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THE MENHIRS OF MADAGASCAR.

By A. L. LEWIS.

IN dealing with this subject I must, in the first place, say that I have no personal knowledge of Madagascar, nor of anything nor anyone connected with it. The details I am about to bring before you are mostly taken from two articles by M. F. M. Barthère, of Tananarive, Madagascar, published in the *Bulletins of the Société Préhistorique Française* for 1916 (pp. 58 and 517), but, as these are not much read in this country, it has seemed to me that the facts and the inferences to be drawn from them are of sufficient interest and importance to justify their being retailed here, even at second-hand.

There are, in that part of Madagascar known as the plateau of Emyrne, or Imerina, numerous menhirs, which, however, are of no great antiquity ; according to tradition the first of them to be set up were for the commemoration of successes in war ; afterwards the practice was extended to signalizing the foundation of new villages by the king, then the nobility began to erect stones as thank-offerings to the king for favours conferred by him upon them, and finally the people at large devoted them to the cult of the dead by placing a standing stone at the head of their tombs. From being merely commemorative of some particular act or occurrence these stones have become sacred objects and instruments of a cult which is practised even at the present time, especially by women desiring children, or an easy delivery during child-birth, and who, having rubbed the stone with grease, rub themselves against it. When either men or women desire the curing of an illness, or success in some undertaking, they throw fine gravel at the greasy part of the stone, and, if it sticks there, hope for success, or they try to throw a stone so that it lodges on the narrow top of the menhir ; if after this their wishes are gratified they bestow another coat of grease on the stone.

As I have already said, these particular menhirs are comparatively modern, the oldest of them (Fig. 1, A) having been set up in the sixteenth century by Ralambo, who is said to have been king of the Hovas from 1575 to 1610, or thereabouts, to commemorate the capture of a village from another king ; Ralambo stood by it to thank the chief of the village who had betrayed it to him, and who placed the smaller stone by the side of it, in token of submission to and confidence in his new lord ; after that the village was removed by the inhabitants to a more convenient situation,

and another stone (B) was set up by the king then reigning in commemoration of the new foundation. It will be observed that these stones are not only the oldest, but the smallest, of those described by M. Barthère, being only $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet high.

MADAGASCAR.

FIG. 1.—OUTLINES OF MENHIRS TRACED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. BARTHÈRE.

Another stone (H) was set up by another king in the seventeenth century to perpetuate the remembrance of his coronation; on which occasion he sacrificed at the foot of the menhir seven oxen for the people, one of a specially marked kind for the nobility, and another of a notable description for the royal family, and he also instituted a market on the spot.

The first of the kings who aspired to the government of the whole of Madagascar set up a very peculiarly shaped stone (C), saying that the higher part was for him and the lower part for the people, but that they were united in the same block because he did not wish them to separate themselves from him. This is considered a very sacred stone, and animals are sacrificed there, and their blood sprinkled on both parts of the top of it. The sprinkling of blood on stones was also found by Colonel Forbes Leslie to be practised in India; this might be taken to show some direct connection between the two localities, but I do not think it does so; the idea of

sacrificing animals or birds at places marked by special stones might quite well be evolved independently, and the further idea of smearing the stones with the blood of the sacrifices would follow quite naturally.

Near the same village (Ivato) are two other stones (F and G). M. Barthère thinks that the shape of one of them (F) must have some peculiar signification, but has not been able to discover it; this stone, however, is never oiled, that honour being reserved for the other stone (G), which is 100 metres further north.

These menhirs are all thin slabs, and, out of nine, the orientation of which is given, the broad sides of five face nearly east and west, those of two about north-west and south-east, of one north and south, and of another north-east and south-west.

There are some menhirs of a kind which may only be erected by kings and princes of the blood-royal; these bear in relief figures of a female breast (D and E), and are generally placed by the side of a tomb. Of one of these (D) M. Barthère says that the work is so good that it is clear that if the sculptor had desired to carve the whole human figure he could very well have done so, but that he obviously wished only to represent the breasts; this stone is traditionally attributed to Queen Ramorabé, at about the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the workmanship tends to confirm the tradition. This point about the workmanship is important, because, at first sight, these stones remind us of the rude neolithic carvings found in France, which appear to represent a female figure, and in some of which the breasts are the principal feature. In Sardinia, also, a line of small standing stones has been noted, some members of which have breasts carved upon them and others have not; about the object or origin of these nothing is known, but the French stones have been thought to represent a goddess.

