

Book Review

Megalithic Jordan

An Introduction and Field Guide

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Gajus Scheltema
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*With an introduction by His Royal
Highness Prince Al Hassan bin Talal
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The first guide to megalithic sites in Jordan. This book contains
detailed descriptions of dolmens, standing stones and related features,
followed by a guide to some of the most interesting of these sites.
Ideal for those of adventurous nature, and a unique synthesis for
the experts, this book contains an important bibliography.

The title of the book accurately reflects the contents, as the author has clarified at the outset that it is meant to be a field guide. The timing of its publication is also opportune, as there has long been an urgent

need for this type of guide-book in Jordan - a fact highlighted by His Royal Highness Prince Al-Hasan bin Talal in his introduction.

In the preface (pp. 11-15) the writer points to the richness of megalithic fields in Jordan, which have unfortunately not received the attention they deserve - whether from locals or from tourists. Worse still, they are threatened by destruction as a result of an ever-growing population, the price of land, agricultural activities, stone quarrying, treasure hunting and other factors. Scheltema stresses on the need to protect this unique heritage through awareness campaigns and greater attention from scholars and stake-holders within Jordan.

The book has been divided into two parts - an introduction and a field guide, thus targeting tourists and other interested people on one hand, and archaeologists on the other.

Several subjects are discussed in the general introduction (pp. 17- 60) including definitions, general occurrence and distribution of dolmens and standing stones in the Levant, related archaeological phenomena in Jordan, dolmen architecture, Biblical and ancient references to megaliths, history of research on megalithic structures, function and orientation, distribution, typology and dating.

The definitions of "dolmen" and "standing stone" presented in this book are rather brief. However both terms have been defined in detail in several past publications (Kohn 1914: 94; Zohar 1992: 44; 1993: 352; Prag 1995: 75; Worschech 2002, Kafafi and Scheltema 2005: 11). Also, various Arabic names have been given to megaliths in Jordan, which often help to explain their functions (Kafafi 2007 "Arabic").

While discussing the general occurrence of dolmens and standing stones (pp.18-19), the author points out that dolmens generally have a wider distribution, and receive more attention, than standing stones. A map of the distribution of megaliths in Jordan early on in the book, and another showing their distribution in the Near East, are revealing and useful to the general reader. The study of

stone alignments (pp.19-21) is also most interesting especially that, as Scheltema indicates, not enough time has been devoted by researchers, to study the variety of stone alignments in Jordan (p.21). However, a first attempt towards some kind of explanation was made by Körber (1994:69), who connected the alignments with the standing stones, and concluded that the entire structures either represented the dead or were related to a deity. Further discussion of other related archaeological features continues on pages 21-26, where information about the stone circles, cairns, cists, cup holes and rock-cut tombs is offered briefly.

In his review entitled "Biblical and ancient references to megaliths" (pp. 27-31), the author might have been more convincing had he explained at the very beginning why Biblical narratives are useful in explaining megaliths since they were built in the later period of the Iron Ages, well before the Old Testament was written.

The "History of research on megalithic structures" (pp.31-38), is discussed chronologically beginning with "early accounts" dating to the early nineteenth century, and concluding with the "post World War II" period. The information presented is not only valuable but compelling, and summarized in a manner that allows the reader to follow the development of megalithic structures systematically.

The study of the distribution of dolmens in the Levant (pp.38-40) indicates that Jordan is widely populated with dolmen fields, whereas in contrast, surrounding regions have only a few. However, it must be noted that though dolmens are visible almost all over Jordan, their main concentrations are in Wadi az-Zaraqa and regions overlooking the Jordan Rift Valley (Kafafi and Scheltema 2005).

The author presents a most interesting and enlightening debate about the architecture of the dolmens and a re-study of the six types proposed by Zohar (1992). He points out that Steimer-Herbert (2004) added more types to what Epstein (1985) and Zohar had proposed. He accurately reflects... "in

conclusion, however, I think it is less important to try to classify the dolmens into types than to organize that both local (tribal) preferences and the availability of material must have had a decisive influence on the outcome of the construction" (p. 45). Despite this, he points out that unfortunately no significant research has been attempted until now on the construction methods of dolmens (p. 46).

In discussing the date of the dolmens, Scheltema presents a study of all published opinions on this matter (pp.46-48) and agrees with Steimer-Herbert, who was of the view that the two main construction periods of dolmens were the beginning of the Early Bronze and the transition to the Middle Bronze Ages (p.48). As a matter of fact, as the author points out, most of the studied dolmen fields in Jordan such as the ones in Damiyah (Yassin 1985), indicate an Early Bronze Age I date rather than any other period.

Scheltema agrees with the view that dolmens were built for burying the dead, although he admits (p.49) that excavators have never actually found any human skeletal remains in spite of digging in several dolmen fields. His explanation for this apparent inconsistency, as with other scholars, is that the dolmens probably functioned as secondary burials and could be construed as being symbols for members of the same family.

To his credit, Scheltema withholds discussion about the orientation of dolmens ... "*many pages have been written on this subject, and I could do so too, but will refrain" (p.50). He rightly feels that not much can be read into the orientation of dolmens, and that in fact there is no specific orientation, despite the view of some scholars that their orientation can be linked to astronomy, terrain, or cult centers.*

In his general introduction, the author offers a thorough study of "Standing stones: distribution, typology and dating" (pp.53-60). He asserts that "*the shape of a standing stone can vary considerably, and therefore it does not always show a specific 'face', unless*

it is found in a clearly defined situation, such as in a room or adjacent to a platform" (p.53). Actually, a standing stone with a carved "face" has not yet been seen anywhere in Jordan whether 'in a room' or 'adjacent to a platform'. The examples offered by the author are those excavated by Kirkbride at the site of the Rizqa/Aqaba region, dating back to the Neolithic period. In actual fact, the Rizqa carved standing stones were found in an open-air area (Kirkbride 1969a; 1969b). Nevertheless, the study of the distribution and typology (pp.53-58) offered by the author is well illustrated and highly informative. Standing stones built in rooms were first recognized at the Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period at Shakarat al-Musay'id, followed by the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B cultic buildings at the site of 'Ayn Ghazal (Kafafi; forthcoming).

The second part of the book entitled "How to use this guide" (pp.61-117) is essential to this study as it discusses the major dolmen and standing stone fields in Jordan and also offers detailed information about locations, according to the Global Positioning System (GPS) (p.61) which is of tremendous help, especially in the absence of detailed maps of Jordan. Selected bibliographies, presented at the end of each discussion and at the end of the book, are of potentially great importance to researchers.

Without doubt, Gajus H. Scheltema, although a diplomat (Danish Ambassador to Jordan for four years, 2003-2007), and a non-expert in the field, has produced a compelling, in-depth, and highly professional presentation of the megalithic fields in Jordan. Having traveled the length and breadth of the country, the writer offers invaluable information and insight from the perspective of a foreigner who apart from his great fascination for megaliths also grew attached to its people and heritage. Certainly, this engrossing publication supported by superb photographs, deserves a special place on the bookshelves of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and even lay persons interested in the beauty and science of megalithic structures.

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