

The function of the alignments*

A spectacular landscape

The standing stones of Carnac, organised into complex systems over a vast, carefully chosen territory in the Neolithic era, have not yet revealed the reason for their existence. Seemingly with no links to the stars, sun or moon, these monumental groups have been protected historical monuments since the late 19th century. The spectacle of the Carnac megaliths gives an idea of the incredible story that was written here over several thousands of years, by the will of men and women seeking to convey some kind of message.

A new approach

Like genuine “fields of memory” marking out a border that is both physical and mental, the Carnac alignments continue to represent a scientific challenge to archaeology. The idea of the ruined temple, which appeared in the 19th century, has gradually fallen from favour. A new, previously unexplored notion has come to light – the “site of passage”, a threshold marking the border between two spaces, two worlds. Within this concept, the alignments become a warning, delivering a message to anyone crossing this space. Decoding this still fragmented message is a long, fastidious process, but a challenge that science needs to tackle.

Glossary

Alignment: rows of standing stones. They can be combined, as at Carnac, with megalithic enclosures and arranged in more or less 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 people with disabilities.

Information.



Bookshop-Giftshop

The guide to this monument is available in the 'Itinéraires' collection in 5 different languages, in the bookshop-giftshop.

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The Carnac alignments

An exceptional Neolithic site

6,000 year-old megaliths



Alignments

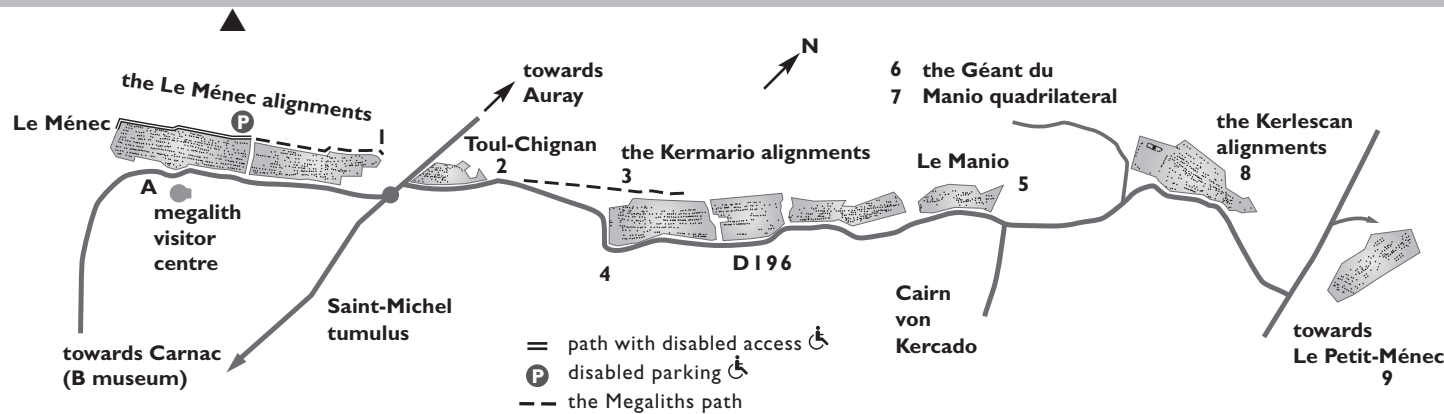
The Carnac alignments* were erected in the Neolithic era, between the fifth and third millennia B.C., by sedentarised

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.



To the west

- 1 Le Méneac.** 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 Méneac 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 Méneac, stands 3.50 metres high and no doubt predates the alignment* itself.
- 2 Toul-Chignan** to the east prolongs the Le Méneac 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, an individual tomb, no longer there.
- 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 Méneac**, located at La Trinité-sur-Mer, are a prolongation of the Kerlescan site.

A The Megaliths Visitor Centre is open all year round: the spaces giving information on megalithic architecture take visitors back in time to the era when the monuments were built. Exhibitions, a ticket office, information point and bookshop-gift shop complete the facilities on offer to the public.

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.