



## What does the Bible tell us about Megaliths?

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There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every activity under heaven:  
a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance,  
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
Kohelet (3:1-5)

### Abstract

Megalithic remnants have been the subject of numerous studies and constitute one of the most controversial subjects in archaeology. The problem of their function is still a point of disagreement among scholars. Archaeologists are usually very careful or critical about any interpretations concerning their religious, social or ritual meanings. The same scientific caution has generally led to ignoring of practices and beliefs found in modern folklore, let alone the biblical text. This is unfortunate, because the Bible is one of the very rare written sources informing us directly about prehistoric or proto-historical periods. Biblical references to the constructions and functions of megalithic monuments are numerous, and if authors have sometimes mentioned them, this has been merely as a simple list of verses without further comment or analysis. But in many places the Bible mentions the construction of megalithic monuments and gives precious information regarding their functions. Why not take them into consideration? The semantic contexts may also lead to further interpretations. I do not need to confess that the presentation only proposes a first approach to the problem, and quotations of the text will most unfortunately have to be reduced drastically.

**Keywords:** bible, megaliths, Gilgal, Passover, Hanukah, Early state

**Słowa kluczowe:** Biblia, megality, Gilgal, Pascha, Chanuka

## 1. Single raised stones or menhirs

### 1.1. The betyle of Jacob

Certainly the most famous raised stone in the Bible is the betyle of Jacob:

When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and He said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you". When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, „Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven". Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz (Genesis 28:11–19).

The stone is isolated and marks a place of incubation, of a prophetic vision, inhabited by the spirit of God. Bet El means the house of God<sup>1</sup>, it is a spot of contact between earth and heaven, a direct opening to the sky. It is a rough stone, natural, left as it was found laying in nature. The only human intervention consists of erecting it vertically. As a step or passage between earth and heaven, the stone also recalls the ladders of seven or nine steps known to represent the link with the upper world in various primitive religions. In European religious folklore as well as in several other traditions numerous are the megaliths said to have kept the mark of the foot of a god, saint or prophet, his last print on earth before leaving for the other world<sup>2</sup>. The first ritual of sanctification is an unction of oil, which is probably related to the previous name of the place, "Luz". Luz means almond or almond tree, both words related to light, because the almond oil was considered the best for oil lamps and the menorah is believed to represent an almond tree. This association leads to another one, because the menorah has seven branches as the seven days of the week, or nine branches as the eight days of Hanukah plus the central guardian light. In the Bible the stars are called lamps or luminaries, and so the seven and nine lamps of the candelabrum are representative of the seven planets or seven planets plus the two pseudo-planetary nodes of the moon's orbit<sup>3</sup>. We see that this Luz – almond tree – candelabrum is directly connected to the problem of calendars, counting time and the starry heavens.

If we look for other meanings of the word "Luz" or related words, we find:

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to Betlehem, in Galilee.

<sup>2</sup> A. Lebeuf, *Stopa Bosa – Stopa Obuta*, Kraków 2003.

<sup>3</sup> W. Hartner, *The Pseudo Planetary Nodes of the Moon's Orbit in Hindu and Islamic Iconography*; "Ars Islamica", 1938, no. 5, p. 121–159; *Idem*, "Le problème de la planète Kaïd", Hildesheim, 1968.

Luz (luwz), lavah – luwt, an old root meaning to twist, to spin, to turn around, and this is of prime interest because of similar meanings of the word “Gilgal” to which we will return soon. Let us remember as well that one of the most frequent popular names of those stones is “turning stone, whirling stone, spinning stone”, as for example the French name “La Pierre qui vire”. Among other possibilities, this revolving, spinning movement probably has to do with rituals of circumambulation, still attested around some megaliths in modern times<sup>4</sup>. It also has to do with the turning and spinning dances leading to ecstasy and flight into the sky. Remember Elisha taken alive up to the sky in a whirlwind after a circuit passing by Gilgal and Bethel.

We find other functions and meanings.

## 1.2. Border stones

The border of the piece of land attributed to Judah at Gilgal when Joshua divides the Promised Land between the twelve tribes, “went up to Beth Hoglah and continued north of Beth Arabah to the Stone of Bohan son of Reuben. The boundary then went up to Debir from the Valley of Achor and turned north to Gilgal” (Joshua, 15:6–7). Here we find here two stone marks for the border. The first one is a single stone, the stone of Bohan, the second a megalithic complex at the centre of the land division, Gilgal.

