

Foraging figures to fish and fjords: The Prehistoric Engraved and Painted Rock Art of Northern Europe

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Abstract:

Across Northern Europe, from the windswept coasts of the British Isles, Norway, Sweden to the river valleys of Finland, Poland and the Baltic shores, prehistoric communities left behind an extraordinary legacy of engraved and painted rock. These sites, ranging from deep cave chambers to exposed granite outcrops, capture moments of symbolic expression that span millennia. Their motifs include dynamic human figures, wild and domesticated animals, boats, solar symbols, and enigmatic geometric designs. While many of these marks appear subtle or weathered today, ongoing research using digital enhancement, 3D scanning, and pigment analysis continues to reveal a complex, interconnected tapestry of visual communication.

This session explores the ways in which Northern European societies used rock surfaces as media for narrative, ritual, and territorial expression. The region's rock art is notable for its diversity: the early painted and engravings of the British Isles, the bold Bronze Age carvings of Bohuslän in Sweden, the marine scenes from coastal Norway, the painted shelters of Finland and Karelia, and the less-studied engravings of northern Germany and Poland. Together, they form a cultural corridor that reflects technological change, shifting cosmologies, and long-distance interaction. By comparing artistic conventions, production techniques, and archaeological contexts, we can better understand how these images structured social memory, mediated relations with the natural world, and contributed to emerging political landscapes.

Equally important is the role of environmental change. Glacial rebound, fluctuating sea levels, and evolving ecosystems shaped the visibility, accessibility, and symbolism of these surfaces. New chronological frameworks and landscape analyses are helping researchers reconstruct

how prehistoric people engaged with these dynamic settings and how rock art functioned within ritualized movement, seasonal gathering, and communal storytelling.

This session also highlights methodological innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Advances in geochemistry, microerosion analysis, and acoustic archaeology are offering fresh insights into production sequences and place-making.