



INGO KRAFT

SOME REMARKS ON AN OLD WORK OF ART. THE HORSE ENGRAVINGS FROM GROITZSCH, SAXONY, GERMANY

ABSTRACT: In Saxony objects of Palaeolithic art are rare. The two known pieces were found in Groitzsch near Eilenburg, a Late Magdalenian site. This paper focuses on the known horse engravings and gives some new insights.

KEY WORDS: Germany – Saxony – Magdalenian – Palaeolithic art

KURZFASSUNG: In Sachsen sind Objekte paläolithischer Kleinkunst sehr selten. Die zwei bekannten Stücke stammen von Groitzsch bei Eilenburg, einem spät-magdalénienzeitlichen Fundplatz. Der vorliegende Aufsatz befasst sich mit der bekannten Pferdegravierung und stellt einige neuere Erkenntnisse dar.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: Deutschland – Sachsen – Magdalénien – Paläolithische Kunst

INTRODUCTION

Two kilometres south from the town of Eilenburg (25 kilometres northwest of Leipzig) a prominent hill is situated, known as the Kapellenberg. It lies at the northern outskirts of Groitzsch, a little hamlet. The hill rises about 25 metres above the surrounding area and is part of a terminal moraine from Saalian time (*Figure 1*). Just below the hill is an old river bed of the river Mulde. Nowadays the riverbed of the Mulde is about one kilometre north of the Kapellenberg.

Since 1932 the site spot is known through surface finds of lithic artefacts. The material is dated to the end of the Magdalenian Period. Four separated sites (A, B, C and D) were discovered on top of the hill and at its western slope (*Figure 2*). From a strategic point of view the spot is well chosen. One has a splendid outlook, water is nearby and there is raw flint readily available from the moraine and last but not least: game came close by on its way to the water.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AND FINDS

Archaeological excavations took place from 1952 to 1961 with longer interruptions in between. They were supervised by Helmut Hanitzsch. He published the final results in a comprehensive monograph (Hanitzsch 1972). More than 154,000 flint artefacts in an area of 1100 square metres were excavated during the campaigns. Due to the bad subsoil conditions – a decalcified, and well aerated silty sand with pebbles – not a single bone had been preserved!

The dating of this site is based on typological considerations only. In comparison to other Late Magdalenian sites in Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and the Czech Republic, Groitzsch belongs to the Alleröd-Late Dryas stage with a valid borer-backed bladelet component (Bohrer-Rückenmesser Gruppe).

Nearly two percent of the lithic artefacts are tool types which included: borers, backed bladelets, burins, backed points, side- and end-scrapers, the so-called Zinken and retouched bladelets. Specific patterns of artefacts and



FIGURE 1. Historical photograph of the Kapellenberg from the north. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

clusters of stones and pebbles were described by Hanitzsch (1972) as ateliers and remains of tent-like dwellings.

It seems that there is a chronological succession among the four separated sites. The distinction is made by the different stage of patination and the different portion of tool-types in specific areas. Helmut Hanitzsch (1972) distinguished

Groitzsch D and A 1 as the oldest one (older stage of Alleröd), followed by Groitzsch C and A 2 (younger stage of Alleröd) and at last Groitzsch B (younger Dryas time). It means that Magdalenian hunters and gatherers reused this attractive spot over hundreds of years.

