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Catherine Perlès, Lautaro Núñez. Non-funerary megalithism among mobile hunter-gatherers and shepherds: Tulan 52 and Tulan 54 (Atacama Desert, Chile). Luc Laporte, Jean-Marc Large et Laurent Nespoulet, Chris Scarre, Tara Steimer-Herbet. *Megaliths of the World*, pp.205-217, 2022, 978-1-80327-320-4. halshs-03878090

HAL Id: halshs-03878090

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03878090v1>

Submitted on 16 Dec 2022

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Megaliths of the World

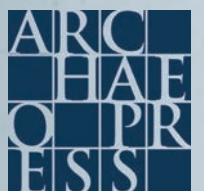
Volume I



edited by

Luc LAPORTE, Jean-Marc LARGE

Laurent NESPOULOUS, Chris SCARRE, Tara STEIMER-HERBET





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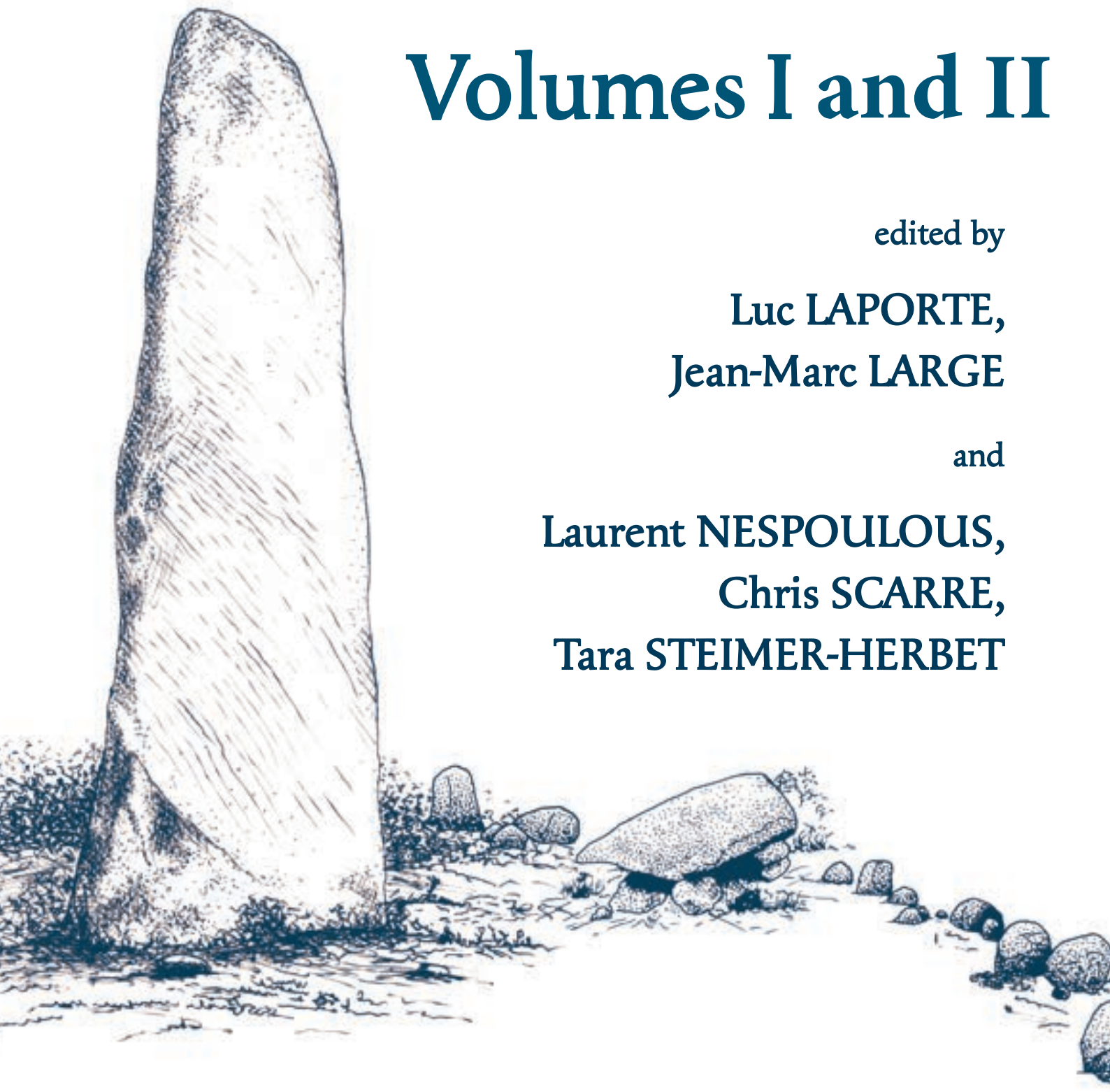
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www.archaeopress.com

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

Publication Director Max AUBRUN
Design and layout: Sylvie CLÉMENT- GILLET



ISBN 978-1-80327-320-4
ISBN 978-1-80327-321-1 (ePdf)

This book is available in print and as a free download from www.archaeopress.com



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During the preparation of this publication we learned of the death of Alain Gallay, Emeritus Professor at the University of Geneva, who has made such a major contribution to the discipline. His participation in the international conference on The Megaliths of the World, and his membership of the Steering Committee, was a great honour for us. The whole of the editorial team pay tribute to him.

