Les reliques de Lothéa (Quimperlé, Finistère) : une tombe aux connexions atlantiques entre Campaniforme et Âge du Bronze ancien

Clément NICOLAS *, Yvan PAILLER **, Pierre STEPHAN ***, Henri GANDOIS ****

MOTS-CLÉS. Bretagne, tumulus, mégalithisme, tombe individuelle, Néolithique final, Campaniforme, Âge du Bronze ancien, jadeïtite, brassard d’archer, flèches, poignards, cuivre arsénié, chaînes de spirales, or, argent, relations atlantiques.

RÉSUMÉ. En 1843, Arthur Boutarel, inspecteur des forêts de Lorient, fouille un tumulus dans la forêt de Carnoët, près du hameau de Lothéa (Quimperlé, Finistère). La découverte de la relation de fouilles, restée inédite durant près de 170 ans, porte à une révision de cette tombe à la lumière des avancées de la recherche. Le tertre, par sa taille, appartient aux grands tumulus de l’Âge du Bronze ancien de Bretagne. Le caveau funéraire est construit selon les principes de l’architecture mégalithique et peut être considéré comme un lien entre les sépultures collectives du Néolithique et les tombes individuelles de l’Âge du Bronze. Le mobilier, particulièrement riche, révèle une triple composante avec des éléments attribuables au Néolithique final (pendeloque en jadeïtite), au Campaniforme (brassard d’archer, flèches à pédoncule et ailerons équarris) et au tout début du Bronze ancien (poignards, hache). Trois grands poignards de type Quimperlé témoignent de relations atlantiques par leurs formes et leur alliage fait de cuivre et d’arsenic. Ces relations à longue distance sont confirmées par la présence dans la tombe de deux chaînes de spirales, une en or et une en argent, qui proviennent selon toute vraisemblance du nord-ouest de la péninsule Ibérique.

KEYWORDS. Brittany, barrow, megalithism, individual grave, late Neolithic, Beaker, Early Bronze Age, jadeïtite, wristguard, arrowheads, daggers, arsenical copper, spiraled chains, gold, silver, Atlantic connections.

ABSTRACT. In 1843, Arthur Boutarel, the Lorient forest inspector, excavates a barrow in Carnoët forest near the hamlet of Lothéa (Quimperlé, Finistère, France). The discovery of the excavation notes, unpublished for over near 170 years, enables this grave to be reviewed in the light of recent research. The mound, by its dimensions, belongs to the class of Breton large early Bronze Age barrows. The grave is of megalithic construction and can be considered as a link between Neolithic collective tombs and Bronze Age individual graves. The grave-goods, particularly rich, show a triple component with artefacts attributed to the Late Neolithic (jadeïtite hatchet-pendant), the Beaker culture (wristguard, squared barbed-and-tanged arrowheads) and the beginnings of the Early Bronze Age (daggers, axe). Three long daggers of Quimperlé type provide evidence for Atlantic connections by their shape and alloy, consisting of copper and arsenic. These long-distance relations are confirmed by the presence in the grave of two spiraled chains, one gold and the other silver, which most probably come from north-western Iberia.

translation: Magen O’Farrell

---

* Doctorant, université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne CNRS, UMR8215 Trajectoires, Maison de l’archéologie et de l’ethnologie, 21, allée de l’Université, 92023 Nanterre cedex, cllement.nicolas@mae.u-paris1.fr.

** INRAP CIF, centre archéologique de Tours CNRS, UMR8215 Trajectoires, Maison de l’archéologie et de l’ethnologie, 21, allée de l’Université, 92023 Nanterre cedex et Géomer - Laboratoire LETG-Brest, UMR6554 CNRS, Institut Universitaire Européen de la Mer, place Nicolas Copernic, 29280 POUZANE, yvan.pailler@inrap.fr.

*** Chargé de recherche, Laboratoire LETG-Brest, UMR6554 CNRS, Institut Universitaire Européen de la Mer, place Nicolas Copernic, 29280 POUZANE, stephan.pierre00@gmail.com.

**** Doctorant, université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne CNRS, UMR8215 Trajectoires, Maison de l’archéologie et de l’ethnologie, 21, allée de l’Université, 92023 Nanterre cedex, henri.gandois@gmail.com.
The relics of Lothéa (Quimperlé, Finistère) : a grave with atlantic connections between the Bell Beaker and Early Bronze Age

On August 14, 1843, Arthur Boutarel, the Lorient forest inspector (Magny, 1856), undertook the excavation of the Lothéa barrow, located in the forest of Carnoët (Quimperlé, Finistère) (fig. 1, 20). This excavation was part of the Romantic and Celtic movement of the late 18th century and early 19th century during which archaeological excavations became more frequent (Cambry, 1799; Frémivinville, 1832; Mérième, 1837; Briard, 1970b; Chaigneau, 2009). This discovery became known only through indirect accounts, in a period in which the learned societies of Brittany were in their infancy (Giot, 1997).

