

## REPRESENTATIONS AND SYMBOLISM OF DEATH IN ROCK ART

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Funerary contexts as well as imagery of death are a rich source of information for researchers. They contain data related not only to ideas about a group's belief systems but also to their social relations, their connection to the land, and the role of the environment in culture. In rock art studies, motifs and contexts associated to the dead have often been approached in relation to ritual and religious aspects but, it seems to us, the other dimensions have not yet been sufficiently explored. For this reason, this session will aim at discussing the representations and symbolism of death in rock art in relation to topics such as gender roles, social organization, territoriality, mobility, and diet, among others.

Connotations of death in rock art can be direct, as in literal depictions of mortality, or the co-presence of skeletal remains. But can also be more nuanced, for example in nearness to burial sites, or the portrayal of characters or scenes related to the hereafter. How should we interpret these differences? And, more importantly, what do rock art sites tell us about how people perceived and coped with death and its effects?

In sum, rock art along with mortuary practices constitute an important part of the archaeological record that have often been underplayed, restricted to interpretations of ritual, but which hold a great potential for gaining access to all aspects of social organization.

We invite interdisciplinary participation of scholars interested in what rock art can help us infer about the position and impact of individuals in and beyond life and, at a more general level, the underlying institutions and principles that generate and support those roles.

## Unique Rock Engraving in 'Uvda Valley, Southern Israel

'Uvda Vally; in the southern Negev, Israel, is a hyper arid area, but highly rich with archaeological remains, including a vast farming settlement system, beginning 6000 BC. On the western side of the valley an isolated rock engraving was found, totally different than thousands of others in the Negev, more abstract, complex and artistic. An attempt to interpret it begins with separation to elements. Several different ways are possible, but one gains better support from additional materials. It is suggested that the image includes four elements. The lower seems to be a predator, with an open mouth and some spots on its body, i.e. leopard. The figures above him are interpreted as two abstract women or goddesses, one with the head up, one with the head down, while the left one carries an infant on her knees. If separation to elements and interpretation are correct, the figures may represent a cyclical perception of life and death. Although it sounds too bold, the interpretation does find support in nearby evidence, additional engravings, and art pieces from the Near East and beyond. The connection of the women/goddesses to leopards is also relevant to the theme.

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**Keywords:** desert, Negev, Sinai, geoglyphs, mythology, Neolithic

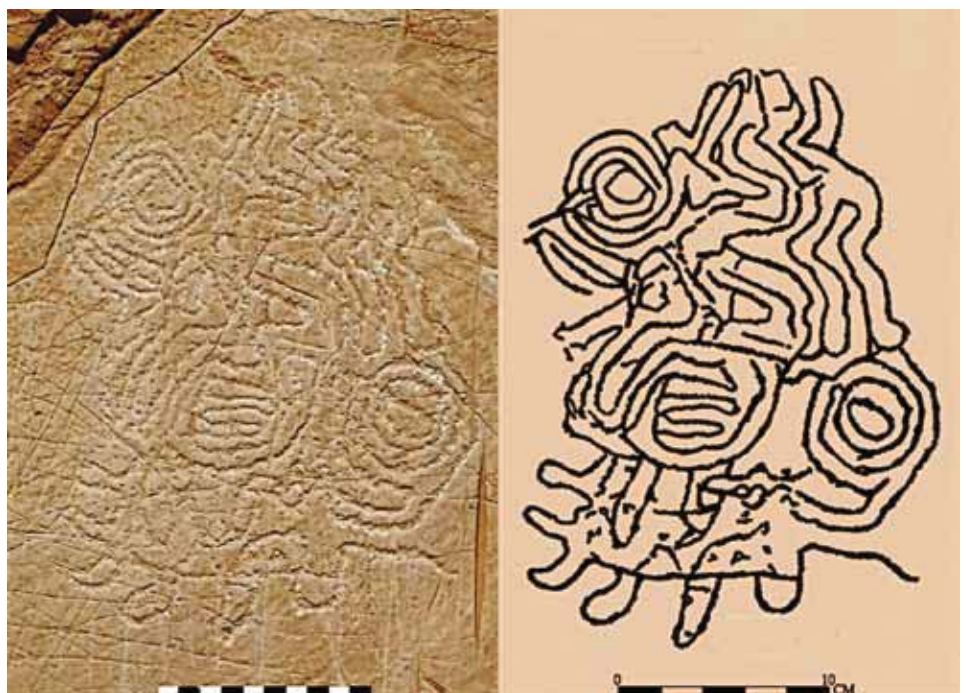


Fig.1 - The engraving from West Uvda Valley, a photo and tracing (without the later scratches).

## Rock art for the dead - a long-term perspective on north European rock art

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**Keywords:** burial ritual, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, chronology

One of the most captivating phenomena of north European rock art is its close relationship to contemporary burial practices. Since 1995 I have gathered more than 500 examples of 'rock art for the dead'. About 300 of these are firmly dated through stratigraphic and archaeological contexts. Some of these rock art contexts are very famous, such as the Sagaholm barrow and Bredarör on Kivik, most of them are less so. The lion's share of this assemblage appears to have been actively made during burial rituals, which are evident from finds of hammer stones and the pristine appearance of images and cupmarks. Cutting through different archaeological time periods and cultural contexts, rock art for the dead continued from 2800 BC until AD 800. As well as providing an overview of these important finds – not least as building blocks for rock art chronologies, this paper also includes some thoughts on prehistoric burial practice in general and the role/s that rock art may have played in these contexts over time.

