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# CONSOLIDATION, RECONSTRUCTION AND THE INTERPRETATION OF MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS

CHRIS SCARRE

Megalithic monuments are visible and enduring marks upon the landscape. From this it follows that the archaeologist who excavates one cannot simply close the project by backfilling the trenches and returning the site to arable or pasture: the preservation and consolidation of the monument itself must be addressed. This obligation raises major ethical and practical issues, above all as to what form the preservation should take, and how far archaeologists or others are justified in intervening and modifying the extant remains. Then there is the further issue of visitor access. It is generally recognised that archaeologists have a responsibility to convey the results of their researches to the wider audience. It is, after all, on behalf of the public that most of their work is undertaken, and much of it is funded by national or local government institutions. For many kinds of site, archaeologists may discharge their public obligation by explaining (in print or in person) the importance and significance of the work that they have done. Where a visible and enduring monument is concerned, however, the responsibility extends much further, and includes arrangements for public presentation and visitor access.

Presenting a site for the public might sometimes involve no more than its consolidation: making it safe for visitors, and ensuring at the same time that it is capable of withstanding the attention of adults,

adolescents and young children. Megalithic monuments that incorporate carved or painted stones are especially vulnerable to the degradation that is often the inevitable consequence of allowing public access, and such decorated stones are sometimes removed to a museum, leaving perhaps a replica in the place of the original. Yet frequently the desire to accommodate visitor access goes much further than mere consolidation, and involves partial (or more radical) reconstruction of the monument. In this process the megalithic monument becomes an educational device and an advertisement for archaeology as a subject. The presentation of the structures becomes a way of engaging the interest of visitors by making them aware of how these monuments would have looked when first they were built. This objective is frequently combined with the demands of preservation, since preservation can sometimes best be achieved by rebuilding a monument, in particular (in the case of megalithic tombs) by reconstructing the covering mound or cairn.

The aim is a very laudable one, but the process itself is fraught with difficulty. In the first place, to what degree is it ethically correct to reconstruct prehistoric monuments? And secondly, in those instances where reconstruction is decided upon, to what extent can we be sure how a monument did in fact originally appear?

Establishing the original appearance of a prehistoric structure becomes particularly problematic in the case of the mounds that covered Neolithic chambered tombs. Chambered tombs today frequently take the form of bare megalithic skeletons, long since robbed of the mounds or cairns that originally covered them. Where such mounds survive, they are inevitably the most prominent feature, all the more so since the chambers are enclosed and concealed by them. In the majority of cases, however, the covering mounds have been lost, through a mixture of natural erosion and the robbing of material to build field walls or houses, or to repair roads. The romanticised image of a megalithic tomb is of the chamber itself standing bare and isolated. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was fierce debate as to whether such megalithic structures had ever been covered (Fergusson 1872; Lukis 1864). The striking appearance of

the typical megalithic chamber suggested to some early writers that these structures must have been meant to be visible, not hidden away within a cairn. Why else, it was argued, would the builders have chosen to employ such massive and impressive slabs of stone? Others argued that the isolated megalithic chamber is merely the inner core of a monument which has in effect largely vanished with the loss of its covering mound. It is the latter view which prevails today, supported by the growing emphasis in 20th century excavations on the structure of these cairns or mounds. Today, it has become standard practice to devote considerable time and effort to investigating the mounds, where they survive, and as a result we know much more about them than formerly we did; but is that sufficient to enable us to reconstruct them with accuracy and confidence?

## **PENTRE IFAN**

The problem can be highlighted by considering one particular type of megalithic tomb where (despite the prevailing orthodoxy) the nature of the covering mound or cairn is still disputed: the portal dolmens of southwest Britain. The famous Pentre Ifan overlooking Cardigan Bay in Pembrokeshire is an excellent example of this type. The surviving structure consists of a rectangular megalithic chamber formed of a massive capstone resting on three uprights, with a further slab set vertically between the twin pillars of the 'portal' and remains of a curving façade of orthostats to either side (Fig. 2). The romantic setting and the striking appearance of Pentre Ifan have long attracted the attention of visitors. It was the subject of one of the earliest surviving descriptions of a Welsh megalithic monument in George Owen's "Description of Penbrookshire in General" of 1603. A famous lithograph of 1865 shows mounted horsemen sheltering beneath the great capstone.

The impressive character and appearance of the monument led some 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquaries to argue that Pentre Ifan could never have

been covered by a cairn. A key proponent of that view was James Fergusson, who in 1872 maintained that “men do not raise such masses and poise them on their points for the sake of hiding them again... they sought to give dignity and expression by using the largest blocks they could transport or raise – and they were right; for, in spite of their rudeness, they impress us now; but had they buried them in mounds, they neither would have impressed us nor their contemporaries” (Fergusson 1872, 169). Fergusson also observed that the moorland setting of many of these monuments provided further argument against the presence of a cairn; the disappearance of the cairn could not be accounted for in these locations by the destructive effects of agricultural encroachment.

