EUROPEAN MEGALITHS: THE MADAGASCAN CONNECTION

by

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The monumental collective tombs built by the Merina people of central Madagascar are a natural focus of interest for archaeologists seeking to understand the megalithic tombs of western Europe. They represent one of the few living megalithic traditions, indeed perhaps the only one to have survived to the present day. As such, they have been used as as a source of ethnographic analogies or parallels by several archaeologists over the past decade (e.g. Chapman 1981, Sharples 1985, Thomas 1988). One major benefit provided by this and similar ethnographic analogies is that they can make the archaeological data less mysterious and alien. a particularly useful consideration where ritual behaviour is involved (Hodder 1982, 166). In this general respect, the Merina parallel has perfomed a most useful service. Most references to the Merina case, however, have used the parallel as a source for conjectures and reconstructions of aspects of social and political organisation wich are not directly observable in the European prehistoric record. The aim of the present study is to assess more precisely the nature and degree of similarity between the Madagascan and European tombs. The present time is especially suitable for such an assessment owing to the recent publication of a number of detailed interpretations of the funerary rituals represented in the European tombs, especially those of the British Isles (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1982, Sharples 1985, Thomas and Whittle 1986, Thomas 1988). To anticipate, careful scrutiny of the European/Madagascan parallels in the ligth of this and other recent research shows that there are a number of significant differences between the two cases. This is not to say that the Merina tombs may not still provide insights into European megaliths in a number of ways. It does suggest, however, that arguments based on the assumed similarity between the two must be used with considerable caution.

Note: the term «megalithic» stricly applies only to those tombs which incorporate large stones in their construction; in this article the term is used as shorthand to cover both megalithic and drystone chambered tombs built in western Europe during the 4th and 3rd millennia b.C.

MERINA TOMBS

The Madagascan tombs have been studied by Bloch (1971, 1981, 1982) and by Joussaume (1985) and Joussaume and Raharijoana (1985). Bloch's account is based on anthropological fieldwork undertaken among the Merina between 1964 and 1966, and seeks primarily to understand the relationship of burial practices to social and kinship organisation as they were at that time. Joussaume and Raharijoana, on the other hand, worked from an archaeological perspective and were interested in the development of Madagascan tombs from their uncertain origins up to the 19th century. For details of burial practices they relied not on direct anthropological observation but on oral evidence collected and recorded by Callet in 1909. The two approaches, though overlapping to some degree, are hence essentially complementary: one contemporary and anthropological, the other historical and archaeological.

From these two sources, we can summarise the main features of the Merina tombs and the associated burial rituals as follows. The tombs are rectangular structures, usually sunk into the ground to some degree, with a single entrance which is blocked or sealed between interments. At the present day, the walls are of stone and cement and the roof is a large stone capstone covered by concrete, The upper part of the tomb, where it emerges above the ground, is often highly decorated, and the structure may be finished off with stone arcades. Bloch's account explains that this type of tomb originated in the 19th century, when European artisans introduced features such as arcading in the elaborate tombs they built for the Merina monarchs and their principal ministers. Prior to this, the tombs had been of megalithic construction, consisting of massive stone slabs and buried up to the capstone in a mound of stones and earth.

Each tomb is the property of a group of people called by Bloch a deme. The numbers of each deme are united by their association with a particular village and ancestral land. The tomb — or a sequence of tombs — will be located on the ancestral land. The village communities are traditionally endogamous, and most of the people within a deme are therefore related by kinship. The deme is not simply a kin-group, however, since by no means all of the nembers are related in this way. Instead, it is the link with village, tomb and ancestral land which is the basis of the deme. Members of the deme retain these links — which include the rigth to burial in the ancestral tomb (and the responsibility to contribute to its construction and upkeep) even if they no longer live in the area of the ancestral village.

