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Professor Kristian Kristiansen

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# WHAT DISTINGUISHES CAUCASIAN MEGALITHS FROM EUROPEAN ONES?

*Viktor Trifonov*

*Abstract: The Caucasian dolmens represent a unique type of prehistoric architecture, built using precisely dressed stone blocks. The monuments date between the end of the fourth- and the end of the second millennium BC. Their origins remain unknown. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century numerous hypotheses have been advanced to account for the origins of the dolmens in terms of external migrations, and today this search for parallels still remains a popular undertaking, albeit sometimes to the detriment of a more in-depth study of the dolmens in terms of their local cultural, chronological, social and ecological contexts. Increasingly high standards of recent excavations in the Caucasus, applied to the entire structure of the tomb and not only to the interior of its burial chambers, are showing that the comparisons between plans of poorly excavated megalithic sites, both European and Caucasian, are dangerously misleading.*

*Keywords: Megalith, dolmen, reconstruction archaeology, Caucasus, Zhane Valley, Dzhubga, ashlar masonry*

## **Introduction and background**

Thousands of prehistoric megalithic monuments are known and have been studied throughout the world. Some of the least known and investigated by archaeologists are those in southern Russia. Also known as dolmens, they can be found in the western Caucasus, on both slopes of the Great Caucasus range, and on the north-east coast of the Black Sea (from Anapa to Ochermchira), in an area of approximately 12,000 sq. km covering both Russia and Abkhazia (Fig. 1).

The Caucasian dolmens represent a specific type of prehistoric architecture, built using specially dressed, precision-cut stone blocks. The monuments date between the end of the fourth millennium and the end of the second millennium BC (Trifonov 2001). Currently the archaeological catalogue lists over 3,000 dolmens usually clustered in groups of two or three to several dozen dolmens (Markovin 1997). The largest cluster at Kizinka consists of over 500 dolmens (Markovin 1978). While generally unknown to the rest of the world, these Russian megaliths are comparable to the great megaliths of Europe and Asia in terms of chronology and architectural characteristics. Yet their origins remain unknown.

The dolmens of the western Caucasus were first recognized in Western Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century thanks to the publications of amateur archaeological enthusiasts: a French merchant in the service of the Russian Empire, Taitbout de Marigny (1821), and a political officer of the British Embassy in Istanbul who illegally visited the Caucasus, James Bell (1840). In 1833 the Swiss scholar Dubois de Montpereux examined dolmens in the environs of today's Novorossisk on his visit to the Caucasus that had been organized by Czar Nikolai I. De Montpereux (1843) was the first person to recognize parallels between the dolmens of the Caucasus and megalithic constructions of Western Europe (e.g. in Brittany) and in fact initiated a comparative analysis of them (Montpereux 1843). Such comparative investigations in Russia were supported by Count A.S. Uvarov (Uvarov 1876, 1878), one of the founders of Russian archaeology, and in Europe by E. Chantre (Chantre 1885). Today this search for parallels still remains a popular undertaking (Lyonnet 2000; Hansen 2010;

Rezepkin 2010), albeit sometimes to the detriment of a more in-depth study of the dolmens in terms of their local cultural, chronological, social and ecological contexts.

The basic grounds for classification of the dolmens were established by an historian of the Kuban area, E.D. Felitsyn (Felitsyn 1904), and developed further in the ethnographic works of L.I. Lavrov (Lavrov 1960) and in the archaeological studies of V.I. Markovin (Markovin 1978). Models of the evolutionary development and interpretations of the diverse forms of dolmen architecture have often been re-examined on the basis of hypotheses on their origin. At the same time, some definitions related to the classification of European megalithic tombs (e.g. gallery graves, passage graves) developed in the 1950s (Daniel 1958) have been introduced into the Soviet archaeology (Nikolaeva & Safronov 1974; Nikolaeva 1981; Rezepkin 1988). Discussions about their chronology continued for a quarter century until the discoveries in 1898 by N.I. Veselovski of megalithic burials at the Tsar's station (today Novosvobodnaya) which led to the scholarly consensus that they dated to the Bronze Age<sup>1</sup> (Spitsyn 1903; Gorodtsov 1910; Tallgren 1911).