When the Philistines abandon their pursuit of the Israelites, as if they had agreed with the limit of their territorial claims, Samuel marks the place with a standing stone:

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12).

The word used, *Macevah*, means a commemorative stone but also by flexion of the vowels:

*Micavah*, a guard, an observer.

*Macav*, a garrison.

*Mucav*, a fence, a wooden wall, a fortification.

The stone is like a guard at the border of a defined and reserved territory, observing the neighbouring land, keeping watch.

It can also guard the road, show the way in wasteland, and can be a milestone.

## 1.3. Milestones

Then Jonathan said to David:

“Tomorrow is the New Moon festival. You will be missed, because your seat will be empty. The day after tomorrow, toward evening, go to the place where you hid when this trouble began, and wait by the stone Ezel” (1 Samuel 20:19).

We see that these stones carry a personal name, and are an integral part of the landscape and toponymy. Sometimes, of course, they also mark a grave.

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<sup>4</sup> See P. Sébillot, *Le folklore de France*, Paris 1904, vol. 1, p. 316, 326–327, 334, 410.

## 1.4. Grave stones

“So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel’s tomb” Genesis, 35:19–20).

Here, the standing stone marks the way and the grave altogether as Rachel died and was buried along the road. Jacob raises the stone for Rachel, his wife, but Absalom knowing he had no children had raised his own memorial preventively:

During his lifetime Absalom had taken a pillar and erected it in the King’s Valley as a monument to himself, for he thought, “I have no son to carry on the memory of my name”. He named the pillar after himself, and it is called Absalom’s Monument to this day” (2 Samuel 18:18).

Here, there seems to appear a game of words between “*ben*”, the son and “*eben*”, the stone. Having no son to recall his earthly existence, he sets a stone. But at last his grave is somewhere else. “They took Absalom, threw him into a big pit in the forest and piled up a large heap of rocks over him” (2 Samuel 18:17).

## 1.5. Tribunal, oath taking place

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord, “See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God” (Josue 24:25–28).

Here the stone commemorates a ceremony of oath-taking, it is a godly witness of the law and of a covenant. It stands under an oak.

## 1.6. Commemoration mark

A place of sacrifice by cremation to thank God for a victory and mark the land property, the border. Here a huge natural stone, remarkable only for its unusual size, is used as a fire altar:

Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh. Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight<sup>14</sup>. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord. The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron (1 Samuel 6:12–18).

## 1.7. Place of sacrifice for the purification of faults and sins

They pounced on the plunder and, taking sheep, cattle and calves, they butchered them on the ground and ate them, together with the blood. Then someone said to Saul, “Look, the men are sinning against the Lord by eating meat that has blood in it”. – “You have broken faith, he said. “Roll a large stone over here at once”. Then he said, “Go out among the men and tell them, ‘Each of you bring me your cattle and sheep, and slaughter them here and eat them. Do not sin against the Lord by eating meat with blood still in it’. So everyone brought his ox that night and slaughtered it there. Then Saul built an altar to the Lord; it was the first time he had done this (1 Samuel 14:32–35).

It is interesting to note that the term “roll” in the expression *golu hajom even gdo-la* – roll a large stone – has the root GL to which we will have to return with Gilgal.

We can consider all these natural or raised lying or standing stones as primitive altars. All of them share one aspect clearly defined by the law on altars.

## 2. Earth and undressed stone altars

The monuments must be constructed of natural stones:

Then the Lord said to Moses, Tell the Israelites this: You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it (Genesis 20:22–25).

The stone altar must be without art figurations, undressed, or just made of a heap of ground and smaller stones. This means that if the megalithic monuments are generally made of rough stones, it is not necessarily the result of some technical limitations or primitiveness but only stems from religious principles.

We find a strong connection here relation between standing stones, cairns and tumuli with sacrificial rituals of total cremations and sacrifices for the banquets of communion. Here again, the god is present at the banquet. Sometimes, the altar is built near a river, a well, or a source, as the Bible mentions. That is a normal thing for a banquet meeting place.

