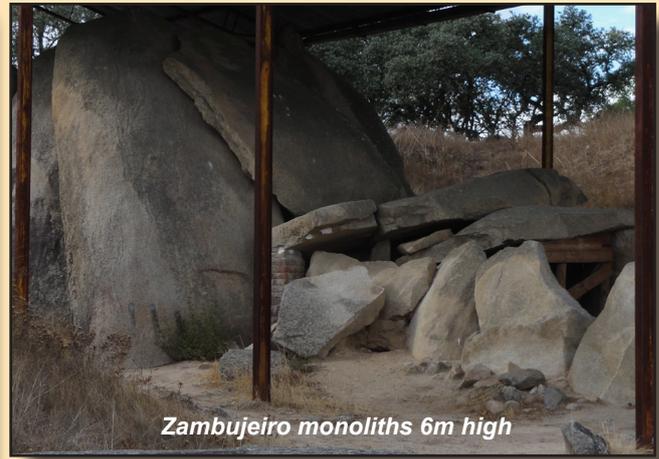
Menhir face with lunar sign



Menhir motif



*Large megalithic dolmen of Zambujeiro*



*Zambujeiro monoliths 6m high*

he was right, this was not a natural outcrop of granite stone.

### **Zambujeiro**

The Anta Grande de Zambujeiro is possibly the tallest dolmen worldwide. But certainly it is the most massive in Europe. Six huge granite vertical positioned monoliths make up the burial chamber. They reach a heights of over six meters. Due to their widths their weight must be phenomenal. And finally they were topped by a single huge stone plate. The whole structure was covered up by mid-sized and smaller stones plus earth to form the typical Neolithic *mamo*. This burial mound was surrounded by a small containment ring wall. This massive dolmen was not erected for a single burial, but served as the community burial chamber.

For recurring burials this burial chamber was entered through a small stone built tunnel, which was covered by a huge monolithic stone plate. How

many burials were placed here is not certain. From excavations at the Anta do Olivial da Pega north of Elvas and east of Evora up to 140 burials dated around 5,500–5,000 BC could be documented. So what happened, when a space problem occurred? It was quite common to push skeletons from earlier burials aside, or to pile up skulls along the walls and remove other bones.

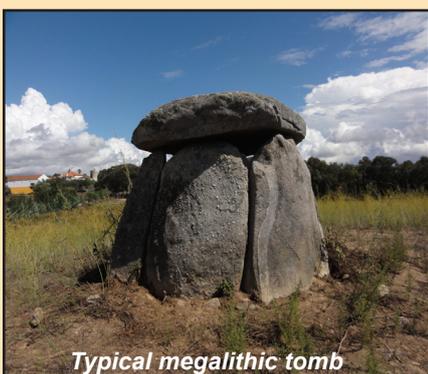
### **Alto de S. Benito**

We have already heard about the existence of 450 megalithic villages in the Evora area. Alto de S. Benito is the largest ancient village and situated on the outskirts of Evora. It is a large natural view point and served as water resource for Evora. An eleven kilometer long aqueduct built by Romans started here and supplied all water needs of the old Roman city. The village was founded around 5,000 BC and inhabited for over 2,000 years. At the end of the Neolithic Period the village was extended southwest to today's village of S.

Caetano and east to the Quinta do Chantre. How many people lived here in antiquity could not be established without doubt. But for Neolithic times it was more than a pure village and closer to an important town possibly with some sort of administrative structure.

### **Megalithic Perspective**

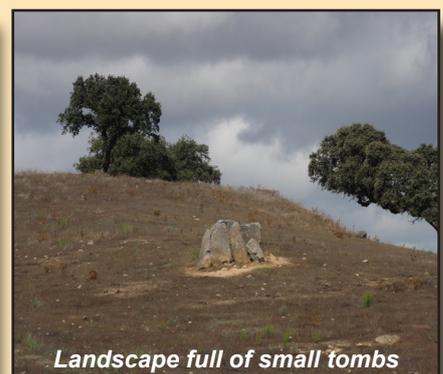
With the existing long distance trade not only goods were transported and exchanged, but also knowledge and new technologies. Some innovations took quite some time like farming, which needed 6,500 years to arrive in Northern Europe. So it is no surprise that megalithic structures started to be erected in England only 2,500 years later than in Portugal. Stonehenge consisted of three or more circles and its pillars were carefully hewn in rectangular flat form. And at least one circle was fitted with roof stones. The astronomical purpose is also proven. So it can be seen as the "Rolls Royce" of megalithic structures.



*Typical megalithic tomb*



*Collective tomb with entrance tunnel*



*Landscape full of small tombs*

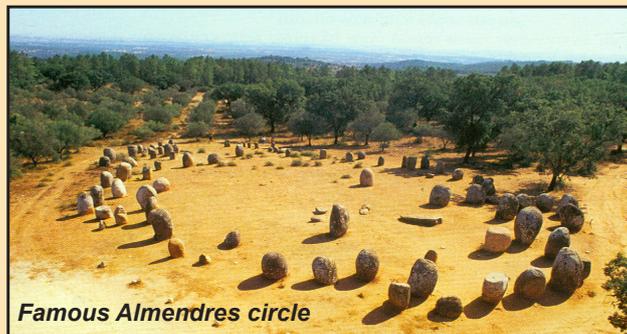


*Xerez rare square cromlech form with central menhir*

As the oldest site of all we can regard Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia, erected 11,000 years ago. This falls into the Pre-Pottery Period. And to what extent did our ancestors went here. The site consists of twenty circles with a diameter of thirty meters. The over 200 huge T shaped pillars weigh forty to fifty tons each. They were carefully sculptured and skillfully decorated with many animals such as: wild boars, jumping foxes, wolves, bulls, lions, gazelle, snake, spiders, frogs, scorpion, bald ibis, ducks and wild plants. In addition there are also some mixed creatures like vultures with headless bodies beneath them. So experts assume, that the site might have been used for ritual and burial purposes. Arms and hands are also depicted on some sides. Therefore it is also assumed, that these pillars might represent stylized humans.

But let us look at the area, where men first settled when he came "Out of Africa". A

very early circle is the 7,000 BC Proto-Canaan built circle of Atlit Yam. It has a horse shoe shape, but unfortunately now lies under water. In the Near East I could only visit one rather interesting site called Rajajil in Northern Saudi Arabia. This cult site is dated around 4,000 BC and consists of various mini groups of stone pillars. At the base of some fire was used possibly for ritual



*Famous Almendres circle*



purposes. Again no burials were found here like at other circles.

### **Conclusion**

Experts had to realize lately, that our Neolithic ancestors were not as primitive, as we previously thought. They were far more sophisticated and talented to master their lives so closely linked to fauna and flora. There is a totally new thinking based on astonishing new archaeological findings all around the world. Yes, we have to re-write our history books with regards to our Paleolithic and Neolithic past. When these megalithic circles were erected about 8,000 years ago, their resourceful creators had invented already most innovative technologies necessary to master their challenging future. The only missing technologies really were iron production and for the fast growing trade over land the logistically so important wheel cart. The latter was possibly the major last Neolithic invention, as nature had no example to learn from. The megalithic circles of Evora are indeed astonishing Neolithic monuments worth visiting and investigating.