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Megaliths as the oldest preserved monuments in Europe

Abstract. This study is devoted to the examination of the megaliths of Europe as an important element of the continent's cultural heritage, with a focus on their historical, religious, and social significance. The aim of the study was to reveal the role of megaliths in the formation of ancient societies and their influence on contemporary cultural identity. During the study, archaeological data on the most famous megalithic complexes, such as Stonehenge in Great Britain, the Carnac stones in France, the Treasury of Atreus in Greece, the Atsanguara megaliths in Georgia, the ancient cemetery of Loughcrew in Ireland, the Talayot in Spain, and the Monte d'Accoddi ziggurat in Italy. The main focus was on the architectural features, functional purpose, and historical context of these structures. The study revealed several key aspects. Megaliths testify to the technical and engineering achievements of ancient societies, demonstrating their ability to organise and implement large construction projects. They provide important information about the social structures, religious practices and livelihoods of ancient peoples. Megaliths were often used as sites for religious rituals and sacrifices. Their location and orientation indicate a connection with solar and lunar cycles, demonstrating the astronomical knowledge of their builders. They also served as tombs for prominent members of the community, emphasising their ritual importance. These structures were also centres of social life, places of gathering and celebration of important events. They helped to strengthen social ties and shape the collective identity of communities. Megaliths reflect the cultural identity and historical memory of nations. They are symbols of national pride and important elements in the formation of national identity. The grandiose stone structures attract numerous tourists, contributing to the development of the local economy and cultural tourism. Visitors from all over the world come to see these unique structures, raising awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage. One of the key challenges is the preservation of megaliths, which face numerous threats, including natural factors and anthropogenic influences. Conservation and restoration efforts are essential to ensure the long-term preservation of these unique monuments

Keywords: archaeology; social structures; cultural heritage; tombs; menhirs; dolmens; cromlechs

INTRODUCTION

Megaliths, huge stone structures, are among the oldest monuments in Europe and are of extraordinary importance for understanding the cultural heritage of the continent. They not only testify to the technical capabilities of ancient societies, but also reflect their social and religious beliefs. Studying megaliths allows to glimpse the world-view of people who lived thousands of years ago and see how they interacted with their environment and with each

other. The relevance of studying megaliths in the context of cultural heritage lies in the fact that they are not only archaeological artefacts, but also important elements of the national identity and historical memory of many European countries.

Many researchers have devoted their work to the study of megaliths, focusing on various aspects of their origin, functions and significance. For example, C. Scarre and

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L. Laporte (2015) investigated the architectural features of megalithic structures, emphasising their diversity and regional differences. They concluded that these structures reflect not only the technical achievements of ancient peoples, but also their ability to organise large groups of people to perform complex tasks. A. Sherratt (2010) examined the emergence of megaliths in the context of the social complexity and ethnic identity of Neolithic societies. The author emphasised that megaliths were important symbols that reflected social structures and hierarchy.

S. Paulsson (2017) focused on the development of megalithic societies, emphasising the changing functions and meanings of megaliths over time. The author noted that these structures not only reflected social changes but also catalysed them. Researcher T. Darvill (2010) examined the materiality of megaliths, analysing the materials and technologies used in their construction. Author emphasised that megaliths were not only objects of worship but also had practical significance as markers of territory and landmarks.

Authors L. Laporte and P. Bueno Ramírez (2022) investigated the origins of megaliths on the Atlantic coast of Europe, highlighting their cultural links with other regions. They expressed the view that megaliths were part of a broader cultural phenomenon that united different peoples. M. Midgley (2010) analysed the cosmological models reflected in megalithic structures. The author noted that these models were important for understanding the worldview of ancient people and their ideas about the universe. C. Renfrew (1983) examined the social archaeology of megalithic monuments, emphasising their role in the formation of social ties and structures. The author concluded that megaliths were important elements of social integration and identity.