Gilgal is at the riverside, while Isaac and Adonijah also look for a water point to build their altars:

And he built an altar there, and called upon the name of Jehovah. And he pitched *his* tent there; and there Isaac’s servants dug a well (Genese 26:25).

Adonijah then sacrificed sheep, cattle and fattened calves at the Stone of Zohemoth near (the source at) En Rogel. He invited all his brothers, the king’s sons, and all the men of Judah who were royal officials, but he did not invite Nathan the prophet or Benaiah or the special guard or his brother Solomon (1 Kings 1:9).

Here again, the stone marks a meeting place for a banquet of communion for tightening familial and clan relations. Insisting on not inviting someone means that the person is rejected from the group, in archaic societies often a death sentence.

## 2.1. Heaps of stones, cairns

Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He said to his relatives, "Gather some stones" So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today". That is why it was called Galeed. It was also called Mizpah, because he said, "May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me". Laban also said to Jacob, "Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us". So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there (Genesis 31:44–54).

The heap of stones is a monument sacralising a sacrificial ritual for communion and agreement. The full construction comprises a standing stone and a cairn built by all the men present. It marks a general accord of the participants and their union. We certainly find here the archaic form of great tumuli and pyramids all over the world. The tumulus is the place of a sacrifice and a banquet. It marks a neutral land reservation where peaceful meetings can take place for diplomatic and commercial contacts and exchange. Laban calls it "Jegar sahaduta" which means a "witness heap" in Aramean, but Jacob names it "Galed", meaning the same but in Hebrew. This is a name in which we once again recognise the root GL, here a heap of stones.

## 2.3. The grave of a man sentenced to death by stoning

Joshua said, "Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today. Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day" (Joshua 7:25–26).

The grave of a condemned man, the guilty one is stoned by all the group of his own relatives; he is then burned together with all his belongings and covered by a tumulus of stones thrown by all the present ones. Unanimity in the execution of the sentence excludes personal responsibility for the crime, which appears as the sole instrument of divine justice: *The Lord will bring trouble on you today.*

It is again as a monument of a general avenger that a cairn appears in Joshua:

So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day. He hung the king of Ai on a tree and left him there until evening. At sunset, Joshua ordered them to

take his body from the tree and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day (Joshua 8:29).

It is probably in these prehistoric customs that we find the origin of the participants into a Christian burial throwing a handful of earth in the grave, and those at Jewish one depositing a stone.

### 3. Complex monuments

#### 3.1. Altars for the sacrifice

We find many mentions of the constructions of altars, unfortunately lacking details of information about their shape or construction. We can safely judge they must have been megalithic because of the epoch of their construction under the mosaic law which insists:

“If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it” (Genesis 20:25).

We know first of the altars Abraham built near Bethel and of course the stone altar in the wasteland of Mora where he was ordered to kill his son Isaac and burn him for the Lord:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and the knife, and they went both of them together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, My father! And he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the sheep for a burnt-offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself with the sheep for a burnt-offering. And they went both of them together. And they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built the altar there, and piled the wood; and he bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slaughter his son (Genesis 22:6-10).

In extremis Abraham finds a substitute for the child, but this passage gives a direct indication of common practices in these times. Much later the Hebrews would be still reproached for passing their sons by the fire for Baal and Moloch:

How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same. You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods (Deut 12:30–31).

He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites (II Kings 16:3). They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal-something (Jeremiah 19:5).

And they have built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to cause to pass through [the fire] their sons and their daughters unto Molech: which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin (Jeremiah 32:35).

## 3.2. Stone circles, cromlechs

### 3.2.1. The stone altar of Moses

Before receiving the Law:

Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey”. Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:4–8).

This fragment tells us a little more about the construction itself, an altar stone surrounded by twelve standing stones, a very common figure known as “*recumbent stone circles*” in Scotland where they are numerous and very frequently number exactly twelve stones and the recumbent one, the altar proper<sup>5</sup>. It also describes a part of the ritual, the burning of various offerings, of a bull and parts of the banquet meats; he divides the blood and sprinkles half on the altar, and the other half on people. The covenant is sealed by blood communion.