The funerary rite described by Bloch has two separate stages. Shortly after death, the body of the deceased is buried. In some cases, this buriel will be in the tomb to which the person had a rigth, but for a variety of reasons the initial burial is often in a temporary earth grave. Temporary burial is particu-

larly commom where a person dies some distance away from the ancestral tomb. Today this is frequent because many people have moved away from their ancestral villages either to the capital, Tananarive, or to other areas where they can take advantage of government land-grants. In the past, Merina military campaigns may have been the principal cause of people dying away from their ancestral village. The second stage of the burial ritual follows after two or more years, and is known as *famadihana*. In this ceremony the body is taken out of the tomb, or exhumed in the case of a temporary grave, and re-wrapped in silken shrouds. It is then placed or replaced in the tomb. If several years have elapsed, the body will of course have decayed and it will be the bones which are re-wrapped. In the course of the *famadihana* ceremony a number of the older skeletons are also removed from the tomb and re-wrapped, in much the same way as the principal interment. During the course of the day, before the tomb is resealed, all the remaining skeletons are re-wrapped in a more hurried way inside the tomb. This is the procedure as recorded by Bloch. Joussaume adds the further detail from oral tradition that in the re-wrapping of skeletons of people who had been dead for some time, bones from three or four individuals would sometimes be wrapped together in the same shroud. He also describes the extreme practice resorted to in the past when a person was unable to bring back the body of a dead relative who had died away from his or her home village. In this circunstances the recently dead corpse would be dismembered so as to retrieve the eight principal long bones for tansport and burial in the ancestral tomb (Joussaume, 1985, 297).

The social logic behind the Merina funerary ritual is held to be that rights over land depend on membership of the deme. This leads to a major emphasis on corporate solidarity within the deme which includes and indeed is focused on the ancestors who are buried in the collective tombs. The collective nature of the burial practice and monumentality of the tombs symbolise the importance of these concepts in Merina society.

COMPARISOM WITH THE EUROPEAN TOMBS

The resemblance between the monumental chambered tombs of prehistoric western Europe and the tombs built by the Merina leads easily to the hypothesis that a similar social logic may have been involved in both cases. There are, I believe, reasonable grounds for believing that some features of Merina society, such as reverence for the ancestors and the importance of group solidarity, may indeed have been paralleled in the European case. The evidence for this belief comes however not only or even primarily from the Merina parallel. It comes rather from careful scrutiny of the evidence from the European tombs, and consideration of that evidence in the ligth of a whole range of ethnographic studies bearing on the relationship between funerary

practices and other aspects of society.

The relevance of the Merina analogy, and its limitations, may perhaps best be assessed by isolating and comparing various aspects of the Madagascan and European tombs and their associated burial practices:

1) the practice of excarnation: this has been argued for the European tombs from the fact that the bones of individuals are rarely found in articulation. In some cases, indeed, parts of bodies have been found articulated, indicating partial decomposition before placement in the tomb. In other cases, bones of different individuals have been sorted into separate anatomical elements such as long bones, or skulls, which have been placed in separate parts of the tomb. Such manipulation of the bones of the deceased must have had powerful symbolic meaning but there is no parallel for it in the Merina rituals as described by Bloch. Nor does the Merina case provide any parallel for the scattered human bones found outside the European tombs at enclosures such as Hambledon Hill (Mercer 1980). In the Merina case, bodies decayed either in the ancestral tomb or in a temporary earth-grave; except in the unusual practice of defleshing described by Joussaume, none of the bones should have been lost. Certainly the open-air excarnation of human corpses, which according to some may have been carried out at enclosures such as Hambledon Hill (Mercer 1980), finds no echo in Madagascar. On the other hand, excarnation itself — the exhumation of bodies and reinterment of the bones after decomposition — is not especially uncommon, and a number of parallels can be cited in addition to the Merina. The Parsees of western India, with their «towers of silence», provide a particularly famous example. Excarnation is indeed practised in some parts of southern Europe at the present day.

