

**AROUND THE  
PETIT-CHASSEUR SITE IN  
SION (VALAIS, SWITZERLAND)  
AND NEW APPROACHES TO  
THE BELL BEAKER CULTURE**

**Proceedings of the International Conference held at  
Sion (Switzerland) October 27th – 30th, 2011**

**edited by Marie Besse**

**Archaeopress Archaeology**

Archaeopress  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 024 2  
ISBN 978 1 78491 025 9 (e-Pdf)

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Cover images: Artefacts from the Petit-Chasseur site (Sion, Valais, Switzerland). Picture: Musées cantonaux du Valais, Sion

Scientific Committee: Marie Besse, Florence Cattin, Philippe Curdy, Jocelyne Desideri, Alain Gallay, Anne-Lyse Gentizon-Haller, Marc Haller, Gilbert Kaenel, François Mariéthoz, Manuel Mottet, Martine Piguet, François Wiblé

Partner Institutions:

Association « Archéologie et gobelets »

Association valaisanne d'archéologie

CUSO – Conférence universitaire de Suisse occidentale

FNS – Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant 10CO12\_138755)

Loterie romande

Musée cantonal d'Histoire

Service cantonal d'archéologie du Valais

Société académique du Valais

UISPP - IUPPS International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences, placed under the auspices of the UNESCO,

Neolithic Civilizations of the Mediterranean and Europe

University of Geneva, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Institute F.-A. Forel,

Laboratory of Prehistoric Archaeology and Anthropology

Layout: Céline von Tobel, Laboratory of Prehistoric Archaeology and Anthropology, Institute F.-A. Forel, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Geneva

Translations: The authors are responsible for the English version of their text

Citation: Besse (M.), ed. 2014. Around the Petit-Chasseur Site in Sion (Valais, Switzerland) and New Approaches to the Bell Beaker Culture, Proceedings of the International Conference (Sion, Switzerland – October 27th – 30th 2011). Oxford : Archaeopress



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*The International Conference “Around the Petit-Chasseur Site” – Sion, Switzerland, October 27th – 30th 2011.*



# Preface



## 1961 – 2011: fifty years of discoveries and scientific studies around the site of Petit-Chasseur at Sion

Marie BESSE<sup>1</sup>, Philippe CURDY<sup>2</sup>, Jocelyne DESIDERI<sup>1</sup>, Alain GALLAY<sup>3,1</sup> and François WIBLÉ<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1961 in Sion (Valais, Switzerland) the slabs of a prehistoric tomb appeared in a pipe trench at the Avenue du Petit-Chasseur. While uncovering them, someone exclaimed: “prehistoric engravings!”. The first funerary stela of the megalithic site had been discovered. The excavations, first conducted by Olivier-Jean Bocksberger, high school teacher at Aigle, then by Alain Gallay of the University of Geneva, lasted about ten years. Patiently reconstructed by the scientists, the eventful history of this necropolis made it possible for the rites, the beliefs and the social structure of these prehistoric communities in Valais to be studied in detail. Later, between 1987 and 2003, further investigations were carried out in the area and added to the discoveries.

In order to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the site, a scientific committee consisting of the representatives of the *Archéologie cantonale* and the *Musées cantonaux du Valais*, and of the University of Geneva and the *Association valaisanne d'archéologie* organised several events during autumn 2011.

### An international conference at Sion

A conference was held from 27 October to 29 October in Sion, at the François-Xavier Bagnoud hall.

The necropolis of Sion still remains a key reference for the understanding of the Final Neolithic period, not only in the Alpine countries, but also throughout Europe. The scientific meeting therefore focused on the end of the Neolithic period in Valais and in the adjacent regions, on the Bell Beaker phenomenon (a European culture?) and on the funerary rites of this period whereas the doctoral course dealt with the end of the Neolithic period in Valais and with the anthropology of megalithic societies.