### 3.2.2. Gilgal

Moses himself had foreseen and ordered the construction of the stone circles at Gilgal and Ebal by Joshua:

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool upon them. Build the altar of the Lord your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up” (Deuteronomy 27:1–8).

Two stone monuments are indicated here: the first at Gilgal on the riverbank, and another one at Mount Ebal.

Here again we find the same principles already mentioned, but also some other indications, the stones must be painted white with lime. According to this command, the first thing the Israelites do after the passage across the Jordan is to build the stone altar:

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<sup>5</sup> A. Burl, *By the Light of the Cinerary Moon, Chambered Tombs and the Astronomy of Death. Astronomy and Society in Britain during the period 4000–1500 B.C.*, Oxford 1981.

So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the *Ark of the Covenant* had stood. *And they are there to this day* (Joshua 4:8).

We can clearly imagine a circle of twelve stones preceded by an avenue leading from the bank of the river, a complex known from other megalithic sites. We must admit the stones were disposed in a circle because of the name of Gilgal itself, which means first of all a circle, a wheel. The construction is meant to sanctify two commemorations, the first miraculous passage of the Sea of Reeds and forty years later the miraculous passage of the Jordan:

On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground’. For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over” (Joshua 5:9).

### 3.2.1.1. *Gilgal, a prophetic site, the place of the theophany*

Bethel and Gilgal were already important cult places before the Hebrews arrived:

And Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land. And there he built an altar to Jehovah who had appeared to him. And he removed thence towards the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, [having] Bethel toward the west, and Ai toward the east; and there he built an altar to Jehovah, and called on the name of Jehovah (Genesis 12:7–8).

Among the kings defeated by Joshua, we find: “the king of Bethel, one; ... the king of Goyim in Gilgal one” (Joshua 12:16; 12:23).

Or: After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it. At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king” (Judges 3:19).

This mention is important because it lets us know that these monuments were richly decorated. We have seen that the stones themselves were whitened with chalk or lime; here we discover they were surrounded with idols, probably made of perishable materials, for which reason we rarely find any in archaeological remains. Israelites probably kept only the megalithic site, which they rewrote in their own history. They certainly destroyed all the representations of foreign gods, but Gilgal itself remained the cult and power place it had been for ages:

The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said (Judges 2:1).

Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings (1 Samuel 10:8).

Elisha as the heir of Elijah is the master of a religious congregation, a school of prophets at Gilgal:

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal (2 Kings 2:1).

Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him (2 Kings 4:38).

### 3.2.1.2. *Gilgal as political centre*

Gilgal is the first military garrison:

“So Joshua marched up from Gilgal with his entire army, including all the best fighting men” (Joshua 10:7).

“Then Joshua returned with all Israel to the camp at Gilgal” (Joshua 10:15).

Gilgal is the administrative centre; it is there that take place the sharing of the land between the twelve tribes takes place:

“Now the men of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him...” (Joshua 14:1 – 21:45).

It is to this political centre that the Gibeonites come to surrender and make an alliance:

The Gibeonites then sent word to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal: “Do not abandon your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us! Help us, because all the Amorite kings from the hill country have joined forces against us” (Joshua 10:6).

However, when the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, they resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. The men put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and mouldy. Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the men of Israel, “We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us” (Joshua 9:3-6).

Well before the arrival of the Hebrews, Gilgal was a political centre as we find among the list of local kings defeated by Joshua west of the Jordan: “the king of Goyim in Gilgal one” (Joshua 12:23).

It would also be the first royal seat of the Hebrews, the seat of royal unction:

Then Samuel said to the people, „Come, let us go to Gilgal and there reaffirm the kingship.” So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord . There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration (1 Samuel 11:14–15).

It is also the first and central tribunal.

Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places (1 Samuel 7:15–17). But Samuel said, „As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women”. And Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal (1 Samuel 15:33).

### 3.2.1.3. *Gilgal and the first Passover*

The text is precise: the Hebrews crossed the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, Nissan. There were only four days left before the celebration of the first Passover forty years after the escape from Egypt through the Red Sea.