Taking the opposite side in this debate was Longueville Jones, who in the brief account that accompanied the 1865 lithograph of Pentre Ifan noted that some trace of the original cairn might still survive: “Although the covering tumulus has disappeared, and though from the height of the cap-stone above the soil it may be supposed that the very foundations are laid bare, yet it might lead to the discovery of remains, if the soil all around were carefully proved and examined” (Longueville Jones 1865, 285). This view was supported by E.L. Barnwell, who in several articles argued that all the megalithic burial chambers of south Wales, including Pentre Ifan, had originally been enclosed within mounds or cairns (Barnwell 1872, 1874, 1884). The issue had, however, to wait until the 1930s for further clarification. In 1936, Grimes noted that traces of the south-western tip of a cairn were discernable at Pentre Ifan, forming a projecting horn 6 metres (20 feet) long though nowhere more than 15 cms (6 inches) high (Grimes 1948, 5). His excavations of 1936-37 revealed further patches of cairn material behind the chamber, notably on the western side, suggesting that it had an overall length of 39m and was fronted by a deep semicircular forecourt (Grimes 1948, 16). The edge of this cairn (including the horns) had been marked out by a series of small upright stones, represented mainly by their empty sockets, though these extended for only 17 metres along the eastern and

western sides of the cairn and did not appear to enclose the whole of the structure (Grimes 1948, 15).

At the end of his excavations Grimes wrote to the Ministry of Works proposing that the cairn of Pentre Ifan be ‘partly restored’: “A low mound could mark the actual limit [of the cairn], with a steeper rise a few feet from the capstone” (quoted in Turner 1992, 107). The reply from the Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Wales, B.H.St.J. O’Neil, was cautious: “whether or not I should like to replace any of the mound I have not yet decided. We know that there was one, of course, but I think that we should also remember that Pentre Ifan is the most impressive of its kind in Wales and one of the finest in Britain. Are we then justified in the cause of pure science in detracting from its outward impressiveness?” (quoted in Turner 1992, 108).

This brief exchange highlights the problem of authenticity in reconstruction: should one rebuild the structures that excavation brings to light, either to consolidate the remains or to aid public understanding of a monument’s original form? What, indeed, was the original form of the Pentre Ifan cairn? On the evidence of Grimes’ excavations it may be accepted that there had once been such a structure. What is far less certain is that it could ever have entirely covered the megalithic chamber. One possibility, illustrated in a published reconstruction, is that the cairn rose only to the height of the base of the capstone, leaving visible the capstone itself (Fig. 2). An alternative interpretation is that the ‘cairn’ was simply a low platform around the foot of the megalithic chamber (Kinnes 1975, 25; Cummings & Whittle 2004, 74). This proposal is based on the observation that portal dolmens never show remains of a substantial cairn, and that the absence of a substantial cairn cannot be explained away as the result of stone-robbing over the centuries. This is essentially the same argument as that put forward by Fergusson in 1872. If the cairn did not cover the chamber, then the builders must have meant the megalithic chamber, and in particular the massive capstone, to be visible. Only if the capstone had been exposed could the recent suggestion be seriously entertained, that the shape and slope of

the Pentre Ifan capstone was intended to echo the profile of Carn Ingli, a prominent mountain some 4 kms to the west (Tilley 1994, 105). Whether or not we accept such a theory, it would only work if the capstone had been visible.

The 'problem' of Pentre Ifan and the portal dolmens of south-west Britain exists only on paper; there is no current proposal to rebuild these cairns, and so the debate over the form that they took can be left to scholarly conferences and publications. The case becomes less straightforward, however, where such a monument is in danger of decay or collapse. That was what Grimes believed of Pentre Ifan. His argument that the cairn should be rebuilt arose from his concern that the uprights supporting the massive capstone were unstable and required consolidation if the structure were to survive. In the event, such a drastic remedy did not prove necessary, but frequently it is the need to consolidate and preserve that drives the agenda. It leads to reconstruction projects which are undertaken with the best intentions, but which require decisions about the original appearance of mounds and chambers that take us far beyond the evidence of the surviving remains.

Two examples from western France illustrate the kind of dilemmas that can arise when seeking to find a compromise between, on the one hand, the needs of preservation and public presentation, and on the other, the obligation to remain as faithful as possible to the surviving remains.

## **BOUGON**

The megalithic cemetery of Bougon is a cluster of five Neolithic burial mounds located some 35 kms southwest of Poitiers in western France. These mounds were large structures, one of them 80m in length, another of them 60m in diameter, and not surprisingly they attracted the attention of local 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarians. A series of excavations were carried out in the 1840s, and the site was subsequently purchased by the

*département* of Deux-Sèvres in a number of stages between 1874 and 1879 (Mohen & Scarre 2002, 12). The aim of the purchase was both to secure the preservation of the monuments and to open them to visitors, and a custodian was appointed at the very outset. Measures were also taken to consolidate the structures – and especially the entrances to the burial chambers – in order to make them safe for visitors. This work was resumed in the 1970s when new excavations were begun by Jean-Pierre Mohen (1972-1986); these latest excavations were the prelude to a more extensive phase of consolidation which included substantial elements of reconstruction.

Tumulus F provides a good example of the kind of work that was undertaken (Mohen & Scarre 2002, 225-231). Visitors in the early 19th century remarked the exposed capstone that was visible at the northern end of the mound (Chamber F2) and in 1840 three local antiquarians undertook excavations beneath one edge of the slab. They uncovered three of the orthostats of the chamber beneath, and recovered a small quantity of archaeological material. The following year (1841) the local landowner decided he would search for the “treasure” within the chamber himself, but in digging around the bases of the orthostats he caused the massive 32-tonne capstone to collapse. There it remained throughout the rest of the 19th century and into the 20th century. One of the first objectives of the consolidation work of the 1970s was to restore Chamber F2, lifting off the capstone, straightening the orthostats, providing new ones for those that were irreparably crushed, and finally replacing the capstone and building up the whole of this end of the mound, to recreate what was thought to have been its original appearance (Fig. 3). Thus a large part of the present structure, including three whole orthostats on the northern side of the chamber interior, is a 20th century rebuild.