9

Catherine PERLÈS, Lautaro NÚÑEZ

Non-funerary megalithism among mobile hunter-gatherers and shepherds: Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 (Atacama Desert, Chile)

Abstract: The two ceremonial centres of Tulán-52 and Tulán-54, in the heart of one of the world's most arid deserts, are an unparalleled example in the Andean area. Tulán-52, which dates to the Late Archaic period, is in fact a unique case in this area of a megalithic ceremonial centre erected by non-sedentary hunter-gatherer communities. It represents as a one-millennium-more prototype of Tulán-54. Tulán-54 dates from the early phase of the Formative Period, and attests to the development of camelid breeding and horticulture. This ceremonial centre also is unique from an architectural perspective with its central half-buried megalithic enclosure, partitioned by walls converging towards a central cell, and its burials of new-born babies accompanied by rich offerings. Data from the settlements and burials do not support the idea of monumentalism associated with stratified societies, where ritual elites would monopolise wealth. On the contrary, they lead us to turn to other early forms of non-funerary monumentalism, megalithic or not, dating from the beginning of the Neolithic process, in which elites would be organised corporately, with no personal accumulation of wealth.

Keywords: *Atacama, Chili, Recent Archaic, Formative, ceremonial centres, hunter-gatherers, pastoralists*

The Andean world is known for the early emergence of ceremonial structures, and even of ceremonial centres, some of which are very impressive. The oldest go back to the Pre-Pottery period and date to the Late Archaic, between 3000 and 1800 BC. Depending on the region, they are associated with mobile hunter-gatherer groups (Aldenderfer 1990) or the first agropastoral communities (Haas & Creamer 2006). During the following period, known as the Formative period (1800-200 BC), these

ceremonial centres developed and took on increasingly monumental forms, with mounds, raised platforms, and courtyards (plazas) (Hastorf 2008; Ikehara & Shibata 2005; Janusek 2004; Lavallée 1995; Pozorski & Pozorski 2008; Oliver, this volume).

We do not intend to discuss these Peruvian and Bolivian monuments here, but rather an overlooked monumentalism, with no known antecedents or descendants, which developed in northern Chile between 3000 and 500 BC, on the edge of a small

canyon in the south of the Salar (salt flats) of Atacama, the quebrada of Tulán (**Fig. 1**). The two sites concerned, Tulán-52 and Tulán-54, which date respectively from the Late Archaic and Early Formative periods, are perhaps less spectacular than some Peruvian or Bolivian sites, but they form a

totally original ‘tradition’ ⁽¹⁾. In fact, they represent the only megalithic sites in the Andes for these ancient periods, even if the scale of this ‘megalithism’ remains modest. Furthermore, the older site, Tulán-52, is a very rare example of megalithism among non-sedentary hunter-gatherers.

(1) It is certainly difficult to speak of ‘tradition’ with only two sites. However, the close analogies between Tulán-52 and Tulán-54, despite the millennium that separates them, allow us to envisage the existence of sites that are chronologically intermediate and that have yet to be discovered.