If in an effort to historicise the place, the twelve stones are said to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, they are certainly still representative of the twelve lunar months of the year. This is all the more credible as Gilgal is first of all the place of the first Passover, a lunar solar feast par excellence timed on the correlation of moon and sun calendar cycles at the spring equinox. The passage through the Jordan also reflects the passages from one epoch to the next, a temporal historical passage: the celebration of renewal in general. The rule of lunar solar adjustment is called in Hebrew *Sod ha ibour*, which can be translated as “secret of the passage” or “secret of the Hebrews” as well as “secret of the calendar”. This shows that Gilgal may be a sanctuary connected to astronomical observations,

In any case, the calendar aspect of Gilgal allows us to look for astronomical orientations in megalithic monuments and is confirmed by many recent works of archaeoastronomy in Europe and elsewhere. Among other many examples, the north corridor at Gilgal Rephaim on the Golan is also directed to the summer solstice sunrise.

*Sod ha Ibou*r, the secret of the calendar, can also be read “secret of the embryo”, which hints at the problem of fecundity, because of the rule of intercalation of a thirteenth month. An embolismic year of thirteen months is called a pregnant year. When the year has thirteen months, the feast of Purim, a kind of carnival always falls in this extra month, the second Adar. Purim means a lottery, casting lots. Carnivals in general, represent the original chaos from which new order emerges, new life, renewal. Carnivals are usually a time of general promiscuity and therefore give a chance to the Lord for curing the sterility of women. We can thus believe that Gilgal was also the sanctuary where orgiastic feasts took place under divine protection<sup>6</sup>.

Then only the great foundation feast takes place:

“On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover” (Joshua 5:10).

This scene repeats what we have already seen about biblical mentions of megalithic sites, the use of rough stones, milestone of the passage, the path, the border, the ritual place of tribal and national gathering and communion. The Passover is the only feast at which a stranger is not accepted.

Gilgal is the political, military, juridical and religious centre of the first kingdom, an example of the primitive state capital<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> May I recall here the many rituals of fecundity in the proximity or on megaliths attested by folkloric and ethnographic sources of the last centuries especially in French Brittany? P. Sébillot, *Le folklore de France*, zob. s. 39, vol. 1, pp. 334–345.

<sup>7</sup> A fortified circular fence defines a magical protective space, which is similar to a pregnant woman. Such a monument foresees the primitive city closed into its walls which is conceived of as a pregnant belly. In French “Une ville enceinte, une femme enceinte”.

### 3.2.1.4. *The first circumcision at Gilgal*

At Gilgal the first circumcision takes place:

“At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again”. So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth” (Joshua 6:1–8).

The fact that flint knives are used for the ceremony, in an epoch when metals are perfectly well known, hints at the archaic and conservative aspect of the tradition.

The term used further in the text aims to explain the etymology of Gilgal: “*to roll away*”:

“Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you”. So the place has been called Gilgal to this day” (Joshua 6:9).

But this game of words is certainly not enough.

### 3.2.1.5. *The semantic field of Gilgal*

Galah, inform, announce, reveal, appear, discover, disclose:

I thought I should inform you (Ruth 4:4).

Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, „This is what the Lord says: „Did I not clearly **reveal** myself to your father’s house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh?” (1 Samuel 2:27).

Galgal, a wheel, a whirlwind.

“I heard the **wheels** being called “the whirling **wheels**” (Ezechiel 10:13).

“Their chariot wheels like a whirlwind” (Isaiah 5:28).

Galgal, the celestial vault, the sky:

“The voice of thy thunder [was] in the **heaven**: the lightning lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook” (Psalms 77:18).

Gal, a heap of stones.

Geled, the skin:

„I have sewed sackcloth over my **skin** and buried my brow in the dust” (Job 16:15).

Gilgul, the fate, fortune, transmigration of souls.

Gillayown, a mirror.

Gol, a bowl:

“He asked me, “What do you see?” I answered, “I see a solid gold lampstand with a **bowl** at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights” (Zachariah 4:2).

Gulgoleth, the head, the skull:

“They put his armour in the temple of their gods and hung up his **head** in the temple of Dagon” (1 Chronicles 10:10).

Gulgoleth, a census:

“Take a **census** of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one” (Numbers 1:2).

### 3.2.3. The stone circle at Mount Ebal

This fragment does not tell us much more, but cannot be forgotten:

“Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses – an altar of uncut stones [of twelve stones], on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the Lord burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings” (Joshua 8:30–31).

