

SCHEMATIC ROCK ART IN EASTERN MIDDLE SWEDEN SLÄBRO IN SÖDERMANLAND

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Sweden has a considerable number of rock engravings. They cover the time span of several prehistoric millennia. There are also different traditions of which the most obvious ones are those of the Early Stone Age/Mesolithic hunters and of the Middle-Late Bronze Age farmers. The early tradition is dominated by depictions of animals interacting with antropomorphs often with shamanistic attributes. The late tradition is dominated by depictions of boats, animals and antropomorphs with various attributes such as weapons, and acting or interacting in actions and scenes. There are also certain sites and panels that seem to bridge these two traditions such as Nämforsen in Northern Middle Sweden.

Alongside of this also appear a rather large number of engravings of geometric symbols and signs which is characteristic of schematic art. Much common are the cup-marks, lines and grooves that were engraved on the roof slabs of megalithic tombs from the Neolithic period. There has been a long-standing debate whether those engravings were made contemporary to the erection of the tombs or were added later during the Middle and Late Bronze Age. The fact that this art is being mainly characterized by schematic designs seems to speak in favor of the early dating alternative. This is further emphasized by the fact that sometimes also engraved human foot-prints appear in this connection. The foot-prints being normally an early element in the Swedish rock art although a more precise dating is not yet provided. However, since some foot-prints occur at early sites like Nämforsen and as well on megalithic tombs this seemingly strengthens the early dating alternative.

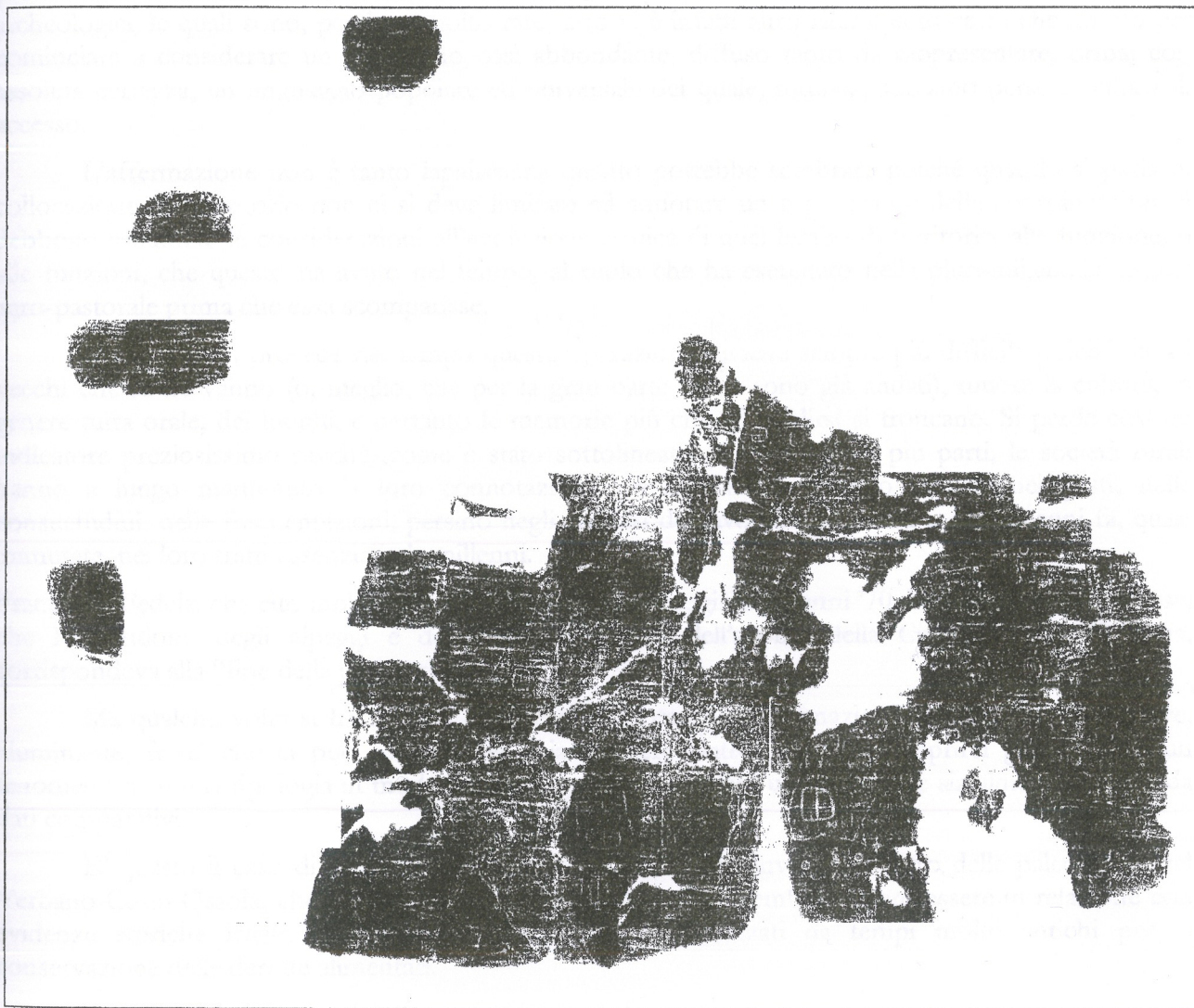
The most remarkable of the sites with schematic prehistoric art is the one situated in the Släbro Park at the Nyköping River in Södermanland some 110 kilometers south of Stockholm. The engravings are located to some low panels close to the river shore that was for a long time grown over by grass turf. The discovery was made in 1984 and as such sensational since the engraved designs differed almost completely from those earlier known in Sweden. In total the number of images reaches up almost 700. The "normal" imagery with boats, animals and weapons is completely missing although there is approx. 250 cup-marks. In addition there are a large number of schematic designs sometimes described as frames or frame-like. These frames are generally decorated with more or less elaborate geometric patterns. Some of the biggest ones seem to have been equipped also with much stylized arms, legs and heads although the smaller ones and the majority lacks such antropomorphs attributes. It has been suggested that the ones with those attributes could be interpreted as adorers and that the decorated "bodies" actually are depictions of cloaks or similar kind of dresses. This may very well be a correct interpretation although the immediate parallels making a comparison possible are not frequent. The largest of these cloak-dressed figures measures 1,5 x 2,1 meter.

However, there might actually be some resemblances with engravings in Galicia and in Valcamonica although further analysis and studies are needed to verify that. It has also been suggested that certain forms and designs also may belong to the art sphere of the Neolithic Beaker Cultures in Europe. If this should prove to be correct assumptions they would further support the early dating to the Late Neolithic or the transitional period to the Bronze Age, the Calcolithic, which has been suggested for the Släbro engravings. If so this complex is yet without parallels among the rock art in Sweden and in Scandinavia.

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Digitized and scanned rubbing of the central panel of the Släbro engraving.
Rubbing: Catarina Bertilsson and Gerhard Milstreu.