

Stone Circles (Gambia and Senegal)

No 1226

1. BASIC DATA

States Parties: Republic of the Gambia and the Republic of Senegal

Name of property: The Stone Circles of Senegambia

Location: Kerbatch and Wassu in Central River Division, Gambia

Sine Ngayène and Wanar in Kaolack Region, Senegal

Date received by the World Heritage Centre: 31 January 2005

Included in the Tentative List: September 1995 (Gambia) / 21 July 1998 (Senegal)

International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the nomination: 19 September 2001 (2 requests)
14 May 2004

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

Brief description:

Four large groups of stone circles represent an extraordinary concentration of over 1,000 stone circles and aligned monuments encompassing in a band 100km across spread out along some 350km of the River Gambia. The four groups, Sine Ngayène, Wanar, Wassu and Kerbatch between them cover 93 circles and numerous tumuli, some of which have been excavated to reveal material that suggest dates between 3rd century BC and 16th century AD. Together the stone circles of carefully worked laterite pillars and their associated burial mounds present a vast sacred landscape accumulated over more than a 1,500 years and reflecting a prosperous, highly organised and persistent society.

2. ACTIONS

Background: This nomination is a revised version of a nomination of five sites (The Prehistoric Stone Circle Sites) submitted in 1995 by The Gambia to the 20th session of the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee (UNESCO, 1996) and deferred to allow protective measures to be put in place, for the development of management plans and for the definition of buffer zones.

Date of the Technical Evaluation Mission: 9-15 November 2005

Dates of request for additional information and of receipt from State Party: None

Consultations: ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management.

Literature: Thilmans, G., Descamps, C., & Khayat, B. *Protohistoire du Sénégal*, Dakar, 1980. Bocoum H., *Archéologie du Sénégal: Les cultures protohistorique; in L'Archéologie en Afrique de l'Ouest, Sahara et Sahel*, CRIAA, 2000.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report: 15 January 2006

3. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nominated property consists of four separate groups of stone circles and associated burial mounds which together represent a vast concentration of megalithic monuments spread out along some 350 km of the River Gambia and its northern tributaries, extending 100km north to the River Saloum, east as far as Tambacounda and west to Kaolack.

In all some 1987 sites have been identified including 1053 stone circles grouped into several clusters and containing around 29,000 individual stones over a vast areas of 35,000 sq km. The stones forming the circles have been quarried with iron tools from nearby laterite quarries and skilfully shaped into almost identical pillars, either cylindrical or polygonal in section, on average around 2m in height and weighing up to 7 tons. Each circle contains between 8 and 14 pillars and has a diameter of 4 to 6 metres. Sometimes the circles are associated with single outlying pillars, or linear arrangements. A few circles have double concentric circles of stones.

All the circles are found near to burial mounds, of a type known from the mountains of Mauritania to the north and from Mali to the east. Several mounds have been excavated to reveal a few single but mostly multiple, and apparently simultaneous burials, with associated sacrifices.

Four clusters of stone circles in the western area where the remains are most dense have been nominated as representative of this profusion of remains.

The total area of the four sites is 9,85ha. Although each of the site is currently surrounded by open farm land, a Buffer Zone has nevertheless been designated. This extends to 200m from the boundaries in all directions. The total area of the sites and their buffer zones is 110,05ha.

The nominated groups of sites are as follows:

Sine Ngayène complex

Wanar complex

Wassu complex

Kerbatch complex

These are considered in turn:

Sine Ngayène complex

The Sine Ngayène complex is the largest site in the area. It consists of 52 circles of standing stones, including one double circle. The majority of the circles are arranged in a wide linear belt running from the south-east to the north-west with three groups of circles to the north-east and three

more to the south-west. In all there are 1102 carved stones, many of which are now fallen or broken.

Around 1km to the east (but not included in the nomination) is the quarry from which the monoliths were extracted and where the sources of around 150 stones can be traced.

Three areas were excavated in 1970s by Thilsman and Descamps and more recently further work was carried out by Holl and Bocoum. This latter work established that the single burials appeared to precede the multiple burials associated with the stone circles.

The site is surrounded by a fence constructed in 2004 when a reception building for visitors was also put in place.

