

XVII International Congress on Dry Stone

"Dry stone perspectives: challenges after the UNESCO inscription"

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"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism".



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Summary

Designed generically as piles of stones, cairns are polymorphic and assume multiple statuses depending on the period of their construction and the human groups who build them. Traditionally, as landmarks, they often replace trees at latitudes and altitudes where these ones are absent. They are also elements of the marking out of space, places of memory, the refuge of supranatural entities, even clues to the presence of a tomb. They may even take on the status of the individuals and some languages call them "men of stone". Many texts talk about the existence of deposits inside these cairns in the form of messages, business cards, travel stories or biographies placed in hermetically sealed containers, or even of food waiting to be consumed or objects considered sacred.

In many regions, the cairns already built can only be conceived as receptacles for other stones, as men pass by, whether this ritual is in response to religious considerations or a tribute to the entities of the place. According to the functions already listed, cairns are therefore to be compared with certain structures such as communal terms, oratories, tumuli and other more official and/or perennial monuments. The contemporary craze for hiking, climbing is often accompanied by

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

a multiplication of cairns to the point that they are banned in certain areas because of their damage to the environment. Land art often place them in honour, making of them the masterpieces of certain artists or simpler structures that oscillate between the art of natural sculpture and meditation.

With very rare exceptions, what is cairn is not built with mortar. Is it therefore dry stone construction? The questions of volume, organization of the stones, technique, status and symbolism linked to the diversity of cairns will be analysed to evaluate their integration into the world of dry stone, to identify the stage where the pile becomes a cairn, a work and where the pile without order becomes structure with firm outlines and filling. This is a physical paradox that has been known since antiquity, named sorite, and which concerns the so-called unstable solids. It is also a paradox that is eminently human and cultural and which concerns spatial planning and construction, where the question is to know what the building "fills" in priority: the place or the spirit?

Keywords: *cairn, dry stone, sorite, function, symbolism*

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I Introduction

A cairn is an accumulation of stones arranged in a more or less precise and harmonious way. The size and shape are of little importance as people call cairns both expandable tumuli or vertical pillars; gigantic heaps of several hundred meters of length that protect covered walkways in the Neolithic period as well as simple stacks of three or four elements that serve as markers along hiking trails.

Today, there is a craze for cairns (everyone wants to build one) to the point that they are sometimes forbidden because they harm the environment and ecosystems, both on the seashore and in the mountains. The land art puts them back in the spotlight but beyond the great plasticians, some cairns are erected by people simply sensitive and inspired by nature.

Because of the convenience of their implementation, cairns exist and have existed at all latitudes and altitudes, but they do not necessarily have the same meaning everywhere. We propose to list here, very quickly, the main functions linked to these piles of stones and then to discuss their belonging to the dry stone building technique.

II. Uses and functions

Dry stone cairns, called "signals" or "pyramids", were often built to map the territory. The famous Cassini map in the 18th century was established by triangulation through cairns, some of which are very high: 3.50m to 4m. The colonial Western powers did the same to map the enslaved countries. These signals relayed the bell towers in Europe or the large trees in areas where these are lacking: at the poles or in the deserts. Many of these cairns, related to surveying, are abandoned after use and disappear.

The cairns that should not disappear are those that delimit the properties or the territories of the communes (fig.1).

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU



Fig.1 - Milestone serving as a communal boundary in Provence - drawing by J.Morin © ASER

They are called "milestones" or "terms" and, in the language of several societies, these milestones are "planted" as trees are "planted" (Acovitsióti-Hameau 2005: 44-54, 2014). These cairns are perennial, and an ancient custom, noted in different countries, was that the demarcation was done in the presence of a son of the owner who was slapped so that he would remember the location of the cairns for life.

The cairns are also used to delimit zones where different activities take place: grazing zone for livestock versus agricultural zone, or zone for hunting versus zone where one can circulate. Of course, these cairns are then of modest size and have only a periodical validity.

