



## HK/86B, PALAEOOLITHIC CEREMONIAL SITE AT HAR KARKOM, HOLY MOUNTAIN IN THE DESERT OF EXODUS

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### SUMMARY

*The discovery of the Palaeolithic Sanctuary HK/86b opened a new chapter in the Har Karkom Project. It showed that Har Karkom has been holy mountain since 40,000 years. This extraordinary site is located in a small valley on the edge of the plateau, where a group of standing pillars, placed in a cluster, follows a precise design at concentric circles. The pillars are natural flint nodes, that resemble anthropo-zoomorphic figures or anatomical parts of the human body. Part of them appears to come from a quarry 3 Km far from the Sanctuary. In the valley and around the pillars are located smaller objects, obtained from small chert bulbs with natural anthropo-zoomorphic shape, by adding in some cases anatomic details and attributes by Palaeolithic knapping technique. All around there are pebble drawings, made by stone circles and stone alignments, and flint flakes and implements belonging to the "Karkomian", a transitional industry between Mousterian and Aurignacian. From the valley a steep path is going down to the Paran desert: along the path, there is a number of rock shelters, where pillars similar to those of the Sanctuary were erected in a similar way.*

*Living sites of the same period and material culture are around the HK/86b: short-lasting stations with hut floors and implements. In the site HK/86b we face the most ancient site in the world where mythic beings were physically represented by a kind of proto-statues, with natural shapes suggesting anthropo-zoomorphic figures flaked and retouched by prehistoric men. The "statues" are ordered in an architectural composition. Thus, HK/86b has been interpreted as a ceremonial site, an open-air shrine, where the Karkomian people made their rituals. The definition of this so far unique site as a "Sanctuary" sounds appropriate*

### RIASSUNTO

La scoperta del Santuario paleolitico ha aperto un nuovo capitolo della ricerca a Har Karkom. Si è dimostrato che Har Karkom è stata una montagna sacra da 40.000 anni. Questo sito straordinario si trova in una valletta sul bordo dell'altopiano, dove un gruppo di ortostati è stato posto secondo un disegno preciso a cerchi concentrici. Le stele sono noduli di selce naturali, con sembianze antropo-zoomorfe o con forma di parti anatomiche del corpo umano. In parte, queste pietre provengono da una cava distante 3 Km. Nella valle ed intorno agli ortostati vi sono oggetti più piccoli, ottenuti da piccoli noduli di selce naturalmente antropo-zoomorfi, ai quali sono stati talvolta aggiunti particolari ed attributi anatomici mediante una tecnica di scheggiatura paleolitica. Tutto intorno vi sono figure, o geoglifi, disegnati con cerchi ed allineamenti di pietre, e schegge e strumenti di selce di industria "karkomiana", cioè una industria di transizione fra Musteriano ed Aurignaziano. Dalla valletta si diparte un sentiero scosceso che scende verso il deserto Paran: lungo il sentiero vi sono ripari sotto roccia, con ortostati simili a quelli della valletta.

Intorno al sito HK/86b vi sono siti abitativi e cultura materiale dello stesso orizzonte: stazioni di breve durata con fondi di capanne e strumenti in selce. Nel sito HK/86b siamo di fronte al più antico sito al mondo dove esseri mitici sono stati rappresentati fisicamente per mezzo di una sorta di proto-statue, con forma naturali che suggeriscono figure di animali o figure umane, ritoccate dagli uomini preistorici. Le stele sono ordinate in una composizione architettonica. Per queste ragioni, il sito HK/86b è stato interpretato come un sito cerimoniale, un tempio all'aria aperta, dove il popolo karkomiano seguiva i suoi riti. Sembra appropriata la definizione di "Santuario" di questo sito finora unico.

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Site HK/86b was discovered in the frame of the survey of Har Karkom, mountain of the southern Negev desert in the north-eastern part of the Sinai peninsula, which belongs to the State of Israel. Until the discovery of HK/86b, Har Karkom had been considered a holy place starting from the Chalcolithic period (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE). At that time, and during the following periods, only rock art sites and worship structures were built up on top of the mountain. Over one thousand hut floors belonging to hundreds of Palaeolithic sites scattered on the surface are well preserved.

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The top of the mountain offers a unique chance to find and study very ancient remains, as the mountain was sacred since several millennia, its top was forbidden to the people; frequentation was reserved just to few leaders or priests. This helped to preserve intact the ground surface of the plateau, and remains dating back to several thousand years are still well evident on the brown tabular flint surface. The hut floors of the ancient campsites, the rock engravings, the tumuli, the geoglyphs and the few stone structures represent the remains of millennia of frequentation of the mountain.

The environment today is that of a stony desert with arid climate, where atmospheric agents, including frequent and robust wind corrosion and rare rains, clean the stony surface and put in light a ground which probably lies today few centimetres below the ancient surface. Due to this reason, the flat plateau appears today as an immense planimetry, where one can easily read and understand the story of the ancient frequentation of the mountain.

This rendered possible to survey, classify and document over 230 Palaeolithic campsites in an area of about 8 Km<sup>2</sup> during ten consecutive survey campaigns. The classification was made according to the material culture, i.e. the flint industry found on and near the remains of the hut floors and in the flint knapping areas, indicative of primary workshop activities.

