

# The image of the ibex through 4000 years of art from the Near East to Central Asia: origin and evolution of a myth

Federico Mailland \*

## SUMMARY

The author reviews the image of the ibex through rock art, vase painting, the decoration of cult objects and funeral objects, seals, over a period of time from 4000 BC to the beginning of the Christian era, in a wide range extending west-east from Egypt and the Near East to Central Asia, and north-south from Mongolia to the Indus Valley and South Arabia. The figure of the ibex alone, in hunting scenes, in dance scenes, in childbirth scenes, in association with celestial elements, two-headed, winged, in chimeric images, is discussed with reference to the interpretation of the cult of the lunar god Sin, or the god Akhtar, and myths of propitiation of rain, as well as myths of fertility. The conclusion is that the image of the ibex represents the totemic animal of a multi-millennial cult, whose origins are unknown, probably associated with the Neolithic revolution and the beginning of agriculture, but which extends from the beginning of the 4th millennium BC from Mesopotamia towards the four cardinal points. This cult evolves into the great religions, with reminiscences up to the contemporary era, and with the persistence of rites now emptied of their original cult significance, but always linked to the agricultural world, rains and fertility.

**Keywords:** Ibex, Moon god, rain, fertility.

**Riassunto (L'IMMAGINE DELLO STAMBECCO ATTRAVERSO 4000 ANNI DI ARTE DAL VICINO ORIENTE ALL'ASIA CENTRALE: ORIGINE ED EVOLUZIONE DI UN MITO)**  
L'Autore passa in rassegna l'immagine dello stambecco attraverso l'arte rupestre, la pittura vascolare, la decorazione di oggetti di culto e oggetti di corredi funebri, sigilli, in un arco di tempo dal 4000 a.C. fino all'inizio dell'era cristiana, in un ampio areale esteso ovest-est da Egitto e Vicino Oriente all'Asia Centrale, e nord-sud dalla Mongolia alla Valle dell'Indo e al Sud-Arabia. La figura dello stambecco da solo, in scene di caccia, in scene di danza, in scene di parto, in associazione ad elementi celesti, bicefalo, alato, in immagini chimeriche, viene discussa con riferimento all'interpretazione del culto del dio lunare Sin, del dio Akhtar, e di miti di propitiazione della pioggia, e miti di fecondità. La conclusione è che l'immagine dello stambecco rappresenta l'animale totemico di un culto multi-millenario, del quale non si conoscono le origini, probabilmente associate alla rivoluzione neolitica e all'inizio dell'agricoltura, ma che si estende a partire dall'inizio del 4° millennio a.C. dalla Mesopotamia verso i quattro punti cardinali. Questo culto si evolve nelle grandi religioni, con reminiscenze fino all'epoca contemporanea, e con la persistenza di riti ormai svuotati del loro significato cultuale originario, ma sempre legati al mondo agricolo, alle piogge e alla fertilità.

**Parole chiave:** Stambecco, dio lunare, pioggia, fertilità.

The Author reported in a previous paper the high frequency of ibex image in the rock art of Chalcolithic and Bronze Age of Central and Southern Negev, reaching 60-75% of all figures engraved in all periods on the rocks of this region (MAILLAND 2015a). There is a lot of evidence that ibex image is associated with magic and religion and the hypothesis becomes more and more consistent that this figure is the symbol of the lunar deity "Sin", or Nanna, or Akhtar, belonging to a cult expanded from Mesopotamia, where it is attested since 4000 BC, towards the four cardinal points and lasted at least until the beginning of the Christian era. The sacred value of ibex hunting has also been extensively discussed with reference to fertility rites and propitiation of rain. In modern Yemen, a remnant of ibex hunting as a pre-Islamic rite of rain and fertility reserved to kings and dignitaries persisted until the years 30 of the last century (SERJEANT 1976). The conclusion was that the association of ibex and crescent in cult objects and in rock art scenes strengthens the hypothesis that the ibex image in the prehistoric and protohistoric art was related to the pre-Islamic worshipping of the lunar

god in Near East and Central Asia. The present paper provides a review of the ibex image through rock art, vase painting, decoration of cult objects and funeral objects, seals, over a 4,000 years long period in a wide geographic area extending west-east from Egypt and the Near East to Central Asia, and north-south from Mongolia to the Indus Valley and South Arabia. The figure of the ibex alone, in hunting scenes, in dance scenes, in childbirth scenes, in association with celestial elements, two-headed, winged, is discussed with reference to the interpretation of the cult of the lunar god Sin, or the god Akhtar, and myths of propitiation of rain, as well as myths of fertility.