C. Scarre (2017) explored the temporal aspects of megaliths, analysing their construction and use over time. The author emphasised that megaliths reflected not only specific historical events, but also ongoing processes of social and cultural change. J. Beck and S. Chrisomalis (2008) studied the interaction of megaliths with the landscape and their significance for pagan beliefs. They noted that megaliths were important elements of sacred landscapes and played a key role in religious practices. Thus, the study of megaliths is extremely important for understanding ancient cultures and their heritage. The work of numerous researchers shows that megaliths were complex and multifunctional structures that reflected the social, religious, and cosmological ideas of ancient societies. Studying these monumental monuments allows to better understand Europe's past and its influence on contemporary cultural identity.

Despite extensive research, many aspects related to megaliths remain poorly understood. In particular, the origin and original purpose of some megalithic structures are still debated among archaeologists. It is unknown how extensive the network of contacts between the regions where megaliths were erected was and how these contacts influenced their architectural features and functions. The social organisation of the ancient societies that built megaliths and the role of these structures in their everyday life are also insufficiently studied. The study analysed literature and archaeological data on megaliths, including such well-known structures as Stonehenge (Green, 1997), the Treasury of Atreus (Como, 2020), Atsanguara (Narimanishvili *et al.*, 2022), Loughcrew (Halpin & Newman, 2006), Talayot

(Osborne, 2014), Monte d'Accoddi (Magli *et al.*, 2011) and the Carnac stones (Cassen *et al.*, 2018). The main focus was on studying the architectural features, functional purpose and historical context of each of these sites.

Data from numerous archaeological excavations and studies published in scientific articles and monographs were collected and systematised. A comparative analysis of megalithic structures, their location and orientation was carried out, which made it possible to identify common features and differences between different regions of Europe. The religious and ritual aspects of megaliths, in particular their use in rituals and ceremonies, were also studied on the basis of ethnographic and mythological sources. Particular attention was paid to the study of the cosmological and astronomical functions of megaliths, in particular their orientation in relation to celestial bodies and natural phenomena. The current state of preservation of megaliths was analysed, taking into account the factors that contribute to their destruction and the measures taken to preserve them. The impact of tourism and public activities on the condition of these monuments was assessed, and efforts to raise public awareness of their significance were examined. Aspects of the cultural heritage of megaliths in modern Europe were also explored, including their place in the formation of national identity and historical memory. An analysis of cultural heritage preservation policies in various European countries was conducted to identify best practices in the preservation and promotion of megalithic monuments.

The aim of this study was to examine the oldest surviving monuments in modern Europe, with a particular focus on megaliths. The study focused on analysing under-researched aspects, such as the ritual and symbolic meanings of megaliths, their connections with the natural environment, and the technological methods used in their construction.

DEFINITION AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MEGALITHS

Megaliths are among the oldest and most impressive archaeological monuments left behind by ancient civilisations. The term "megalith" comes from the Greek words "μέγας" (megas), meaning "large", and "λίθος" (lithos), meaning "stone". Accordingly, megaliths are large stone structures or stones that were usually unworked or minimally worked. They were created during the Neolithic to Bronze Age periods and served various functions, from ritual and religious to astronomical and memorial. There are several main types of megaliths, each with its own characteristics and purpose. The main ones are menhirs, dolmens, cromlechs and megalithic tombs. Menhirs are vertically placed stones, often ranging in height from a few metres to tens of metres. Menhirs can stand alone or be part of larger megalithic complexes. Their purpose remains a subject of debate, but they are often associated with religious or astronomical functions. Dolmens are structures consisting of several vertical stones supporting a horizontally placed stone. Dolmens were usually used as tombs and could be covered with earth to form burial mounds. They often contain burials and various artefacts, indicating their ritual significance. Cairns are complexes of stones arranged in circles or ellipses. The most famous example of a cromlech is Stonehenge in Great Britain. Cromlechs are believed to have had ritual or astronomical functions

related to the celebration of solar and lunar cycles. Megalithic tombs are more complex structures that combine elements of dolmens and menhirs. They could contain several chambers and were used to bury large groups of people or important individuals (García Sanjuán *et al.*, 2020).

