

**NOMINATION FORM**  
**International Memory of the World Register**

The Nebra Sky Disc  
(Germany)

2012-34

The Nebra Sky Disc features the oldest concrete depiction of cosmic phenomena worldwide. It is therefore a key-find not only for the discipline of archaeology, but also for astronomy and the history of religions.

It was ritually buried together with two precious swords, two axes, two spiral arm-rings and one bronze chisel circa 3,600 years ago on the Mittelberg near Nebra (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany) and dedicated to the gods. The bronze disc is considered to be one of the most important archaeological finds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After being dug up by treasure hunters illegally in 1999, in 2002 it was seized by the police and since then has been in the possession of the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle (Saale) as its legal owner. In a time without writing the Nebra Sky Disc combines an extraordinary comprehension of astronomical phenomena - which until now no-one has believed a prehistoric human being was capable of - with the religious beliefs of its period. The Nebra Sky Disc is a unique and irreplaceable object, that allows us unique glimpses into the early knowledge of the heavens and is therefore of immense culture-historical value for entire mankind.

**2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)**

State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt - State Museum of Prehistory Halle

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**2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage**

The State Museum of Prehistory is the central archaeological museum of the state of Saxony- Anhalt. As such it holds all archaeological objects owned by that state. The hoard of Nebra with the Sky Disc is part of a permanent exhibition and is on display there and publicly accessible.

The State Museum of Prehistory is one of the most important museums for prehistoric archaeology in central Europe with an extensive collection (circa 13 million inventory numbers) from a history of nearly 200 years of collecting. Amongst its collection, besides the Nebra Sky Disc, there are numerous finds of worldwide or European importance. For example: the finds of the homo erectus from Bilzingsleben, the finds from the world's largest site of the straight-tusked elephant Neumark-Nord, the oldest fingerprint of a Neanderthal from Königsau, the oldest nuclear family of the world from Eulau, the Germanic princely tomb of Gommern, the lead coffin of Queen Editha from Magdeburg Cathedral, or the finds from the parental home of Martin Luther in Mansfeld. The State Museum of Prehistory, which is a purpose-built museum architecture, is also one of the oldest museums for prehistoric archaeology in Germany.

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**2.3 Contact person(s)**

Prof. Dr. Harald Meller, Director of the State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt - State Museum of Prehistory Halle (State Archaeologist)

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**2.4 Contact details**

Name

Prof. Dr. Harald Meller

## Address

Richard-Wagner-Strasse 9, D-06114 Halle (Saale)

### Telephone

0049/345/5247-311

### Facsimile

0049/345/5247-315

### Email

sekretariat@lda.mk.sachsen-anhalt.de

### **3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated. If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given**

Nebra Sky Disc

State Museum of Prehistory Halle, Inv. HK 2002:1649 a

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### **3.2 Catalogue or registration details**

#### **3.2.1 Description**

The Nebra Sky Disc is a circular bronze disc, varying in diameter between 31 cm and 32 cm. Its thickness decreases from the centre outwards from circa 4.5 to circa 1.5 mm. It weighs around 2050 g. In its current state the disc has a green patina, the original colour having been brownish aubergine. Originally, the Sky Disc had 37 gold inlays. One of the inlays had been removed already in antiquity. Its former position can be determined by still visible grooves.

The perimeter of the disc had been perforated from the front with at least 38 holes, which are all circa 2.5 mm in diameter and placed in a quite regular distance from each other.

The reverse of the disc is undecorated. Imprints of the gold inlays from the averse can be seen. In addition, a groove several centimetres long is visible, which has been cut by a Bronze Age artist for material assurance purposes.

The depicted astronomical motifs are unique, they can be immediately identified as the sun, the moon and stars.

Besides the full moon or the sun and the crescent moon, originally there were 32 small stars spread across the disc, in an irregular order. They do not represent particular stars or constellations. The exception is a rosette-shaped group of seven stars, interpreted as the Pleiades. At a later date two horizon arcs were attached laterally, and during the course of this on the right hand side two stars were covered up. Their outlines are still visible under the arc.

On the left hand side one star had to be moved. In a third phase on the lower edge of the Sky Disc another golden arc was attached, which is interpreted as a stylised ship. This arc is decorated by two parallel grooves and along its edges surrounded by strokes which are engraved into the bronze. These three phases are not only proved by stratification, but also by scientific methods, showing that different gold was used for each phase. The holes on the perimeter punch through both horizon arcs as well as the ship and were therefore applied at a later stage. Finally, the left horizon arc had been removed, presumably intentionally, before the burial of the Sky Disc together with its burial goods.

The treasure hunters caused various damages, for example the notch at the left upper edge of the Sky Disc and various scratch marks on the full moon or sun. From this element also part of the gold inlay was ripped off.

#### **3.2.2 Assessment of physical state and condition**

Apart from smaller traces of damage caused by the treasure hunters, the Nebra Sky Disc is in very good condition. The missing gold from the full moon/sun could be repaired.