The excavations of the 1970s also explored the long mound stretching southwards behind chamber F2, and revealed the presence of a series of longitudinal internal walls (Mohen & Scarre 2002, 32-34). These were eventually reconstructed to give a stepped profile to the

mound, although there is no conclusive evidence to demonstrate that the internal walls were originally intended to be visible. The stepped interpretation stems primarily from the excavations conducted by Pierre-Roland Giot at Barnenez and Ile Guennoc in the 1950s and 1960s (L'Helgouach 1965; Giot 1987). When Giot began work at Barnenez he was struck by the fact that the inner walls were visible high up the cairn, standing to a greater height than the outer kerb of the monument. As he himself explains, "Such structural features had hitherto been considered part of the internal arrangements hidden within the cairns, evidence of phases and techniques of construction, and playing the role of retaining or supporting walls." The visibility of the inner walls at Barnenez led him instead to propose that it had been a stepped structure, and thus was it reconstructed at the end of his excavations (Giot 1987, 31-32). The model that Giot proposed for Barnenez has since been adopted at a number of other sites, and was the inspiration behind the stepped reconstruction of Tumulus F at Bougon.

The excavation of Tumulus F not only revealed the internal structures of the cairn but also led to discovery of a small circular chamber of dry-stone construction at its southern terminal. This chamber (Chamber F0) was badly degraded and had no trace of a capstone. It was concluded that it had been covered by a corbelled vault. Corbelled vaults are a common feature of Neolithic chambered tombs in Normandy, Brittany and Poitou-Charentes, and there is nothing inherently improbable in that conclusion. Once the excavation of Chamber F0 was completed, reconstruction of the monument was undertaken, and a covering cairn was added. The published excavation diagrams show that the chamber walls were preserved in their original state to a height of only around 1 metre, which means that the greater part of the structure visible today dates from the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD rather than the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Fig. 4). Yet although much of Tumulus F is now effectively modern, the work undertaken at this and other of the Bougon mounds serves to highlight the substantial dimensions and impressive appearance of these Neolithic monuments. Equipped with information boards and an

elaborate site museum, the Bougon cemetery has become an effective educational device.

## **PRISSÉ-LA-CHARRIÈRE**

My second French example is a site that is still under excavation: the Neolithic long mound of Prissé-la-Charrière, situated to the west of Bougon but in the same region of Poitou-Charentes. It is one of a number of large Neolithic long mounds south of the Loire which are comparable in their dimensions to the Carnac mounds of southern Brittany. Prissé-la-Charrière was specifically selected for a major research excavation on the grounds that it had survived substantially intact, though it had not escaped the general processes of decay and had at one stage (probably in the Gallo-Roman period) been quarried for stone to feed a limekiln.

In its final form the long mound of Prissé-la-Charrière measured 100m in length and almost 4m high. It has been dated to the late 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Laporte *et al.* 2002; Scarre *et al.* 2003). The internal structure of the mound consists principally of dry-stone walling with earth and rubble infill, arranged in a pattern of constructional cells. There are also remains of external walls that belong to various phases of the monument, and three collective tombs within it that are built partly or wholly of megalithic slabs.

The same dilemmas of preservation and presentation apply here as at Bougon or Pentre Ifan. As soon as excavations began it became clear that they themselves were provoking decay. Over the period of 6000 years since its abandonment, the long mound of Prissé-la-Charrière had achieved a high degree of stability. It was covered by a protective layer of surface rubble capped by earth and trees. Once this protective layer was removed in order to explore the *in situ* structures beneath, a new cycle of decay was initiated. One long-term solution to arrest this deterioration would be to bury the monument once again and cover it with

turf. That, however, would mean concealing the structures that have been exposed. Although those structures could eventually be re-excavated, they would for the moment be accessible only through the records and publications of the excavation. In the event, another solution was chosen in an effort to reconcile the conflicting demands of preventing further immediate decay yet allowing the excavated structures to remain visible: the upper courses of some of the walls were rebuilt, so that new stonework covers and protects the old. The division between original and rebuilt stonework is marked by a layer of synthetic membrane.

This provides only a temporary solution to the problem of consolidating the long mound of Prissé-la-Charrière. If one moves on to consider the options for a permanent solution a number of additional issues arise. First and foremost we must ask whether indeed there is any clearly defined Neolithic ‘original’ to which we might seek to return. One of the most significant results of the excavations at Prissé-la-Charrière has been the detailed demonstration of the multi-phase nature of the structure. These results show that the monument began as a modest dry-stone rotunda at the western end, though even that had been remodelled at least once (Scarre *et al.* 2003). The rotunda was later enclosed within a ‘short’ long mound encircled by a continuous rock-cut ditch. That in turn was buried beneath one end of the eventual 100-metre long mound. Excavations at the western end have removed most of the later structures to reveal the outer wall and ditch of the ‘short’ long mound, and the rotunda. These are the structures that have been consolidated. Thus the visitor to Prissé-la-Charrière today sees a composite monument which is essentially a selective amalgam of earlier elements and later elements. Among the later elements is a Gallo-Roman limekiln, which has been left in place. What to leave and what to remove, what to consolidate and what to cover up, are choices that must inevitably be made when deciding to consolidate and preserve an excavated structure.