The origin of megaliths remains one of the most debated topics in archaeology. There are several theories that attempt to explain why and how these huge stone structures were created. One of the most common theories is that megaliths had a religious and cult purpose. They could have served as places of worship, rituals or sacrificial ceremonies. Menhirs, for example, could symbolise ancestral spirits or gods, while cromlechs could have been used for rituals related to solstices and equinoxes. Some scientists believe that megaliths performed astronomical functions. They could have been a kind of calendar or observatory, helping ancient people to track the movement of celestial bodies. For example, the location of the stones at Stonehenge coincides exactly with the position of the sun on the days of the summer and winter solstices. Another theory is that megaliths served to demonstrate the power and might of certain groups or leaders. The construction of such huge structures required significant resources and coordination, which could indicate a high level of organisation and social hierarchy in the societies that created them. There are also theories that megaliths may have had practical functions. They could have been used as boundary markers or landmarks, to aid navigation, or as meeting places for discussing important community issues (Hauf, 2018).

Megaliths played an important role in the lives of ancient societies, performing several functions at once. They could serve as places of religious rituals, centres of social activity, and symbols of cultural identity. In many cultures, megaliths were associated with death and the afterlife, as evidenced by the presence of burials and artefacts in dolmens and megalithic tombs. The process of creating megaliths was extremely complex and required considerable knowledge and skill. The use of primitive tools to process and move huge stones testifies to the high level of technical skill and organisational abilities of ancient builders. There are several theories about how megaliths were built (Krzemińska *et al.*, 2018). One of the biggest mysteries of megaliths is how ancient people moved such large stones. Researchers believe that wooden rollers, sledges and even waterways were used for this purpose. Others suggest that the stones could have been moved using systems of levers and lifting mechanisms. Although most megaliths consist of unworked or minimally worked stones, some structures have carefully worked surfaces and complex details. This indicates the use of various stoneworking techniques, such as chipping, grinding and drilling. The installation of vertical menhirs and horizontal stones required precise calculations and great physical strength. Ancient builders probably used systems of earth mounds and supporting structures to lift and install the stones in place.

Megaliths have a deep symbolic meaning that reflects the worldview and beliefs of ancient people. They may have symbolised the forces of nature, ancestral spirits or gods. The location and orientation of megaliths are often linked to important astronomical events such as solstices and equinoxes, indicating their importance in marking seasonal cycles. The preservation of megaliths is an

important task for modern archaeologists and historians. Many megalithic monuments have been damaged by natural factors, human activity, and lack of proper care. Modern technologies such as 3D scanning and modelling help to document the condition of megaliths and plan measures for their preservation (Scheib *et al.*, 2019). Research on megaliths also continues, with new discoveries and theories constantly changing the understanding of these ancient structures. Collaboration between archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and other specialists allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the role and significance of megaliths in ancient societies. In conclusion, megaliths are unique and important archaeological sites that provide invaluable information about the lives, beliefs and technologies of ancient people. Studying them allows not only to look into the past, but also to preserve this heritage for future generations, making megaliths an integral part of Europe's cultural and historical memory.

THE MOST FAMOUS MEGALITHS IN EUROPE

Stonehenge is one of the most famous and studied megalithic complexes in the world. It belongs to a type of megalith known as a cromlechs, i.e. a circle or ellipse of upright stones (Fig. 1). Stonehenge is located in Wiltshire, England, about 13 km north of Salisbury. The construction of Stonehenge took place in several stages, beginning around 3100 BC and continuing until 1600 BC. The first stage of construction involved the creation of a large earthwork and ditch surrounding the complex. The main stone structures were erected between 2600 and 2400 BC (Green, 1997).



Figure 1. Stonehenge – one of the most famous megaliths in Great Britain
Source: Uainfo (2023)

Theories regarding the origin and purpose of Stonehenge are diverse and often the subject of debate. One of the main theories suggests that Stonehenge functioned as an astronomical observatory, where solstices and equinoxes were observed. The arrangement of the stones precisely aligns with the position of the sun during the summer and winter solstices, indicating its possible astronomical function. Another theory maintains that Stonehenge served as a site for religious rituals and worship. It is known that burials took place within the complex, which points to its ritual significance. Stonehenge may also have functioned as a centre for social and political gatherings, where important

events and decisions were discussed and celebrated. Despite numerous studies, Stonehenge remains an enigma – its exact purpose and the methods of its construction continue to arouse interest and inspire new hypotheses among scholars.