As landmarks, cairns must be visible. Thus, in Cameroon, they are painted (one says dressed) in red and white: "because a stone that is not 'dressed' goes unnoticed and is no different of another one" says a member of a chiefdom (Sandores Tchandeu et al. 2019: 83). In Arctic areas, the landmark function is paramount (fig.2), especially when time is dark or foggy. Many of these cairns mark the migration routes of the

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

Inuit and are built in such a way that they evoke the silhouette of a standing man: in fact, of a great ancestor. We speak of Inukshuk, in the meaning of men of stone (Hamelin 1956).



Fig.2 - Cairn made of stone slabs built on the Knud Rasmussen route in Greenland in 1917 - after Malmurie (1955)

At the poles, cairns also serve as hiding places: explorers place boxes with provisions, tracking devices, messages, and expedition stories (Malmurie 1955). These cairns, synonymous with survival, cannot be destroyed and the Inuit consider them sacred. Sometimes a pole is placed on top of them to hang the flag of the exploring nation.

In the mountains, this type of cairn is often built at the end of a climb. A tin box or a bottle enclosed in the device contains messages or business cards. These markers, not really sacred, are frequently knocked down by the frequent storms in the mountains.

The cairns thus connect men. In certain contexts, they testify to the audacity, obstinacy, and courage of those who built them. They become sacred and it is understandable that they can acquire a funerary function: be the tomb or the cenotaph of a venerated person. Often, each passer-by must throw a stone on the cairn to honour the memory of the buried "hero": this is the custom known as "the stone of the last salvation", and woe to anyone who forgets to throw it (Barbe 1873). The cairn can also be the residence of the spirits to whom one offers flowers, foliage, food or shells.

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

In Provence (south of France), around the cave dedicated to Mary Magdalene in the Sainte-Baume massif, cairns, pompously called "castelets", that is to say "small castles", were built in the past (fig.3). These were a few stones superimposed on top of each other representing a wish: that of finding the chosen one of one's heart within a year. If the castelet remained intact during the year, it meant that the wish would soon be granted (Hameau 2021).



Fig.3 - Oratory called "Saint Pilon" on the crest of the Sainte-Baume. The "castelets" are in the foreground - after Hameau (2021)

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU



Fig.4 - Cairn used as a landmark built by hikers at the place called les Roches Blanches (La Garde-Freinet, Var) in 2017 - photo G.Wagner © ASER

Today, the proliferation of cairns is surprising (fig.4). They multiply on hiking trails to the point that they are no longer landmarks: to the point that all the natural clues (a twisted branch, a natural rock) that once served as signals are forgotten. Paradoxically, because they are fragile, these cairns are often maintained and restored by other passers-by (Gillet 2008). Paradoxically, too, they have no function, they carry no message, since they are no longer markers, nor the work of any particular person. Signs have even appeared to prohibit too many cairns in a limited space.

The term cairn remains attached to the material "stone". Many accumulations of other materials (cow dung, dried cod, shoes, etc.) are known to be heaps reminding cairns but with a distinct vernacular name or called "piles" or "pyramids". Cairns are also heaps, but small or large, old or new, rudimentary or elaborate, do they fully fall into the category of dry stone construction?

III. Concepts and implementation of the technique

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 **'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU**

To answer the former question, it is necessary to mobilize concepts of philosophy, technology and anthropology that have been enunciated since antiquity and continue to be analysed to this day. It is not our intention to present here all relevant arguments, but just to approach the ideas that may be useful for the understanding of our subject.

The definition of "heap" is an essential point. Can two elements constitute a heap? From what number of elements is the heap no longer a heap? Is there a threshold at which the heap becomes a cairn? Or, at what point does the heap without order become an ordered structure with fixed contours? Since their first appearance and until today, these definitions seem impossible to formulate without nuances. They can only be relative because they depend on contexts. These contexts are infinitely diversified because of the plurality of materials (any solid body, flexible or rigid, but also stones of all kinds and consistencies), because of the particularities of places and times, because of the subjectivity of the actors' look (the builder's look differs from that of the walker, of the peasant, of the artist, etc.), because of the semantic laxity of the usual languages (the ordinary speaker does not care much about the absolute exactitude of the words uttered and even admits variations). The fact is that the quantity of the elements considered and their overall quality (pile or work) do not automatically correlate.