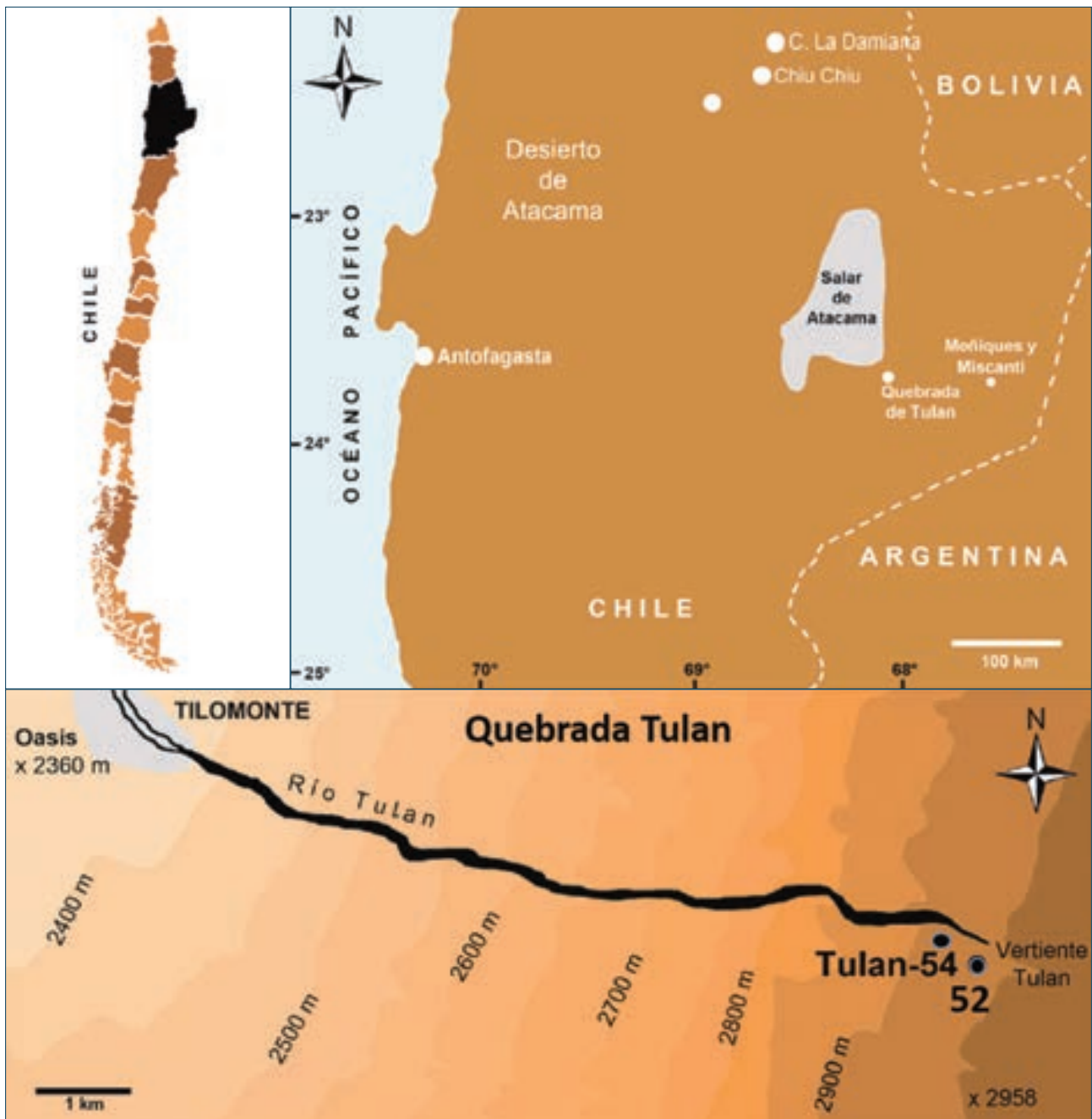


Fig. 1 – Location of the Tulán sites in Chile.

1. A very arid environment

Another peculiarity of the sites of the quebrada of Tulán is their location in a very dry region, which experienced a marked aridification episode during

the construction of Tulán-52. The Tulán quebrada (**Fig. 2**) is located between the Salar de Atacama, at 2,500 m above sea level, and the High Puna, at about 4,150 m, which is itself overlooked by the Andean



Fig. 2 – The Tulán quebrada seen from Tulán-54. In the distance can be seen the Salar de Atacama (Photo: C. Perlès).



Fig. 3 – Partial view of Tulán-52 in its arid environment. In the distance are the Andean summits (Photo: C. Perlès).

<i>Stratigraphy</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Date BP</i>	<i>Date cal. BC, 1 sigma</i>
Interior, upper part of the filling	Beta 198837	3860 ± 60	2335 ± 96
Interior, middle part of the filling	Beta 198838	4220 ± 70	2789 ± 100
Interior, lower part of the filling	N-2488	4270 ± 80	2866 ± 132
Interior, upper part of the filling	N-2487	4340 ± 100	3051 ± 159
Interior, lower part of the filling	Beta 198840	4390 ± 70	3097 ± 146
Exterior, start of occupation	Beta 210511	4580 ± 90	3307 ± 167

Fig. 4 – Table of radiocarbon dates from Tulán-52. CalPal online calibration.

peaks. From ca. 7000 BC to ca. 2500 BC, a period of instability and climatic deterioration (Grosjean *et al.* 2007) led to the abandonment of many previously occupied sites (Núñez & Santoro 2011; Núñez *et al.* 2013). This prompted the hunter-gatherer groups that had remained in the region ⁽²⁾ to exploit the rare refuge areas for fauna and flora: oases with perennial springs along the Salar de Atacama and the bottom of the pre-Puna canyons (the ‘quebradas’), and some of the lakes in the Upper Puna (or Altiplano) that became swampy areas where vicuñas (*Vicugna vicugna*) and guanacos (*Lama guanicoe*) could graze. This was the case of the Laguna Miscanti, which overlooks the quebrada of Tulán at 4,120 m above sea level (Núñez *et al.* 2018). During the Late Archaic, when Tulán-52 was erected, the economy was based on hunting wild camelids, capturing rodents (chinchillas, viscachas, *Ctenomys* sp.) and birds (passerines, doves, occasionally flamingos), as well as gathering seeds and fruit, such as canker (*Goeffroea decorticans*), white carob (*Prosopis alba*) and cucurbits (De Souza *et al.* 2010).