The Treasury of Atreus – also known as the Tomb of Atreus or the Tomb of Agamemnon – is a remarkable megalithic structure located near the city of Mycenae in Greece (Como, 2020). It belongs to the type of megaliths known as “tholos” or beehive tomb. Tholos are circular tombs with a domed roof, often covered with earth to form mound-like hills (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The Treasury of Atreus in Greece

Source: Wake up media (n.d.)

The Treasury of Atreus was built around the middle of the 13th century BC, during the Mycenaean civilisation. This structure consists of a long, narrow passageway (dromos) leading to a circular burial chamber with a domed ceiling made of large stone blocks. The dome, built using the spoon vault method, was the largest of its kind until the appearance of the Roman Pantheon. The purpose of the Treasury of Atreus was ritual and burial. It served as a

tomb for important figures of the Mycenaean civilisation, possibly kings or prominent military leaders. It is believed that members of the ruling Mycenaean dynasty were buried in this tomb. The structure also served as a repository for the treasures and valuables belonging to the buried individuals, hence its name “treasury”.

In the modern context, the Treasury of Atreus is of great importance to the Greeks as a symbol of their rich historical and cultural heritage. It is an important archaeological monument that attracts numerous tourists and researchers from all over the world. This tomb is a vivid testimony to the technical and engineering achievements of the Mycenaean civilisation, as well as its ritual and burial practices. The Treasury of Atreus also plays an important role in shaping Greece’s national identity and historical memory. It is a symbol of the grandeur and power of the ancient Greek kingdoms, highlighting their contribution to the development of European civilisation. Thanks to its unique architecture and historical significance, the Treasury of Atreus is a source of national pride and an important element of cultural heritage that is preserved and studied for future generations. Thus, the Treasury is not only an archaeological monument but also a living symbol of Greece’s historical and cultural wealth, providing a unique window into the past and reflecting the diversity of ancient Greek civilisation.

The Loughcrew megalithic cemetery, located in County Meath, Ireland, is one of the most significant and ancient megalithic complexes in the country (Fig. 3) (Halpin & Newman, 2006). It belongs to a type of megalith known as burial mounds or chamber tombs. This complex consists of more than 30 separate tombs located on three main hilltops – Carnbane West, Carnbane East, and Carnbane Lough. Loughcrew was built between approximately 3500 and 3300 BC, making it one of the oldest megalithic monuments in Ireland. The complex includes burial mounds with chambers consisting of large vertical stones forming walls and horizontal slabs serving as roofs. The interior walls of many tombs are decorated with carved symbols, including spirals, zigzags and other geometric patterns.



Figure 3. Ancient megalithic cemetery in Ireland, Loughcrew

Source: Heritage Ireland (2023)

The purpose of Loughcrew was likely ritualistic and funerary. The tombs were used for the burial of prominent community members and probably held religious significance. It is thought that these structures served as a site

for rituals connected with death and the afterlife. Furthermore, some researchers believe the orientation and placement of the tombs may have had astronomical significance, linked to the solstices and equinoxes. Loughcrew is in

relatively good condition, although some of the tombs have suffered damage due to natural and human factors. However, thanks to conservation and restoration efforts, many of these structures have been recovered and preserved. The site is actively being researched by archaeologists, who continue to uncover new details about its construction and use. For modern Irish people, this ancient cemetery holds great cultural and historical significance. It is a symbol of their ancient past and a testament to Ireland's rich megalithic heritage. The complex attracts numerous tourists and researchers, which contributes to the preservation and promotion of this important monument. Loughcrew also plays an important role in shaping Ireland's national identity and historical memory. It is a source of pride for local residents and an important element in the study and understanding of the country's ancient history. Due to its archaeological and cultural significance, Loughcrew remains one of the key sites that preserves and transmits the heritage of the ancient Irish to future generations.