This is a physical paradox, called sorite, formulated by Eubulides of Megara in the 4th century BC. This paradox concerns solids that are heaped or stacked in a non-quantifiable way. Modern and contemporary philosophers (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel or Bertrand Russel, for example) also comment on this paradox and speak of the incompatibility between considerations of quantity and notions of quality. The example of the pile of seeds that feeds a flock of birds is a classic paradigm. We would not know how many units of seed there are in the one and how many birds in the other, but this does not change the understanding of the meanings of "heap" and "flock". The lesson of these reasonings is that the confusion of the categories of reflection and of the contexts harms the clarity of the

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

discourse and the explanation of the facts. Within this framework, we can say that cairns - as elements - are structures with variable metric and numerical data, which is quite compatible with the technical properties of any other dry stone work.

Indeed, it is through the implementation of intentional technical acts and gestures that the pile in elevation becomes a structure. It is because of this that it is called a "cairn" or with some other word. Earlier, we pointed out the variety of words for the multiple forms and functions of this element. The issues of integration with the physical site and the thoughtful arrangement of materials (external faces and links and internal lines of force of the structure) are added to the criterion of the absence of binder to classify the work in the art of dry stone. We touch here the questions of mechanics that manage the implantation and the assembly of these structures, whether they are heaps, walls or elaborate architectures. Indeed, for mechanics scholars, all these structures are "collections of rigid bodies" placed in lateral contact and exerting pressure on each other through dry friction (Bagn ris and Jean 2017). These frictional forces maintain the cohesion of materials and the stability of structures. When pushes or pulls exceed these forces, the structure is destabilized and breaks up: it "takes on a life of its own", it settles, it cracks, it topples, etc. Whether it is a question of free walls, retaining walls, huts or cairns, the deconstruction follows patterns that refer to construction.

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

IV. Constructive practices and social facts

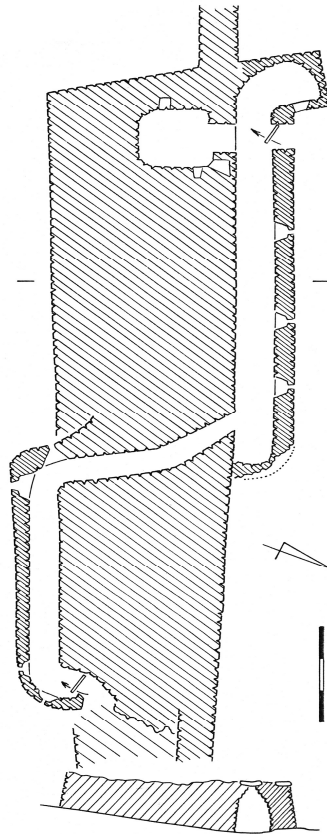
Therefore, in order to include cairns in the universe of dry stone, it is not enough to affirm that most of them are built of stones arranged without binders and holding each other by mutual pressure. In theory, the notion of balance applies to all these structures, whether they are composed of rigid solids (such as stone) or transformable solids (sand, seeds, leather, fabric, etc.). According to the materials and the goals pursued by the builders, the application of the principle of equilibrium obeys, however, various issues and processes. The situation, the volume, the organisation of materials, the status of the work, the aesthetics, the symbolism are all criteria of equal value with the basic constructive technique and they are also largely managed by the principles of relativity and variability.

To support these principles, it is advisable to advance an elimination: that of the heaps "which roll", which spread out and which flatten during their existence, which thus do not have faces, angles and locks containing durably the accumulated materials. This is where the difference lies, in principle, between a "heap" and a "stonework" on the edge of a path or plot. The first (the heap) is a pile which evolves by its own constitution. The second (the stonework) also evolves but that is done, generally, by successive and voluntary additions. Its volume increases or decreases according to the uses and according to the developments of the affected grounds. It is the case of stone works placed in limit of cultivated or grazed plots (fig.5) which are transformed by additions and diggings to form passages, plant beds, caches, niches, corridors, etc. These evolving structures exist in most of the Provençal countryside.