Wanar complex

Wanar consists of 21 stone circles including one double circle. The site contains 9 'lyre' stones, double stones joined at the base and sometimes with a short cross piece strung between the two halves.

Many stones have fallen over and there are plans to reerect some of these after suitable excavations. (see below)

The site has not yet been excavated. The site is enclosed with a fence along the boundary.

Wassu complex

Wassu contains 11 circles and associated frontal stones. Several excavations have been carried out, most recently by the Anglo-Gambian stone Circles Expedition of 1964-5 led by Evans and Ozanne. Finds excavated from burials yielded dates of between 927 and 1305 AD.

Some 200m to the east of the site is a quarry that appears to have been used for the megaliths on the site.

The site is fenced. Four thatched round buildings, built in the manner of traditional houses, provide a museum and visitor reception facilities.

Kerbatch complex

This site contains nine circles, including one double circle. Within the site there is a 'V' stone, the only one known in the area.

Several circular buildings constructed in local materials offer facilities to visitors and housing for a caretaker.

History

Although the stone circles have been the subject of research over the past 100 years, and several parts of the nominated site have been excavated, more could be elucidated about the megalithic zone as a whole.

Material from excavations suggests that the burials took place mainly during the first and early second millennia AD. However the relationship between the burial mounds and the stone circles has yet to be fully ascertained. It is not clear whether the burials pre-date the circles, whether they are contemporary or whether perhaps the circles pre-date the burials.

The excavations by Tholmans et al were published in 1980 and those by Galley et al in 1982. Excavations were re-

started by Lawson in the Gambia in 2002 and by Hall and Bocoum in 2001-2004 in Senegal.

Some of the quarry sites have been identified, although none are in the nominated area. However only a very small proportion of the megaliths can be traced to a source.

The burials that have been excavated appear to reveal a less ordered regime. They show mass burials with bodies thrown haphazardly into graves, suggesting either an epidemic or some sort of sacrifice.

The Manding people who currently live in much of the megalithic zone seemed to have moved into the area in the 16th century, after the construction of the megaliths, and so do not appear to be related to the megalith builders.

Protection and Management

Legal protection:

The two sites in the Gambia, Wassu and Kerbatch were proclaimed national monuments in 1995. The National centre for Arts and Culture (NCAC) is responsible for monitoring development within the protected areas and they are assisted at the regional level by the divisional Cultural Committee. Both Senegalese sites, Sine Ngayène and Wanar have also been proclaimed national monuments in 1978. This protects them against irremediable consequences and any demolition, transformation or restoration of the site needs the permission of the Ministry of Culture.

The Buffer Zone which surrounds all four sites allows farming practices but within it all construction is forbidden. The by-law was given consent by the district Chiefs in December 2004.

Management structure:

The four sites are owned by their respective States.

In The Gambia, management authority rests with the Museums and Monuments Division of NCAC. Daily management of the two sites is through the permanent site attendant and caretakers on the sites who report to Curators and Monument Officers.

In Senegal the *Direction du Patrimoine Culturel* (DPC), under the *Ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine Historique*, is responsible for the management of the two sites. An independent technical commission headed by the Minister for Culture and National Heritage is responsible for overseeing all authorisations for new interventions at national heritage sites. At the regional level the *centres culturels régionaux* assists the Ministry in working with local organisations to take account of local specificities and to coordinate the efforts of state bodies involved in culture, tourism, education and the environment.

The population living near the sites and their representatives, as well as school teachers, youth associations, and women's associations, were all involved in the preparation of the nomination dossier and the Management Plan.

The Management Plan has been prepared jointly for all four sites. This has been a collaborative exercise: 58 people were involved in the production of the plan.

Education programmes involving local schools are beginning to be put in place and an association the Friends of the Stone Circles has been set up to work for the conservation and promotion of the megaliths for the benefit of the local populations.

Resources:

In the Gambia, each site has a caretaker and one site attendant with day to day responsibility for security, ground maintenance and guiding visitors.

In Senegal a permanent caretaker is employed at Sine Ngayène. At Wanar no permanent staff has yet been appointed – but it is planned to make an appointment once the protective fence has been erected. The recurring expenditure for the two sites in The Gambia is provided by NCAC. All revenues for visitor tickets and sales of books etc, are submitted to the NCAC. External funding has been provided for the development of small site museums.