The problem of the origin of the dolmen culture currently remains unresolved. Convincing indications of the autochthonous formation of the construction of megalithic burials in the western Caucasus have not yet been found, and, for this reason, numerous hypotheses have been advanced to account for the origins of the dolmens in terms of external migrations (Bonstetten de 1865; Uvarov 1876, 1878; Chantre 1885). The basic similarity of the Caucasian dolmens with the megaliths of Europe and Asia led to the elaboration of several hypotheses that replaced the older, unsubstantiated Indian or South Asian theory (Bonstetten de 1865). North European and Mediterranean hypotheses were advanced. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Russian archaeologist A.A. Spitsyn (Spitsyn 1903) proposed that the ceramics found in 1898 in the megalithic burial at Novosvobodnaya were linked in their origin to the so-called globular amphora culture of Western Europe. A. Tallgren developed a distinctive interpretation of this

<sup>1</sup> Roughly speaking the Bronze Age in the Caucasus covers the period between 3500 and 1200/1000 BC.



Fig. 1A Europe and western Caucasus;

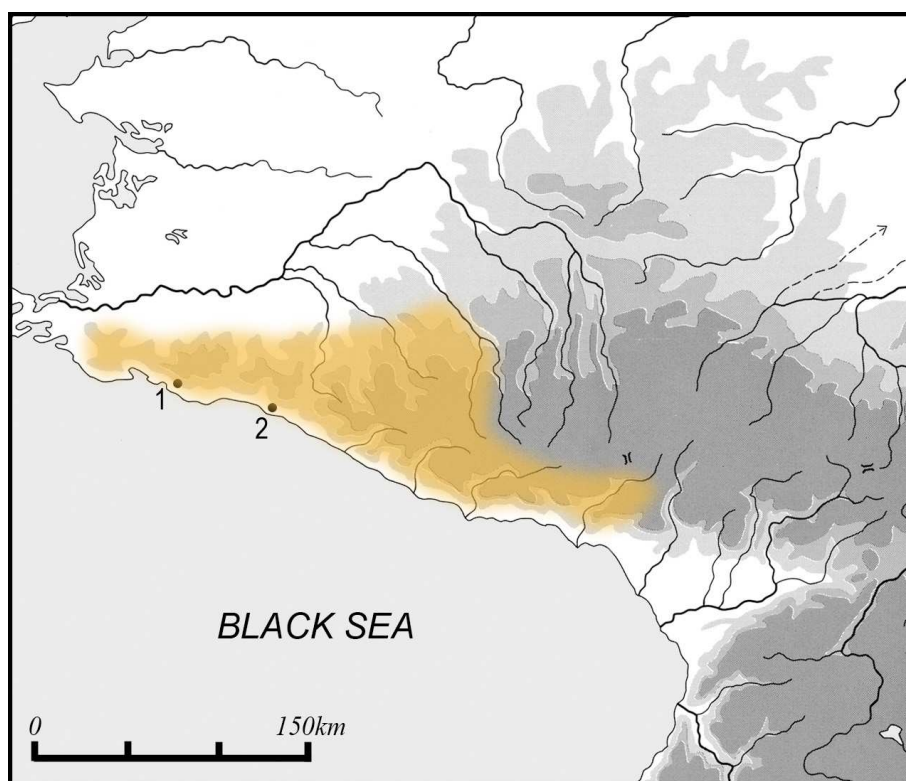


Fig. 1B western Caucasus: 1 – Zhane; 2 – Dzhubga; coloured area – dolmens of the western Caucasus.

theory. He believed that the pottery component of the dolmen culture originated in Europe, while the dolmen concept itself is an Asiatic contribution (Tallgren 1933). In Germany this theory was further advanced by K. Struve who proposed a link between the globular amphora cultures and funnel beaker cultures with the origin of the burials at Novosvobodnaya (Struve 1955).

