

Press release for the article "Critical comments on the find complex of the so-called Nebra Sky Disk" by Prof. Rupert Gebhard & Prof. Rüdiger Krause

3 Sep. 2020

Nebra Sky Disk is 1,000 years younger than previously assumed

The Nebra Sky Disk probably does not originate from the early Bronze Age (circa 2200 – 1600 BC), but from the Iron Age (circa 800 – 50 BC). It is thus no longer the oldest known concrete depiction of the sky.

This statement is the view of Prof. Dr. Rupert Gebhard, Director of the Archäologische Staatssammlung München and Professor of Pre- and Protohistory at Munich University (LMU), and Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Krause, Professor of Pre- and Protohistory at Frankfurt a. M. University. They have carefully analysed the documents relating to the discovery of the Sky Disk by two looters, included the statements from the two sets of court proceedings against the looters, and scientifically examined all the research results published so far. Their analyses lead Gebhard and Krause to conclude that the site and circumstances of the discovery of the Sky Disk, which were investigated in 2002 in a subsequent scientific excavation, cannot have been correctly described and depicted in the specialist literature. In particular, the two archaeologists are convinced that the Sky Disk cannot belong together with the other finds which seemed to facilitate the dating of the world-famous object in the first place. Its symbols and its style of depiction mean that the Sky Disk probably originates from the Iron Age, which comes after the Bronze Age, and is 1,000 years younger than previously thought. Gebhard and Krause thus fundamentally call into question the bases of the previous interpretation of the Sky Disk. Their research findings have now been published in the specialist journal "Archäologische Informationen".

Discovery site, context and previous dating of the Nebra Sky Disk

The Nebra Sky Disk was found in 1999 by two looters, allegedly in a so-called hoard together with two Bronze Age swords, with axes and armlets. These other finds are crucial for dating the Sky Disk: the disk itself cannot be dated, neither scientifically nor archaeologically, by means of direct comparisons with other objects, because a comparable disk does not exist. A procedure which is common practice in archaeology is to then determine the age by means of a comparison with other finds which were found in a find context which can be dated. But do the objects – the Sky Disk and the two swords in particular, which can be dated well, and the flanged axes – belong together at all, and can they therefore be considered to be of the same age? With a scientific excavation this would be known, whereas the descriptions given by the two looters are contradictory, vague and questionable. Several groups of researchers have therefore already spent many years of investigation attempting to confirm that the objects belong together, confirmation which is independent of the information from the finders. Rupert Gebhard and Rüdiger Krause now present three powerful lines of argument which they are convinced strongly contradict the previous interpretation of the Sky Disk:

1. Gebhard's and Krause's investigations first arrive at the finding that the official find history from the reports of the looters and the subsequent scientific excavation cannot



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be correct. This is because the damage and traces of corrosion on the disk do not match the history; for example, the recognisable direction of the stroke from the excavation pick of one of the looters, which caused damage to the disk in 1999, does not match the description of how the disk had supposedly lain in the soil. The reconstructed position of the find at the place which had previously been assumed to be the find location, and where the subsequent excavation took place, cannot be correct according to the results obtained by the two researchers. This calls into question the whole find situation as it had previously been asserted.

2. Sky disk, swords, axes and armlets have been painstakingly analysed by other researchers in recent years to ascertain the precise composition of the bronze, and thus determine whether the objects could have belonged together, i. e. were buried together at the same time in a so-called hoard. They hoped they would be able to detect a specific pattern of trace elements which they shared, that could only originate from a very restricted supply source – which would strengthen the assumption that all objects belonged together. The previous analyses found that all objects originated from the same raw material and consequently belonged together. According to the research results of Gebhard and Krause, the previous interpretations of the trace element spectrum are not conclusive, however, because the metal is a type of copper which occurs frequently in the Eastern Alps. The bronze used for the Sky Disk and the other items is therefore a standard material, which was used by prehistoric people over extended periods of time in many cultural spheres.
3. The lead isotopes contained in the bronze say a great deal about whether the find complex belongs together, however. This is because the "hoards" known to be from this time which have been proven to belong together exhibit a high homogeneity in respect of the raw material used. According to Rupert Gebhard and Rüdiger Krause, the data from Nebra demonstrate much greater differences: it is certain that four objects do not fit to the others – the Sky Disk crucially being one of them.

Rüdiger Krause, an expert who is internationally renowned for his studies on metal analyses, concludes: "In our view, the results obtained so far speak against the finds belonging together." Prof. Dr. Harald Meller, federal state archaeologist of Saxony-Anhalt, who is widely known for his research and stories on the Nebra Sky Disk, was following a find narrative which could not correspond to the actual discovery.

How old is the Nebra Sky Disk?