It is on display to the public in its own room in the permanent exhibition of the State Museum of Prehistory Halle.

### **3.2.3 Registration details**

The Sky Disc is kept in the State Museum of Prehistory Halle, Inv. HK 2002:1649 a.

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### **3.4 History/provenance**

The Nebra Sky Disc was illegally dug up by two treasure hunters as part of a hoard of the early Bronze Age (circa 1600 BC) together with precious burial goods (two bronze swords with inlay and golden hilts, two bronze axes, one bronze chisel, two bronze arm-rings) on 4th July 1999 on the Mittelberg near Wangen, parish of Nebra, district Burgenlandkreis, Saxony-Anhalt. Afterwards they sold it on to a dealer. After further changes in ownership the police in Basel (Switzerland) was able to secure the finds on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2002. By law of the State of Saxony-Anhalt (Law on Protection of Historic Monuments DenkmSchG LSA § 12 sec. 1), archaeological finds on discovery become the legal possession of the state, therefore the finds were passed on to the State of Saxony-Anhalt as their legal owner and since then they are located in the care of the State Museum of Prehistory Halle. The treasure hunters were sentenced in 2003 and the dealers in 2007.

#### **4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)**

Name: State of Saxony-Anhalt, represented by the State Address  
Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology  
Saxony-Anhalt - State Museum of Prehistory Halle  
Richard-Wagner-Str. 9  
D-06114 Halle (Saale), Germany

Telephone

0049/345/5247-311

Facsimile

0049/345/5247-315

Email: sekretariat@lda.mk.sachsen-anhalt.de

#### **4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)**

Name: State of Saxony-Anhalt, represented by the State Address  
Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology  
Saxony-Anhalt - State Museum of Prehistory Halle  
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Facsimile: 0049/345/5247-315

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#### **4.3 Legal status**

According to the law of Saxony-Anhalt (Law on Protection of Historic Monuments DenkmSchG) § 12 sec. 1 all archaeological finds on discovery become the property of the state. After securing the Nebra Sky Disc and its burial goods through the police, they were handed over to the State of

Saxony-Anhalt as their legal owner. Since then they have been located in the care of the State Museum of Prehistory Halle.

The question of ownership has been legally confirmed several times in the course of civil and criminal law proceedings (sentence of the higher regional court Naumburg of 29/01/2007, AZ 2 SS 226/06, in which the sentence of the regional court Halle of 26/09/2005, AZ 26 Ns 33/2004 was confirmed, and in particular the sentence of the district court Magdeburg relating to the copyright issues of the Nebra Sky Disc of 16/10/2003, AZ 7 O 847/03).

#### **4.4 Accessibility**

The original Nebra Sky Disc is part of the permanent exhibition of the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle and is therefore publicly accessible. In addition barrier-free access to information about it can be found on the Internet at [www.lda-lsa.de](http://www.lda-lsa.de).

Furthermore, the State Museum of Prehistory has two so called “master copies” made of bronze with gilding in the original measurements of the Sky Disc at its disposal. These copies can be sent out on loan and have been on display -amongst others- in 2005 at the world exhibition in Nagoya (Japan), in 2007 in Schwerin at the Day of German Unity, or in 2008/2009 at the Arkeologisk museum of the then European Capital of Culture Stavanger (Norway). In 2012 a copy will be on display at the National Maritime Museum Cornwall in Falmouth (Great Britain).

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#### **4.5 Copyright status**

The State Department for Historic Monuments and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt holds the copyright (word and image) of the Nebra Sky Disc. This has been legally confirmed (see above 4.3).

### **0 Assessment against the selection criteria**

#### **5.1 Authenticity.**

The Nebra Sky Disc is a unique archaeological find. Its authenticity has been proven without doubt through numerous scientific and archaeological investigations and has been confirmed through findings in court. Also the authenticity of the findspot on the Mittelberg near Nebra, district Burgenlandkreis, Saxony-Anhalt is assured through archaeological excavations, legal inquiries, and scientific investigations.

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#### **5.2 World significance**

The Nebra Sky Disc is the world’s oldest known representation of concrete astronomical phenomena, written evidence of which followed around 1000 years later. As an object the Sky Disc is unique in the world and is therefore irreplaceable for the cultural history of mankind.

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#### **5.3 Comparative criteria:**

##### **1 Time**

The Nebra Sky Disc is dated to the early Bronze Age. It was made circa 1800 BC and was in use over several generations until around 1600 BC when it was buried and dedicated to the gods. During its long period of use it was modified several times, each time with a significant change in meaning. As far as we know, it is the first evidence of the figurative depiction of concrete cosmic knowledge worldwide.