The conference was attended by nearly 200 people, students, junior and senior scholars from many countries including Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Morocco, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. Thirty-eight papers were grouped into five sessions each preceded by an introductory one-hour conference: Fifty Years of Discoveries at the site of Sion/

Petit-Chasseur; The Neolithic in Valais and its Neighbouring Regions presented by Alain Gallay; Is the Bell Beaker Culture a European? Economy, Culture and Society by Maxence Bailly; Funerary Rituals during the Final Neolithic and the Bell Beaker Period by Henri Duda; and Anthropology of the Megalithic Societies presented by Alain Testart. The present volume reports on these scientific presentations and the ensuing lively debates.

More particularly, our thoughts go out to Alain Testart. Several of us met him at the Sion conference for the last time. Alain Testart, our friend and anthropologist, research director at the CNRS, passed away on 2 September 2013 at the age of 67, leaving behind him a work at once ambitious, original and precious for ethnologists, sociologists, religious historians, and lawyers as well as for archaeologists, prehistorians and biological anthropologists. The French Prehistoric Society paid a final tribute to him\*.

### A visit to the archaeological site of Saint Martin de Corléans at Aosta, Italy

Under the direction of Gaetano de Gattis of the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage and Activities of the Aosta Valley, the conference participants travelled to Aosta on 29 October to admire the stelae recovered from the funerary site of St-Martin de Corléans, the twin site of the necropolis of Petit-Chasseur. On that occasion, the group had the opportunity to visit the giant construction site of the future museum of archaeology dedicated to this site.

### An outstanding public lecture

On 27 October, 2011, Jean Guilaïne, honorary professor at the *Collège de France* and member of the Institute, presented a public lecture at Sion, in front of a packed audience on the issue “*Stèles néolithiques d'Europe... un voyage culturel*”.

### A doctoral course at the University of Geneva

A graduate course “*Autour du Petit-Chasseur: 50 ans d'études anthropologiques, de la sépulture à l'individu*” was organised

\*. Lécivain, V., Gallay, A., 2014. Alain Testart, anthropologue et agitateur d'idées. Bulletin de la société préhistorique française 111,1, janvier-mars, 171-173

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by Jocelyne Desideri on 7-9 November, 2011 at the University of Geneva. This course – part of the doctoral programme of Antiquity sciences (EDOCSA) offered by the University Conference of Western Switzerland (CUSO) – was attended by nearly 70 participants (bachelor and masters students, doctoral and post-doctoral students). This block course not only offered lectures on current research issues in anthropology but also provided an occasion for a meeting and scientific exchange between junior scholars and skilled scientists.

In addition, two public lectures completed this training workshop. Marianne Sommer of the University of Lucerne developed the issue of the Neanderthal in the media at the start of the 20th century and Bruno Boulestin of the University of Bordeaux presented the results stemming from the study of the famous Neolithic site of Herxheim in Rheinland-Pfalz (Germany).

### **An exhibition at the *Espace arch ologique* of the Valais History Museum in Sion**

From October 2011 to April 2012 the Valais History Museum presented the fourth part of an exhibition aiming at placing the canton of Valais in its European context from the prehistoric period up to the modern times. The exhibition “*Autour du Petit-Chasseur*”, traced the different stages that made it possible to determine in detail the lifestyle and the beliefs of the Neolithic populations in the Rhone valley from the first discoveries made during the 19th century up to the latest archaeological investigations. Particular emphasis was placed on the guidelines established by the study of the site of Petit-Chasseur: archaeological sites triggering such an impact on research in very varied fields are indeed utterly exceptional.

### **Publications on the Neolithic period in Valais**

The synthetic work of Alain Gally on the history of the site of Petit-Chasseur and the discoveries made in the surroundings, published by  ditions Errance, accompanied the exhibition.

This book entitled “*Autour du Petit-Chasseur, l’arch ologie aux sources du Rh ne, 1941-2011*” provides an overview of the scientific background that is full of discoveries. It also highlights the debt that the author owes to all the people who participated in this tremendous adventure and particular recognition is due to S bastien Favre, one of the first collaborators of Olivier-Jean Bocksberger.