The distribution of megalithic tombs along the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Sea coastlines resulted in the belief that maritime activity may have played a part in the dissemination of the megalithic concept (Childe 1948). L.I. Lavrov was the first in Russia who proposed a possible borrowing of the megalithic idea from somewhere in the Mediterranean as a result of 'marine expeditions of Caucasian Peoples' and V.I. Markovin explicitly suggested the Pyrenees in the Iberian peninsula as the area of this borrowing (Lavrov 1960; Markovin 1978). Finally, A.D. Rezepkin proposed a compromise variant between the North European and Mediterranean hypotheses. In his opinion, the appearance in the Caucasus of Novosvobodnaya burials (early megaliths) is linked with migrations of the funnel beaker culture while the appearance of 'true dolmens' (late megaliths) in the Caucasus is the result of migrations from the Iberian Peninsula (Rezepkin 1988).

Another reason to keep holding the Caucasian dolmens in focus with regard to the study of European prehistory was what could be called 'Indo-European aspects' of the subject. The foundations of the approach were laid by G. Kossina in the very beginning of twentieth century. He believed in cultural and ethnic-linguistic identity between the Globular Amphora Culture (German: *Kugelamphoren-Kultur*) and *Indogermanen* (Kossina 1902). The hypothesis of a western homeland of *Indogermanen* has led to the suggestion of massive wave-like migrations of belligerent farmers (German: *kriegerisches Bauernvolk*.) from the west to the east as a possible explanation for signs of cultural similarity from Germany up to the Kuban area and Armenia in the Caucasus (Antoniewicz 1936; Schulz 1936). Since the end of WWII for some well-known reasons the Kossina's idea of a massive movement of *Indogermanen* to the east quickly started to become stale, but did not go out of use completely. In Russia the hypothesis of a West European origin for the Caucasian megaliths and their connection with the hypothesis of a West European homeland of Indo-Europeans (or Aryans), still finds support (Nikolaeva & Safronov 1974; Klein 1990, 2010; Rezepkin 2010).

The intricate plot of early Indo-European studies was thickened by the fact that almost the same list of true and virtual signs of similarities between West European and Caucasian megaliths has been exploited by an alternative hypothesis of the Aryan homeland. The hypothesis of the eastern homeland for the Aryans was put forward by G. Childe and supported in detail by J.E. Forssander (Childe 1925; Forssander 1933). At that time both believed that the Western European Globular Amphora Culture and megaliths with porthole slab (German: *Steinkisten mit Seelenloch*) were derived from tombs in Novosvobodnaya, in the north-western Caucasus. Quite the same point of view on the so-called window cists from Saxony and Hesse has been expressed by A. M. Tallgren, who believed that their origin was influenced by the Caucasian dolmens (Tallgren 1933:202). For the sake of balance it is worth noting that G. Childe himself was not quite sure of that idea because of still unsolved problems for the dating of the Bronze Age Caucasus chronology at that time (Childe 1926). Though G. Childe expressed his doubts clearly, and finally even renounced his own research into Indo-European origins as among 'childish' things he wrote (Childe 1958), the hypothesis of the East European homeland of the Indo-Europeans is still in widespread use. The

popularity of the concept is substantially thanks to M. Gimbutas who has done much to develop and propagate the hypothesis. And again the Globular Amphora Culture, Caucasian megaliths and movement of people from the northern Caucasus are parts of her *Indogermanen* scenario (Gimbutas 1986). In more recent versions of the hypothesis, Caucasian megaliths no longer result from long-distance migrations from the Caucasus to Northern or Central Europe nor are they ascribed to the Indo-European family of cultures (Mellory 1989; Anthony 2007). Instead one finds a hint at the existence of long-distance cultural contacts between the northern Caucasus and Northern Europe (Sherratt 1994; Hansen 2010). The paradox is that the new hypothesis exploits almost the same poor repertoire of fragments of similarities between the Western European and Caucasian megaliths which was adopted in ethnic-linguistic hypotheses a quarter of a century ago.