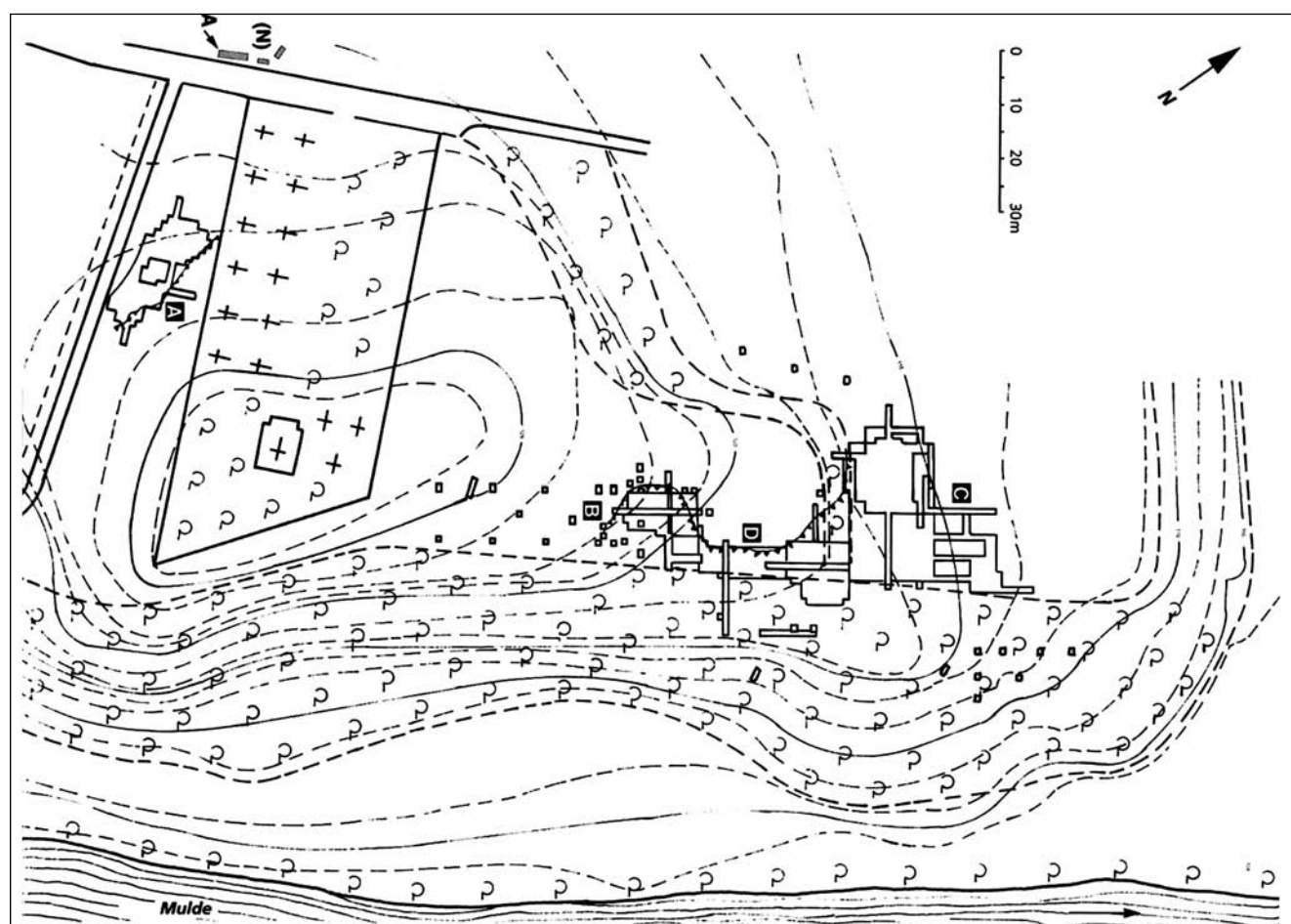


FIGURE 2. Site plan with the four separate sites. N: excavation from 1996 with more than 700 new artefacts finds. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

Objects of Palaeolithic art

Actually two works of mobile art were found in Groitzsch. One of them has since been lost. It is an engraved fourfold chevron (zigzag) band ornament on a small, long rectangular piece of petrified wood (length 8.6 cm, height 1.4 cm). The ornament is composed of four parallel engraved lines (Hanitzsch 1972: Table 76). Detailed investigations of its whereabouts brought nothing to light.

The other piece is the most important work of Palaeolithic art in Saxony. It is a little piece of shale (Tonschiefer) of dark-grey colour, showing horse engravings. Shale is very rare in Groitzsch. The object is 5.3 cm long, 3.3 cm high and just 0.7 cm thick. It was found during the 1958 campaign in the north part of area D, and bears engravings of three horses.

At first the bigger of two horses on the front side was recognised and finally the smaller one, which is of more coarse elaboration (Figure 3). They touched each other partly with their mouths. Notably, it is not until a long time after the discovery of the two horses that the third one was found on the backside of this little piece of shale (Figure 4). One side of the stone is broken. On the other sides the stone has more or less the original form. On top and down there are parts of the natural edge. That means, that the piece was originally longer, an oblong worked piece of shale.

Horse engravings

In Palaeolithic art, the horse is the most frequently depicted animal. Commonly horses in Palaeolithic art have impressive manes and characteristic beards as it is well known e.g. from the horse engravings of Gönnersdorf (Germany), the antler engraving of a horse from the Kesslerloch/Thayngen (Switzerland), and from cave paintings such as Niaux (France). However, the horses of Groitzsch are different. On the front side the heads, necks and the breasts of the horses are clearly noticeable. The curved eyes are clearly visible as well, whereas the part where the ears should be seen, is either damaged (in the case of the big horse) or has never existed

since there was no space left to cut the ear lines (in the case of the little horse). Only a part of the backline of the smaller horse is incised, obviously due to lack of space (Figure 5).

