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Megalithic Stela

3rd Millennium B.C

Neolithic Mediterranean

Granite

H: 67cm

A tall anthropomorphic stela of carved granite, divided into two distinct regions of the body and face. The body is a single unarticulated block, but the facial features are outlined with strong carved lines. A T-shape marks the position of the nose and eyebrows, with two small horizontal lines for the eyes and a third, slightly deeper, line for the mouth.

Stele of this kind are represented in many major traditions in prehistoric Europe. These include: southern Ukraine and Moldova, regions of the Italian and Swiss Alps, Lunigiana in the Apuan Alps, Southern France, Sardinia, Corsica, Iberia, Southern Italy, Malta, the Paris Basin, Channel Islands, Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Due to the scarcity of the archaeological record, it is impossible to estimate the total numbers of stelae in each group, but the largest known groups are those from Lunigiana and Ukraine, which each have over 100 known examples.[1] Although each traditional has its own characteristics, there are still many commonalities across geographically distinct localities. The question of how such widely dispersed but clearly related traditions can have come about and continued for over a thousand years (between about 3500 and 2000 B.C.) is still something of a mystery.

Most stele are removed from their archaeological context before they are found – it is not uncommon to

find them reused in modern architectural structures. Those that are found in context are generally in monumental, often funerary sites. Some are used as grave or mound markers, and others have been found within tombs and burial chambers, or in groups at ritual sites. They have therefore been interpreted as representing gods or ancestral figures. Due to their scale and materials, it would have been a large undertaking to produce one of these stele, which was probably carried out by groups within the community rather than single individuals.

[1] John Robb, 'People of Stone: Stela, Personhood, and Society in Prehistoric Europe', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 16:3 (September 2009), pp. 169-170.