Late Archaic settlements, considered to be semi-sedentary, have been excavated north of the Salar de Atacama, particularly in the quebradas of Vilama (Agüero & Uribe 2011) and Puripica (Núñez *et al.* 1999, 2010). They are located between 2,000 and 3,000 m above sea level and consist of circular or subcircular constructions on stone block foundations. A decrease in the average size of large camelids (guanacos or llamas) and only these, greater variability in their size and a pathological bone at Puripica 1, indicate the presence of captive animals and attest to the early stages of camelid domestication (Cartajena 2013). Very long-distance contacts are demonstrated by the presence of exogenous elements, such as obsidian from the High Puna of Argentina, and marine shells from the Pacific coast (*Oliva peruviana*, *Pecten purpuratus*).

2. Tulán-52

The Pre-Pottery site of Tulán-52 was not, however, built in one of the eco-refuges, but rather above one,

on the desert reg on the edge of the quebrada of Tulán at an altitude of 2,970 m above sea level (Fig. 3). The base of the construction lies on an occupation level dated between 3400 and 3200 BC (Fig. 4), slightly earlier than the first architecture. The site was initially interpreted as a semi-sedentary settlement for hunter-gatherers, taking advantage of the abundant resources around the quebrada of Tulán (de Souza *et al.* 2010). It was recently reinterpreted as an early (‘templete’) (Núñez & Perlès 2018).

The site appeared as an early prototype of a ceremonial centre a low mound, 1.3 m high, covered with the remains of eroded fireplaces. Test pits on the periphery of the mound showed that site extension was limited and that the ‘templete’ was not surrounded by any domestic structure.

Excavations (90 m²) were mainly carried out between the late 1970s and 1985 (De Souza *et al.* 2010) and revealed agglomerated half-buried structures made of vertical slabs up to 1.5 m high, sometimes flaked to fit together, and topped by horizontal slabs (Figs. 5 and 6). These walls delimited very small cells, with diameters varying from 1.4 m to only 2 m – much smaller than the dimensions of dwelling structures of that period. Several alcoves with pillars and lintels were incorporated into the walls, which is a classic feature of Andean ceremonial buildings in both the Late Archaic and Early Formative periods (Núñez *et al.* 2005: 309). At the foot of one of these alcoves, a depression contained a block with linear incisions.

The whole monument was progressively covered by thick deposits resulting from intense food preparation and consumption activities, as evidenced by abundant mortars, some of which were apparently intentionally fractured. These deposits contained many wild camelid bones. The size of the meat cuts suggests collective feasts. In addition, the site was used for the production of arrowheads from local siliceous tuff and exogenous obsidian, for the preparation of colourant and, above all, for the production of abundant beads from Pacific shells (*Olivia peruviana* and *Pecten purpuratus*), stone,

(2) It is considered that the development of sedentary or semi-sedentary settlements on the coast during this period, exploiting marine resources, is linked to the displacement of groups of hunter-gatherers from the interior, escaping from this too arid environment (Núñez *et al.* 1999, 2010).