In 1994 A. Häusler demonstrated that the model for an external (West European) origin for the Novosvobodnaya tombs in the northern Caucasus is unnecessary, unsupported by archaeological evidence and inherently unlikely (Häusler 1994). Since then no persuasive evidence in support of the Western European origins for the dolmens in the north-western Caucasus has come to light. The reasons for such comparisons today seem far less compelling than was previously thought. Based on the recent excavations it has been established that the diversity of megalithic monuments in the north-western Caucasus is much more extensive than was previously thought using the classification of these remains by V. I. Markovin which were referenced repeatedly in western 'megalithic' literature (Markovin 1978; Joussaume 1988; Mohen 1990).

#### **The diversity of megalithic monuments in the north-western Caucasus**

It is not surprising that the substantial lack of comprehensive knowledge related to the development and function of megalithic monuments in the north-western Caucasus has caused the emergence of quite a few controversial hypotheses on the subject. For a long period of time (from the early 1820s until recently), Russian archaeologists practiced an oversimplified, rather primitive and often quite destructive method of dolmen excavation. This method limited itself to first digging inside the burial chamber, then digging a very narrow strip around the façade - or they bulldozed any structures around the burial chamber to provide quick access to it. Since the archaeologists were focused on the burial chamber and collecting grave goods and offerings, they did not pay proper attention to the dolmens themselves. This method of excavation finally resulted in a commonly adopted impression that the Caucasian dolmens were freestanding megalithic burial chambers without any additional external buildings or architectural structures (Markovin 1978; Rezepkin 1988). Recent fieldwork and new archaeological evidence suggests otherwise and demonstrates quite clearly that this view of Caucasian dolmens stands very far from the truth. It is quite appropriate to make a comment here that, a long time ago, the West European archaeological study of megaliths encountered the same problem until more critical and sophisticated methods of excavation '...revealed that the allegedly simple dolmens are just the most stubborn remnants of more complex structures' (Childe 1948).

In the late 1990s our team from the Institute for study of material culture history, Russian Academy of Sciences (Saint-Petersburg) introduced to Russia innovative methods for unearthing megaliths. In 1994 Prof. K. Kristiansen invited me to join the Thy project in

Denmark where I had the opportunity to gain a little experience in the restoration of megaliths from my Danish colleagues, Dr. Svend Hansen and Dr. Torben Dehn (see this volume: Dehn, Hansen & Westphal), with whom I worked for a few weeks. Frankly, I was really impressed with what they did. On returning to the Caucasus, I decided to combine the advantages of a large scale excavation with a small scale restoration of megaliths. The concept was based upon the integration of a carefully planned excavation and reconstruction with the aim of understanding the original building methods of the dolmens. In this way, restoration can be carried out in an authentic way based upon archaeological documentation and with no use of modern materials. So, we introduced into domestic archaeological practice not only new methods of ‘reconstruction archaeology’ but substantially customized them in accordance with the type of monuments and the specific aims of the project.

Modernized methods of excavation have resulted quickly in the unearthing of previously unknown external structures of burial chambers (such as cairns, courtyards, roofed passages, dry walling, ramparts, ritual places etc.). These methods provided a unique opportunity to learn more about prehistoric building techniques and burial rituals. It is hard to believe now, but before our excavations in the Zhane Valley (1997-2005), a cairn itself (Russian: *kurgan*), as an intentional stone construction around megalithic burial chambers, was disputed as a highly improbable or later addition.

The difference between old and new images of one and the same dolmen can be demonstrated by two examples: the dolmens from the Zhane Valley and from Dzhubga.