According to the results obtained by Rupert Gebhard and Rüdiger Krause, the Sky Disk must be assessed from the archaeological point of view as a unique piece or as a find without established find context. The symbols on the disk and how they are depicted mean it does not fit into the early Bronze Age in Europe (circa 2200 – 1600 BC), because the large number of known objects from the Bronze Age show quite different motives and designs. The renowned Iron Age expert Rupert Gebhard can prove many similarities with the motifs used in the Iron Age (circa 800 – 50 BC), however, especially with objects from the area in Southern Germany settled by the Celts: similar design elements such as the arcs, for example, are quite common there. The imagery of the Sky Disk can also be found on objects made by the Celts, for example on the sword from Allach (Munich) from the 5th century BC, where the night



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symbolism with full moon, crescent moon and stars, which is very characteristic of the Celts, is evident. The sword from Allach is not a unique example: a similar object was found in the River Rhine near Mainz-Kastel, for example.

Authentic, unique, but too much imagination!

On the basis of these new scientific analyses performed by Rupert Gebhard and Rüdiger Krause, the previous, supposedly key significance of the Sky Disk for the regional primeval history is not valid in the authors' view. Correspondingly, the historico-cultural conclusions based upon it are also invalid. They are graphic accounts rather than sober science. With the re-dating of the Sky Disk, Harald Meller's tales of a powerful kingdom of the Unetice culture in Eastern Germany 3,700 years ago became untenable. Gebhard and Krause also do not doubt that the Sky Disk is an authentic prehistoric and unique object, doubtlessly of high scientific value. The question regarding its historico-cultural significance has now to be investigated completely afresh from a different point of view and with different content.



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Further information

The scientific paper (freely accessible in Open Access):

Gebhard, R. & Krause, R. (2020). Critical comments on the find complex of the so-called Nebra Sky Disk. Archäologische Informationen 43, Early View, published online 3 Sept. 2020:

https://www.dguf.de/fileadmin/AI/ArchInf-EV_Gebhard_Krause_e.pdf

resp.

Gebhard, R. & Krause, R. (2020). Kritische Anmerkungen zum Fundkomplex der sog. Himmelscheibe von Nebra. Archäologische Informationen 43, Early View, online publiziert 3. Sept. 2020:

https://www.dguf.de/fileadmin/AI/ArchInf-EV_Gebhard_Krause_d.pdf

A press release of the University of Frankfurt on the topic can be found there:

<https://www.muk.uni-frankfurt.de/Pressemitteilungen-Goethe-Universitaet>

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Photos

... for publication can be downloaded at
<https://dguf.de/nebraskydisk.html>.

Picture captions

1. Drawing of the Nebra Sky Disk with damages and dirt adhering before it was delivered to the Landesmuseum Halle. Left: the previous interpretation, where the bigger damage was assigned to the finders. The red arrow indicates the direction of impact of the minor, fresh damages, where the handle of the digging hoe would have been under the surface of the earth. Right: the position of the disc according to the description of the finders. The direction of the minor, fresh damages caused by the finders corresponds to their description. The bigger lateral damage covered with corrosion must have occurred before their excavation. Picture: R. Gebhard.

2. New reconstruction of the finding situation of the Nebra Sky Disc according to the description of the two finders. The direction of impact corresponds to the fresh minor damages. The bigger lateral damage covered with corrosion already (now turned to the top right) does not come from the finders and must be older. Picture: R. Gebhard.

3. Early Celtic iron sword from the 5th century B.C. from Munich-Allach with inlaid gold sheets representing the crescent moon, full moon and five stars. Photo: State Archaeological Collection, Manfred Eberlein.

4. Drawing of picture (3): Sword of Munich-Allach. Picture: R. Gebhard.

5. Compilation of latène-age (celtic) swords similar to the sword of Munich-Allach. Below the Nebra Sky Disk, orientated in such a way that it corresponds to the picture motif of the swords. The gold inlay on the sky disc, interpreted by H. Meller as a "ship", turns out to be a rainbow.

6. Early picture of the Nebra Sky Disk. This is one of the few photographs showing the condition of the sky disc (approx. January 2002) before it was taken over by the Landesmuseum Halle and before the conservation work carried out there. Important are the traces of corrosion, which are still easily recognizable here. A part of the allegedly fresh damages (see picture 1) caused by the two finders in 1999, show recognizable old traces of corrosion, which could hardly have been caused in the period 1999-2002. Photo: Hildegard Burri-Bayer.

7. Further early pictures of the Nebra Sky Disk and the find complex. Above: The Nebra Sky Disc. Below: Bronze Age swords, axes and arm jewelry, allegedly found together with the Nebra Sky Disk. Condition (like picture 6) before the Landesmuseum Halle took them over, ca. Jan. 2002. Photo: Hildegard Burri-Bayer.

Disclaimer: This press release is based on an academic paper by Rupert Gebhard and Rüdiger Krause, which was published after undergoing the usual quality assurance process of "Archäologischen Informationen", and on their statements to the DGUF press office. The authors named are responsible for the correctness of the statements.



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