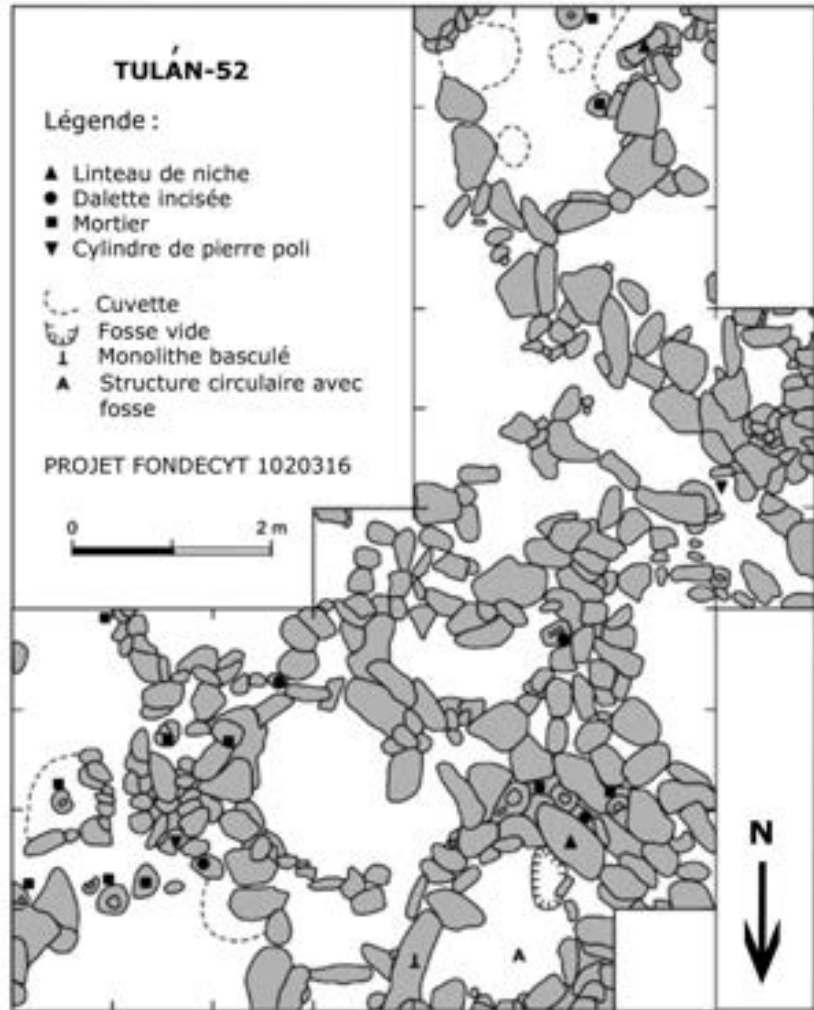


Fig. 5 – Plan of the excavations of Tulán-52 (After De Souza *et al.* 2010).



Fig. 6 – View of two cells at Tulán-52 and detail of the wall of the northwest cell (Photos: L. Núñez).

and sometimes copper ores (De Souza *et al.* 2010). When the site was abandoned, in around 2800 or 2300 BC ⁽³⁾, i.e., after several hundred years of use, it was almost totally camouflaged by these deposits. It was probably also intentionally filled in by external deposits, as suggested by a stratigraphic inversion in the radiocarbon dating. Thus, if ever the site had had an ostentatious appearance, this was completely obliterated.

Remains of domesticated squash (*Lagenaria* sp.) were found in the most recent deposits, echoing the first signs of llama domestication (Pozorski & Pozorski 1990; Kuijt 2002; Kuijt & Goring-Morris 2002; Yerkes 2002; Sassaman 2004; Pearson 2007; Cohen 2011; Schmidt 2012; Hadad 2014; Stordeur 2015).

3. Tulán-54

Tulán-54 is located 1 km downstream from Tulán-52, also on the edge of the quebrada. The initial occupation of the site is dated by radiocarbon to between 1300 and 1100 cal BC, making it a millennium more recent than Tulán-52. The main ceremonial structure was erected a hundred years later, and the site was abandoned between 460 and 420 cal BC (see list of dates in Núñez *et al.* 2016, 2017). During this period the climate had become wetter, leading to a diversification of the areas exploited outside the eco-refuges (Grosjean *et al.* 2007; Núñez & Santoro 2011). By that time, llamas were fully domesticated (Cartajena *et al.* 2007), but most of the consumed meat still came from vicuña hunting, while the llama was used for caravan transport. Horticulture was practised in the bottoms of the quebradas, where maize (*Zea mays*), quinoa (*Chenopodium quino*), oca (*Oxalis tuberosum*), peppers (*Capsicum* sp.) and cucurbits (*Cucurbita* sp.) were grown. But domestic plant remains are rare. As with meat, wild resources remained important in the diet, leading at least part of these groups to make regular moves.

Pottery was present in the form of tableware, cooking ware and pipes, which indicate connec-

tions with the plains of northwestern Argentina. The lithic industry was dominated by micro-perforators associated with an intense production of beads, as in Tulán-52. Blades of siliceous rock and obsidian tools and weapons indicate contacts with the east (80-100 km) and with the High Puna of Atacama and Argentina to the west, respectively.

Tulán-54 consists of a main central structure (the ‘templete’), subsidiary ceremonial structures, and technical structures (Figs. 7 and 8). Like Tulán-52, the site is completely covered by the accumulation of remains of feasting and of technical activities that took place there over several hundred years. A few burials, without funerary deposits, have also been unearthed recently around the temple, during a campaign of geophysical surveys and test-pits (Núñez *et al.* 2016, 2017). However, a genuine cemetery (Tulán-58) was located about 50 m away, at a considerable distance from any domestic settlement site. The burial position of adults and new-borns is a mixture of Late Archaic and Early Formative traditions, probably corresponding to groups from different parts of the Tulán region or the Salar de Atacama (Núñez *et al.* 2006a: 107). No exceptional funerary deposits, comparable to those found in the *templete*, were uncovered.