## **CONSOLIDATION, RECONSTRUCTION AND RADICAL RECONSTRUCTION**

The examples of Bougon and Prissé-la-Charrière exemplify different approaches to the conservation of excavated megalithic monuments. Excavation tends both to destabilise the existing structures and to provide fuller evidence of the original shape and size of the covering mound. Faced with the question of what to preserve and how best to do so, the responses of archaeologists, heritage managers and engineers range from simple stabilisation to wholesale reconstruction. Megalithic monuments throughout western Europe illustrate these differing degrees of intervention in the way they have been preserved and presented. In some cases, the work may have been subtle and sensitive, leaving few obvious traces for the visitor but presenting the monument as a consolidated ruin. At the other extreme are wholesale reconstructions which seek to present the monument just as it originally appeared. To explore these alternatives in more detail, three well-known examples will be taken: the chambered cairns of Belas Knap in southern Britain, La Table des Marchand in Brittany and Newgrange in Ireland. In all three cases, the aims were both to stabilise the monument and to allow visitor access. Where they differ is in the extent to which they involved the rebuilding of the monument. These differing degrees of intervention may be labelled ‘consolidation’, ‘reconstruction’, and ‘radical reconstruction’, though in the example chosen here, even the ‘consolidation’ in fact involved a significant element of reconstruction.

### **1. Consolidation: Belas Knap**

Belas Knap in southwest England is a trapezoidal Neolithic long mound of ‘Cotswold-Severn’ type. Monuments of this kind were built within the period 3800-3400 BC and may be divided into two principal variants according to the arrangement of the burial chambers: those

with an axial chamber opening from the middle of the broader end; and those with lateral chambers placed usually symmetrically along the long sides of the mound (Darvill 2004). Belas Knap is an example of the lateral chambered type, but has a 'false door' arrangement between the horns at the wider end.

The Belas Knap that the visitor encounters today is a neat grass-covered dome edged by tidy dry-stone walling (Fig. 5). The walling of the mound is in fact very similar to the field wall that was built around the site in the 1860s. The setting is emphatically rural, not to say bucolic, with woodland and ploughed fields, and the nearest road over half a mile away. The visitor might very easily get the impression that Belas Knap is effectively an intact monument, and that this is how it must originally have looked in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

In reality, the Belas Knap one sees today is essentially a creation of the early 1930s, when extensive consolidation work was undertaken (Berry 1929, 1930). Excavations in the 1860s had left a massive gash across the centre of the mound, between the two principal chambers, and another at right angles extending up to the false portal. The scale of the damage is shown both in 19<sup>th</sup> century lithographs and in early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs. To repair this, and to stabilise the mound, in the early 1930s the government Office of Works back-filled the early trenches. They also consolidated the chambers, replacing the megalithic uprights in their supposed original positions. The passages leading to them were rebuilt in dry-stonework backed by cement, and the chambers themselves were provided with concrete roofs.

This work made it possible to give the restored mound the regular grass-covered form it has today. But that is entirely the result of the 20th century restoration, and bears little relationship to its original Neolithic appearance. We know as much from the record of the excavations that were undertaken in 1929 and 1930, immediately before the consolidation work was begun. Resting against the outer face of the dry-stone wall around the mound was a deposit of flat stone slabs, each of them around 2-3cms thick. At first, the excavators thought that these

had been placed against the outer wall as a kind of revetment, but closer observation led to an entirely different conclusion. The excavators noticed that the slabs had a bevelled and water-worn edge on one or two, or occasionally on three sides; and furthermore that many of them had a white watermark about 3cms from the actual edge, as if they had been laid in overlapping fashion one upon the other. It became obvious that these had been the roofing or covering of the mound (Berry 1930, 129-131). The precise morphology of the roof remains somewhat conjectural, though a ridged form, resembling that of a house, has been proposed for Cotswold-Severn cairns of this type (Corcoran 1969, 78). Such a roof would have given Belas Knap a similar appearance to that recently reconstructed on paper for the neighbouring Cotswold-Severn mound of Hazleton North (Saville 1990; Fig. 5).

The visitor-experience of Belas Knap with a stone slab roof would be entirely different from that of the present turf-covered dome. It would blend less readily with the surrounding countryside, and appear more brutal and less venerable. Yet that is most likely how it originally looked. To assert this is not to criticise what was done. The turf covering established in the 1930s was clearly intended to consolidate the mound rather than to reconstruct its original form, and in that respect it may be judged to have been successful. The outcome is nonetheless misleading for visitors who are unaware of the evidence provided by the excavations.

## **2. Reconstruction: La Table des Marchand**

Belas Knap is an example of the 'first degree', where the primary aim is consolidation. The 'second degree' goes beyond this to engage in a much more overt process of reconstruction. Here the passage grave of La Table des Marchand at Locmariaquer in southern Brittany provides a good example. The contrast between the condition of the monument illustrated in early 19<sup>th</sup> century engravings and at the present day is particularly striking (Fig. 6). Today the megalithic chamber is enclosed within

a neatly-built dry-stone cairn with a gently domed summit. The early illustrations show that by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, little trace remained of the original cairn, nor was it remarked upon in the majority of the early descriptions of the site (e.g. Mahé 1825; Fréminville 1834; Bathurst Deane 1834). Indeed, in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many believed these monuments to be altars built by the Druids and one early account, perhaps with this in mind, describes the capstones of chamber and passage as forming a platform (Fréminville 1834, 24). The most conspicuous feature of La Table des Marchand was the massive chamber capstone, which had a clear break at one end and appeared to be precariously balanced on its three supports. A second focus of interest was the carvings on the inner face of the backstone and on the underside of the capstone.