The examination of the flint industry allowed the classification of sites of Lower Palaeolithic, Middle Palaeolithic and early Upper Palaeolithic.

A number of sites revealed the presence of a unique flint industry, characterized by implements displaying features between Mousterian and Aurignacian. This particular industry, called "Karkomian" because its peculiarity, is tentatively dated back to 40,000 BP by analogy with Levantine transitional Palaeolithic industry in sites dated by means of radiocarbon. No human skeletal remains were found in association with the Karkomian industry, thus the attribution to an early *H. sapiens* is speculative.

The Karkomian campsites present today the remains of the hut floors, with a large central hut, surrounded by few smaller huts, where family units of few individuals were supposed to be sheltered. In many campsites the remains of fireplaces and the flint knapping areas are still evident. Refitting was often possible there. The findings are consistent with groups of 20-30 individuals, the scarce flint material is consistent with short-lasting stations. So far, 22 Karkomian campsites have been described with the aforementioned characteristics, divided in three clusters of sites (Figure 1): one on North, one on South, while the last one is located in the Eastern part of the plateau, on a bow-shape open on East, and facing the small valley near the ravine edge.

In the valley, the Karkomian people built the "Sanctuary" (site HK/86b), a group of standing pillars, with vaguely anthropomorphic shapes, placed in a specific order, following a precise design at concentric circles. The small valley measures 80 m in length and in the lower part is open on East to the Paran desert, while in the upper part it widens in a fan shape, like a small amphitheatre, where the pillars are located. The pillars of the site HK/86b are natural flint nodes, that resemble anthropo-zoomorphic figures or anatomical parts of the human body (Figures 2, 3 and 4). The height varies between 50 and 120 cm. They appear to come from three different quarries, one on the spot, one in the surroundings and one on a site 3 Km far from HK/86b.

Overall, 40 pillars were counted, out of them 18 standing and the others lying on the ground. Large flint fragments scattered around suggest that some pillars were broken, either due to the corrosion made by atmospheric agents or to human activities. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether all the pillars were standing in ancient times. Many of them have shape of recumbent or rolled up bodies.

In the valley and around the pillars are located smaller objects, obtained from small chert bulbs with natural anthropo-zoomorphic shape, by adding in some cases anatomical particulars and attributes by Palaeolithic knapping technique. All around there are pebble drawings, made by stone circles and stone alignments, and flint flakes and implements belonging to the Karkomian industry.

Around the valley of HK/86b there are living sites, with the same flint industry. The Karkomian people probably lived there while building up the Sanctuary. Also the sites grouped on North and on South of the plateau have characteristics of short lasting stations.

Common to the Sanctuary and to some Karkomian living campsites, is the collection of anthropo-zoomorphic "figurines", small flint stones of about 10-20 cm length, some of them also roughly retouched to evidence some anatomical parts, including eyes, mouth, breast and pubic triangle. Figurines were always found in association with Karkomian flint industry.

From the site HK/86b, there is today a spectacular view on East of an immense area, of the Paran desert, that during Middle and Late Pleistocene was a large grassland.

To the eastern border of the valley, face on the precipice, still firmly blocked in the rock hollow by stone flakes, is a pillar made of pink chert, about 40 cm high, in a shape of closed fist. That object seems to suggest the way of a steep trail that is going down from the Sanctuary to the Paran desert, with a gradient of about 300 m. Along the path, there is a number of rock shelters, one above the other, where pillars similar to those of the Sanctuary were erected in a similar way (Figure 5).

The definition of this extraordinary site as a "Sanctuary" sounds appropriate. Prehistoric men collected chert monoliths. Some of them could not have been transferred by less than 4 or 5 people together. Furthermore, some monoliths were flaked and retouched to complete natural shapes. Then, they have been ordered in an architectural composition including an upper and a lower group, that seem to form a congregation of "spirits". Thus, site HK/86b is interpreted as a Karkomian ceremonial site, an open-air shrine.

In later prehistory, sites with standing pillars placed in straight alignment or in circle, are considered as the remains of ceremonial structures, where the statues are the physical representations of ancestors, and the geoglyphs or pebble drawings are related to ancient rituals. Modern tribal peoples, like the aborigines of the Arnhem Land, in Australia, still build up sanctuaries during mortuary or healing rites, with wooden or sandy pillars standing on the earth, and believe they are ancestral spirits. They draw circles by putting stone alignments on the ground surface, where they dance and perform initiation rites.

We face here the most ancient site in the world where anthropomorphic beings were physically represented by a kind of proto-statues, with natural shape suggesting anthropo-zoomorphic figures.