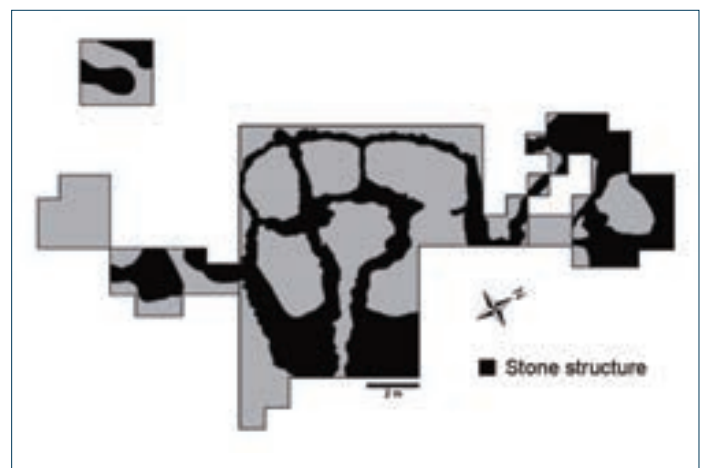


Fig. 7 – Plan of the stone structures at Tulán-54 (After Núñez *et al.* 2016).

(3) Four of the five dates coming from the filling of the structure are between ca. 3100 and ca. 2750 cal BC. Only one indicates more recent use, between 2450 and 2250 cal BC.



Fig. 8 – Structure adjacent to the ceremonial centre of Tulán-54 (Photo: C. Perlès).



Fig. 9 – View of the main structure of Tulán-54 and indication of the locations of two burials of new-borns, one with a gold-plated pectoral (black arrow) (a) and the other with a gold-plated wooden condor's head set with turquoise (white arrow) (b) (After Núñez & Perlès 2018).

Tulán-54 is much larger (8,000 m²), more complex and later than Tulán-52, but nevertheless presents a number of similar architectural features, even if the megalithic character of the construction is less pronounced. The central structure covers an area of more than 100 m². It consists of a half-buried enclosure with an internal perimeter made up of a wall of vertical slabs interrupted by alcoves with pillars and lintels. This is capped by several courses of small horizontal slabs.

The interior of the enclosure was partitioned by dividing walls, delineating a central oval cell with limited access by a ramp in a narrow corridor, and five surrounding cells. In the central cell and next to the enclosure wall, 27 burials of new-borns, mostly 6 to 12 months old, were placed in small pits, most of which were covered with stone blocks and then backfilled. All the neonates were lying on their right side. The majority of the burials contained funerary deposits, such as bead necklaces and millstones, one of which yielded starch from *Anadenanthera* sp., a genus known for its psychotropic properties (McRostie 2013, cited in Núñez *et al.* 2017). Some of these funerary deposits were exceptional, especially in the central cell where two engraved and intentionally perforated stone vases and two gold pendants were found (Fig. 9). Two other children were accompanied, respectively, by a snail from the Amazon and a gold-plated wooden condor head. It is not established whether the new-borns died a natural death or were sacrificed, but the latter hypothesis seems likely. Several hearths were uncovered near the burials, some of which were carefully built with fragments of millstones. Some blocks inserted in the walls were engraved or painted, in a similar style to the rock art that developed at the same time in the quebradas (Núñez *et al.* 2006b).

After the construction of the ceremonial enclosure and the deposition of the burials, interpreted as foundation deposits, the interior and exterior of the structure were filled in by a succession of ash lenses mixed with bone, lithic and pottery remains, until they formed a mound covering the entire monument, in the same way as Tulán-52. These deposits seemingly correspond to activities that took place inside the cells of the 'templete', and to an intentional filling consisting of the remains of

activities that took place outside (Núñez *et al.* 2017). Faunal data indicate the presence of wild vicuñas and guanacos, as well as domestic llamas. The very high representation of new-born camelids (35%) in the filling of the interior of the enclosure, which is significantly higher than in the external deposits (Cartajena *et al.* 2007), obviously evokes the burials of new-borns, while the selection of anatomical units, mostly the head, pelvis and extremities, appears to answer a symbolic code.

Like Tulán-52, Tulán-54 has been intensely visited, particularly over a period of two centuries (Núñez *et al.* 2017: Fig. 3). When the site was abandoned, it was practically concealed, and its monumental character was undetectable. However, members of the nearby community at Peine continue to refer to it as the place where their ancestors feasted (Núñez *et al.* 2017: 913).

4. Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 in the context of 'megalithic societies'

The two complexes of Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 represent a particular form of what is variously referred to, depending on the contexts and suggested interpretations, as a 'ceremonial centre', 'civic building', 'community building', 'religious monument' or 'temple'. Unlike most of these monuments, however, both of these complexes are located at some distance from dwelling sites – but not rock art sites – and must therefore be seen as aggregation sites, where groups who lived scattered throughout the region came together for ceremonial purposes (Pearson 2007: 379; Artusson *et al.* 2016). As in all the other centres of Neolithisation where community buildings, civic buildings or ceremonial centres were built, the erection of these monuments must have required control, or even coercion to organize the collective construction work, especially as the groups were not sedentary (Kuijt 2002; Carballo *et al.* 2014; Hadad 2014, 2019; Stordeur 2014; Laporte *et al.* 2020).