##### **2 Place**

The Mittelberg near Nebra is important for the understanding of the Sky Disc, because from there important landmarks are visible from which astronomical relations can be reconstructed. On the day of the summer solstice on 21<sup>st</sup> June viewed from the Mittelberg the sun sets behind the Brocken mountain, which is 1141 m high and the highest mountain of the Harz (uplands in northern Germany). As the course of the sun between the solstices could be determined by the two lateral horizon arcs (phase 2), this visual relation is suitable to determine calendrical dates. On 1<sup>st</sup> May, the date for the spring feast, which was known in Celtic times as feast of Beltaine and which is today reflected in the Walpurgis Night, the sun sets behind the Kyffhäuser massif. The latter is a mountain range which is also famous since prehistoric time for its sacrificial votive shafts and legends. The Kyffhäuser massif thus denotes an ancient religious custom.

### **3 People**

The Nebra Sky Disc is closely related to the extremely rich princely tombs of the early Bronze Age, which for the first time in the prehistory of central Europe attest a strong social differentiation. In the way of the ritual burial of the disc, parallels to the princely burial places of the early Bronze Age become apparent. Although the manufacturer or manufacturers of the disc did not yet write, the circle of users can be determined very exactly due to precise research. In central Germany there is evidence for an elite which communicated throughout Europe and which is replicated in the so called princely tombs of the early Bronze Age. With the Sky Disc a completely new understanding of this kind of evidence became possible. The princely networks are reflected in burial goods, which have parallels from the British Isles to south-east Europe. In particular in the duality of the burial goods together with the Sky Disc, a close relation to the furnishings of the princely tombs with their abundance of gold becomes apparent. With the dedication of the Sky Disc to higher powers, a close relationship is expressed of this unique object to religious beliefs of the early Bronze Age.

### **4 Subject and theme**

The theme of the Sky Disc attests extraordinary knowledge and further development in the astronomical and religious field, which until its discovery could not previously be proven archaeologically.

The Sky Disc combines the knowledge of several generations. Behind the layout of the golden picture elements, the materials used, and the traces of production and use, an eventful biography in five phases is concealed.

The iconographic program of the first phase shows the full moon or the sun, the crescent moon and the Pleiades before a symbolic representation of the night sky. The seemingly simple image conceals a complicated message: the exact instruction for the leap year rule to synchronise the longer solar year with the lunar year. Thus for the first time an astronomical instrument was available to determine exactly certain days in the calendar for years ahead. A written document of this leap rule is only known from around 1000 years later from a Babylonian cuneiform text, the mul-Apin. In addition the Pleiades, in combination with the sun and the moon, signal important sowing and harvesting dates in the farming year.

During the first change on the Sky Disc two stars were covered over and a third star was moved in order to make room for two golden arcs. They show the rising and setting points of the sun over the course of the year on the horizon. The two upper ends mark the sunrise and sunset at the time of the summer solstice, the two lower ones at the time of the winter solstice.

The 82° angle span of the two arcs indicates exactly the angle between the positions of sunset at summer and winter solstice at the latitude of central Germany. As a result of the fastening of the two arcs, the code of the original leap year rule had been destroyed. The knowledge of it had been forgotten or had intentionally been removed.

During a third phase with the fastening of a highly stylised barge an abstract image appears. The ship's bow is heading towards left and is marked with stylised paddles in form of short lines

engraved in the bronze. On this barge the sun is travelling through the day and the night – a myth, here depicted for the first time and well known from later pictures of the Nordic Bronze Age. As a result, in addition to its significance as an astronomical tool, the Sky Disc also gained a religious component.

At a later date the Sky Disc was perforated all around its perimeter, perhaps in order to fix it to a standard or something similar.

Finally, in a last phase, still during the Bronze Age, one of the arcs was removed and therefore the Sky Disc became useless in ritual and deprived of its religious power. It was then buried on the Mittelberg, with grave goods like an early Bronze Age prince, and dedicated to the gods. This also marks the end of the early Bronze Age with its extremely richly furnished princely tombs.

## **5 Form and style**

The kind of inlay technique used on the Sky Disc was up until then unknown in central European metallurgy. The type of depiction is singular.

## **6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:**

The Nebra Sky Disc sheds new light on the knowledge of Bronze Age people about astronomical phenomena and opens up new views into the prehistory not only of Europe, but worldwide.

### **6.1 Rarity**

The Nebra Sky Disc is a unique find in a worldwide context. As an object it shows in a compressed way the astronomical knowledge of its time, which so far was only evident in an encrypted way in monumental buildings like Stonehenge. The Sky Disc opens up new perspectives for our knowledge of the understanding of prehistoric people about cosmic relations, not only for the discipline of archaeology, but also for archaeo-astronomy and the history of religions and therefore the cultural history of the entire humankind.

### **6.2 Integrity**

The Nebra Sky Disc is part of a hoard to which belong besides the disc itself, two precious bronze swords with inlay and golden hilt, two bronze axes, two bronze spiral arm-rings and a bronze chisel. The Sky Disc is complete in its find condition. The missing horizon arc was already removed intentionally in the Bronze Age. The current condition of the artefact is the result of careful conservational treatment (cleaning, and fixing of two loose golden applications).