2) ancestor worship: Bloch writes; «The tombs stand for the permanent unity of people and land; they place the ancestors in the land» (Bloch 1986, 35); and in invoking the ancestors «The invocation may take place anywhere, but if the blessing is of particular significance it will take place at the communal familial tomb» (ibid, 41). The ritual of *famadihana*, when the bodies in the tomb are re-wrapped, may be considered to incorporate elements of ancestor worship. Many of the prehistoric chambered tombs of western Europe were equipped with passages or portals which would have enabled them to be reopened from time to time. This could have been to allow successive burials to be introduced, but it could also have served for the periodic removal and veneration of the bones of the ancestors. The Merina practice of removing bodies and re-wrapping them at periodic intervals is unlikely to be detected in the archaeological record, as the Merina carefully replace the bodies in the tombs at the end of the *famadihana* ceremony. The Merina place the bodies on separate shelves; few if any of the West European megaliths have

human remains arranged as they are in the Madagascan tombs. The sorting and segregation of the anatomical parts attested in some European tombs suggests that if ancestor rituals were involved they may have resembled the «skull festivals» practised by West African peoples such as the Dowayo of Cameroun rather than the Merina *famadihana*. The Dowayo keep the skulls of the male dead, after the flesh has decayed, in a hut on the edge of the village, and bring them out for a final ceremony during which blood, entrails and excrement are sprinkled on them (Barley 1983, 99-103). Some such practice may explain the collections of human crania found separated from other parts of the skeleton in certain European megalithic tombs; for example the 27 skulls gathered together in one of the side chambers at Isbister on Orkney (Hedges 1983), or the 17 skulls in the terminal stall at Knowe of Yarso on Rousay (Callander and Grant 1935). However we read this evidence, it indicates that if the bodies of the ancestors in the European tombs were used in recurrent rituals there is no reason to suppose that those rituals bore any close resemblance to the Merina *famadihana* ceremony. The parallel which can be drawn is only of a general nature.

3) community solidarity and cohesion: Merina tomb rituals stress the importance of the group rather than the individual dead. Bloch (1981) interprets the physical effects of the *famadihana* ceremony on the corpses themselves in these terms: «Ordinary Merina do not consider tombs as important because they contain specific people but because they contain undifferentiated, and often ground-up together people; this is produced quite literally as a result of dancing with the corpses of members of the deme in the *famadihana*. This grinding together of the corpses, and the communal symbolism of the tomb, is the funerary equivalent of endogamy». Shanks and Tilley reach a similar conclusion in their study of mortuary practices in British and Scandinavian megalithic tombs: «An assertation of the collective, a denial of the individual and of differences between individuals. The regrouping of the disarticulated remains may represent an assertion of resonance between essentially discrete individuals, and thus a denial of asymmetrical relationships existing in life» (Sanks and Tilley 1982, 150). But what Shanks and Tilley are discussing goes far beyond the accidental mixing of bones; they are discussing the intentional placing and manipulation of male and female bones and bones from the left and rigth sites of the body. At the Ascott-under-Wychwood long barrow, one skeleton had been «reconstituted» from the remains of two separate individuals, one male, the other female (Chesterman 1977). Other European tombs show a different pattern yet again. At La Chaussée-Tirancourt the distribution of non-metrical genetic features indicates that different parts of the tomb were reserved for separate families or kin-groups. In this case the corporate solidarity of the kin-group (separate areas within the tomb) seems to have been maintained despite the commu-

nality of the collective burial concept (everyone buried in the same chamber) (Scarre 1984). The group-solidarity of the Merina tombs, as it is expressed in the disposition of the human remains, cannot be carefully studied.

4) morphology: the European tombs differ from the Merina tombs in their architecture and construction. The more recent Merina tombs illustrated by Bloch (1971, fig. 7, p. 113 and plate 3b), built of squared granite blocks bound together with mortar and a concrete-covered capstone, are unlike any of the structures known from prehistoric Europe. Prior to 19th century contact with British and French, however, the Merina tombs were of megalithic construction and were enclosed within a mound, and hence were generally similar to some of the chambered tombs of prehistoric western Europe. The great variety of European tomb types and features finds no counterpart in Madagascar, however; no passage graves, segmented chambers, long mounds, or megalithic art. These important characteristics of the European tombs therefore cannot be explained by reference to the Merina example. The considerable variation among the European tombs should in itself lead us to question whether any single interpretation or analogy could reasonably be expected to cover all the various types.