The older site, Tulán-52, was erected at the very beginning of the Neolithisation process, and the more recent, Tulán-54, at a time when camelids and a number of plants had been fully domesticated. Neither site, nevertheless, relied on an economy that could be described as purely pastoral or agro-

pastoral, since food resources remained mainly wild. Furthermore, neither of these centres was built by fully sedentary communities. Thus Tulán-54, and to an even greater extent Tulán-52, deviate markedly from the socio-economic models proposed, on the basis of ethnographic and archaeological data, for ‘megalithic societies’ (Gallay 2006) or ‘societies with megaliths’ (Jeunesse 2016). Indeed, different syntheses on past and present megalithic societies (Testart 2005, 2012, 2014; Gallay 2006, 2016; Jeunesse 2016) highlight a sedentary agropastoral economy with surplus production, the accumulation of wealth and a will of ostentation. These societies are classically described as stratified or hierarchical societies in which elites, under the guise of ritual power and by way of the dependent networks they set up, control long-distance exchanges and appropriate wealth and prestigious goods (Testart 1982, 2012; Price & Brown 1985; Feinman 1995; Hayden 1995, 2018; Price & Feinman 1995; Blanton *et al.* 1996; Trubitt 2000). Recent studies on this subject strongly emphasize the ostentatious character of megalithic (or monumental) constructions as an expression of the wealth of certain individuals, as a reflection of strategies for acquiring power and prestige, and as a sign of profound inequalities in society (Testart 2014; Artusson *et al.* 2016; Jeunesse 2016). For some, the mere presence of monuments requiring the implementation and coordination of collective work is enough to attest to ‘*a system of obligated surplus production and labour*’ for the benefit of elites, even if the inequality of wealth is not obvious from archaeological data (Artusson *et al.* 2016). The construction of megalithic monuments has also been assimilated with the work of ‘secret societies’, frequently associated with the erection of megaliths or monumental buildings (Hayden 2018). The strategies implemented by the higher-ranked initiates in these societies very clearly illustrate one of the mechanisms by which the manipulation of ritual power can lead to personal enrichment.

5. Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 are not exceptions: monumentalism in non-agropastoral societies

In light of this apparent anomaly, several options can be explored. First of all, the ‘megalithic’ character of these monuments can be refuted. This is unquestionably possible, given the rather small dimensions of the slabs. Boulestin (2016: 79) considers that we can only speak of ‘megalithism’ when blocks weighing more than one and a half or two tons were transported, which is not the case in Tulán. But he also advances a second criterion: the fact that the work cannot be carried out by a domestic unit. And it is indeed difficult to imagine that Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 could have been dug and built by a single family, or even an extended one. Moreover, blocks larger than those used for dwellings were deliberately selected. Whatever we choose to call it, this monumentalism in non-sedentary societies, with an economy still essentially based on the exploitation of wild resources, must be taken into consideration. Alternatively, we could doubt this use of wild resources, but that would run counter to archaeobotanical and archaeozoological data. Moreover, as we will see, Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 are not unique in this respect. The same applies to the non-sedentariness of these groups. Again, unless perennial occupations are discovered in the future (which seems unlikely in the context of a hunter-gatherer or mixed pastoralism economy), this hypothesis does not fit with the excavation data.

It therefore seems more relevant to broaden the range of socio-economic contexts in which forms of megalithism, or, more generally, monumentalism, occur. Since megalithism is one among several forms of monumentalism, they will be considered together in the following discussions. Research in recent decades has revealed that, in many parts of the world, profound social and ideological transformations preceded the domestication of plants and animals, or, at any rate, the adoption of a fully agropastoral economy. This is exemplified by the appearance of collective ritual places, some of which are megalithic, in the Jomon (Kobayashi 2004; Kaner 2007; Pearson 2007), in Southern Peru (Aldenderfer 1990), among the fishermen of the recent Archaic northern coast of Peru (Pozorski & Pozorski 1990; Vega-Centeno & Lafosse 2008), in

the Early Woodland (Yerkes 2002), the Hopewell (Wright 2014), as well as by the megalithic collective buildings or ‘sanctuaries’ from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A in the Near East (Kenyon 1957; Schmidt 2012; Stordeur 2015; Hadad 2019). Monumentalism was ignored for too long, but it is in fact a recurring phenomenon among hunter-gatherers.

The above-mentioned societies can, it is true, qualify as ‘complex’ (Price & Brown 1985) or ‘affluent’ (Koyama & Thomas 1981) hunter-gatherers or fishermen. Most were sedentary, unlike the hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities of Tulán. There are, however, rarer examples of monuments erected by non-sedentary hunter-gatherers. The stone architecture of Tulán-52 is probably unique, but we can also mention the sites of the final Pre-Pottery of the Piruru tradition in the central Andes (Bonnier & Rozenberg 1988) and the monumental mounds of the Middle Archaic in the south-eastern United States, which required an even more considerable collective investment (Sassaman 2004; Saunders *et al.* 2005; Gibson 2006).