Since this time, several generations of archaeologists have attempted to learn more about the nature of this monument and the results of its excavation (Chatellier, 1883a; L’Helgouac’h, 1970; Treinen, 1970; Briard, 1983; Bertrand, 1884 and 1891; Société d’Émulation des Côtes-du-Nord, 1884; Serret, 1885 and 1901; Chatellier, 1889 and 1907; Aveneau de la Grancière, 1899; Mortillet, 1902 and 1903; Briard, L’Helgouac’h, 1957; Briard, Mohen, 1974; Briard et al., 1977b; Eluère, 1982 and 1986; Giot et al., 1979; Briard, 2000; Balquet, 2001) (fig. 2 to 5). The present article would be just one among many if it was not inspired by the discovery made by one of us (Y. P.) of the previously unknown account by the excavator, Arthur Boutarel, to the Mediatéque de l’Architecte et du Patrimoine in Paris (n° 0080/026/0019). This account is accompanied by a report by Prosper Mérimée, Inspector General of Historic Monuments (Bercé, 1979, p. 323) and the excavation report concerning the second barrow excavated by Arthur Boutarel at Kerivoalen (Quimperlé).

Arthur Boutarel’s description of the excavations relates the exact contents of the artifacts found in the Lothéa tomb, and is corroborated by various documents (tabl. I; fig. 3). It allows a distinction to be made between the objects found in the grave and the false “relics” later mistakenly attributed to it (fig. 6). In 1844, the archaeological artifacts of Lothéa were integrated into the collections of the Cluny Museum in Paris (Revue archéologique, 1844; Sommerard, 1847 and 1883). They were later transferred to the National Archaeology Museum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (Reinach, 1898 and 1917; Mohen et al., 1994), except for one gold chain (Henry, 2008). Several objects have since disappeared: two pieces of a weapon and one rod in a copper alloy, a silver spiral chain, seven flint arrowheads, one quartzite pebble and one copper alloy axe head, probably stolen at the time of the discovery (Le Men, 1868).

The Lothéa barrow is not alone in its environment (Le Roux, 1981; Paulet, 2005; Galliou, 2010), belonging to a small concentration of Megalithic burial mounds and cists dated to the Late Neolithic, Bell Beaker and Early Bronze Age periods (Euzenot, 1868 and 1878; Le Pontois, 1890; Giot, 1960; Le Roux, 1974, 1975 and 1999; Brunet et al., 2004; Gouézin, 2007; Galliou, 2009; Pailler et al., 2010; Donnart, 2011) (fig. 1). During the Bell Beaker period, many of the Megalithic monuments were still used. Middle Neolithic passage graves and Late/Final Neolithic gallery graves were reused (Chatellier, 1883a; L’Helgouac’h, 1970; Treinen, 1970; Briard, 1983; Salanova, 2003). The presence of sites rich in casseriter (Guiges, 1970) and a navigable river could explain this concentration of Early Bronze Age tombs near the coastal river of Laita.

The Lothéa barrow still displays traces of its excavation in 1843, corresponding to two large trenches, 3 to 4 m wide (fig. 7 to 9). The volume of the barrow, including the excavation back dirt, is 1580 ± 32 m³. Its diameter must have originally been 26 m and its height 4 m. The burial chamber was composed of nine edge stones in local orthogneiss (Cogné et al., 1973) (fig. 10). It is oriented east-west and measures 2.5 m long, 2 m wide and 1.45 m high. The slab cover, which is now broken, was 2.2 m long, 1.8 m wide and 0.45 m thick. A cairn surrounded and covered the tomb. It is partially visible in section and is composed of small stones measuring 15 to 20 cm. The cairn is approximately 1.7 m high and its diameter at least 8 m – making it one of the largest in Brittany along with those of Kervini (Briard, 1972) and La Motta (Butler, Waterbolk, 1974). The rest of the mound is composed of a homogeneous layer of yellow sily-clay.

The Kerivoalen barrow is better preserved and apparently less spread out and smaller than that of Lothéa. It is 19 m in diameter and 1.7 m high (fig. 9). It is also crossed by two trenches, north-south and east-west. The excavation of this barrow revealed no internal structure and yielded very few artifacts other than a few potsherds and charcoal originating from the mound sediments.