#### The Zhane dolmens

The group of three dolmens were built in a row, and stand on a hill overlooking the Zhane River near the coastal resort town Gelendjik (Fig. 1). It was introduced into archaeology at the very beginning of the twentieth century (Felitsyn 1904). Since then, the image of the most impressive dolmen of the group was reproduced a number of times in different publications in Russia and abroad (Letchenko 1931; Tallgren 1933, 1934; Markovin 1978; Voronov 1979). The dolmen was presented as a free-standing rectangular chamber decorated with carved designs both inside and outside. The inside chamber walls of the central dolmen are decorated with carved zigzags and hanging triangles running in a band around the chamber. The butt-ends of the side slabs shaping the portal of the dolmen were decorated with vertical zigzag chevrons. Another relief decorative motif is found on the top of the porthole slab. It can best be described as a lintel held up by two columns or an image of a dolmen in front with a porthole in the centre (Fig. 2). But what did the dolmen look like originally?

The excavations of the 1999-2001 season unearthed very striking structures that make up the true dolmen construction (Trifonov 2009a). A paved courtyard (300 m<sup>2</sup>) lay in front of the dolmen, surrounded by the horseshoe-shaped cairn of about 25 m in diameter which was made with carefully selected (by shape and size) river boulders. The courtyard is separated from the cairn with 2.5 m high dry walling stretching for over 24 m. The wall was made with big, well-dressed regular shaped sandstone blocks (Fig. 3). The excavations revealed more of the massive dry walling which shaped a high curb around both the cairn and courtyard. All elements of construction fit each other with tongues and grooves and rest on levelled virgin soil, so that there is no doubt that these structures were part of the original architectural concept.

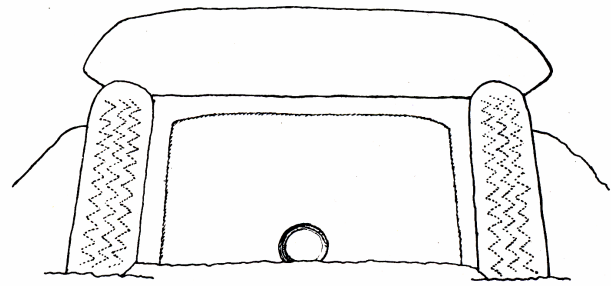


Fig. 2A Zhane dolmen (after Tallgren 1934);

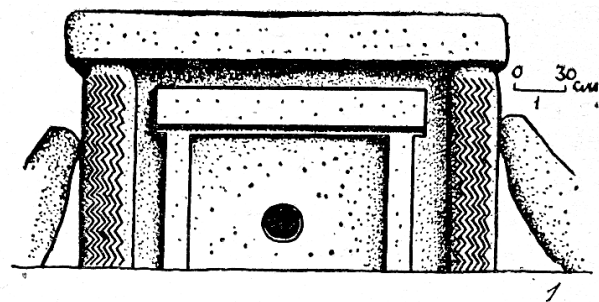


Fig. 2B Zhane dolmen (after Voronov 1979).

#### The Dzhubga dolmen

The Dzhubga dolmen is located on the Black Sea coast in the Dzhubga River Valley (Fig. 1). Due to its size and extremely original architecture, the Dzhubga dolmen stands out even against a rich background of prehistoric megalithic monuments of the western Caucasus. The first description of the dolmen dates back to 1871 (Bayern 1871) (Fig. 4). On 8-9 July 1886, Countess Uvarova, a member of Moscow Archaeological Society, even made an attempt to start excavation, but had to abandon the venture shortly after beginning due to ‘disappointing’ results (Uvarova 1904). The Dzhubga dolmen was presented to the international public by E. Chantre and A. Tallgren (Chantre 1885; Tallgren 1926, 1933, 1934). Since then the site has been visited a number of times by archaeologists who published some drawings and descriptions in which the dolmen was described as a free-standing burial chamber with circular dry-walling around the courtyard that was added much later. This was the reason for ignoring the courtyard as a substantial and inherent element of dolmen architecture (Markovin 1978, 1997).

