

## A Voice from the Early Bronze Age

Let me introduce myself, dear reader. I am a slab of grey-blue schist, 2.2 metres long, just over 1.5 metres wide and 160 mm thick, and I weigh about a tonne. However, when I was made in the early Bronze Age sometime between 2150 and 1600 BC I was somewhat longer. Some have estimated that I may have been nearly four metres long but I am not sure about that. At some stage I was broken before I became part of a stone cist burial, as I shall tell you later.

I am sorry I cannot be more precise about these dates and details; but it was a long time ago – more than three and half millennia and, indeed, possibly more than four millennia. I have heard some of you humans who have lived a trifling eighty years or so complaining about not remembering things, so please forgive me if my memory is hazy about things those long millennia ago, especially as for much of the time I was asleep in the ground.

I was discovered in 1900 by Paul du Châtellier, a French prehistorian who owned the Château de Kermuz, part of which he had turned into a museum, at Pont-l'Abbé in Finistère, Brittany. He discovered me during the excavation of an early Bronze Age barrow, known locally as *le tumulus de Saint-Bélec*, that is, 'the barrow of Saint Bélec'. Who Saint Bélec was, I do not know other than that he was a Breton saint whose legend had become associated with the barrow. However, because of that I am known as the *dalle gravée de Saint-Bélec* or, more simply in English, as the 'Saint-Bélec Slab.'

This barrow is in the parish of Leuhan in Finistère and within that barrow I formed the western wall of one of the largest stone cists in that region. The cist itself was orientated west to east and measured 3.86 metres by 2.1 metres and was 1.86 metres high. When I was discovered, I had, as I have told you, already been partly broken and I had lain under several layers of rubble. What interested Paul du Châtellier was that my surface had been carved before I had become the western wall of the cist; he realized I had had an earlier life before being buried. He made a detailed drawing of my surface, wrote up a report of my discovery and stored me in the Château de Kermuz.

I was eventually acquired by the *Musée d'Archéologie nationale* or, as you would say in English, the 'National Archaeological Museum'. Some say I was donated to the museum after Paul du Châtellier died in 1911; but others say I was acquired by a private museum soon after I had been discovered and that I was not donated to the National Archaeological Museum until 1924. Now if you humans are unclear about things that happened a hundred years ago, I think I can be forgiven for not remembering everything clearly from three or four millennia ago. But, whatever happened, I was first stored in a niche of the Château's moat before being moved into a cellar in the 1990s. There I slept until 2014 when some researchers rediscovered me, read du Châtellier's report and realized from his drawing that the intricate engravings on my surface probably represented an early Bronze Age map.

Eventually the French Institute for Preventative Archaeological Research, Bournemouth University, the French National Centre for Scientific Research and the University of Western Brittany all got together and carried out a joint study of me between 2017 and 2021. The study was published in April 2021 in the *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française*.

Those years of study by the joint group were exciting times for me; I began to come alive again and old, long forgotten memories stirred within me. They made general and detailed photographs with oblique lighting; and they used several three-dimensional survey methods such as photogrammetry, using general and high definition three-dimensional scanning in order to record my typography at different scales and to analyze the morphology, technology and chronology of the engravings on my surface. You may wonder, dear reader, how an ancient Bronze Age slab would know or understand all these technical terms. Well, of course, for most of my life I did not know them but during those

exciting years of research I listened to all those learned people because I wanted to know what they were doing and what was happening to me. I learnt more than I had learnt in all the past millennia. From all this work, the research teams eventually generated a three-dimensional elevation map which became the basis for their subsequent interpretation and analysis.

My engravings had suffered biological, chemical and mechanical alterations in recent times, because when I was found I had been cracked and needed to be cemented together; the engravings, however, did not show any signs of weathering. This was because I had not been exposed to air for long after the engravings were made all those millennia ago; they were still relatively fresh. The clever people in the research teams were able to work out the successive phases in which I had been engraved; furthermore, they were able to see that these successive phases did not significantly change the overall composition of my carving but rather were added in a planned way. It became obvious to the researchers that these modifications corresponded to the topography of the upper Odet River valley which is overlooked by the Saint Bélec barrow; and a series of lines were found to correspond to a more extended river network. It would seem that my engravings depicted an area of land measuring approximately 30 by 21 kilometres or if, dear reader, you still use miles, 19 by 13 miles. Furthermore, compared to your modern maps I had around 80% accuracy which, I think, is not bad for people working on a large stone slab in the early Bronze Age without all your modern technology.

The researchers argued about why I was made in the first place. Clearly a map engraved on a large, heavy stone slab is not one that could be used like your modern paper maps or, nowadays, maps on cell phones and other similar electronic devices to carry around and use for navigation. It might be possible, I suppose, that I was kept in a central place and consulted for navigation purposes; but I do not recall that being done and I do not think it is likely, nor did the researchers. Also, dear reader, consider why I was not used as a map for very long before becoming the wall of a cist.

Is it not obvious that I was a *cadastral* map, delineating the territory owned by rulers of a strongly hierarchical entity which controlled that area in the early Bronze Age? This control had, I think, been exercised for some few centuries, but at the time I was created there were already stirrings of discontent, hence the need the rulers felt for a physical cadastral map. But this rule was eventually overthrown towards the end of the early Bronze Age sometime between 1900 and 1600 BC. It was then that through an act of iconoclasm, signalling the rejection of the former political entity, I was broken to become the western wall of the cist; and there I might have remained for ever had not Paul de Châtellier discovered me 122 years ago.

I hope you have liked my sharing my story with you. The *Musée d'Archéologie nationale* has now put me on public view in its Bronze Age section in the mezzanine between the ground and first floors. The museum is in the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye which is situated in Place Charles de Gaulle, 78100 Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The people at the museum tell me this is about 19 kilometres (or 12 miles) west of Paris and that if you do not have a car, you can easily get here from Paris either by train on the RER line A or by bus 258 from La Défence. Will you come and visit me one day? I should like that very much.