

The function of the alignments*

Sacred burial architecture

Megalithic architecture can be divided into two major categories:

- Individual or collective tombs whose sheer size means that, in addition to their use as burial grounds, they could also be considered as territorial markers or even emblems of the collective identity of the group that built them.
 - Standing stones, which remain a mystery.
- Several interpretations have been put forward, none of which are wholly convincing. Today, specialists tend to view them as “markers” for special or sacred sites.

The “Neolithic temple” hypothesis

The common characteristics of the great alignments* in the region of Carnac suggest that they could have served as ceremonial places. The rows mark off converging paths towards the enclosures*, which occupy strategic positions on higher ground and complete the megalithic layouts.

In this scenario, the combination of an open processional area (the rows of menhirs*) and a closed-off worship area (the enclosure*) form the outline of the most ancient preserved “temples” in the history of mankind.

Glossary

Alignment: rows of standing stones. They can be associated, as at Carnac, with megalithic enclosures and arranged in parallel groups.

Cairn: a stone monument covering burial places.

Chamber: a burial place which formerly held human remains.

Dolmen (“stone table” in Breton): a chamber, sometimes with a burial passage, bounded by horizontal stones.

Enclosure: a space which is closed off by adjoining or close megaliths.

Menhir: a Breton word meaning “long stone”.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour.

Tours accessible to disabled visitors.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments translated into several languages. Éditions du Patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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The Carnac alignments

An exceptional Neolithic site

6 000-year-old megaliths



Alignments

The Carnac alignments* were erected in the Neolithic era, between the fifth and third millennia B.C., by sedentarised

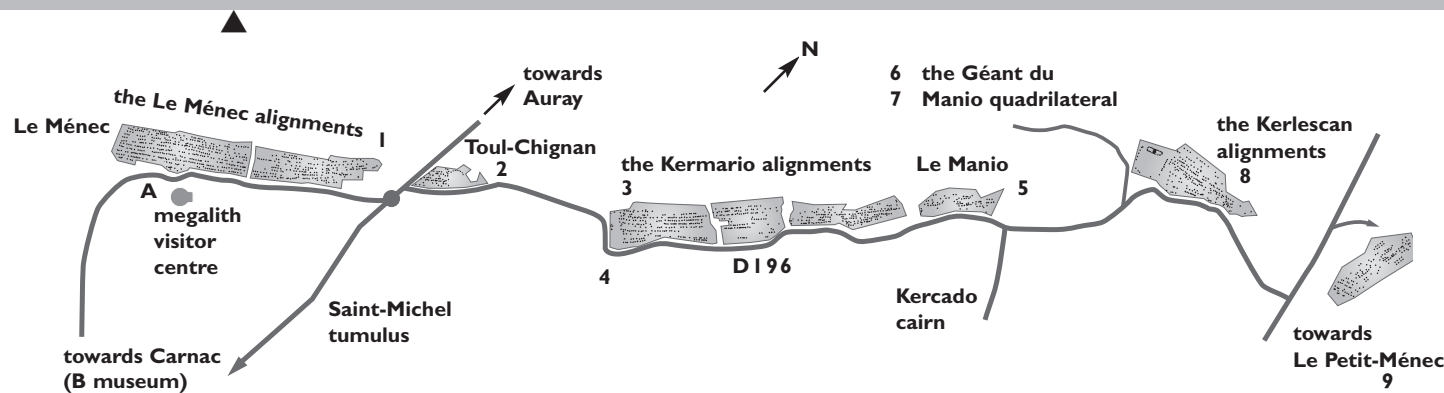
communities who raised livestock and farmed. These stone constructions, combining rows of menhirs* and enclosures*, form part of a megalithic landscape comprising isolated menhirs*, individual tombs (mounds) and collective tombs (dolmens*).

From belief to science

According to the legend of Saint Cornely, the Carnac megaliths were Roman legionaries turned to stone, while local belief held them to be magical stones. Scholars at the beginning of the nineteenth century believed them to be Celtic temples. The scientific approach adopted by the inspector of historic monuments Prosper Mérimée led the State to pursue a policy of buying and preserving megaliths from 1830 onwards. During the twentieth century, the site underwent restorations and developments which enable contemporary visitors to have a better understanding of the Neolithic builders.

* Explanations overleaf.

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To the west

- 1 Le Méneec.** Located to the west of Carnac, this site currently has 1 050 stones running over a total length of 950 metres. The village of Le Méneec was built within the enclosure*, comprising 71 blocks which almost touch one another. This oval-shaped enclosure lies further south than the eleven rows of menhirs* leading up to it. One of the stones, the Géant du Méneec, stands 3.50 metres high and no doubt predates the alignment* itself.
- 2 Toul-Chignan** to the east prolongs the Le Méneec group until it meets an enclosure* of which two sides remain standing. There are few isolated monoliths in the landscape to the east.

To the east

- 3 Kermario** is probably the most visited site at Carnac due to the impressive size of its monoliths. Its reputation led to erosion before the site was fenced off. To the west, the bend in the road marks the point where the megalithic enclosure* is thought to have stood, forming a boundary to the site. In this area there is also a dolmen* without its original cairn*.

- 4 The dolmen***, a collective tomb, was a very common type of burial place in the Neolithic age. It took the form of a cairn* (which is no longer present) covering the megalithic architecture of passages and the burial chamber*, which housed the remains of several people.

Beyond La Petite Métairie, the rows of menhirs* go up onto the Moulin de Kermaux plateau, before descending again in a gentle slope towards the Etang de Kerloquet, which was dug in the nineteenth century.

- 5 At Manio** there are rows of menhirs* straddling a burial mound which predates their erection. At the top of the mound, there is a lofty menhir* standing 3.50 metres above the ground. This mound was excavated in 1922, revealing a large number of artefacts which are on display in Carnac Prehistoric Museum.
- 6 The Manio quadrilateral**, further east, is an area with one-metre-high local granite blocks, restored in the early twentieth century. According to old descriptions, they stood adjoining one another to form a boundary to a tumulus mound, i.e. an individual tomb.
- 7 The Géant du Manio**, further south, stands roughly six metres high.

- 8 Kerlescan** comprises thirteen rows of the best-preserved menhirs*. These alignments* are clearly visible, converging in the west towards the remains of a quadrangular enclosure*. This enclosure is closed off to the north by a long mound which has a tall menhir* at its western extremity. This burial place has been interfered with, as can be seen by the artificial depressions in the centre. This type of burial contained the most prestigious archaeological artefacts and attracted the interest of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “antiques dealers”.
- 9** The alignments* at **Le Petit Méneec**, located at La Trinité-sur-Mer, are a prolongation of the Kerlescan site.

Carnac Prehistoric Museum

- B The prehistoric museum** traces the history of the evolution of mankind in Brittany from the Paleolithic era (450 000 B.C.) to the Middle Ages. It provides a wealth of information for exploring the sites and for better understanding the daily life of Neolithic men, their stone architectures and burial rites. The James Miln-Zacharie Le Rouzic museum exhibits one of the most extensive prehistoric collections in the world. It is named after two precursors of modern archaeology. James Miln carried out excavations at the end of the nineteenth century and Zacharie Le Rouzic did so until 1939. They uncovered many remains: flints, schist and quartz tools, and ceramics.