In 2006 the Russian Academy of Science launched the excavation of the Dzhubga dolmen which revealed what is probably the largest dolmen complex along the Black Sea coast in the Caucasus. The complex occupies an area of about 700 m<sup>2</sup> and comprises a spacious burial chamber, a circular courtyard in front of the façade and cairn around both the chamber and courtyard. Except for the size, the quality of building was extremely impressive. The dry walling of the courtyard was made with big, well-dressed sandstone blocks which were carefully fitted to each other by shape and size (Fig. 5). The outer side of each block was slightly curved to keep the rounded line of the wall. The wall was made of



Fig. 3A Zhane dolmen 2001

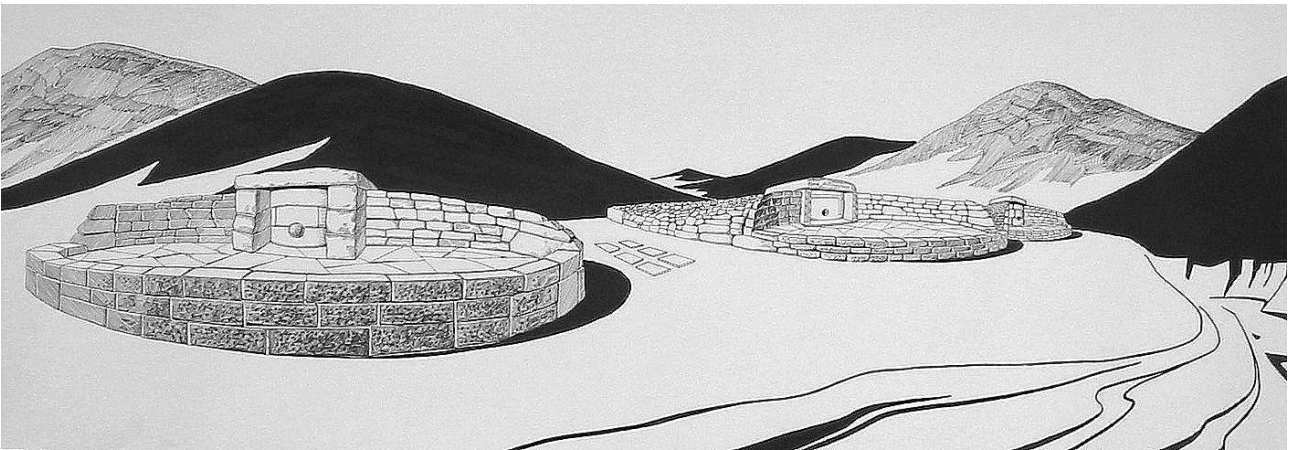


Fig. 3B Zhane dolmens, reconstruction.

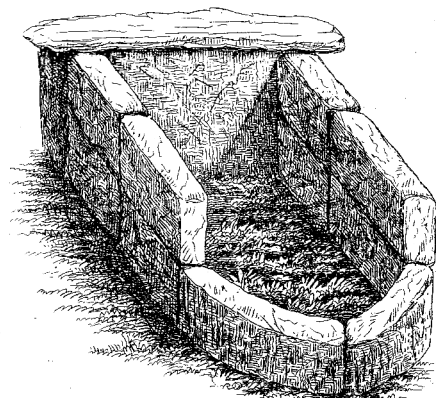


Fig. 4 Dzhubga dolmen (after Bayern 1871).

Видъ джубской усыпальницы съ противоположной стороны.



Fig. 5 Dzhubga dolmen, 2007.

four layers of stone blocks which were put one above another in ashlar masonry style. The wall was about 2.5 m in height with no signs of any entrance structure. That is, it was an absolutely blank wall! But it is the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic petroglyphs that were discovered on the courtyard walls that really make this dolmen unique. Finally, due to the proper excavation which lasted for three field seasons it was established that the whole construction was a result of architectural and building unity (Fig. 6) (Trifonov 2009).