The Talayot megaliths, located in the Balearic Islands in Spain, are among the most famous and interesting megalithic monuments in the region (Fig. 4) (Osborne, 2014). These megaliths belong to the tower-like structures, which got their name from the local word "talayot", meaning "tower".



Figure 4. Talayot megaliths on the island of Menorca, Spain

Source: Talayot on Menorca... (2022)

Talayot megaliths are round or oval towers built from large stone blocks without the use of mortar. These structures have massive walls that taper towards the top and can reach several metres in height. Talayot towers usually have one or two floors, with a central column supporting the roof and an entrance at ground level. Some of these structures are surrounded by defensive walls and other auxiliary buildings. The Talayots were built between approximately 1000 and 600 BC during the Talayotic culture, which flourished on the islands of Mallorca and Menorca. The purpose of these megaliths remains a subject of debate among archaeologists, but there are several main theories.

One theory suggests that the Talayots served a defensive function and were fortifications where the local population could defend themselves against enemy attacks. Another theory suggests that these towers may have been ritual or religious centres where ceremonies and rituals were performed. There is also a hypothesis that the Talayots

could have been used as watchtowers to control the surrounding territory and sea routes. The Talayot megaliths are in varying states of preservation. Many of them are well preserved and continue to stand upright, while others have been destroyed by natural and anthropogenic factors. Some of these monuments have been partially restored and studied by archaeologists, which has provided more information about their construction and use.

These megaliths are of great cultural and historical importance to Spain. They are an important part of the archaeological heritage of the Balearic Islands and testify to the high level of development of the Talayotic culture. These structures attract numerous tourists and researchers, which contributes to increased interest in the history and culture of the region. These structures also play an important role in shaping Spain's national identity and historical memory. They are a symbol of the country's ancient history and an important element in studying and understanding the past. Due to their archaeological and cultural significance, the Talayots remain one of the key sites that preserve and pass on the heritage of the ancient Spanish people to future generations.

Monte d'Accoddi is a unique megalithic ziggurat located on the island of Sardinia in Italy, near the modern city of Sassari (Fig. 5) (Magli *et al.*, 2011). This ziggurat was built between approximately 4000 and 3650 BC, making it one of the oldest megalithic complexes in Europe.



Figure 5. Modern view of the Sardinian ziggurat Monte d'Accoddi in Italy

Source: Sardegna Turismo (2023)

The ziggurat can be classified as a megalith due to the use of large stone blocks in its construction. It consists of a massive platform accessed by a sloping ramp, reminiscent of the design of Mesopotamian ziggurats. The ziggurat is about 5.5 metres high, and the area of its upper platform is approximately 12.5 by 7.2 metres. The ziggurat was created in several stages. The first stage of construction involved the erection of a rectangular platform covered with limestone mortar, giving it the appearance of a white, shining monument. The second stage, which began around 3000 BC, involved the reconstruction and expansion of the platform, giving it the shape of a stepped pyramid. The purpose of Monte d'Accoddi remains a subject of scientific debate. The main theory is that the ziggurat was used as a religious and ritual centre. The remains of sacrificial

altars have been found on the upper platform, indicating that religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed there. Some archaeologists believe that Monte d'Accoddi may also have served as an astronomical observatory from which ancient inhabitants observed celestial bodies.

Monte d'Accoddi is in relatively good condition thanks to restoration and conservation efforts carried out in the second half of the 20th century. Archaeological excavations, which began in 1954, revealed the structure of the ziggurat and restored it to its original appearance. The ziggurat is an important tourist attraction and subject of scientific research, attracting the attention of archaeologists and historians from around the world. This ziggurat is evidence of the ancient civilisation that existed in Sardinia thousands of years ago and its high level of development. Monte d'Accoddi symbolises Italy's rich archaeological heritage and is an important element of national identity, preserved and promoted for future generations.