### 3.2.4. The stone circle at Mount Carmel

The next mention of a monument of a twelve stones appears in the first book of the Kings, concerning the descent of God’s fire on the altar to prove the supremacy of the God of Israel over Baal. Elijah enters into competition with the priest of Baal:

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.<sup>21</sup> Elijah went before the people and said, “ow long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him”. But the people said nothing. Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord . The god who answers by fire – he is God”. Then all the people said, “What you say is good”. Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire”. So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “O Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened”. So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me”. They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord , which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel”. With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord , and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood”. “Do it again”, he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time”, he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down

around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the *prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed*: “O Lord , God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord , answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again”. Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord - he is God! The Lord - he is God!” Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there” (1 Kings 18:20–40).

This is of course of immense interest because of the detailed description of the ritual taking place. We witness an ideological fight to the death between the priests of two different national gods. We also witness the destruction of the enemy’s sanctuary and the reconstruction of one’s own temple. This could explain us the reason why archaeologists have found so many sequences of reconstruction at Stonehenge, for example.

Elias builds an altar, which must be circular because of the fact that twelve stones are used. The altar is the place of circular dances, a ditch surrounds it, and these two points are observed in many megalithic sites also surrounded by ditches and where, as in Winterbourn or Sutton, archaeologists have found the ground hammered around by innumerable steps, probably dances, beating feet on the soil.

The believers of Baal dance a limping step in a circle around their altar, and these limping dances are peculiar to spring festivals<sup>8</sup>. They are also strictly bound to erotic rituals. Ritual wounds and bloodletting are also connected to spring rituals destined to bring the fecundating rain in Neolithic agriculturist societies.

Accordingly, after the miracle of the descent of god’s fire, the rain will fall:

And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain”. So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees<sup>43</sup>. “Go and look toward the sea”, he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there”, he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back”<sup>44</sup>. The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea”. So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you’”. Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel” (1 Kings 18:41–46).

The miracle of the fire descending on soaked wood is explained in another fragment:

Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislev we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the festival of booths and the festival of the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices. For when our ancestors were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire of the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where

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<sup>8</sup> See A. Lebeuf (avec la collaboration de Monique Cohen), *Les boïteries rituelles de printemps* [in:] *Astronomie et Sciences Humaines*, Strasbourg 1988, vol. 2, p. 81–98.

they took such precautions that the place was unknown to anyone. But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to get it. And when they reported to us that they had not found fire but only a thick liquid, he ordered them to dip it out and bring it. When the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and on the things laid upon it. When this had been done and some time had passed, and when the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marvelled. And while the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests offered prayer – the priests and everyone. Jonathan led, and the rest responded, as did Nehemiah. The prayer was to this effect: “O Lord, Lord God, Creator of all things, you are awe-inspiring and strong and just and merciful, you alone are king and are kind, you alone are bountiful, you alone are just and almighty and eternal. You rescue Israel from every evil; you chose the ancestors and consecrated them. Accept this sacrifice on behalf of all your people Israel and preserve your portion and make it holy. Gather together our scattered people, set free those who are slaves among the Gentiles, look on those who are rejected and despised, and let the Gentiles know that you are our God. Punish those who oppress and are insolent with pride. Plant your people in your holy place, as Moses promised.” Then the priests sang the hymns. After the materials of the sacrifice had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured on large stones. When this was done, a flame blazed up; but when the light from the altar shone back, it went out. When this matter became known, and it was reported to the king of the Persians that, in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire, the liquid had appeared with which Nehemiah and his associates had burned the materials of the sacrifice, the king investigated the matter, and enclosed the place and made it sacred. And with those persons whom the king favoured he exchanged many excellent gifts. Nehemiah and his associates called this “nephthar”, which means purification, but by most people it is called naphtha” (2 Maccabees 1:18–36).

Of course, a simple glass placed in the sunrays would light fire in this heap of wood soaked with naphtha, that is petroleum. Indeed, the text mentioned that the miraculous fire set up when the clouds opened and the sun shone out.

This text reveals to us one of those fabulous tricks played by the priests of all religions to strike the minds.