Generally, radical changes in the field strategy and methods of investigation resulted in a new understanding of dolmen diversity in the western Caucasus. During the last quarter of century it has been established that a massive stone cairn typically surrounded the burial chamber on three sides and that a paved courtyard, portal, roofed corridor or any other kind of antechamber was always set in front of the façade of the dolmen, ensuring access to the burial chamber for periodic interments. The form, construction and dimensions of all three integral components of the dolmens (chamber, antechamber and cairn) significantly varied and in numerous combinations formed previously unknown patterns of dolmen architecture (Trifonov 2001). The dolmens were constructed of slabs and blocks detached from monolithic rocky outcrops or cut directly out of the rock face as was done at the ‘Tomb of Midas’ in today’s Turkey (Midas Şehri) (Akurgal 1985). The burial chambers were trapezoidal, rectangular, circular or

semi-circular in shape, their areas varying in size from 0.25 to 25 m<sup>2</sup>, and reaching up to 3 m in height. The ceiling of one of the large dolmens (Novosvobodnaya, Klady, 40 / 1) was supported by a circular-sectioned, 3 m high stone column (Rezepkin 2000). The paved courtyards and surrounding constructions were equally diverse in their forms and areas.

Aside from their dimensions, forms and constructions, dolmens are distinguished by their decorative finishings that include decorations on the façades and internal walls of the burial chambers with relief geometric drawings. In one case (Novosvobodnaya, Klady, 11 / 54) the walls of the burial chamber were decorated with red ochre (Rezepkin 2000). Geometric signs, traditionally linked to solar and astral symbols, form a special group. Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations are exceptionally rare. Paired depictions of ‘female breasts’ can also possibly be related to the anthropomorphic symbols. Relief depictions on the mushroom-shaped top of the stone plug that always closed the entrance into the burial chamber appear most frequently. As a rule, these figures appear in the forms of concentric circles and figured crosses, and sometimes as phallic symbols (Markovin 1978).

Other megalithic constructions are also associated with the dolmens including: menhirs, ornamented stelae and concentric cromlechs (Shamba 1974; Rezepkin 2000; Vasilinenko 2007). Unfortunately, the current description of Caucasian dolmens is