The Carnac stones are one of the most famous and significant megalithic complexes in the world, located in the Brittany region of north-western France (Cassen *et al.*, 2018). These stones are huge vertically erected monoliths, which belong to the menhir type. The complex includes thousands of stones forming rows, circles and other configurations, located on an area of about 4 square kilometres (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. The mysterious Carnac stones, Brittany, France
Source: Complete France (2023)

There are several theories about the origin and purpose of the Carnac stones. One of the most common theories is that the stones had religious and ritual significance. They may have served as places of worship for gods, ancestral spirits, or natural forces. Another theory suggests that the stones were used for astronomical observations, such as tracking solstices and equinoxes. The Carnac stones were erected between approximately 4500 and 3300 BC, during the Neolithic period. It is believed that they were created in several stages during this period. The process of setting up the stones involved moving and installing huge monoliths, some of which weigh several dozen tonnes. This process required considerable knowledge and technical skills, as well as the coordination of a large number of people.

The Carnac stones can be classified as megaliths due to their large size and method of installation. The menhirs of Carnac vary in height from a few metres to over 6 metres. The stones are arranged in long, straight rows,

forming unique configurations. The most famous of these are the rows of Menec, Kermario, and Kerlescan. The Carnac stones probably had several functions. In addition to their religious and astronomical significance, they may have served as symbols of social and political power. The location of the stones and their configurations may have had a symbolic meaning related to the cosmology and worldview of the ancient inhabitants of Brittany. The Carnac stones are of considerable archaeological and tourist interest. Many of the stones are in relatively good condition, although some have been damaged or moved over the centuries. Thanks to conservation and restoration efforts, many of the stones have been restored and the site is now protected. The Carnac stones are of great cultural and historical importance to the French. They bear witness to the ancient history and heritage of the Brittany region. The complex attracts numerous tourists and researchers, contributing to the preservation and promotion of this unique archaeological site. The Carnac stones are a symbol of national pride and an important element in the study of Neolithic culture in Europe.

THE MEGALITHS OF EUROPE AS CULTURAL HERITAGE OF NATIONS

Megaliths, these huge stone structures located throughout Europe, are unique witnesses to ancient civilisations and are extremely important as part of the continent's cultural heritage. Not only do they reflect the technical capabilities and engineering knowledge of the people of that era, but they also carry profound cultural, religious and social meanings. When considering megaliths as part of cultural heritage, several key aspects can be highlighted that make them extremely important for understanding the history and culture of European nations. They are one of the oldest evidence of human activity on the European continent. They appeared in the Neolithic era, more than 5,000 years ago, and continued to be built until the Bronze Age. These structures represent the material remains of ancient civilisations that existed before the advent of writing and provide invaluable information about the life, beliefs and social structures of these communities (Sánchez-Quinto *et al.*, 2019). Each megalithic complex is a kind of archaeological archive that helps scientists reconstruct images of the past. For example, complexes such as Stonehenge in the United Kingdom, the Carnac stones in France, and the dolmens in Spain allow researchers to study not only the architectural techniques and materials used, but also the social and religious practices of the time. By analysing megaliths, archaeologists can determine how work and life were organised in ancient societies, what rituals and ceremonies were performed, and how these practices influenced the development of these communities (Tejedor Rodriguez, 2018).

Megaliths are often associated with religious and ritual practices. Many are located in places of special significance to ancient cultures, such as hilltops, river valleys, or places with specific astronomical characteristics. Their location and orientation often indicate a connection with solar and lunar cycles, demonstrating the astronomical knowledge of ancient builders. The religious significance of megaliths is also reflected in their use as burial sites and ritual venues. For example, dolmens, which can be found throughout

Europe, often served as tombs for prominent members of the community. Their interiors were decorated with reliefs and drawings depicting religious symbols and scenes related to beliefs about the afterlife (Tejedor Rodriguez, 2018).