The text of Nehemiah is a commentary on the construction of the altar at Mount Carmel, but if at Mount Carmel the relation of the stone circle is with the springtime festival as in Gilgal, the text of Nehemiah also relates to the feast of Kislev 25<sup>th</sup>. Another text gives more details about Kislev.

### 3.3. The renovation of the altar on Mount Zion

I mentioned earlier the relation between the megalithic circle of Gilgal, timekeeping and astronomy. More specifically the problem concerned the rule of intercalation of the lunar calendar in the solar year and the feast of the first full moon after the spring equinox. At Mount Zion, the problem concerns the adjustment of the new moon at the winter solstice. At spring time, the ritual seems to be associated with fecundation, and thus logically, the feast of Kislev nine months later should be connected to the ritual of birth-giving:

There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the

chambers of the priests in ruins. Then they tore their clothes and mourned with great lamentation; they sprinkled themselves with ashes and fell face down on the ground. And when the signal was given with the trumpets, they cried out to Heaven. Then Judas detailed men to fight against those in the citadel until he had cleansed the sanctuary. He chose blameless priests devoted to the law, and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place. They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down, so that it would not be a lasting shame to them that the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar, and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them. Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts. They made new holy vessels, and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. Then they offered incense on the altar and lit the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple. They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken. Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering. They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests, and fitted them with doors. There was very great joy among the people, and the disgrace brought by the Gentiles was removed. Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev (1 Maccabees 4:38–59).

The fact that the dedication of the stone altar falls **exactly** a year after its destruction and profanation by the pagans shows the importance of the calendar and time aspect of this monument.

The descriptions are rich enough to show us what type of noisy and colourful ceremony took place on such occasions. The music of horns, drums, citharas, harps, cymbals, and the chorus accompanies the feast. The monument itself is decorated with flowers and shields. The feast takes place in the very early morning, in winter still at night, for the rise of the last moon crescent. There is a large fire so that the place is brightly lit and indeed it is the foundation of the Feast of Lights, Hanukkah. The feast lasts for eight days starting on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev the ninth month. In a lunar calendar, this means that the eight days of the Feast of Lights cover the period of the new moon between the last crescent and the return of the new crescent, in the ninth lunar month, meaning around the winter solstice, when the nights are longest and darkest. This all means that the Feast of Lights takes place in the darkest possible period of the year, when days are short and the nights are moonless. The eight days of Hanukkah oscillate in the Gregorian calendar between November 25<sup>th</sup><sup>9</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup> at the earliest, and December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup> at the latest. Of course, the eight days of Hannoukkah are related to the eight days counted between the birth and

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<sup>9</sup> The start of the liturgical year for the Catholics.

the circumcision of a child. This is quite normal if it takes place nine months after its miraculous conception at the spring equinox in the Purim-Passover vernal ritual cycle. In the first and the second case, we notice the strong relation with megalithic buildings: spring at Gilgal and Carmel, and winter at Zion. These traditions then prove very archaic.

For a population coming from Egypt, a country of high culture, famous for its monuments of perfectly well dressed stones, inscriptions and rich figurative decoration, it seems at least very strange that the Hebrews adapted so quickly to the old local and very primitive traditions of Canaan immediately after arrival. Moreover, even before that, when still wandering in the desert, Moses built an altar of twelve stones during Exodus and ordered the construction of Cromlechs at Gilgal and Ebal Mount, so little an Egyptian tradition! It is most probable that on their arrival the Hebrews found the old megalithic monuments, which they simply reused or demolished and rebuilt to inscribe them in their own history. The main difference between their cult and the cults of local nations is apparently that theirs is directed to Yahweh, a god without a body or physical representations, but for the rest, the forms of cult must have been very similar. We also see with this text that the fight between different national gods leads principally to the mutual destruction of rival altars and sanctuaries. The winners reuse the stones to build a new sanctuary dedicated to one's own divinity. Every time the temple is demolished, profaned and then rebuilt and again sanctified. Here again we are led to think of Stonehenge.

In Israel, this cult would evolve towards a progressive abandonment of archaic forms.

#### **4. The fight against old forms of cult and the persistence of them among the Hebrews**

In the Bible, the latter prophets of Yahweh are constantly fighting against old religious remnants and practices. Bethel and Gilgal and all the high places are rejected and represent the abomination of idolatry.