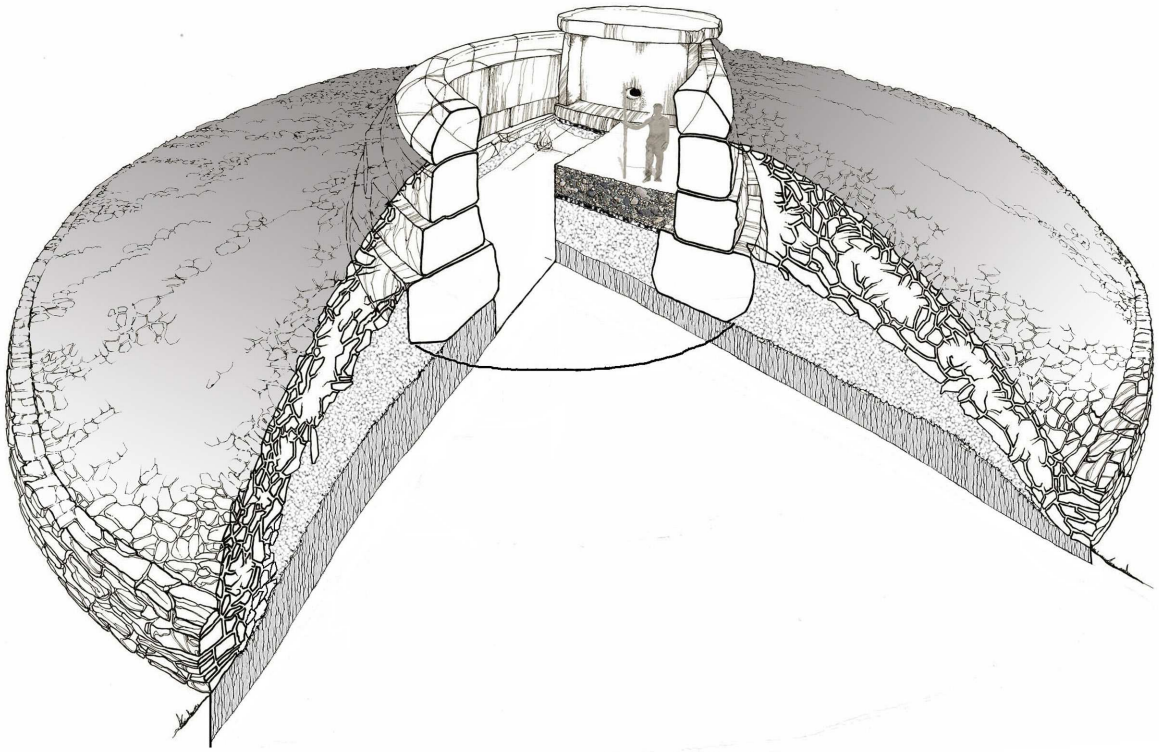


Fig. 6 *Dzhubga dolmen, reconstruction.*

very far from completion and recent field experience suggests that we are merely on the threshold of investigating and discovering the full range of their diversity.

#### Discussion and conclusions

From the earliest days of the study of what were usually classed in Russian archaeology as megaliths, or more often defined with the quite archaic and ambiguous term ‘dolmen’, a latent fallacy has been the acceptance of similarities in common forms and building materials as an indication of cultural unity or long-distance contacts. The introduction of formal standards which were adapted from West European archaeology and used to classify the Caucasian dolmens (e.g. gallery graves are comparable to Novosvobodnaya tombs while dolmens represent a kind of passage grave) caused quite biased and misleading classification results from the quest to determine the origin of the Caucasian megaliths (Rezevkin 1988). If confusing megalithic rhetoric is to be omitted, then the open-minded comparison between the Novosvobodnaya tombs and the rest of the Caucasian megaliths demonstrates that all belong to one and the same class of what could more neutrally be described as a chambered cairn. Both the Novosvobodnaya tombs and true dolmens have a chamber, antechamber and cairn as integral parts of construction. Meanwhile, the Novosvobodnaya tombs are quite variable themselves in terms of roofing, for example (flat roof and gable roof) (Rezevkin 2000), and nobody knows for sure the extent to which they are variable in terms of cairn construction, because these structures have not been unearthed at all or were swept away by a bulldozer in the process of excavation.

Whatever the relationship between the Novosvobodnaya tombs and true dolmens in the Caucasus, both groups are very different from any group of European megaliths and any detailed

comparison must be seen as flawed. Even the holes (German: *Seelenloch in*) in porthole slabs, which have been much discussed, are quite different in standard size between Europe and the Caucasus. In other words, even without discussing the topic of cultural context, ritual, artefacts and chronology, there is no solid typological foundation for identifying the Caucasian dolmens with the European megalithic tradition.

They are very different in architectural style, building technology and quality. By all standards the Caucasian dolmens represent one of the earliest traditions of ritual stone constructions that are characterized by regular, multi-tiered layers of ashlar masonry, false domes, the use of developed forms of columns, flat, shed or gable roofing, relief decorations on the surfaces of the façades, decorated walls with anthropomorphic depictions and monumental zoomorphic circular sculptures. In fact, the vague term ‘megalithic’ adds nothing substantial to the description and can be easily omitted. As such, it is no longer obligatory to search for the origin of Caucasian ‘dolmens’ in just a European or Asiatic ‘megalithic’ cultural context. As a result of the new perspective on Caucasian dolmens, a relevant question is raised as to whether the origin of ashlar masonry in the region is completely independent or whether it is due to an outside influence.

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