In many cultures, megaliths were associated with ancestor worship and the worship of natural forces. They served as sites for sacrifices and ritual ceremonies aimed at ensuring the fertility of the land, protection from evil spirits, or strengthening social bonds within the community. They were also used to mark important events, such as changes in the seasons or harvest cycles. Megaliths are important symbols of cultural identity and historical memory. They reflect not only the physical but also the spiritual heritage of ancient peoples. Their existence testifies to people's desire to leave a mark in time, to engrave their achievements and beliefs in the form of monumental structures. For example, Stonehenge in Great Britain is not only an archaeological site but also a national symbol that inspires pride in the past and contributes to the formation of national identity. Similarly, the Carnac stones in France symbolise the deep historical roots and cultural heritage of the Brittany region. These megaliths have become a place of pilgrimage not only for tourists but also for local residents, who see them as a connection to their ancestors and history (Bumham, 2018).

Megaliths also have great social significance, as they serve as a place for communities to gather and celebrate important events. They create a space where people can come together for rituals, ceremonies and celebrations. This helps to strengthen social bonds and form a collective identity. In many cultures, megaliths were the centre of social life in the community. They were used as places for meetings, discussing important decisions and concluding agreements. Their location in the centre of settlements or in strategically important places testifies to their significance as symbols of social power and influence (Glyn, 1980). In the modern world, megaliths are also of great tourist and economic importance. They attract numerous tourists from all over the world, contributing to the development of the local economy and cultural tourism. Megalithic complexes such as Stonehenge, the Carnac stones or the dolmens of Spain are popular tourist attractions that generate significant income for local communities. Tourism associated with megaliths not only contributes to economic development but also raises public awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage. It stimulates investment in the preservation and restoration of megalithic monuments, helping to preserve these unique structures for future generations (Phillips, 2018).

Despite their historical, cultural and tourist value, megaliths face numerous conservation challenges. Natural factors such as erosion, weathering and vegetation can damage stone structures. Human activities, including urbanisation, agriculture and vandalism, also pose a serious threat to megaliths. Conservation and restoration efforts are essential to ensure the long-term preservation of megaliths. These include scientific research, monitoring the condition of monuments, and involving local communities and international organisations in the conservation process. For example, restoration programmes carried out at Stonehenge and the Carnac Stones demonstrate successful examples

of cooperation between scientists, government and community organisations (Krištuf *et al.*, 2024). Megaliths continue to play an important role in contemporary culture. They are a source of inspiration for artists, writers and musicians, who draw on them for themes for their works. Megaliths also appear in popular culture, including films, books and video games, which contributes to their popularity and cultural significance. In addition, megaliths are used for modern rituals and festivals, demonstrating their enduring symbolic importance. For example, the annual celebrations of the summer and winter solstices at Stonehenge attract thousands of people who seek to connect with ancient traditions (Laporte, 2019). The megaliths of Europe are an extremely important part of the continent's cultural heritage. They reflect the diversity of ancient cultures, their technical achievements, religious beliefs and social structures. Megaliths serve as material evidence of the past, helping to understand the history and development of humanity. The importance of megaliths lies not only in their historical and cultural significance, but also in their ability to bring people together, preserve the memory of the past and inspire the future. Efforts to preserve and promote them are key to ensuring that these unique monuments remain accessible and understandable to future generations. Thus, the megaliths of Europe are not only archaeological sites, but also living symbols of cultural heritage that continue to play an important role in the lives of modern nations (Bahn *et al.*, 2021). They serve as reminders of a shared past and inspire the preservation and celebration of a rich cultural heritage that is an integral part of human identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Research into European megaliths has revealed their exceptional importance as part of the continent's cultural heritage. These ancient structures not only testify to the technical and engineering achievements of ancient societies, but are also deeply integrated into the social, religious and cultural practices of the time. Analysis of megaliths has shown that they played an important role in the lives of ancient Europeans, serving as sites for rituals, social gatherings and even astronomical observations. Built during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, Europe's megaliths are important witnesses to prehistoric times. They reflect an era when societies were just beginning to develop complex social structures and technical skills. Stonehenge in Great Britain, the Carnac stones in France and the numerous dolmens in Spain demonstrate how ancient people were able to organise large communities to carry out complex construction projects. Each megalithic complex provides invaluable information about the construction techniques, social structures, and beliefs of ancient societies.

