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La racine indo-européenne *kol* désigne, selon les linguistes, un élément fiché en terre, dressé comme un pilier. Le mot grec *kolossos* est employé par Hérodote pour désigner les statues égyptiennes, debout ou assises, les jambes serrées, les bras le long du corps et donc plus ou moins assimilables à des piliers par leur silhouette semblable à celle d'une momie. Composante fondamentale de l'imagination humaine, le colossal fascine et repousse à la fois. Il exprime tour à tour l'ambition poussée jusqu'à la mégalomanie de l'artiste et celle des empires ou des régimes, souvent totalitaires, qui utilisent ses services. Hors des normes, il exalte l'individu et l'opprime d'un même mouvement.

Ce *Dossier* Universalis, composé d'articles empruntés au fonds de l'Encyclopaedia Universalis, rend compte de ces aspects multiples, des alignements de Carnac à la Grande Muraille de Chine en passant par Saint-Pierre de Rome et l'île de Pâques.

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