Although Moses himself builds stone altars and recommends their construction when his people reach the promised land, he also recommends their destruction:

Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exodus 34:12–14).

We might understand that this prescription exclusively concerns the altars of rival divinities, and not a condemnation of those buildings as such.

Osaiah's fight against the old holy places of Israel:

“Though you commit adultery, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Do not go to Gilgal” (Osaiah 4:15).

“Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal, I hated them there” (Osaiah 9:15).

“Is Gilead wicked? Its people are worthless! Do they sacrifice bulls in Gilgal? Their altars will be like piles of stones on a ploughed field” (Osaia 12:11).

And Amos mocks them:

Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more (Amos 4:4).

In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practised sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger (2 Kings 21:5–6).

The tragic story of Jephthah also shows that old pagan ritual was still alive in Israel:

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon. When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break. My father, she replied, you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request, she said. Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry. You may go, he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (Judges 11:30–40).

The sacrifice no doubt took place on a stone altar, old style, megalithic.

I discussed just a few instances here where megalithic sites are clearly mentioned, but very many more are doubtless bound to other megalithic sites, under the general appellation of prostitution with stones and wood. The association of megaliths with living sacred trees is constant, and continues to exist today.

Talking of wood, we know of many prehistoric sites with wooden poles or pillars, but wood can also mean living trees, of which modern archaeology cannot find the remnants, but which belonged without doubt to the same religious complex. All we can gather now are the innumerable sacred trees in different parts of the world, often covered with images and pieces of cloth, decorated with colourful ribbons. Let us only remember the altar under the oak at Mambre, Absalom murdered when he was hanging in the oak, and “The angel of the Lord” which “came and sat down under the **oak** in Ophrah” (Judges 6:11).

*We can also be certain* that human sacrifice was common on these megalithic sites. The case of the sacrifice of Isaac is exemplary; the fight of the prophets against passing children through the fire to Moloch is constant. The human sacrifice to God for thanksgiving after a victory is exemplified by the dramatic oath of Jephthah.

Human sacrifice was also common for the sanctification of new sanctuaries:

In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun (1 Kings 16:34).

In spite of this fight lasting millennia, the Hebrews could not abandon those venerable customs. Women especially, always more conservative, answer insolently to the prophet:

Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present—a large assembly—and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, “We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine”. The women added, „When we burned incense to the Queen of Heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, did not our husbands know that we were making cakes like her image and pouring out drink offerings to her?” (Jeremiah 44:19).

And curiously, the prophet Isaiah foresees the reinstallation of the old custom in Egypt for the future:

“In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border” (Isaiah 19:19).

## 5. Provisional conclusions

We find in the Bible a clear description of megalithic constructions and their functions. Indeed everything here looks very logical and is well known from other religions and confirmed partly by modern archaeological finds, ethnographic and folklore remnants. All this should lead to a more complete and detailed study. What strikes most in this collection of biblical fragments is the continuity we find in Christianity and other cults, as if the fundamental religious needs were very similar anywhere and at any time, in spite of the very much changing historical conditions. Religious matters look like an everlasting reconstruction from scattered fragments of the past. The megalithic sanctuaries are:

- House of God
- Place of prophetic visions and encounter with divinity
- Residence of priests
- Place of sacrifice, rituals, ceremonies
- Place of communion
- Community centre
- Place of pilgrimage and processions
- Territorial landmark, military and spiritual fortress
- Astronomically orientated and dedicated to calendar

- Gathering place of idols, state or national treasury
- Collection of relics and clan signs
- Music and dance centre
- Place of royal unction
- Political centre
- Tribunal
- Necropolis or mausoleum

Concerning this last point, it is good to recall that the majority of modern authors see in the megalithic sites mere graves. But the fact of finding bones under a monument does not make it a grave only.

Reading the Bible, megaliths appear as more or less important sanctuaries, very comparably to, let us say, Christian buildings and crosses. They can be found at cemeteries, oratories, chapels, churches, cathedrals, a crowning seat, caves, crossroads, isolated graves, an accident memorial on the roadside, the mark of an illiterate on a church register. It is not because the kings and great men of Poland are buried at Wawel that it is only a mausoleum.