In Senegal the construction work on fences and reception buildings has been financed by the central government.

Currently visitor numbers are very low. Access is difficult in the rainy season and even in the dry season visitors are rare. Nevertheless the local community at Ngayène has begun to construct a guest house to welcome visitors in order to benefit from the cultural resource.

Justification of the Outstanding Universal Value by States Parties (summary)

The four sites are nominated as representative of the megalithic zone in Senegambia which:

- is notable for many thousands of skilfully dressed stone laterite pillars arranged in circles.
- is specific to the region, does not have links with other megalithic sites in Africa or elsewhere and has no equivalent
- appears to represent a vast necropolis for a distinct cultural group which reflect a very distinct perception of death

4. EVALUATION

Conservation

State of conservation:

None of the sites has been the subject of active conservation. The state of conservation for most of the circles is good. Some megaliths have fallen over or are leaning away from the uprights but there has been little robbing of stone from the sites.

Protection and Management:

Rural communities are strongly involved in the management of the sites.

An association, the "Friends of the Stone Circles" has been set in The Gambia up to work for the conservation and the promotion of the megaliths for the benefit of the local populations.

As a means of broadening understanding of the importance of the megalithic zone as a whole, megalithic civilization is now one of the programmes taught in schools and colleges in both Senegal and The Gambia.

All four sites have now been enclosed, which allows overall control of the site and the exclusion of cattle. Excluding cattle does bring problems with controlling vegetation around the stones in the wet season and this has yet to be fully resolved in a labour effective way. In Gambia the possibility of low growing crops such as soya are being used and this approach is being studied in Senegal.

- Boundaries

The nominated boundaries adequately enclose the four stone circle complexes. These four complexes have been chosen to represent the geographical spread of stone circles as well as their density and complexity. Sine Ngayène for instance is the largest complex with 52 stone circles, and the other sites represent various features such as lyre stone, double circles.

What are excluded from the nominations are the quarry sites from where some of the stones originated. ICOMOS considers that would be desirable to protect these sites as outliers of the nominated sites.

Risk Analysis:

The monoliths are, or have been, subject to the following threats:

- Stock

The monoliths are scattered across an agricultural landscape and sit within fields which in the winter months are grazed by cattle. In the wet season large animals leaning against the stones can cause them to work loose. The nominated sites have been fenced to prevent further damage.

- Stubble burning

At certain times of year stubble and vegetation is burnt and this can harm the megaliths.

- Water erosion

Depending on the strata from which the megaliths were quarried, certain rocks have developed hair fissures into which water can penetrate. This in place can lead to the rocks splitting apart. This is however not a major problem.

- Visitors

Visitor numbers are currently comparatively low and it is thus possible to manage them with a small number of staff. It would be desirable to put in place local committees in order to provide extra support for the staff and a degree of involvement for the local communities.

- Lack of knowledge

The exceptionally large number of megaliths over such an extensive area tends to lend these monuments a commonplace air. Isolating the four nominated sites and raising their profile will help to spread information of their significance but more needs to be done to raise the profile of the sites across the whole megalithic zone.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The stone circles still stand in their farmed landscape and there have been few interventions. A very small number of stones have been re-erected and a few burial sites excavated and subsequently back-filled but these are minimal disturbances. The overall authenticity of the four sites is intact.

Integrity:

The integrity of the four nominated sites can only relate to the integrity of part of what is a wider unified cultural complex. The nominated groups retain their integrity in terms of the spatial associations of their component circles and individual megaliths and tumuli. The spiritual beliefs attached to the stones by local communities helps to protect their integrity.

Comparative evaluation

The comparative analysis in the nomination is confined to stone circles rather than megalithic monuments in general. The size of the Senegambian megalithic complex with 1,053 Stone circles and a total of 28,931 monoliths make it easily the largest complex yet recorded in any region of the world. What also sets this complex apart from other stone circles is the sophisticated stone working traditions, with each of the monoliths being dressed with iron tools to a pillar form thus giving the circles a near uniformity.

The number and density of the monuments and the quality of the stone extraction and dressing both suggest a highly organised and highly structured society that had the technical ability and capacity to mobilise significant labour forces to support the massive quarrying, transportation and construction programme over many centuries.