Various forms of ‘community’ or ‘ceremonial’ constructions of these hunter-gatherer societies exist, depending on the region, and they can reach impressive dimensions. The circular form is common in the oldest monuments and, when they are not mounds, they are often half-buried, which significantly increased the workload compared to a monument built on the ground (Hadad 2019). Like Tulán-52 and Tulán-54, some monuments were ritually ‘sealed’, broken, destroyed by fire or buried under so-called ‘archaeological sediments’, which Price and Bar-Yosef have described as ‘villages garbage’ (Price & Bar-Yosef 2012: 157)! This is the case for the ceremonial buildings of the PPNA in the Levant (Schmidt 2012; Stordeur 2015). In the Andes, the ceremonial buildings of the Chiripa in Southern Peru were ritually buried under layers of earth, apparently by every generation (Janusek 2004). These sealing rituals could necessitate major collective work, in some cases equivalent to construction work (Hadad 2019), and had the effect of obliterating, as at Tulán, the earlier monuments.

6. Funerary monumentalism and non-funerary monumentalism: which societies?

It is therefore indisputable that megalithism or, more generally, monumentalism, is not the prerogative of either agropastoral or sedentary societies (Jeunesse 2016). Moreover, all the examples cited to support this proposal present common features: they all represent an early phase of monumentalism in their cultural area. Secondly, they are instances of non-funerary monumentalism, although they are sometimes associated with human sacrifices, as at Tulán-54. Correlatively, they correspond to a collective monumentalism, and not a monumentalism linked to a lineage or a few individuals. Finally, the societies in which they are found do not show clear signs of differential accumulation of wealth.

We can therefore have recourse to alternative models, already proposed for regions of the world where early monumentalism was not accompanied by perceptible differential wealth between individuals in the dwellings or burials: the Near East (Kuijt & Goring-Morris 2002; Asouti 2006; Hadad 2014), the Ancient Jomon (Pearson 2007), the Mississippi (Sassaman 2004), the Hopewell (Yerkes 2002), and the Late Archaic societies of the northern coast of Peru (Pozorski & Pozorski 1990). According to these models, ritual elites would operate not on network strategies, but on a corporate strategy (Blanton *et al.* 1996; Feinman 2000, 2011), or what Renfrew called ‘group-oriented chiefdom’ as opposed to ‘individualizing chiefdom’ (Renfrew 1974: 74-79, 83-84). In this strategy of power, which would be precisely characterized by the presence of collective ritual spaces – as opposed to ostentatious individual or lineage burials – power would be distributed over several segments of society and would not lead to the individual accumulation of wealth (Feinman 1995, 2013: 46-47, 2016: 7).

A priori, Tulán-52 and perhaps also Tulán-54 would correspond to this corporate mode of elite organization since no difference in wealth has been documented to date through burials or dwellings. Yet, we cannot exclude an evolution of the socio-political context between Tulán-52 and Tulán-54 and a shift in ritual elites from a corporate mode of organization to a ‘network’ mode. The development

of caravan exchanges and the controlled circulation of valued goods could indeed have favoured such a shift.

7. Conclusion

The two seemingly isolated examples presented here are part of a wider group of megalithic or non-megalithic monuments. Like others, they confirm that ceremonial centres, sometimes megalithic in nature, were erected by communities of hunter-gatherers and non-sedentary pastoralists. Moreover, they lead us to put the emphasis on a non-funerary monumentalism in societies where the economy is not yet fully agropastoral. They enable us to argue, as Renfrew suggested a long time ago, that non-funerary monumentalism/megalithism and funerary monumentalism/megalithism (except for collective burials) form two opposite, even antagonistic, expressions of monumentalism because they are the product of two opposite poles of power distribution. In other words, monumentalism or megalithism are not necessarily the result of '*ostentatious plutocracies*' (Testart 2012: 4) or '*signs of very significant inequalities affecting society*' (Gallay 2016: 47), but may also have been the expression, perhaps ephemeral, of a corporatist power strategy of ritual elites.

The debate, nevertheless, is not closed: Hayden, for example, interprets several of the sites we have just mentioned, including Tulán-52 and Tulán-54, as the work of secret societies (Hayden 2018). In the same way, given the early development of monumentalism, the question of the socio-political organization of ancient communities and the nature of elites has disconcerted specialists of the Andean world for decades, and no real consensus has yet emerged (i.e., Siveroni 2001; Pozorski & Pozorski 1990; Haas & Craemer 2006). The answer, if any, is unlikely to come from the ceremonial centres themselves. It will stem rather from a better knowledge of all the other types of sites associated with them – hunting halts, settlements, dwellings, cemeteries, quarries, sheepfolds – which will enhance our understanding of the socio-economic organisation of these societies. However, in order to approach these fields through the study of material remains, archaeology needs to rely on historical or contemporary reference systems. But what references will we ever be able to use for societies in the process of Neolithisation?

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