## DATING IBEX IMAGES

The dating of rock art always poses problems of certain proofs and even the most sophisticated modern methods leave room for doubts on the interpretation of the age of the representations. The rock art of Negev and Sinai has been classified by Emmanuel Anati<sup>1</sup> in 10 different styles by typology and dating (ANATI 2015). Engravings of different styles on the same rock

\* Independent Researcher. Email: federico.mailland@gmail.com

1 Despite the attempts of other Authors to add original elements to the criteria for rock art classification, that of Emmanuel Anati remains a masterful point of reference for all Scholars.

are a common finding. Absolute dating was suggested by figures of tools and weapons, images of extinct animals, the association with datable inscriptions. Stratigraphy of the images, superimposition and different oxidation patina on the same surfaces allowed processing a relative chronology. The ibex images at Har Karkom start in the Chalcolithic period with few exceptions from Neolithic, and continue along the Early Bronze period. During about 1,000 years of rock art, ibex images have been engraved alone or in scenes representing hunting, dance, childbirth, and in association with celestial elements as well. In later periods of rock art at Har Karkom, the images of ibex are found in different contexts and seem having lost their original holy value.

The dating of rock art of other sites is cited as per published papers of other Authors and is not discussed here.

The objects coming from excavations have dating proved by different methods, which are the methods of archaeology, thus dating is more certain. Other objects cited in this paper are including citations of private collections and they are mostly cited as sporadic finds, not in archaeological context, but many had been certified by Prof. Lambert<sup>2</sup> and dating is reported based on that certification.

#### VESSEL PAINTING AND THE START OF THE LUNAR CULT

The images of the ibex attested as the most ancient figures date back to the discovery of the beakers of Susa ca. 4000 BC. There are several such beakers in the museums, all coming from the excavations of the prehistoric levels of Susa (later on becoming the Elamite Shushan, modern Shush, Iran). The beakers are thought to have been made during the Susa I period, sometime between 4200 and 3500 BC. The one in Louvre Museum, made of painted ceramic, is a large vessel with its dimensions listed at 28.90 x 16.40 cm. According to the interpretation of the museum, it was a funerary item among the first inhabitants of Susa. They interpreted the bushel as an example of the animal style, defining it as *a decorative approach in art with an emphasis on animal motifs*. Most notably, the ibex is the most important motif dominating the figurative art of the beaker. The ibex is portrayed in a non-naturalistic way, with the use of simple shapes, such as triangles. The horns of the goat arch back over itself, forming a circle over its body. The beaker was discovered during a 1906–1908 excavation of a Susian necropolis led by Jacques de Morgan (ARUZ 2003).

The beakers of Susa have in common the following elements: the large ibex image, with exaggerated horns, and figures of wavy lines symbolizing water and rain (ACKERMAN 1967). Rather than simply a decorative animal motif, the ibex is a symbol of the Moon god Sin, i.e. one of the most important deities of the Near East, a cult started in Mari and Susa (MAILLAND 2015b).

The decoration with ibex motifs and association with comb (symbolizing the rain), snake (symbolizing the water) and disk with dot in the centre (full Moon) is common also in the pottery of the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC from Indus valley. The identification of comb image with symbol of rain was first put by Ackerman (op. cit.) and that of snake with water is a widespread interpretation. In the vessel of Figure 1 (height 11cm) all the cited elements are represented, and the figure of a life-tree completes the painting on the back. Overall, the scene alludes to the myth of the lunar deity, who has the power to make it rain and gives fertility to the earth. The association between ibex image and water in vascular painting is also found in predynastic Egypt: a lot of jars depicted with large rowing boats with ibex-shaped figure-head were found in the site of Naqada (Upper Egypt) and belong to the Naqada II period (mid 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC). In Figure 2 are reported two of those jars, kept in Pushkin Museum (Moscow). A correspondence with the large boats of Naqada II jars is found in the relief of Narli (MAILLAND 2004) in Caria (Turkey), attributed to the Minoan period (Figure 3). There are three ships engraved on Narli rock: among them, the largest one is 58 cm long and 50 cm high (including the sail). The figure presents the outline and the ribs, the mast and a rectangular, large sail, depicted in frontal view. A square over the sail has been interpreted as the frame for the ropes. On the stem, there is a large, ibex-shaped figure-head. Stem and stern have a similar height. The engraving of ships on Narli rock corresponds to a shape of the hull and sail that was in use during the Middle and early Late Bronze Age and to a convention that used to represent the sail in frontal view with the hull on side. The engraving is comparable to the fleet fresco from Akrotiri (Santorini, Greece) and allows to draw a conclusion on dating not later than 1500 BC. The ibex-shaped figure-head in Narli ship n° 1 is not comparable with other ship pictures in the Aegean area. It has, however, a further reference in Egypt, in the equipment of Tutankhamon grave. It is a model of ship in alabaster, carrying the cartouches of Tutankhamon and of Queen Ankhesenamun, and belonging to the late XVIII dynasty (XIV century BC). Ibex-shaped figure-heads are also common in ship and boat bronze models of ancient Nuragic Sardinia, dating back to the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (DE-PALMAS 2005).