Prosper Mérimée, who had been appointed *Inspecteur général des monuments historiques* in 1834, visited La Table des Marchand during his tour of inspection the following year. He remarked on evidence suggesting that the passage and chamber had originally stood within an enclosure, though he did not relate this specifically to a cairn: “Autour du dolmen, on distingue une espèce d’enceinte circulaire, assez régulièrement tracée, de pierres entassées, s’élevant à un ou deux pieds du sol. Ont-elles été portées là seulement pour débarrasser les champs voisins? Ou bien sont-ce les substructions d’un mur, élevé à dessein, pour enclorre le dolmen?” (Mérimée 1836 (1989), 124). Blair and Ronalds in 1834 had noted that the chamber orthostats were partially sunken, though they too did not infer a mound (Blair & Ronalds 1836). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the original character of the monument as a megalithic tomb covered by a cairn had come to be generally recognised. The report of the visit by the Cambrian Archaeological Association in 1889 describes it as “partially buried in the mound, which must originally have covered it entirely. The capstones and tops of the supports are to be seen above the ground in consequence of the upper part of the mound having been removed” (*anon.* 1890, 59).

The first attempt to restore La Table des Marchand was undertaken in 1883, shortly after its purchase by the French government. The restor-

ers initially sought only to block the gaps in the chamber walls: several of the original orthostats on the eastern side of the chamber had disappeared, and the gap was closed by dry-stone walling. This walling collapsed in 1892 and was rebuilt on a slightly different line (Closmadeuc 1892). No attempt was made at this stage to reconstruct the covering mound. Half a century later, however, a bolder agenda was set in train. In 1937, under the direction of Zacharie Le Rouzic, a partial reconstruction of the cairn of La Table des Marchand was undertaken along with further consolidation of the passage and chamber. The reconstruction of the cairn raised strong protests from the Société Polymathique du Morbihan, who objected that “Le caractère du monument tel que les siècles l’avaient façonné a été altéré: une grande partie de sa valeur documentaire a été annihilée” (Bouix 1937). In reply, Le Rouzic explained that the restoration work had not been undertaken for artistic reasons but in order to ensure the “conservation du monument et de ses gravures”. He also addressed explicitly the criticism that the reconstruction work had entirely destroyed the appearance of the tumulus. The reconstruction of the cairn, he explained, had been based on the evidence of the circle of material around the chamber. This material represented the remains of the cairn rather than the debris of earlier diggings, as some had maintained. The appearance of the cairn had hence not been damaged by the reconstruction; it had been improved (Le Rouzic 1938).

It was only in 1986-1989 that systematic excavation of the cairn around La Table des Marchand was undertaken (L’Helgouach 1994, 1997). The resulting plan shows the cairn to have been a roughly circular two-part structure with a central core 9m in diameter surrounded by an outer cairn on its northern, eastern and western sides. Despite earlier deprivations, the wall around the inner core was preserved throughout the greater part of its circumference and stood in places to a height of 2 metres. The outer wall by contrast was much less carefully constructed, and had clearly been built up against the inner core (L’Helgouach 1995). On the basis of the distinction between outer and inner elements, the cairn has now been reconstructed, following the

excavations, as a stepped structure, with the central dome rising above the outer skirt.

This latest reconstruction both protects the megalithic chamber and gives an idea of the original appearance of the monument (Fig. 6). Whether it has enhanced the visitor-experience of La Table des Marchand depends perhaps on those visitors' expectations. A recent survey revealed that some people regret the conversion of what was a romantic ruin into the present neat and tidy cairn. The reconstruction of the cairn has also masked key features of the monument that were formerly more easily visible, including the fact that the capstone was a fragment of a larger menhir that had been broken and dragged here for re-use. It has also made it impossible to see the carvings on the rear face of the backstone of the chamber. These, first discovered in 1922, demonstrate that this stone was originally a free-standing decorated menhir since it was decorated not only on its front, facing into the chamber, but also on its back, which would have been hidden once the enclosing cairn was built (Péquart *et al.* 1927, 122; Breuil *et al.* 1938, 19-20. It is possible, indeed, that the chamber was constructed around this pre-existing standing stone (L'Helgouach 1983, 65; Le Roux 1984, 242). Thus one inevitable consequence of the reconstruction work undertaken at La Table des Marchand has been to obscure the earlier phases in the development of the monument. The structure is reconstructed as it would have appeared in its final state. Yet it is unwise to be too critical, and this loss is perhaps a small price to pay for the better preservation of the chamber, enclosed within its new protective mound. It reminds us once again, however, that reconstruction is never a neutral process.