Unlike stone circles in parts of Europe, the stone circles in Senegambia are not isolated monuments sited on hills or knolls to be seen from long distances to enhance their ritual importance. Instead they are strewn along river banks and have apparently always been near to cultivated land and settlements.

What is being nominated is not the whole megalithic complex but four sites to represent that complex. Nevertheless, just one of those: Sine Ngayène with its 52 stone circles alone bears comparison with many other stone circles elsewhere in the world. Although it would be desirable if more than four sites could be nominated to protect the extraordinary richness of the whole complex, the four nominated sites do represent the key attributes of the whole group.

Outstanding Universal Value

General statement:

The four nominated megalithic complexes are of outstanding universal value for the way they represent:

- A vast, extensive megalithic monumental building tradition manifest in over a 1,000 stone circles spread across one of Africa's major river valleys

- The products of a highly structured, prosperous and organised society whose traditions of stone circle construction, associated with burials, seem to have persisted in the areas for over a millennia

Evaluation of criteria:

The site is nominated on the basis of criteria i, iii, and iv:

Criterion i: The four sites are put forward as a masterpiece of human creative genius in the light of the precise and skillful stone working practices involved in the carving individual pillars.

Although research into the history and meaning of these sites is still underway and it is as yet too soon to say whether they were laid out for visual effect as well as for ceremonial and ritual purposes, the results are monuments of imposing grandeur and skill which merit the application of this criterion. ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

Criterion iii: This criterion is suggested in the sense that the assembly of stone circles represents a very distinctive cultural tradition which has now disappeared. Although research has yet to provide evidence of the societies that built these stone circles, one can nevertheless maintain that the physical survival of so many circles is a unique manifestation of construction and funerary practices which persisted for over a millennia across a large sweep of landscape and one that reflects a sophisticated and productive society. ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

Criterion iv: The nomination suggests that the landscape of stone circles illustrates the mastery of iron tools in a spectacular way. Iron smelting sites associated with the megaliths have been documented and related to early first millennium Iron Age sites to the north of the nominated areas. The stone circles could be an early manifestation of iron working, but more research would be needed to establish this and justify this criterion. ICOMOS considers that this criterion has not been justified.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

The outstanding universal value of the four nominated sites is related to their representativity of the much wider megalithic zone which in terms of size, consistency, and complexity appears to be unrivalled anywhere in the world.

Although ICOMOS supports the inscription of the four sites on the World Heritage list, it recommends that these are seen as the first stage of a serial nomination that will in time be expanded to encompass much more of the megalithic zone. ICOMOS also recommends that the circles in their landscape should be seen as cultural landscapes with if possible appropriate management regimes put in place to enable agriculture to be compatible with the monuments. ICOMOS also recommends that a research strategy is put in place for non-interventionist research that would encompass the recording of oral traditions relating to the stone circles, the gathering of evidence on iron working sites, quarries used for the megaliths, other associated built structures, such as stone

drains, and, as resources permit, a large-scale mapping programme to record the whole megalithic zone.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the Stone Circles of Senegambia, Republic of The Gambia and Republic of Senegal, be inscribed on the World Heritage list on the basis of ***criteria i and iii***:

Criterion i: The finely worked individual stones display precise and skillful stone working practices and contribute to the imposing order and grandeur of the overall stone circle complexes.