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

Fig.5 - Plan of a scree used for hunting, forming a boundary between the ager and the silva (Provence) -



drawing 'A.Acovitsioti-Hameau © ASER

Precise provisions concerning the construction's base and the adjustment of the materials ensure the stability and durability of each stonework. Of course, these properties are relative but they are also sufficient on a human scale and characteristic, for this reason, of dry stone construction. Indeed, dry stone construction, especially when it is ordinary, does not aim at eternity, which is rather the corollary of monumentality. Dry stone simply allows for flexible evolutions according to the circumstances and needs of spaces and societies. Several cairns (which are not stone works in the agropastoral sense of the term) conform to these prescriptions: they can be landmarks, hiding places, commemorative or religious signs, boundary markers, etc., at the same time or in turn. We mentioned this variability of use at the beginning of this article. They may also disappear or reappear according to circumstances.

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 **'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU**

In sum, to reinforce the thesis that cairns belong to the domain of dry building, registers other than the built devices must also be considered. Firstly, it is necessary to take into account the close links of the technique with the global country-planning: with the road system, the crops, the pastoralism, the circulation of water, the forestry works, the circulation and the stays of people outside their homes, etc. Secondly, it is necessary to underline the propensity of dry stone to underline the topography, to prolong and recall the natural environment, to express or to record the geomorphological, historical and symbolic characteristics of each place.

All these properties are intrinsic to dry stone works and show that this art of doing is combined with an art of feeling the natural and social environment and with an art of living or lifestyle (Acovitsióti-Hameau 2017). By their locations and functions, the cairns fulfil these predispositions in all places and times. In our time, their trivialization and proliferation following a logic of address and performance are largely an expression of the misunderstanding of ordinary community practices. These are converted into actions that their authors feel and present as individualized and extraordinary.

Does the importance of scale play a role in these designations and assessments? This does not seem to be the case. The technicality, the integration with the place, the social and cultural implications and meanings are more or less the same, whether the cairns are coarse or elaborate, small or imposing, simple and utilitarian or displaying monumental or artistic pretensions. In this too, the cairns conform to the principles of the art of building in dry stone, an art that can be discreet or ostentatious following the configuration of the terrain and the needs and aspirations of the human groups that put them in place.

"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

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"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 **'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU**

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"Erecting cairns is it enough to talk about dry stone?"

Reconciling practice, performance and symbolism". Cavtat, Croatia, October 1-2 2021 'Ada ACOVITSIOTI-HAMEAU and Philippe HAMEAU

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Born in Athens, 'Ada Acovitsióti-Hameau lives and works in France. She is an anthropologist at the Association ASER du Centre-Var. She founded and directed for 15 years the Museum of Ice in Mazaugues (Var). She is a founding member of the S.P.S. (International Scientific Society for the Multidisciplinary Study of Dry Stone, declared in France in 1998) and is its general secretary. Holder of two doctorates, in classical archaeology (University of Paris I) and in cultural anthropology (University of Provence), she specializes in the themes of the Anthropology of space, techniques and identity in the Mediterranean rural area. Drymoniti has studied Architecture, Geograph, Secondary Teaching and Tourism. Through her studies and professional activity, she has dealt with issues related to urban planning and sprawl, architectural heritage, sustainability and conservation. She lives permanently on Amorgos Island, where she owns an alternative travel agency, specialising in hiking tourism, local culture, gastronomy and agritourism. She is a co-founder of „The Mitato of Amorgos“, a Non-Profit Partnership aiming at the preservation and promotion of the natural and cultural environment of Amorgos and the Cycladic islands in general.

Philippe Hameau began his career as a departmental archaeologist for the Var and has been a lecturer in anthropology at the Université Côte d'Azur since 2003. His work focuses on graphic acts, in diachronic terms, from prehistory to the present day. His work is the explanation of the variability of iconographic corpora by the study of their social, cultural and ideal context and at the same time the research of the rules which cross the graphic act whatever the cultural environment in which it is registered. Philippe Hameau also works within the framework of the ethnology of rural societies, in their transformations and/or contemporary survivals.



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