### **3. Radical reconstruction: Newgrange**

My third example makes no pretence to be neutral in tone: few will disagree that the famous rebuilding of Newgrange in Ireland merits the description of 'radical reconstruction'. The rounded grass-covered

mound visible up to the 1960s (when excavations began) has been transformed into a white-fronted vertical-sided drum (O’Kelly 1982; Eriksen 2004) (Fig. 7). This reconstruction has been controversial from the very outset. One early critic lamented how “Only a few years ago New Grange was scientifically dug into, many of its interior and other stones were disturbed, and the reconstructed model, now curiously faced with a layer of ornamental pebble-dash of quartz and boulders to represent someone’s theory of how it originally looked, lets in rain through the roof for the first time in history.” (Michell 1982, 149).

The chamber of Newgrange was first entered in modern times in 1699, but despite a succession of subsequent visitors it was only in the 1870s that the kerbstones around its foot were discovered. A trench was dug to reveal them, and more systematic exploration followed in 1928 when 54 of the kerbstones were exposed (O’Kelly 1982, 41). By the 1950s, however, it had become clear that a major campaign of consolidation was needed. Visitor numbers were rising, and people were brushing against the decorated stones and clambering over the eroding mound. Accordingly in 1962 Michael O’Kelly was entrusted with new excavations designed to determine the original appearance of the mound and to be followed by consolidation and reconstruction (O’Kelly 1982, 10). The excavations discovered a layer around the foot of the mound composed of small angular pieces of quartz and less numerous water- or glacially rounded cobbles of granite and granodiorite. This layer was traced along the southern side of the mound to either side of the passage entrance for a distance of 142 metres, extending 6-7 metres outwards from the kerbstones. The white coloured quartz that it contained made a striking contrast with the black granite and granodiorite inclusions. O’Kelly concluded that the layer was in fact the fallen remains of a near-vertical revetment wall that had stood on top of the kerbstones around this edge of the mound. This conclusion led to the abandonment of the earlier intention that “the original natural sloping face of the mound be restored” (O’Kelly 1982, 72). The decision was taken instead to follow through O’Kelly’s interpretation by reconstructing the sup-

posed near-vertical black and white façade, backed by concrete to retain the mound behind it in place.

Few archaeologists today would support the concept of such a radical reconstruction. Its aim goes significantly beyond the desire to preserve the site; instead, it is designed to impose a particular interpretation on the visitor. Furthermore, that interpretation has itself been called into question. Any vertical façade of this kind would have been structurally unsound and entirely incapable of resisting the pressure of the mound behind; O’Kelly himself recognised that it would have been the first element of Newgrange to collapse. Whether that instability in itself makes the reconstruction unconvincing is perhaps open to question (Bradley 1998, 104); we must not assume that the builders of these monuments were intending to create enduring structures. Parallel features at other Irish sites have however been interpreted rather differently. Layers of white quartz have been found outside the kerb of some of the Loughcrew passage tombs, but they are thought to have been laid as a covering surface or collar around the cairns inside the kerbstones. At Knowth, close to Newgrange, spreads of quartz and other stones outside the entrances to the two passage graves may have been ritual pavements (Eriksen 2004, 74). We must conclude that the Newgrange reconstruction proposed by O’Kelly is not the only one possible. It has the merit of reminding us that these monuments in their original condition did not resemble the romantic or venerable megalithic ruins or grassy knolls that we so often see today. Yet the very audacity of the Newgrange reconstruction is itself a source of criticism. It is not the restoration of the old, but a rebuilding in a modern idiom with the help of modern materials such as concrete.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has focused on chambered tombs, but many of the same issues apply equally to other kinds of prehistoric monument,

including stone circles. Stonehenge provides an obvious example. It is insufficiently recognised how much this famous structure is in its present form a product of 20<sup>th</sup> century restoration. In the course of that century, of the 36 sarsen uprights apparently *in situ*, six have been re-erected, two removed and replaced, and 15 straightened; while at the same time 6 of the 19 bluestones standing today have been removed and replaced (Lawson in Cleal *et al.* 1995, 345-6). Yet even this degree of modification is relatively modest compared with the treatment meted out to certain other stone circles. The Balbirnie stone circle in Scotland was excavated and dismantled to make way for a road-widening scheme, and then re-erected on an entirely new site. Not surprisingly, archaeoastronomists are horrified by this kind of practice. As Alexander Thom (inventor of the ‘megalithic yard’) put it: “To see how completely useless such a procedure is, one only has to picture what will happen when all record of the re-erection is lost and investigators take the re-erected circle as genuine.” (Ritchie 2004; Thom & Thom 1978, 176)

We need not be quite so severe as this in our appraisal of reconstructed monuments. It could be argued, indeed, that the reconstructed Balbirnie gives a ‘safer’ and more reliable impression of the original appearance of the monument than the radical solution followed at Newgrange; even though Balbirnie has been entirely relocated and Newgrange remains *in situ*. Yet this leads us to question what exactly it is that we are seeking to achieve when we restore or reconstruct these monuments. The primary aim is some form of conservation: to protect the monument for the benefit of future generations. Many would argue that that is as far as any intervention should go. To quote one recent Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments for England: “All forms of intervention to delay the process of decay do, in themselves, alter the monument. It is the duty of the heritage manager to ensure that such intervention is kept to a minimum and is well documented” (Saunders 1989, quoted in Evans 2004, 415).

