

Who were the people who built the megalithic tombs in the Levant? Why did they appear at the turn of the 4th millennium BCE in the basalt highlands of the Akkar region in northern Lebanon? What was their role in the emergence of the first urban centers in the Levant during this period?

These questions will be addressed by researchers from the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IMOC PAS) and the University of Geneva (UniGE-LAP) in the proposed project: **"MEG-A: The first megalith builders of the northern Levant. A multidisciplinary investigation of Akkar's archaeological landscape (Lebanon, 4th-3rd millennia BC) "**. Megalithic structures are often perceived as isolated, anonymous, and mysterious monuments. Yet, they were conceived and constructed by a specific group of people, for whom the monumentalism of the building served as a way of expressing their identity in its various aspects, e.g. social, economic, or religious.

The megaliths of Akkar – tombs made of monumental boulders – are often interpreted as having been built by nomadic pastoralists. These structures were discovered and examined in the 1960s by French Jesuit monks (René Mouterde and Maurice Tallon) stationed in the area, who recognized the extraordinary importance of these monuments. Material from this pioneering study allowed the megaliths to be tentatively dated to the period between the end of the Chalcolithic period and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (around 3700–2800 BCE). They are the first structures of this type in Northern Levant, where the tradition of erecting and using them continued for nearly 1,500 years.

The discovery of remains of houses in the vicinity of the tombs in 2018 challenged the interpretation of the megalithic community as nomadic and living on the fringes of the civilized world. This discovery was made by two archaeological teams working independently in this area: a Swiss one – led by Dr. Tara Steimer and a Polish one – led by Dr. Zuzanna Wygnańska. In addition to houses, researchers also identified hitherto unknown traces of agricultural infrastructure, two places of worship near watercourses, and carvings on stone boulders depicting snakes and geometric signs, near both the tombs and the places of worship. These findings gave impetus to the joint research proposal focused on decoding the history and identity of the megalith builders. We hypothesize that these people were not nomads, but a population that settled in the demanding region of a basalt highland. We assume that the building of the megaliths was a complicated logistical undertaking that required resources, knowledge, and proper organization and that the Akkar community must have been able to meet these demands. This well-organized megalith builder community may have had access to some natural resources, perhaps the famous Lebanese wood (forests cover the mountainous part of Akkar even today). It seems that this ensured their important role in the formative process of the first urban centers of the Levant at the turn of the 4th millennium BCE, although their model of social organization was different from that of the emerging urban civilization.

To address these questions, the "MEG-A" project proposes to depart from the traditional, that is monographic (or typological), approach to megaliths and instead to apply in their research some interdisciplinary methods: archaeological, architectural, geological, archaeobotanical, and archaeozoological to put the interpretation of the origin and meaning of the megaliths on a scientific footing. For the first time, rock carvings will be studied using methods currently used in the study of megalithic art in Europe. Radiometric methods will be used on a large scale to obtain absolute dating of the megaliths. Comprehensive environmental studies will serve to assess the natural conditions under which the megalithic community lived and to ascertain whether they allowed for a sedentary lifestyle based on an economy that exploited the diverse resources of Akkar's basalt highlands.

These studies and analyzes are meant to provide data that will help to answer the question on the identity of the builders of the Akkar megaliths and their role both in the broader phenomenon of building megalithic tombs throughout the Levant and in the context of the formation of urban civilization.