These main lines of the engravings stem from strong scratches with the lateral edge of – for example – burins or other sharp-edged stone tools. The incisions in the soft surface of the stone are deep and mostly V-shaped. The main lines of the horse engraving on the backside are made in a somewhat different way. The breast and neck line is broad and deeply incised. A large number of parallel grooves delete some parts of the head, especially the lower jaw, mouth and nostril. It seems that the horse engraving was to be wiped out. The very deep forehead line is of rectangular shape in cross-section. The eye looks like a triangle. It is questionable if the two deep parallel scratches above the throat-lower jaw angle indicate the ear of the horse.

On both sides there are bundles of inclined parallel scratches. Their meaning is unknown. It may be that these scratches signify the number of killed horses. Another explanation is an indication of grass and scrubs, or it is just a visible expression of a *horror vacui* (Figure 6 on left side and right side).

Special characteristics of the Groitzsch horse engravings are the deep, in any case intentionally made incisions in the neck-breast area of each horse (Figure 6 in the middle, top and down, and Figure 7). With regard to these special characteristics only one possible parallel is known: the horse (or hind) engraving on a little and broken piece of shale of Saaleck in Thuringia, Germany (Taute 1969, Hanitzsch 1978). Saaleck is also dated to the Late Magdalenian with nearly the same characteristics of lithic industry. The distance between Saaleck and Groitzsch is 70 km as the crow flies.

Up to now, there is no other Palaeolithic work of art known with the same pattern: a short but deep – as if punched – scratch in the neck-breast area (in the case of Groitzsch) or in the throat (in the case of Saaleck). These are very vulnerable parts of the horse's body where one can



FIGURE 3. The so-called front side with two horses. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

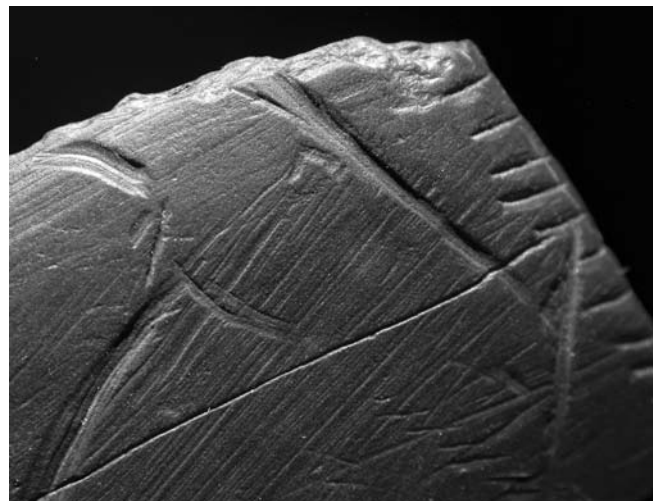


FIGURE 4. The so-called back side with single horse. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)



FIGURE 5. Top left: incised backline of the smaller horse. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

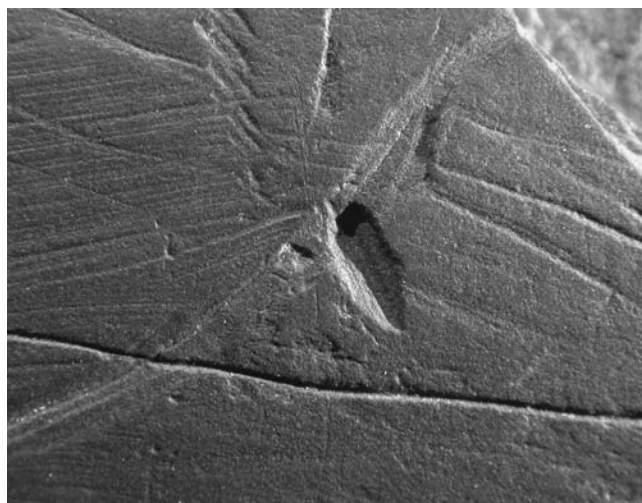


FIGURE 7. Detailed view of a deep intentionally made incision on the back side. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

injure vital organs like the *arteria carotis* or the heart in the lower breast area.

This pattern is interpreted as a hint to magic or ritual practices that were to ensure a lucky horse hunt (it means sympathetic magic) respectively to thank a higher being for a successful hunting party in the past. Many lectures have been held and many books have been written on this issue (e.g. the overview by Narr 1983). One impressive example is given by John Tanner, who lived for thirty years among Native Americans in North America (1789–1819). As a young boy Tanner was abducted, and for many years he lived among the Ojibwa tribe. Most of the time, the Ojibwa lived mainly as hunters and only occasionally as gatherers (or harvesters of the so-called wild rice) and planters of corn in the area surrounding the Great Lakes in North America. Tanner described a rite common among the Ojibwa, during which images of enemies or game were drawn on birch bark or

other material (Tanner 1987: 170). The location where the deadly blow should hit the game or the enemy was especially deep incised on the image. He also reported on the so-called “medicine hunt”. Shortly before starvation, the hunter prays for a longer time, then he makes images of hunting game with special signs in the vital parts, and goes hunting.