Alongside this plea for restraint, however, it is crucial to recognise that much of the value of the archaeological heritage lies in its appeal

to a wider audience. That immediately leads to two further considerations: visitor access and visitor interpretation. The issue of visitor access may involve both the provision of physical means of access (pathways, stairs, lighting) and the consolidation of the monument so that it is not damaged by the regular passage of visitors. Most archaeologists would agree that this, too, is a necessary procedure, though there may be disagreement over the kinds of access arrangements that are put in place. They should aim to be as elegant and discreet as possible. What is much more contentious is the question of visitor interpretation. We have seen above some examples of reconstructions with which not everyone will be happy. The attempt to enlighten visitors all too often risks misleading them; making it difficult to distinguish what is original from what is restored or rebuilt; and imposing reconstructions that are either speculative or that quickly come to be thought incorrect or unlikely.

Finally two more general issues cannot be ignored. As already noted, some recent visitors to La Table des Marchand regretted the transformation and disappearance of the romantic ruin that it once was. In tidying-up and consolidating these monuments we may be damaging the sense of place that many people consider to be an important part of the message they convey. And lastly there is the issue of change. In consolidating these monuments, using modern materials and techniques, the aim is to freeze them in time, to prevent further decay and deterioration. In seeking to do this, however, we must recognize that we are not freezing these monuments in some remote Neolithic age, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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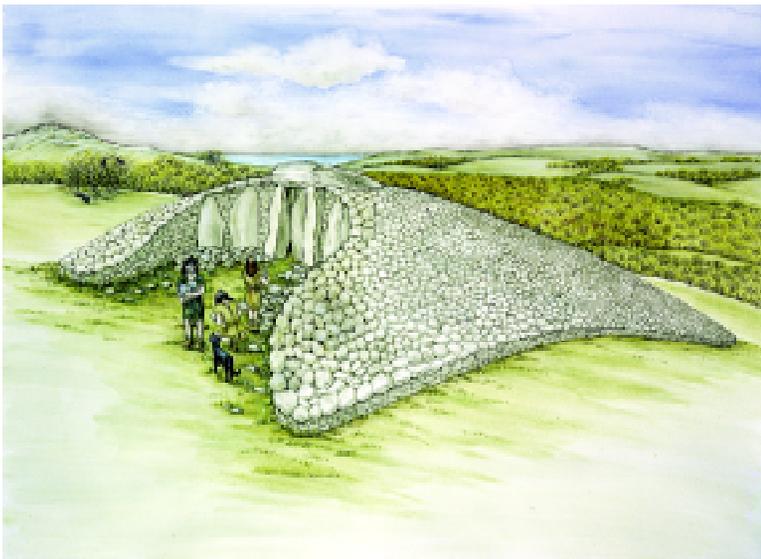
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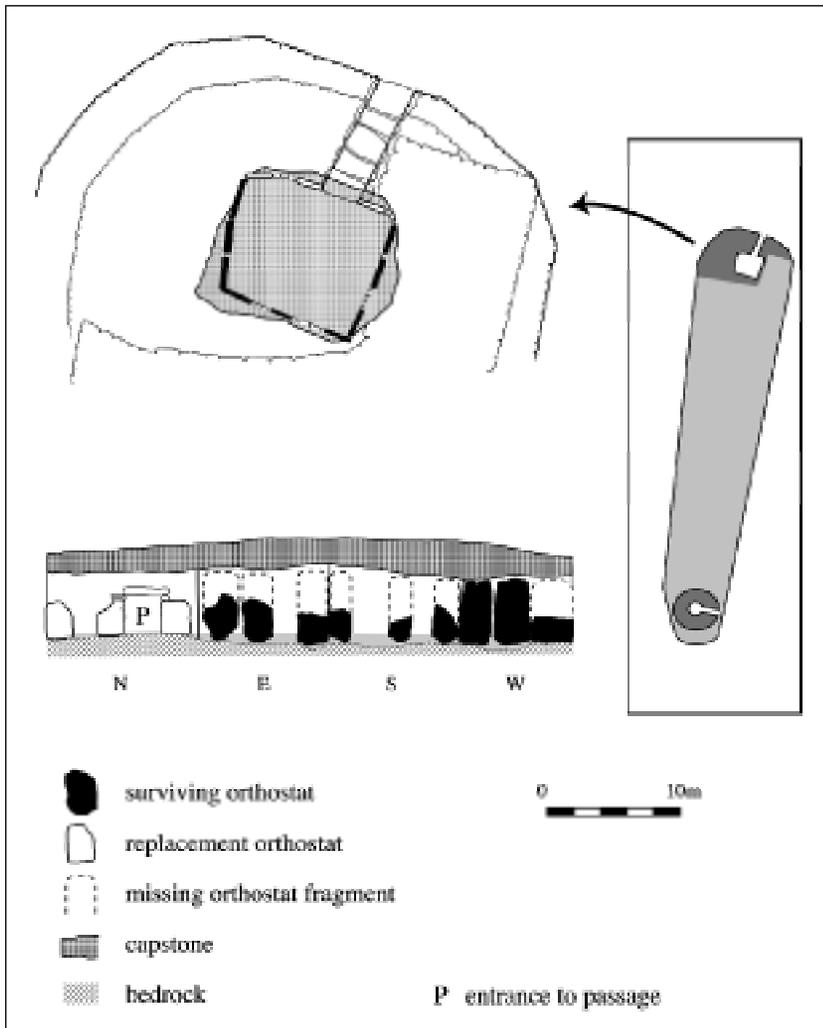
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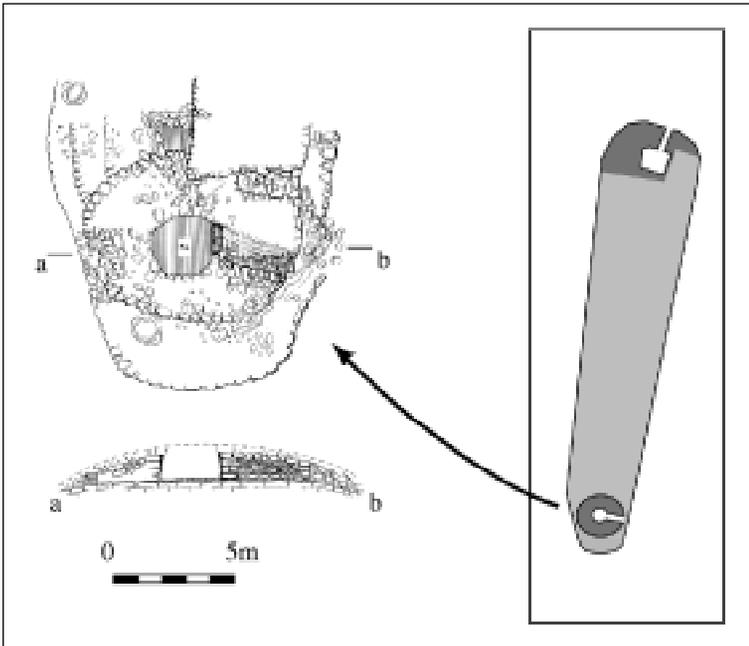
FIG. 1. Location of sites mentioned in the text.



