2003JRASC..97..245M

The Sky Disk of Nebra

by Philip Mozel, Toronto Centre (phil.n.mozel@attcanada.net)

Many readers of the *Journal*, when outside at night, will have in their possession a chart of the constellations. In this, they are carrying on a tradition whose origins have recently been pushed back to 1600 BCE by the so-called Nebra Disk. That we even know of the disk's existence is due largely to the spadework not of archaeologists but of police.

Discovered in 1999 atop the 252-metre-high Mittelberg Hill near the town of Nebra (180 km south-west of Berlin) the object is a bronze disk 32 cm across, the diameter of a dinner platter. Embossed on its surface are representations of what seem to be a crescent moon, a full moon (or sun), twenty eight stars (although the count varies with different authors), and an arc, which may represent a ship for carrying the sun or moon. A cluster of seven stars may depict the Pleiades although the arrangement is not similar to the actual cluster. All are highlighted in gold leaf. Curves on opposite sides of the disk may show the extremes of summer and winter solstice sunrise and sunset.

The suggestion has been made that, rather than being a map in the usual sense, the disk simply displays stars in their order of heliacal rising. To "read" this information from the disk it is conceivable that some kind of mechanical pointer was used. An image of a simple astrolabe may spring to mind. In any case, such information would have been important for timing the planting and harvesting of crops as the seasons passed.

Numerous alternate explanations of the iconography abound. The arcs may represent rainbows or even the Milky Way. The twenty-eight stars might be a count of the number of days in the lunar cycle. We will probably never know. What does seem clear is that this is the first explicit evidence of central-European

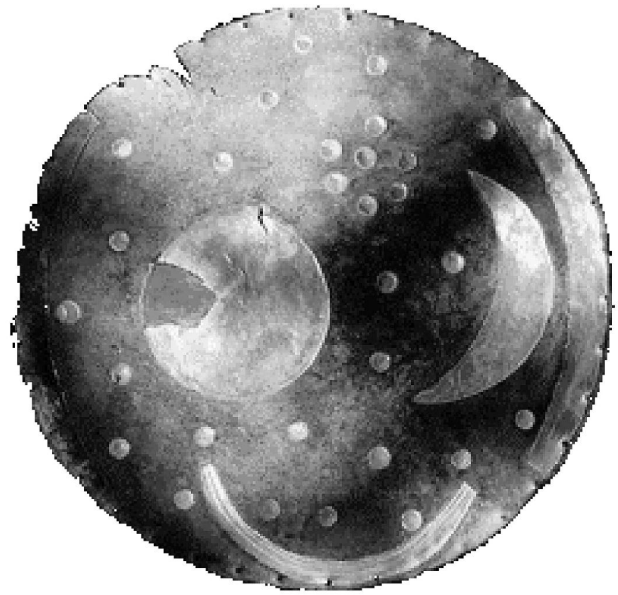

Figure 1. — The Nebra Disk (courtesy of www.nebra.net).

celestial symbolism from the mid-2nd millennium BCE and the oldest representation of the sky, anywhere, that is not purely artistic.

The Bronze Age find site is also of interest. The remains of a circular wall some 200 m in diameter encloses the summit and is surrounded by a system of trenches. The nearby forest contains 1000 barrows (graves) from the period. Dating of associated artifacts, such as swords and axes, suggest the area was in use from circa 1600 to 700 BCE. The site has been described as a German Stonehenge partly because, from the Mittelberg Hill, the summer solstice sun sets behind the distant Brocken Mountain, the most important in the Harz Range. On the first day of May, the sun sets behind the Kulpenburg, the highest hill of the Kyffhauser. Some researchers have gone so far as to call the Nebra Disk a pocket version of Stonehenge. Plans for reconstructing this ancient "observatory" are in the works.

The disk's "first light" after its long burial was not without incident. Removed from the ground by treasure hunters it remained in criminal hands for several years. When a recent attempt was made to sell it, a police sting operation recovered this astronomical treasure and resulted in the arrest of its unlawful keepers.

Study of the disk and its meaning, as well as the excavations at Nebra, continue.

Thanks to Martin Fischer, for translating, and to Edwin Krupp, Griffith Observatory; Lis Brack-Bernsen, University of Regensburg and Gerd Grasshoff, University of Bern.

Phil Mozel is a past National Librarian of the Society and was the Producer/Educator at the McLaughlin Planetarium. He is currently an Educator at the Ontario Science Centre.

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