The tomb of Lothéa yielded several objects attributable to periods from the Late Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age;
- A gold spiral chain (Eluère 1986) (fig. 11, fig. 12, 1 and fig. 13, 1)
- A silver spiral chain (fig. 12, 2)
- Four daggers in arsenical copper decorated with one to three grooves parallel to the edges (tabl. II; fig. 11, fig. 14, 1 to 4). The arsenic, whether or not it was intentionally added, probably contributed to the preservation of the metal (Hundt, 1971; Papillon, 1997; Krause, 2003; Roussot-Laroque, 2008). The very good state of preservation of the daggers allows us to have a more functional and functional observations to be made (Quilliec, 2007) (fig. 13, 2 to 6). Three of the long blades (fig. 14, 1 to 3) are of the Quimperlé type, and the fourth one (fig. 14, 4) of the Trévère type (Miciault, 1883; Gallay, 1981; Briard, 1984; Needham, 2000a and b). The Quimperlé type is thought to be one of the oldest of the Armorican type daggers. The arsenical copper of the Lothéa daggers confirms their old dating since this material was used in Atlantic Europe during the Bell Beaker period and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (Briard et al., 1998; Gandois, 2008 and 2011).
- A bronze heel (tabl. II; fig. 11, fig. 14, 5). This object was probably made by the lost-wax casting method, attested in the Early Bronze Age (Schwenzer, 2009) and known elsewhere in Brittany (Aveneau de la Grancière, 1898; Needham, 2000a). It is decorated with fishbone-shaped incisions under the umbrella and near a slight median swelling. A circle in hollow dots emphasizes the three perforations. The proportion of tin (13.2%) in this heel appears unusually high and it is possible that this object did not originate from the tomb of Lothéa (intrusive object, mixed collections?).
- A “copper rod” (fig. 14, 6). This object could correspond to an ingot (Tinevez, 2007; Le Bihan, Villard, 2010).
- A “bronze axe” with slight ridges (fig. 14, 7). This type of axe is found in many Early Bronze Age graves in Brittany (Briard, 1984). It is nonetheless not certain that it originally came from the tomb of Lothéa (Le Men, 1868).
- Seven flint arrowheads with a pointed tang and squared barbs
The artifacts from Lothéa reveal numerous exchanges of objects and ideas along the Atlantic coast. The most astonishing links were found between the gold and silver chains of Lothéa and specimens from Portugal and Spain (Labert, 1859; Chatellier, 1879; Halna du Fretay, 1889; Soeiro, 1982; Hernando Gonzalo, 1983; Briard, 1984; Eluère, 1986; Delibes de Castro, Del Val Recio, 2005) (fig. 19, 1). These spiral chains, discovered in poorly dated contexts on the Iberian Peninsula, can be linked through their distribution to a series of gold ornaments from the Bell Beaker period discovered near the Tagus estuary and Galicia, and between the Gironde estuary and the Gulf of Morbihan (Le Rouzic, 1930; Eluère, 1982; Hernando Gonzalo, 1983; Ambruster, Parreira, 1993; Salanova, 2000; Ladra et al., 2003) (fig. 20). This distribution of gold work is identical to that of other Bell Beaker artifacts (beakers, Palmela points) (Salanova, 2000; Briard, Roussot-Laroque, 2002; Prieto Martínez, Salanova, 2009). In terms of their shape and their arsenical copper composition, the long daggers of Lothéa (Quimperlé type) are very similar to Quinta de Rorome blades and confirm the existence of relations between Brittany and the north-western zone of the Iberian Peninsula (Briard, Mohen, 1974; Delibes et al., 1982; Gomez de Soto, 1990; Ambruster, Parreira, 1993; Brandthammer, 2003; Krause, 2003) (tabl. II; fig. 19, 3 to 6). Other types of long arsenical copper daggers show the particularities of Atlantic metallurgy and its influence on the continental world (Pigott, 1938; Briard, 1965; Gerloff, 1975; Hundt, 1971; Almagro Gorbea, 1972; Delibes et al., 1982; Guillaume, Briosi, 1984; Gomez de Soto, 1990; Needham, 2000b; Brandthammer, 2003). Finally, parallels can be drawn between the archer’s wristguard from Lothéa and the Iberian specimens (Songmeister, 1964) (fig. 19, 2).

The weapons and ornaments of Lothéa are part of the numerous technical and cultural changes that occurred at the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. along the Atlantic coast of Europe (the transition from copper to bronze metallurgy, the “fission” of the Bell Beaker culture, the emergence of Early Bronze Age cultures) (Harrison, 1974; Almagro Gorbea, 1997; Needham, 2005; Brandthammer, 2007; Strahn, 2007). The absolute chronology of these evolutions remains difficult to perceive due to certain poorly dated contexts, the imprecision of the 14C calibration curve, and in some cases, the lack of radiocarbon dates (Voruz, 1996). This results in a more or less reliable chronological phasing for the different cultures of the Atlantic coast (Harrison, 1988; Almagro-Gorbea, 1997; Bailly, Salanova, 1999; Hughes, 2000; Needham, 2005; Sheridan, 2007; Lanting, 2008; Bettencourt, 2010; Salanova, 2011; Nicolas et al., in press) (fig. 18). Taking into account the few radiocarbon dates available for the artifacts connected with Lothéa, we can unambiguously attribute this tomb to the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. Given the chronology of the Bell Beaker and Early Bronze Age periods in Brittany (Needham, 2000a; Salanova, 2011; Nicolas et al., in press), we are inclined to situate the barrow of Lothéa to sometime around the 22nd century BC.

Though numerous questions remain unresolved, the re-discovery of A. Boutarel’s account of his excavations has reminded us of the historical importance of the tomb of Lothéa. This grave must have contained the remains of an important person, heir to the Bell Beaker culture and founder of the elites that would then reign over Brittany (Briard, 1984). For this period, it attests to long distance movements of ideas, objects and people, who are today increasingly perceptible through archaeology (Tomalin, 1988; Briard, 1998; Needham, Woodward, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2009; Cook et al., 2010; Chenery, Evans, 2011; Salanova et al., 2011).