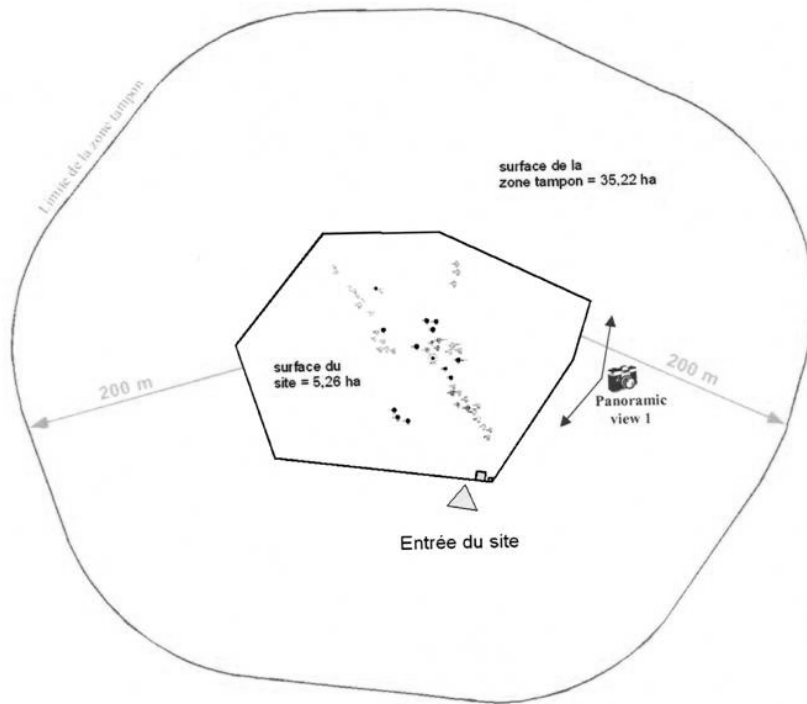
Criterion iii: The nominated stone circles, represent the wider megalithic zone, in which the survival of so many circles is a unique manifestation of construction and funerary practices which persisted for over a millennia across a large sweep of landscape, and reflects a sophisticated and productive society.

ICOMOS recommends that the States parties give consideration to extending the nominated sites to include quarry sites.

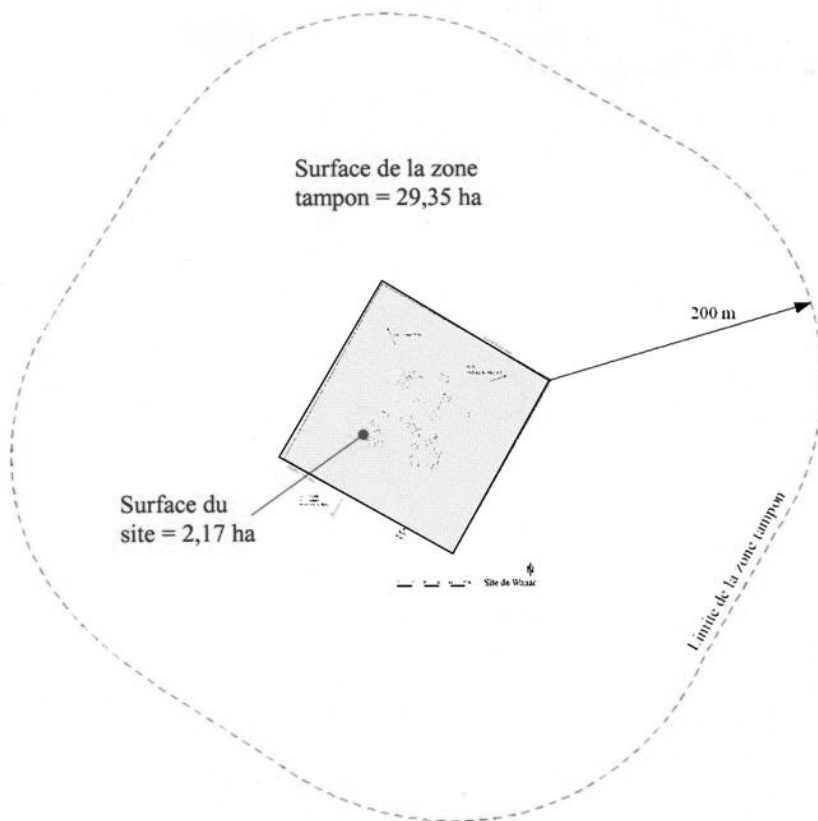
ICOMOS also recommends that the States Parties consider nominating further sites as part of a wider cultural landscape serial nomination in order to sustain more of the megalithic landscape of Senegambia.