5) Menhirs: both Bloch (1971) and Joussaume and Raharijoana (1985) refer to the menhirs or monolithic standing stones of Madagascar, and since menhirs are also found in neolithic Atlantic Europe they provide a further point of comparison between the two areas. The most spectacular of the European standing stones are the stone rows of Carnac in Brittany and the stone circles of the British Isles, neither of which have any parallels in Madagascar. The Madagascan stones tend rather to be single. Sometimes they are near to the megalithic tombs. Bloch describes these as «menhir-tombs», erected to commemorate the dead whose bodies it has not been possible to bring back to the ancestral tomb (Bloch 1971, p. 8). In this context, therefore, they are the symbolic equivalent of the tombs. Joussaume, however, points out that the situation is not so simple, and that the Madagascan standing stones have a number of different purposes and significances. Referring to the study by Raharijoana (1962), he distinguishes two types of standing stones: those raised to commemorate the dead, and those erected to commemorate an event. Some may even have been boundary markers. He concludes that the number of different reasons for which the Madagascan menhirs were erected makes it impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions which can even tentatively be applied to the prehistoric European examples: «Si l'on devait admettre qu'il y a autant de causes differentes a l'erection des menhirs de la France, on peut etre assuré de ne jamais savoir precisement leur raison d'etre» (Joussaume 1985, p. 299). The variability among the prehistoric standing stones of Atlantic Europe gives added point to this remark. While

a few are found as single stones adjacent to megalithic tombs, others by contrast appear to have been intentionally destroyed when the tombs were built and their broken remains incorporated in the chambers (Le Roux 1984, 1985). These re-used Breton menhirs must date early in the Neolithic, perhaps around 4000 b.C.; by contrast, some South Welsh menhirs have been dated to the Early or Middle Bronze Age (Williams 1988). They were no doubt raised in different reasons. The fact that megalithic tombs and standing stones are found both in Atlantic Europe and Madagascar is probably to be explained simply by the availability of suitable stone and the development of a tradition of megalithic architecture in those areas; there is no reason to postulate any closer parallel.

This comparison of the archaeological evidence has cast doubt on the closeness of the similiarity between the megalithic tombs of Europe and the Merina tombs in terms of burial practices, morphology and related features. The significance which this holds for the use of the Merina tombs as an analogy for those of prehistoric western Europe will be discussed in the final section of this article. First, however, the historical development of the Madagascan megaliths will be considered. Can the Madagascan evidence help in any way to explain the origin of the European tombs?

SOCIAL CHANGE AND MEGALITHIC TOMBS

The origins and development of the Madagascan megalithic tombs are known from a combination of archaeological and historical evidence. Though the sequence has not been used explicitly as a parallel for the development of the European tombs, such an application is to some degree implicit in Joussaume and Raharijoana's account (1985).

Few of the tombs on Madagascar have been excated, but a three-stage sequence of development is suggested (Joussaume and Raharijoana 1985). The earliest tombs are thought to be simple stone cists. Though these sometimes hold more than one burial (typically remains of from one to three individuals), it is likely that all the bodies in a particular grave were placed there at the same time, and not as the result of successive interments. They are not therefore truly collective graves comparable to the later Merina tombs. An excavated example at Ankatro contained a principal burial accompanied by the remains of two smaller individuals, perhaps women or children (Lejamble 1976, quoted in Joussaume and Raharijoana 1985). These early cists are of relatively modest dimensions, around 2 m. long by 0,5 m. high and 0,5 m. wide.

The second stage of development includes the earliest tombs which can be attributed to the Merina. These are cist graves, similar in size construction to the earlier cists. They contain more bodies, however, and were re-opened from

time to time for successive interments; on this basis they may be considered truly collective tombs. Their chronology is uncertain, but some of them at least can be dated to the 18th century A.D.