These research activities are not isolated. They are part of the ongoing development in our field. In that regard Alain Gally owes a great deal to Professor Marc-Rodolphe Sauter, former director of the Department of Anthropology who introduced the senior scholars among us to Valaisian prehistory. This work does not reflect the current state of our knowledge but illustrates a continuous process of challenging and stimulating our knowledge of the past, a work relentlessly pursued during more than fifty years.

The anniversary of the discovery of the Petit-Chasseur also provided an occasion to launch a publications programme by providing financial support for distinct, still uncompleted site analyses and publications that had been delayed. Several

monographs concerning the Neolithic sites of Valais were published on that occasion: the results of the excavations of dolmen MXII and MXIII of the necropolis of Petit-Chasseur (S. Favre and M. Mottet), the synthesis of the Neolithic settlement site of Petit-Chasseur, excavation sectors I to V (M. Besse and M. Piguet), the prehistoric sequence of the site of Sous-le-Scex at Sion (M. Honegger) and the publication of the data stemming from recent investigations carried out at the Final Neolithic sites in Valais at Bramois (M. Mottet, A.-L. Gentizon-Haller, M. Haller and G. Giozza) and Bitsch Massaboden (P. Meyer, G. Giozza and F. Mari thoz).

### **An experimentally manufactured stela**

Moreover, a prehistoric stela, identical to those recovered from the Petit-Chasseur site was created by the AETA-Cascavel association. Anne-Lyse Gentizon and Marc Haller, experimental archaeologists, manufactured a stela of nearly 1 m height based on observations of original stelae and using stone tools. This work made it possible to test several hypotheses with regard to the technique used by prehistoric peoples for the engraving of the stelae; for example, it could be demonstrated that the percussion technique using a regularly re-sharpened flint point made it possible to work the surface by pecking with the same precision as that used on the original pieces. It was also possible to estimate the time required for the making of a stela, between one and two months depending on the size of the effigy.

### **Presentation of the publication of the international conference**

The present publication includes twenty-five papers referring to the periods represented at the Petit-Chasseur necropolis i.e. means the end of the Neolithic, the Bell Beaker period and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age.

### **The necropolis of Petit Chasseur and the Alps**

A first group of papers deals directly or indirectly with the Valaisian necropolis. The sequence of this site remains complex and was the subject, in its time, of a very detailed publication that aimed to provide the scientific community with all the field data so as to enable it to understand the scenario of the site’s history and likewise to challenge the proposed construct. For a long period of time no criticism was expressed, until in 2007 Harrison and Heyd, in a well-documented article published in *Pr historische Zeitschrift*, challenged the established sequence, more particularly based on the data stemming from the site of Saint Martin de Corl ans in the Aosta valley. Here *Alain Gally* presents a well-argued response highlighting that fact that the two scholars made a distinct number of mistakes in their interpretation of the published documentation and demonstrates why the initial interpretation actually has to be maintained. This discussion reveals the limits encountered by so-called “exhaustive” publications of complex key sites. These sites should of course be published in an exhaustive manner, but the reader should be able to easily access the demonstration. Scientists are submerged by multiple issues and by overabundant documentation. Consequently essential work should be done in order to facilitate access to the documentation that is provided. This situation led to misinterpretations concerning the sequence of Petit Chasseur.

It is important for both the excavator and the opponent to clearly demonstrate how their ideas are connected respectively. This act of formalising the reasoning is generally omitted as it is often hindered by the exhaustiveness of the data and by the fact that the key data for the interpretation of the site are not stressed as being essential.

The position defended by Gallay finds unexpected support in the communication of *Sébastien Favre* who assumes that the antennae erected on the front sides of the monuments were stelae that had remained in their original position. As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is opposed to the one advanced by Harrison and Heyd who assumed that there was only one early phase with all the stelae forming a single alignment that was destroyed later. The hypothesis supported by Favre indeed argues in favour of the sequence proposed for the stylistic evolution of the stelae, i.e. stelae of type A, followed by stelae of type A and B, stelae of type B.