Megaliths are often associated with religious and ritual practices. Their location and orientation indicate a connection with solar and lunar cycles, suggesting their astronomical significance. Many megaliths were used as burial and ritual sites. Dolmens and burial mounds found throughout Europe served as tombs for prominent individuals, underscoring their religious and social significance. These structures may also have been used for worshipping gods or ancestral spirits, as evidenced by archaeological finds of sacrifices and religious artefacts. The megaliths of

Europe are an extremely important part of the continent's cultural heritage. They reflect the diversity of ancient cultures, their technical achievements, religious beliefs and social structures. Megaliths serve as material evidence of the past, helping to understand the history and development of humanity. The importance of megaliths lies not only in their historical and cultural significance, but also in their ability to bring people together, preserve the memory of the past and inspire the future. Efforts to preserve and promote them are key to ensuring that these unique monuments remain accessible and understandable to future generations. Megaliths continue to play an important role in contemporary culture. They are a source of inspiration for artists, writers and musicians. Megaliths also appear in popular culture, including films, books and video games, which increases their popularity and cultural significance. In addition, megaliths are used for modern rituals and festivals, attracting thousands of people who seek to connect with ancient traditions.

Despite their importance, megaliths face numerous challenges in preservation. Natural factors such as erosion and weathering can damage these structures. Human activities, including urbanisation and vandalism, also pose a serious threat. Conservation and restoration efforts are key to ensuring the long-term preservation of megaliths. Promising areas for further research include the use of modern technologies for detailed analysis of megaliths, study of their astronomical significance, and deeper exploration of the socio-cultural context of their creation.

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Мегаліти, як найдавніші збережені пам'ятки Європи

Анотація. Це дослідження присвячене вивченню мегалітів Європи як важливого елементу культурної спадщини континенту, з акцентом на їхнє історичне, релігійне та соціальне значення. Метою дослідження було розкриття ролі мегалітів у формуванні стародавніх суспільств та їхнього впливу на сучасну культурну ідентичність. У ході дослідження було зібрано та проаналізовано археологічні дані щодо найвідоміших мегалітичних комплексів, таких як Стоунхендж у Великобританії, Карнакські камені у Франції, Скарбніця Атрея в Греції, мегаліти Ацангуара в Грузії, старовинне кладовище Лафкрю в Ірландії, Талайот в Іспанії та зикурат Монте ді Аккодді в Італії. Основна увага була приділена архітектурним особливостям, функціональному призначенню та історичному контексту цих споруд. У результаті дослідження було виявлено кілька ключових аспектів. Мегаліти свідчать про технічні та інженерні досягнення давніх суспільств, демонструючи здатність організовувати та реалізовувати великі будівельні проекти. Вони надають важливу інформацію про соціальні структури, релігійні практики та життєдіяльність стародавніх людей. Мегаліти часто використовувалися як місця релігійних обрядів і жертвоприношень. Їхнє розташування та орієнтація вказують на зв'язок із сонячними і місячними циклами, що свідчить про астрономічні знання їхніх будівельників. Вони також служили гробницями для видатних членів спільноти, що підкреслює їхню ритуальну важливість. Також ці споруди були центрами соціального життя, місцями зібрань та відзначення важливих подій. Вони сприяли зміцненню соціальних зв'язків та формуванню колективної ідентичності спільнот. Мегаліти відображають культурну ідентичність та історичну пам'ять націй. Вони є символами національної гордості та важливими елементами у формуванні національної ідентичності. Грандіозні кам'яні споруди привертають численних туристів, що сприяє розвитку місцевої економіки та культурного туризму. Відвідувачі з усього світу приїжджають, щоб побачити ці унікальні споруди, що підвищує обізнаність про важливість збереження культурної спадщини. Одним із ключових викликів є збереження мегалітів, які стикаються з численними загрозами, включаючи природні фактори та антропогенний вплив. Зусилля з консервації та реставрації є необхідними для забезпечення довгострокової збереженості цих унікальних пам'яток.

Ключові слова: археологія; соціальні структури; культурна спадщина; гробниці; менгіри; дольмени; кромлехи