The third and final stage consists of the first Madagascan tombs which can properly be termed megalithic. In the «History of the Kings» these are associated with King Andrianampoinimerina, who reigned from 1787-1810. This king it was who first unified central Madagascar and laid the foundations for subsequence Merina control of the whole island. The «History of the Kings» attributes the origins of Merina megalithic tombs to a conscious act on the part of Andrianampoinimerina. It describes how in early times the people built small tombs — the earlier cist graves — in which they buried the inhabitants of a single household. Andrianampoinimerina, however, made them build larger tombs — the first megalithic tombs — in order to increase social cohesion and bring greater stability and unity to his realm. He is quoted as saying «Join together to quarry the stones; for in that way you will demonstrate your matual friendship; join together to transport the stones which will contribute to your well-being» (quoted by Joussaume and Raharijoana 1985, p. 541). Many examples of these megalithic tombs survive, and some contain the remains of up to 300 individuals.

From the evidence assembled by Jousaumme and Raharijoana it can be seen that on Madagascar we have a transition from small tombs containing two or three burials, built before the growth of political unity, to large megalithic structures with hundreds of burials originating in the period of social and political change which coincided with the foundation of a powerful centralised state. Does this pattern have any relevance for our understanding of European megaliths?

It is clear that in many areas of Europe the earliest neolithic tombs were relatively small in size, and that large and spectacular tombs were a later development, For Ireland, Sheridan has proposed a five-stage sequence of megalithic tombs, beginning with simple chambers surrounded by a kerb some 10-15 m in diameter, and culminating in the final stage with the Boyne valley tombs Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange, each over 80 m in diameter (Sheridan 1985). The cemetery of megalithic tombs at Bougon in western France shows a similar trend: the earliest mounds, E and Fo, which date from c. 3800 b.C., are relatively small (estimated original volume C. 300 cum and C. 100 cum respectively); the later mounds A, C and F1/2, dating to approximately 3200-2800 b.C., had volumes in excess of 4000 cu m. The Orkney islands provide a closer parallel to the Madagascan case, with not only a sequence from small, simple tombs to large and elaborate tombs, but also the probability that the earlier tombs held relatively few bodies, while the later tombs may contain the remains of over 350 individuals (Sharples 1985). Hedges has calculated the work effort involved in the construction of the Orkney tombs. On this basis he

has argued that the few large tombs of the so-called «Maes Howe» type, the product of up to 39.000 work-hours, belong to a more centralised society than the more numerous small early chambers, many of which probably required fewer than 10.000 work-hours (Hedges 1984). The argument and conclusions are smilar to those of Renfrew's earlier study on the tombs and ritual monuments of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Wessex (Renfrew 1973).

The argument which regards fewer and larger monuments as the sign of a more centralised and hierarchical society, though not without critics, is relatively straightforward and intuitive. Certainly it is not derived from any specific ethnographic parallel. But while the development of larger monuments in all these regions may indicate a trend towards centralisation and complexity, the scale or level of this complexity may be totally different in the diferent case. Comparing the social background of tomb development on Madagascar with that we know of Orkney or other parts of neolithic Western Europe indeed highlights just such a major contrast. The large Merina tombs were the product of a state society with a professional army and a literate bureaucracy (Bloch 1986); there is no evidence for anything like that in Neolithic Britain. This fundamental difference in social context constitutes a major obstacle to the use of the Merina tombs as a source of analogies for either the development or symbolism of the European chambered tombs.

DISCUTION

Several authors have commented in recent years on the use and abuse of ethnographic analogies in archaeology (e.G. Gould and Watson 1982, Hodder 1983, Wylie 1985). All agree, though in different ways, that analogy is essential to the understanding of the archaeological record, especially for the prehistoric period where written records are lacking. The problem is in deciding whether a specific analogy is helpful or relevant. As Hodder states: «all analogical reasoning accepts that there will be some differences between the things being compared. We can set the past beside the present even if some aspects of the contexts do differ»;but he also points out that «The proper use of analogy in archaeology must pay special attention to context; that is, to the funcional and ideological framework within which material items are used in everyday life» (Hodder 1938, 26-27).