## **The art of death: Exploring the conception of human demise in the European Upper Palaeolithic**

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**Keywords:** Europe, Upper Palaeolithic, burial, mortuary practices, social differentiation

Based on a comparative analysis of archaeological burial contexts and rock art in the European Upper Palaeolithic, this paper suggests two main forms of mortuary practices for that period: one aimed at the disposal and eventual disintegration of the dead, and another focused on their preservation and retention. The earlier reveals an intention to disguise social differences, the latter, on the contrary, seems to represent an effort to singularize the gender and age-group of the deceased. It appears that, following the changes in climate and settlement patterns that took place after the Gravettian and into the Magdalenian and Epigravettian, the burial forms and practices pertaining to different social groups became more homogeneous, to some extent. However, we identify some continuous trends which lead us to conclude that the Paleolithic idea of death may be perceived as a long-term phenomenon that, despite superficial transformations, maintained some basic elements at its core.

## A Rock Art Site in Wessex Expressing a Perception of Death Seemingly Linked to Expectations in the Hereafter

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**Keywords:** Avebury Hills, death symbolism, western paradise, summer solstice, winter solstice

On the Marlborough Downs east of Neolithic Avebury in Wiltshire (England) are two stones upon which are carved images firmly indicative of death and yet, because orientated to the setting sun at the summer and winter solstices, possibly presenting optimism about the future for souls of the recent dead. The first stone exhibits the head of a dead animal, with gaping toothless mouth, and at its north-western side the carving of a helmeted human head facing sunset at the summer solstice. This recalls a myth, referenced by Gordon Frazer, in which souls of the dead repose in a convenient rock while awaiting the next solstice sunset when they follow the sun into the paradisiacal land beyond the horizon. Knowing this, the author predicted that there might exist a similar carved rock facing the direction of the winter solstice sunset. Such a stone was found located nearby, again with the carved head of a dead animal and head of a noble-looking human. It is suggested that these rock carvings were created in the worldview belief that human souls are sheltered in this manner until the coming of the next solstice when they depart to the land of paradise in the west.



Fig. 1 - Avebury Hills. Death Stone sculptured in connection with the summer solstice sunset. (photo © T. Meaden)

Fig. 2 - Avebury Hills. Death Stone sculptured in connection with the winter solstice sunset. (photo © T. Meaden)

## Rock art and cult of the Dead's

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**Keywords:** rock art, death cult, post-Paleolithic, Valcamonica, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Copper Age, stelae

Much has been written about the post-Paleolithic rock art of Valcamonica and other European sites, but the deeper meaning of the signs, their functions when they were produced and, in some cases, preserved and showed, still warrants further interpretative analysis. The analysis of the images made during different periods, especially from the Copper Age onwards, allows us to understand how the underlying ritual language has evolved and transformed in parallel with the cultural changes. A ritual language predominantly addressed to the dead, during the Copper Age, and became a commemorative, re-evocative, mythical, celebrative and reactivating language during the Iron Age. The stelae, anthropomorphic stelae and statue-stelae of the Copper Age, often concentrated in megalithic sanctuaries, are what remain of extensive ritual activities related to the cult of heroes, mythical ancestors, founding fathers of the community, the bearers of metallurgical knowledge: a permanent language that in some cases lasted many centuries. These rituals were paralleled in the engraved rocks. The images represented: scenes of combat, warriors often associated with waterfowl or migratory birds, birds, "solar boats", hunting scenes, "shovels", buildings, and even wagons tell us about the cult of the dead, like the figures of boats, common in Scandinavian countries, as the graphic ritual reduction of the journey to the afterlife.



Fig.1 - Naquane r. 1, Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica, Italy. (Photo A. Priuli)

Fig.2 - Naquane r. 44, Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica, Italy. (Photo A. Priuli)

## Scenes from a funeral: memory of death in Dadabe cave (Hararghe, Ethiopia)

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**Keywords:** rock art, funeral scene, Ethiopia, Hararghe

This research presents a scene which is likely to be funerary in character, preserved on the lower wall of the Dadabe cave (Hararghe, Ethiopia). A painting, unique in the rock art of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, was identified during the 2009 mission, carried out in collaboration with the University of Florence and the Museum of Natural History of the Maremma in Grosseto. This was carried out in the context of a research program on rock art sites, evidence of prehistoric archeology and the surviving ethnological evidence, that the University of Florence and the Museum of Grosseto have begun to implement since 2002. Dadabe Cave is an unpublished site that exhibits numerous geometric-schematic paintings.



Fig.1 - Dadabe Cave, Hararghe, Ethiopia. (photo Luca Bachechi)  
Fig.2 - Dadabe Cave, Hararghe, Ethiopia. (photo Luca Bachechi)

## War dances, combat and death in the rock paintings of Spanish Levantine art

This paper discusses several rock art panels, painted in shelters and cavities in open air in the mountain ranges of the Mediterranean Basin of the Iberian Peninsula, overall known as Levantine rock art. We focus, in particular, on scenes and compositions referring to warfare themes depicting wounded or dead figures, and even an isolated instance of a burial. The events portrayed may contain mythical or symbolic aspects, but also historical and normative subjects. We have classified the art's contents in the following categories: 1) warrior group; 2) warring phalanx; 3) warrior dances; 4) ambush; 5) battles; 6) group execution; 8) killing; 9) dead characters. We suggest that the pictorial records of these practices and events definitely record conflicts that took place amongst Post-Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer societies.

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