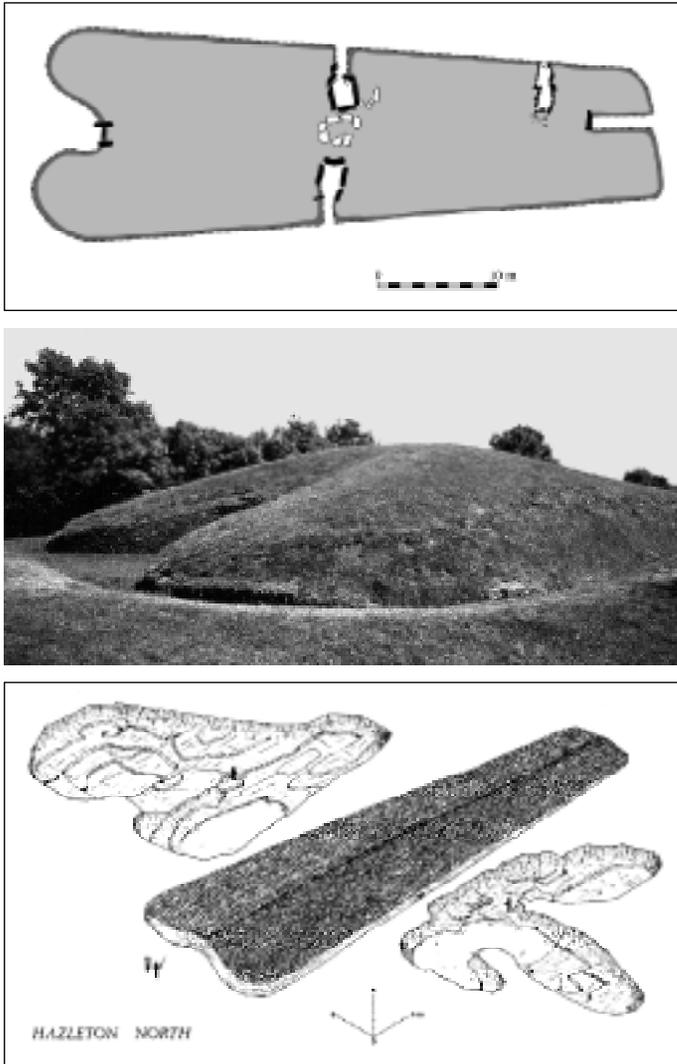
**FIG. 2.** Pentre Ifan: (above) photo of site at present day (photo: Chris Scarre); (below) reconstruction drawing (by Jane Durrant) showing the monument with a hypothetical covering cairn reaching up to the level of the capstone (Cadw: Crown Copyright).



**FIG. 3.** Bougon: the reconstruction of Chamber F2: plan and internal elevations of chamber showing (black) the surviving orthostats; (broken outline) their missing upper portions; and (white) the replacement orthostats added during the consolidation and reconstruction work of the 1970s (after Mohen & Scarre 2002).



**FIG. 4.** Bougon: the reconstruction of Chamber F0: (above) photo of the reconstructed monument (photo: Chris Scarre); (below) plan and cross-section showing the surviving extent of the original structures (after Mohen & Scarre 2002).



**FIG. 5.** Belas Knap: (above) plan of the monument showing the lateral chambers and the niche with 'false door' at the broader eastern end; (middle) photo of the monument at present day, following consolidation work undertaken during the 1930s; (below) reconstruction drawing (by Jon Hoyle) of Hazleton North, giving an impression of the likely original appearance of Belas Knap (by kind permission of Alan Saville).



**FIG. 6.** La Table des Marchand: (above) engraving from a drawing of 1823 by J.B.J. Jorand; (below) photo of the reconstructed cairn in 2004 (photo: Chris Scarre).