With regard to a different issue, *Geneviève Perréard* makes an essential contribution to the understanding of the funerary rites of the necropolis. The idea that collective tombs were monuments destined for “elites” dedicated to only a small part of the population is a widely accepted assumption amongst prehistorians, but this consensus has never been really proved. For the first time, Geneviève Perréard provides proof for this assumption through a very technical palaeodemographic analysis of the human remains of dolmen MXII. The relationships between the human remains that were discovered and the original populations are indeed utterly complex in that demographic attributes of the original population, of its system of social organisation and of the history of the monument, including reconstructions and possible cleaning, have to be taken into account. Geneviève Perréard for example demonstrates that the individuals registered in dolmen MXII do not represent the entire population and she proposes a demographic estimation of the original population which is assumed to be an enlarged family or a small clan.

For a long period of time, the necropolis of Petit Chasseur remained an isolated burial place as the corresponding settlement site was unknown. In a comic fiction, *Le soleil des morts*, it was hypothesised, though without any proof, that the settlement of the monument’s builders was located on the hills surrounding the area of the city of Sion, as this was the case for the Middle Neolithic farmers. A fiction uses unfounded interpretation of the facts as archaeology only provides an incomplete picture of the past. But we were completely wrong. In 2007, the rectangular floor plans of two semi-interred huts with hitherto unknown architecture in Valais were discovered at Bramois, on the plain a few kilometres from the necropolis. The radiocarbon dates showed that these buildings were contemporaneous with dolmen MVI. *Nicole Reynaud Savioz* and *François-Xavier Chauvière* present the study of the faunal remains that were discovered in the filling of the two features. In some regards, the published table is amazing. The predominance of domestic sheep and goats is consistent with the data of the preceding periods. However, the complete absence of hunted animals should be stressed. The site yielded a very large number of antler sleeves, but these are shed antlers collected in the forest. This situation is all the more remarkable as deer with regard to Alpine rock art and the ornamentation of distinct stelae is an animal that plays a central role in the beliefs of that period. There are indeed some reasons to upset

the simplistic Marxist relationship between economic infrastructure and ideological superstructure. If such a relationship exists, it would be a lot more complex.

This reflection leads us to a region where exceptional discoveries were made over the last few years. *Raffaella Poggiani-Keller* and *Marco Baioni* give a detailed overview of these discoveries in Lombardy which permits us to renew the interpretation of the functional context associated with the stelae. This overview unveils the complexity of funerary rites associating collective burials in rock shelters and sanctuaries with stelae containing secondary deposits of human bones as well as the complete functioning of these ceremonial sites established on the high plateaus overlooking the Val Camonica and the Valtellina. In these cases, it can be stated that ceremonial sites with stelae were dissociated from those with collective burials. This observation does not exclude any functional relationship, a situation differing a great deal from the one encountered in the Petit-Chasseur sites and requiring some explanation on the structural level.

A necropolis is not only connected with ideological aspects, it can also reveal distinct aspects related to the economy. The procurement of raw materials indicates openness to the Alpine world and beyond implying technical approaches and a “European” vision with regard to the identification of possible raw material sources within an already continental exchange network.

*Jehanne Alfalter* approaches the issue of flint raw material procurement. The particular paucity of flint raw material sources in Valais is well known and it is also a well-known fact that this dearth was compensated by the manufacturing of rock crystal. The issue of flint procurement thus implies that the search was extended to a much larger area. The proposed analysis deals with the entire Neolithic period and concerns very different regions such as the Paris Basin, the Jura Mountains, the Vercors, southern France and northern Italy.

The same problem can be encountered with regard to metal ore, which is a key issue in that the Bell Beakers were thought for a long time to be metal “prospectors” attracted by the sources in Valais, and this region was considered to be the nuclear zone of a particularly rich and original civilisation at the beginning of the Bronze Age, the Rhone civilisation. *Florence Cattin* and her colleagues reconsider this issue based on the metal objects stemming from Petit-Chasseur by combining classical and lead isotope analyses. The method is hindered by the multiplicity of the potential Alpine and European sources and by the difficulty in identifying them. Nonetheless, two facts can be highlighted. First, the metal sources in Valais seemingly are not a valid explanation for the presence of Bell Beaker people in this Alpine valley. Second, local ore procurement cannot be excluded for the metal objects when the casting of bronze appeared, namely as early as the Early Bronze Age A2 phase.