ICOMOS also recommends that a research strategy be put in place to address the wider associations of the stone circles and to record in more detail the megalithic zone

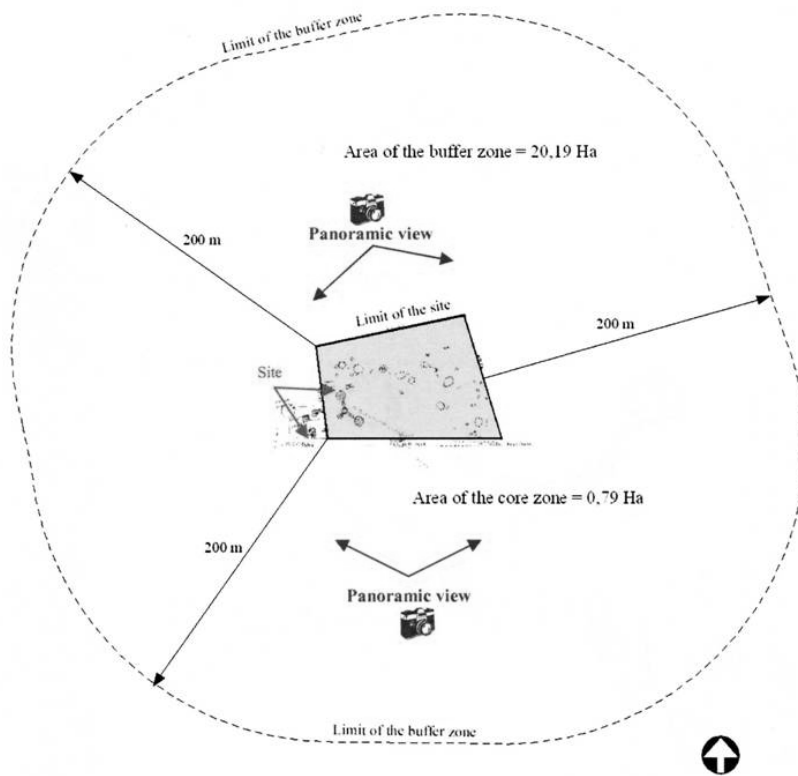
ICOMOS, April 2006



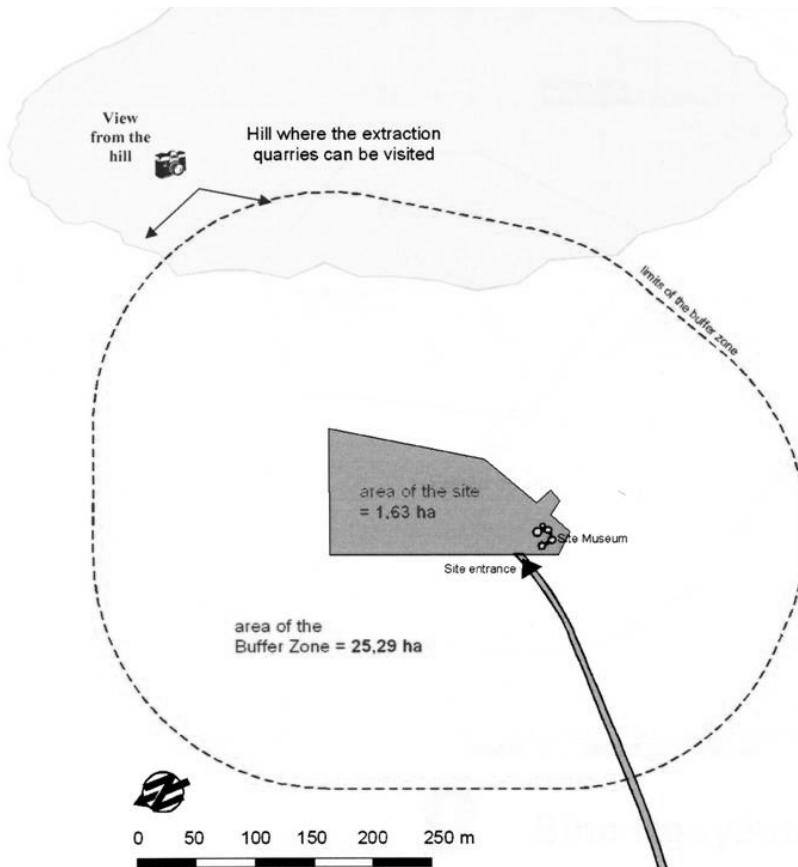
Map showing the boundaries of Sine Ngayène



Map showing the boundaries of Wanar



Map showing the boundaries of Kerbatch



Map showing the boundaries of Wassu



Ngayène, double circle



Wanar, Lyre stones



Wassu



Kerbatch, « V » stone