According to the old natives consulted by M. Barthère, the underlying idea of the Madagascar stone breasts is quite different: they are merely a symbol. Milk, the food of the newly-born, supports their life and health, and, as the infant requires health and succour from the breast of its mother, so the adult at the foot of the menhir demands protection and assistance from his ancestor. A simple rubbing of the hand on the stone breasts is sufficient on occasions of no great necessity; but if the request be of greater importance, the applicant must apply his lips to the breast and appear to draw nourishment from it.

The fact that these stones with breasts may only be venerated by members of the family of the dead, who are always of royal or noble blood, causes more power to be attributed to them than to the ordinary menhirs, which are at the service of the people in general; but the latter, desiring to follow the example of their superiors, seek and make use of stones which happen to have natural protuberances resembling breasts. The best specimen of these naturally formed stones is supported on two others, and has eighteen or twenty breasts of different sizes on its under side; these and the upper face of the stone are all kept well greased, and passers-by, after applying the grease, throw little pebbles into a deep and narrow hole between the supporting

stones. The cult of these natural stones, being practised by the people at large, still flourishes, but that of the artificially breasted ones has nearly died out, because the only families entitled to use them are almost extinct.

With regard to some other menhirs, forming alignments on the tops of certain mountains, the belief is that they commemorate the deaths of army officers of a certain rank, or the boundaries of territories as settled by the kings of Emyrna after fortunate campaigns. Concerning these, however, Mr. Sibree (*A Naturalist in Madagascar*, p. 116) says: "Other noticeable objects, when travelling about the central provinces, are tall stones of rough undressed granite, from 8 to 12 feet high, called *Vatolàhy*, or male stones, which have been erected in memory of some bygone worthy, or of some notable event, now forgotten, and which often crown the top of prominent hills. They are also sometimes memorials of those who went away to the wars of olden times, and who never returned to their homes. In these cases a square of small stones—at least three sides of one—is formed as part of the memorial, as a kind of pseudo-tomb; these little enclosures are from 8 to 10 feet square. Some have supposed from the name of these memorials that we have here a relic of phallic worship."

According to M. Barthère, the long sides of the oblong houses of the Hovas before the French occupation were always set north and south, with a door and window at the west: the north-east corner was consecrated to the ancestors, and the north was the most honourable side of the hearth. Mr. Sibree (p. 95) points out that this arrangement of the house enabled it to answer the purpose of a sundial to some extent, certain periods of the day being distinguished by the part of the house or its contents lit up by the sun from time to time.

Dr. Baudouin, commenting upon this part of M. Barthère's communication, says that as Madagascar is in the southern hemisphere, the north there corresponds, from a religious point of view, with the south in neolithic France, which proves that he was right in insisting that the mid-day sun in the first instance played a very considerable rôle, which during the last 9000 years has gradually been forgotten in Europe, but kept up in Madagascar, where the neolithic period lasted at least as lately as our Middle Age; in his view the traditions connecting these stones with the Hova kings are of no value: the stones are of different and distant periods, as shown by their different bearings, and are only statues of the sun already anthropomorphised. Although I think it right to state Dr. Baudouin's views, I may say that as regards the age of these particular monuments I do not agree with them; M. Barthère is living in Madagascar and has been at great pains to get all the information about the stones that can be got from the few old men who have preserved the traditions of their villages, which are entirely forgotten by the modern Hovas. It does not seem to me likely that stones so small as the oldest of those described by M. Barthère would have been preserved for a much greater period than that assigned to them by him.

There are in my opinion two points of particular interest about these menhirs. Firstly, although the special feature of the breasted stones so closely resembles that of some of the French sculptures that at first sight anyone would say that there must have been some connection between them, a consideration of those parts of the French carvings which do not exist on the Madagascar stones shows that the basal motives of the two are entirely different, and that they have been developed quite independently. Secondly, assuming the dates and circumstances assigned to the stones by M. Barthère to be even approximately correct, they present to us the entire history of the birth, life, and death of a cult connected with them, beginning with the setting up by a king of an insignificant looking slab as a mere memorial, its becoming an object of respect, and then of veneration and even of sacrifice, and having supernatural powers attributed to it; this being followed by the setting up of other and larger stones by the people, and by the gradual falling into disuse of some of the smaller stones, because of the dying out of the families to which they belonged, and of the neglect and loss of the traditions concerning them, and all this within three or four centuries, and apparently untouched by any outside influence.