What were the routes used for the distant procurements of raw materials? For a long time it has been accepted that the Alps did not hinder the circulation of men, materials and ideas. But this statement has to be proven. *Claudia Defrasne* and *Maxence Bailly* open a concrete and local line of research by presenting the paintings of a rock shelter located in the Southern French Alps at an altitude of 2390 m. These are the

Y-shaped designs referred to as « branch signs » which are also reported from Spain. The rock shelter is located within a very particular topographic context, namely a large passageway between two rock faces that also exhibit engravings of daggers of the Remedello type. Apparently, the passage was largely frequented at different points of time during the Neolithic and it was possibly used during the period when jadeite from the Monte Viso massif was diffused.

## Beyond the Alpine region

At a first glance, the papers submitted by *Elena Burri-Wyser* and *Ariane Winiger* concerning the site of Concise on the shores of Lake Neuch atel are not in any way related to the Petit-Chasseur site. However, this site, like all the other sites of Lake Neuch atel may play an essential role in the as yet unresolved question of the relative dating of dolmen MXII and MVI within the sequence of the necropolis. The radiocarbon dates, suggesting that the two monuments were contemporaneous, are not consistent with the information yielded by the grave goods. As a matter of fact, the vestigial remains of dolmen MXII can be assigned to the L uscherz phase and those of dolmen MVI to the Auvernier-Corded Ware phase of the Lake Neuch atel sites. The two papers on the Concise site reveal a ten-stage occupational sequence covering the end of the Neolithic period which is accurately dated by dendrochronology. This may be the key that enables us to resolve this question in the future.

Latest data stemming from sites attributed to the Bell Beaker in the canton of Fribourg, in close vicinity to the Concise site, are presented here by *Michel Mauvilly*, *Julien Spielmann* and *Marie Besse*. This cluster of sites yielded various diagnostic Bell Beaker materials. The Villeneuve “La Baume” site, investigated only in a trial trench, is particularly interesting. It contained standard beakers, V-perforated buttons and shell beads. This site resembles the Champ Vully Est site at Rances in the canton of Vaud, at less than 50 km.

*Emilie Blaise* and her colleagues provide an overview of animal husbandry and hunting during the Bell Beaker period in Southern France. This contribution focuses on the issue of horse bones, which are present, albeit in small numbers. The difficulties related to the wild or domestic status of this species are well-known. Its absence during the Middle Neolithic and its reappearance at the end of the Neolithic are stressed here.

*Nicola Dal Santo*, *Alessandro Ferrari*, *Gabriella Morico* and *Giuliana Steff e* present the Bell Beaker period in Eastern Emilia-Romagna and the relationships with the Spilamberto group. The authors demonstrate the survival of a latest Bell Beaker stage in parallel to the emergence of the Polada civilisation in the Italian Prealps.

*Ana L ucia Ferraz* and *Pascal Tramon*i report a group of unregistered stelae stemming from the central Alentejo in Portugal dated between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 4th millennium.

*Erik Drenth* deals with the Bell Beaker cremation burials of the Netherlands.

*Anna Endr odi* examines the funerary rites of the Bell Beaker Csepel group in Hungary exhibiting various types: cremations

in urns, inhumations in crouched position, scattered cremation burials, possible presence of circular ditches surrounding in particular scattered cremation burials or symbolic graves. At the same time, she analyses the relationships with the Mak o-Kosihi- Caka group and the Somogiv ar-Vinkovci culture. This picture is completed by the analysis of the palaeobotanical remains discovered in these graves conducted by *Ferenc Gyulai*.

*Hanna Kowalewska-Marzalek* and *Henri Duday* outline the results of a French-Polish collaboration conducted at the burial site of Kichary Nowe in Poland. The authors evidence continuous occupation of a necropolis arranged around a Middle Neolithic mound as well as the succession of Funnelbeaker, Corded Ware and Bell Beaker graves.