Something new

Hanitzsch (1972: 98) has pointed out that the engravings were of great value for the Magdalenian people in Groitzsch. He supported the theory that the work of art was passed on from hand to hand over a long period. He also suggested that the stone was a pendant on a necklace and the part of the stone with the hole in it had broken off.

I would doubt this interpretation. Under a microscope one does not find any traces of longer wear such as smooth polishing patterns on the surface, especially not on the

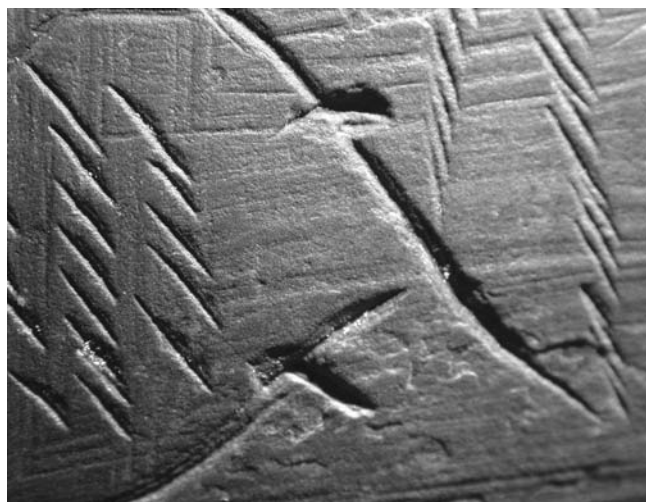


FIGURE 6. Detailed view of the inclined parallel scratches and the deep intentionally made incisions in the middle. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)



FIGURE 8. Horizontal and vertical grooving. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

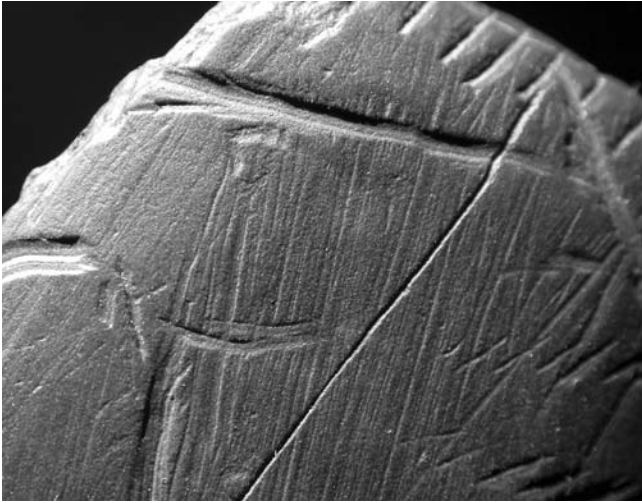


FIGURE 9. Traces of rubbing off on some parts of the horse head. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

prominent parts of it, as one would expect under these conditions. One also has to consider that the shale is of very soft texture. The traces of grooving and polishing are not accidental but intentionally made: firstly to sharpen the longitudinal edges and secondly to smooth the matrix (surface) in order to make engraving easier. In case of the front side with the two horses this applies – more or less – for the whole surface. The grooving goes upright and horizontal (Figure 8). The back side, by contrast, shows these grooving traces only in the area of the horse. These traces go through the horse line, thus they are clearly younger than the engravings. Some parts of the horse – nostril, mouth and lower jaw – are rubbed off (Figure 9). The carver wanted to wipe out the horse, but did not complete his work.



FIGURE 10. Detail of an incision cutting the lower jaw line. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)



FIGURE 11. The bulged rounded edge looks fresh, with no traces of any abrasion. (Archaeological Heritage Service, Saxony)

Contrary to Hanitzsch (1972: 98), the little horse would have been engraved earlier than the bigger one, because the mouth-chin line of the bigger horse cuts the same part of the smaller one. Finally the carver made the bundles of inclined incisions as can be seen on the scratch, which cuts into the deep lower jaw line (Figure 10).

The rather parallel deep kerfs over the back line of the little horse and the similar kerfs on the transverse edge have no functional aspect, as the author thought at the first sight of the piece of shale. The former ones were cut into the polished edge, the latter ones then into the bulged, rounded edge with no signs of any abrasion or use wear (Figure 11).

CONCLUSION

It is well possible that the shale from Groitzsch is the work of two carvers due to the differences in style of the horse engravings on the front side and the back side. In this sense it can be assumed that the stone changed hands at least twice. It has also to be mentioned that both sides of the shale can be carved in a few minutes. But there is no evidence of a long or longer use for this little but fine work of figurative Palaeolithic art, the only one known in Saxony up to now.

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