FIG. 2.—OUTLINES TRACED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY DR. SIBREE.

This has struck me as being a noteworthy and suggestive lesson as to what may have happened in other places with regard to some of the rude stone monuments.

The stones we have been dealing with so far appear to belong to the Hovas, the dominant tribe. Another tribe, the Betsileo, according to Mr. Sibree, sets up wooden posts with a kind of shelf on which are placed the skulls of oxen killed at a funeral feast (Fig. 2, c); a more modern erection is a well-shaped standing stone, with a light iron frame round the top, to which are fastened iron horns in place of the genuine articles (D). Another tribe visited by Mr. Sibree—the Tanàlas—had no tombs, but buried their dead in a common pit; the only sign he saw of anything like religious observances in their country was an upright stake, with a number of bamboos arranged round it, forming a cone-shaped erection, in front of which several stones were fixed at which heads of cattle and fowls were thrown as expiatory offerings, and children and other blessings were prayed for; he also saw in that country a long flat stone, supported by several smaller ones, forming a sort of altar used for similar offerings.

Another form of megalithic work was seen by Mr. Sibree at some of the older villages. In one case a round stone about 10 feet in diameter was used as a gate, being rolled by levering to close or open the entrance (A). In another case he saw a gateway with stones from ten to twelve feet high, and megalithic stairs leading up to it (B); this does not seem to have had a rolling stone, so it might just as well be at Grimspound on Dartmoor as in Madagascar; it may indeed have been constructed by the Vazimba, an earlier neolithic people, whose spear-points are said to have been made of baked clay, and who were conquered by the Hovas, who had iron weapons. In Madagascar, then, as well as in Britain and elsewhere, we find megalithic building used in different localities and by different tribes in quite different ways; these gateways are just as megalithic as Stonehenge or Avebury. It is not the construction of dolmens or circles only that constitutes megalithic building, it is the use of large stones without cementing material, and without regard to the manner or object of their use, and this might and probably did occur independently in many different places, for whenever and wherever men took to piling stones together to form a shelter or defence they would find, sooner or later, that the largest stones they could contrive to move and set up were the most useful and permanent; but of course the means of transportation and erection would not be equal in all localities, nor would the ingenuity necessary to make use of them always be forthcoming in equal measure in all places and at all times, so that differences in development would occur naturally.

The introduction of mortar or cement was, I think, the first great step from megalithic to modern architecture, and that might possibly have originated in one place only, and spread therefrom in various directions. Is there, for instance, any evidence of its use in Great Britain before the Roman occupation; or of its use in Ireland until, after the retirement of the Roman power from Britain, a number of

refugees had been driven from it to the sister island by the advent of Teutonic "Kultur" ?¹

I do not know of any such evidence.

Since the above paper was read before the Institute two long and important articles on the "Religion of the Malagaches," by MM. A. and G. Grandidier, have appeared in *L'Anthropologie*, January–April and May–June, 1917, from which it seems that religious sites, customs, and ceremonies vary greatly in different parts of the island. The following are points of special interest:—A low stone table on four pillars, to receive offerings and sacrifices, such as is set up in a house in the north-east corner sacred to the ancestors, may also be found in the open air in all parts of the island except Imerina. In the north of Madagascar a circle of stones where sacrifices are offered is found in the centres of the villages. Stones are only set up in the north-east and centre of the island; a king having been inaugurated at one of them, his successors would be inaugurated at the same, and it would ultimately be said that they reigned by the grace of the stone. In the north and east of the island, menhirs, five and six metres high, commemorate the illustrious or wealthy dead, or an event important to some family; there the people deposit offerings for the manes of their ancestors, and pray to them on serious occasions, but if their prayers are not granted they reproach the stone and beat it; the stones, however, are not divinities, but merely permanent and durable witnesses of events interesting to the nation, or to a family.

¹ "A.D. 492. Ælla and Assa besieged a town called Andreds-cester, and slew all its inhabitants, both small and great, leaving not a single soul alive." *Ethelwerd's Chronicle*, Bohn's edition. The town in question would appear to have been Anderida or Pevensey.