Even the environment of the Sanctuary is important to understand or to speculate about the meaning and intimate significance of this site. Placed on the ravine edge, it suggests the border of two opposite natural forces: the hunting ground and the mountain. A dualistic vision of the Universe, in terms of co-eternal binary opposition, is still today part of the religious and philosophic thinking of the modern tribal peoples, like the Sandawe of Tanzania, Highlanders of Papua or the Aborigines of the Arnhem Land. On one side, the Sanctuary looks at the top of the mountain, the highest point of the extraordinary site that is Har Karkom; on the other side, it looks at the immense lowland 300 m below the level of the plateau, where millenary trails marked the passage of ancient peoples during their migration from Africa to Asia. The top is an arid and nude rock, the bottom is a fertile grassland. The Sanctuary was in the middle, it was the hinge, the joint of this dualistic world, contact point of negative and positive, of black and white, of dark and light, of death and life.

The Karkomians saw the shapes of the "ancestors", in the natural flint nodules. They felt the need to collect the boulders, to complete the shapes and to put them in a definite order.

With the site HK/86b we are facing a kind of proto-art, where the search of special stones, resembling natural shapes, introduces or is contemporaneous to a true expressionistic attempt and implies the presence of symbolic ideas.

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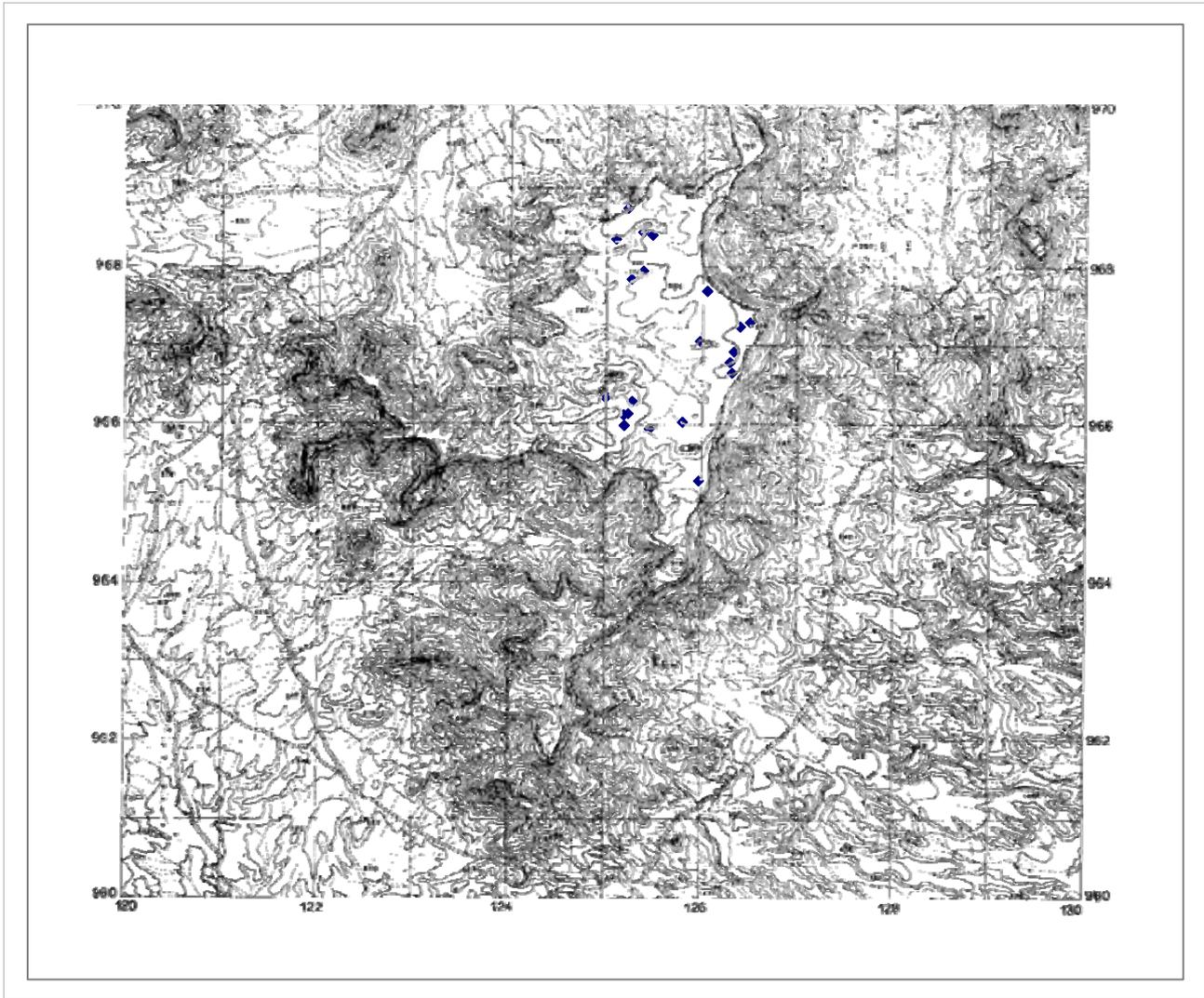


Figure 1: Map of Karkomian sites on Har Karkom plateau



Figure 2: HK/86b - the flint pillars with the geoglyphs in front



Figure 4: HK/86b – particulars of anthropomorphic pillars



Figure 3: HK/86b – particular of an anthropomorphic pillar



Figure 5: Map of site HK/86b and the path going down to Paran desert (drawing Luigi Cottinelli)