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# Past Responses to Plague reflected by the Northern Tradition Rock art

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## Abstract

The presentation will tentatively argue that the Northern Tradition Rock art came as a response to rather dramatic demographic changes at the end of the Late Mesolithic, and that the iconography still stores most relevant information under need for further decoding. Recent analyses of the Northern Tradition rock art have pointed at the frequent presence of both human skeleton images – variedly disarticulated – and the numerous motifs of skeletonised cervids, most explicitly addressing a past death perspective for the iconography. The rock art tradition has also been associated with growing sedentism, but several dating approaches have shown that the relatively short production period for the rock art can also be associated with a drop in the population at the term of the Late Mesolithic. Dead and disarticulated anthropomorphs, skeletonized animal images, the end of a rock art tradition or practice, and a documented severe decline in the population, after their clustering into larger groups, makes it tempting to suggest that some type of plague or epidemic spread of diseases could have been the inevitable natural cause for a decline in the population and the ultimate end for the rock art tradition. Growing sedentism might have formed preconditions for the spread of diseases not only because of the clustering of people, that might have attracted rodents, fleas, or insects that transmitted diseases but also because of domestication or semi-domestication of animal species that are yet not known to us. It will therefore be suggested that major loss of people, even affecting animals, triggered religious rituals and the making of images onto solid rock. The paper also addresses a future goal of a more thorough decoding and deciphering of the numerous panels with Northern Tradition rock art. Such investigations of the rock art in the light of relevant archaeological and scientific data, will most positively extract more meaning from the imagery, helping us to acquire an even deeper understanding of Late Mesolithic demography, epidemics, diseases, and potential narrative responses to past plagues.

**Keywords:** Rock art, Death perspectives, Mortuary Processes, Skeleton images, Epidemic diseases, Late Mesolithic

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