Let us briefly review the comparison between Madagascan and European tombs in the light of these comments. It is clear that the Merina tombs provide a number of good general similarities to European megalithic tombs, notably in their monumentality, in the custom of collective burial, and in the practice of excarnation. Alongside these must be set number of major differences. The European tombs contain evidence of burial practices (disarticulated and «reconstituted» burials) which are apparently unknown among the Merina. The

architecture of the European tombs: the passage graves, the long mounds which emphasise the mound rather than the chamber, and the megalithic art found in some chambers, are without parallels in Madagascar. If we turn, as Hodder recomends, to the social and ideational context, we find further differences. Thus the large Merina tombs originated in the context of a state society with centralised power, a standing army and a literate bureaucracy; there is no evidence for a comparable level of socio-political organisation in neolithic western Europe.

At the detailed level, therefore, the Merina parallel fails in a number of important respects. At a general level, however, it is undoubtedly a fruitful source of ideas about the kinds of beliefs and practices with which the European chambered tombs of the 4th and 3rd millennia b.C. may have been associated. This provides valuable suggestions as to what we should look for in the European evidence, and what particular features might mean. A good example is the possibility that remains of the ancestors were used in periodic rituals. This as we saw may be the explanation for the separate placing of skulls at Isbister. Another important feature of the collective burial rite practised by the Merina is the emphasis on group solidarity, which may be the reason for the re-construction of a skeleton from the remains of different individuals seen at Ascott-under-Wychwood and other sites: incorporation of several bodies into one. The important point in both these cases, however, is that although the general idea may be derived from the Madagascan, the precise manifestation is of a form unknown in the Merina tombs.It would not indeed be an exaggeration to say that what we understand about European megalithic tombs rituals today is as much despite as because of insights gained from the Merina case.

The study presented here has shown that the differences between the European and Madagascan tombs are such that the parallel between them is only of a general, rather than a detailed, type. This limits the inferences which can be draw from the Merina context about features of the relavent prehistoric European societies which are lacking, or nearly so, in the European archaeological record; there is no reason, for instance, why the connection between monumental tombs and restricted resources on Madagascar (Chapman 1981) need necessarily hold for prehistoric Europe. Such a contention would require either a closer ethnographic analogy — preferably of a relational type (Hodder 1983, 16ff) — or direct archaeological support. It must not be forgotten also that Madagascar is only a single case; the only recent society to have practised collective burial in megalithic tombs. This very uniqueness makes it all the more difficult to assess the signifiance of such similarietis as there are between the Madagascan tombs and those of prehistoric Europe. As Gould remarks, «All ethnographic analogues are self-limiting by their very nature and are based entirely upon on existing kinds of behaviour as observed ethnographically. They cannot inform us objectively about past behaviour that may have

no known historic or ethnographic counterpart, nor can they provide all the possible alternatives that might apply even in cases where contemporary analogues do exist (Gould and Watson 1982, p. 372). A much stronger case would be argued if there were a number of ethnographic examples, preferably from separate societies not culturally or historically linked, for the use of monumental collective tombs. It would then be possible to establish whether certain features of social organisation were regularly associated with tombs of this type, and to assess the significance of any differences.

A final point which must be emphasised is the variability among European megalithic tombs, both in morphology and burial rite, from period to period and region to region. No sigle ethnographic parallel can be expected to fit all these tombs equally well. But this is by no means a counsel of despair. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that many of the features in which the European tombs differ from those of Madagascar, and from each other, can nonetheless be explained in terms of the wide range of custom and behaviour which we know of from ethnographic accounts of non-state societies. The process of reasoning is essentially that of Wylie's multiple or composite analogy — a complex ethnographic analogy composed of elements from a number of different sources (Wylie 1985, p. 105-107). This must be the basis of almost all archaeological interpretation. It is in the over-reliance os specific single analogies, which never fit the archaeological evidence exactly, taht the dangers lie.

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