

Deer and Death across the Euro-Atlantic façade during the Holocene: towards ArtLantic landscapes

Sofia Figueiredo-Persson¹; Joana Valdez-Tullett²; Trond Lødøen³

1- CHAM – Centre for the Humanities, NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities, NOVA University Lisbon, 1069-061 Lisbon, Portugal and Iconictheory, Portugal.

2- Department of Archaeology, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom and Wessex Archaeology, United Kingdom

3- Department of Cultural History, University Museum of Bergen, University of Bergen, P.O. Box 7800, N-5020, Bergen, Norway

Key-words:

Deer; Holocene; Euro-Atlantic façade; Funerary practices; Rock Art Imagery

Abstract:

As the Holocene began, the climatic and environmental transformations that reshaped the Euro-Atlantic façade, from Scandinavia to Britain, Ireland and the Iberian coastline, led to a broad ecological reconfiguration. While during the Last Glacial cervids were largely restricted to southern refugia, the Holocene enabled a significant northward expansion of these species. Although cervids appear in Palaeolithic records, their importance increases in the Holocene, also reflecting broader habitat availability. Beyond their economic value as sources of antler, bone, hides and occasionally meat, these animals also emerged as powerful symbolic agents, as evidenced in rock imagery, ritual headdresses, masks and funerary deposits that reveal deep cultural and ideological significance.

This resonance is evident across the Atlantic façade. In the Scandinavian Mesolithic, deer engravings in open-air rock art and cervid-derived objects in burials reveal complex human–animal engagements. In Britain, evidence includes Mesolithic headdresses, cervid remains in tombs and, more recently, Neolithic deer engravings within a funerary monument. Further south, Iberian deposits of red-deer antlers in pits and graves, from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, accompany cervid depictions in rock shelters, open-air outcrops and funerary monuments, a tradition persisting into the Bronze Age.

This session explores the varied contexts in which deer remains and representations emerge across northern and western Europe, reassessing how these finds have been interpreted in relation to human–animal relationships. Focusing on the Atlantic façade between the Mesolithic and the Bronze Age, it examines how references to deer intertwine with death and funerary practices, whether through the deposition of antlers and related materials in ritualised spaces or through their symbolic role in mortuary rituals. By integrating iconographic, zooarchaeological, technological and contextual approaches, this session evaluates the importance of cervids within economic, ritual, funerary and symbolic spheres and welcomes comparative, methodological and interdisciplinary contributions.