Lastly, *Abdelouahed Ben-Ncer* and his colleagues analyse two infant burials in a cave dated to the Chalcolithic period in Morocco.

In addition to the presentation and analysis of the basic documentation the studies are more ambitious with regard to their interpretative approaches, but are also more fragile. They are placed in a wider historical perspective, i.e. a functional and anthropological perspective.

An enlarged geographic perspective, indispensable for historical approaches, requires increasing encyclopaedic knowledge that is difficult to manage in that a great volume of documentation has to be compiled. This is, however, of crucial importance in order to understand the history of both megalithism and Bell Beaker. Two aspects appear in this context: the diffusion of the Bell Beaker phenomenon and the stelae – which are not covered here but which were discussed in lively debates at the recent meeting of Saint-Pons on the Neolithic statuary. In these discussions the interpretation of the Eurasian data made it possible to distinguish the earlier stelae of the Middle Neolithic from those dated to the third millennium.

The paper of *Olivier Lemerrier* deals with the first aspect. This author focuses on the position of the Rhine-Rhone corridor and presents a challenging re-evaluation of this axis with regard to the diffusion of the Bell Beaker.

In the functional and anthropological field *Manuel Angel Rojo-Guerra* and his collaborators advance a social and political hypothesis with regard to the emergence of megalithism in the Ambrona valley in Spain. They highlight a transitional type of collective burial testifying to communitarian ideology developing towards more individualistic funerary rites, specific to the Bell Beaker.

*Jan Turek* discusses the social and symbolic background of the Bell Beaker phenomenon based on the Central European graves. He states that the opposition between male and female rites triggering distinct stereotypic funerary patterns, is a highly cultural phenomenon based to only a small extent on biological grounds in that the DNA analyses demonstrated that a certain number of the graves with the male ritual are in fact female graves and vice versa. He thus supports a gender theory considering the expansion of the Bell Beaker as a phenomenon mainly related to the cultural and symbolic and not to the economic field. By generalising this point of view,

he compares the diffusion of the Bell Beaker to that of gothic art in Europe, stressing the highly symbolic character of both phenomena.

*Alain Gally* provides a document review on the fifty years of historic and functional theories implicating directly or indirectly the history of the Petit Chasseur site. The conclusion is bitter in that this retrospective analysis demonstrates the extreme weakness of our constructs when proposing more challenging explanatory visions. According to him, these studies are more closely related to “feuilletons” dear to the *Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse than to real scientific approach.

## Megalithic Societies

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of this third part is invariably the same. It is only possible to back our explicative constructions if we establish a serious dialogue with the field of cultural anthropology and if we construct a real science of the human facts, which is far from being achieved currently, even by ethnologists.

From this perspective, the organisers of the conference had invited *Alain Testart* – one of his last public engagements – to speak on megalith building societies. According to him, the megalithic societies apparently do not constitute a particular social type. The outstanding descriptions of the Naga, Nias, the Oromo and the Merina people show that the megalith building societies are not lineage societies. Megalithism has to be considered as the most elaborate form of wealth, of power that stems from wealth. In this context whether or not

a megalith is destined for a single person or a social group is a secondary issue. The idea advanced by Alain Testart that megalithism and lineage societies are not compatible is however contradicted by the facts from Africa, an aspect developed by Gally at the conference of Saint-Pons with regard to Senegambian megalithism.

*Nicolas Cauwe* also provides a significant contribution to this issue by completing the referential on the megalithic societies with regard to destruction and re-use of the monumental statuary. He indeed demonstrates that the “destruction” of the statues on Easter Island is due neither to climatic peoration nor to conflicts between clans leading to a period of anarchy but highlights a radical change in ideology occurring shortly before the arrival of the European people.

Translation: Karoline Mazurié de Keroualin



Sion, « Petit-Chasseur I », 1971. Excavation of a pile of burnt human bones deposited in a pit along the substructure of dolmen MVI.