#### TWIN-HEADED IBEX IMAGE

The first two-headed ibex image came to the attention of the author from a rock engraving found at the HK/4 site of Har Karkom (Figure 4). The engraving is attributed to the RA style III, reference period Chalcolithic. The figure represents a quadruped with a muzzle to the left, and long horns which arrive above the middle of the dorsal line. The animal figure has full pecked body and anatomic particulars including muzz-

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Wilfred George Lambert was Academic and Professor of Assyriology (1970-1993). He was Consultant of the British Museum and developed a large personal collection of Mesopotamian and other seals.

zle, open mouth and eye clearly distinguishable. What has made the interpretation of this figure uncertain is the second pair of horns which starts from the caudal end, and which almost touches the first pair of horns already described. The caudal end itself may be interpreted as a second snout. The figure was completed by a later addition of a vertical double line, with lighter patina. At first, the figure was interpreted as an animal with exaggerated horns that come to touch the end of the dorsal line. Against this interpretation is the fact that the curved line of the horns is not continuous, but is interrupted above the middle of the dorsal line. Furthermore, while the Bronze Age ibex figures in HK are frequently represented with horns along the entire length of the body, this detail is absent in the RA-III style, which is normally more naturalistic.

The correspondence of this image with objects of power or cult explains the fact that the two-headed ibex actually represents the image of a myth already present in the Chalcolithic period. The most notable object with two-headed ibex was found in the hoard of Nahal Mishmar, now kept in the Israel museum in Jerusalem. The object (Figure 5) is a mace head, or a *sceptre*, or a *standard*, according to the definition of MOOREY 1988. The hoard, consisting of 429 objects, all of them but 13 made of copper, dating back to the second quarter of the IV millennium BC, was found in "the cave of treasure" in 1961 and the two-headed ibex is not the only one figure of ibex in the hoard. Four out of the standards of the hoard "feature the whole body or the horned heads of what are probably types of goat". Ibex muzzle or simply ibex horns are present also in other objects of the hoard, mainly in the so-called crowns, and postulate the hypothesis that the treasure was part of the votive deposit of a temple according to the most accredited theory. The ibex image was associated to the idea of a godhead and the practice of the cult<sup>3</sup> (EPSTEIN 1978, p. 32) in Palestine. Of note, "the most persuasive studies of this imagery demonstrate its local origin and its relevance to the socio-economic conditions of Chalcolithic Palestine. This is a key point, of course, in any assessment of the hoard's ultimate origin" (MOOREY 1988, p. 178).

The twin-headed ibex should have been a part of a myth which persisted along the millennia in the Near East. This is a recurring motif, for example, in the figurative art of Luristan bronzes. Luristan bronzes are small cast objects decorated with bronze sculpture from the Early Iron Age (between about 1000 and 650 BC) which have been found in large numbers in Lorestan Province and Kermanshah in western Iran (MUSCARELLA 1989). They include a great number of ornaments, tools, weapons, horse-fittings and a smaller number of vessels. Luristan people should have been Persian, possibly related to the modern Lur people who have given their name to the area. The bronzes tend to be flat and use openwork. They represent the art of a nomadic or transhumant people, for whom all possessions needed to be light and portable, and

necessary objects such as weapons, finials (perhaps for tent-poles), horse-harness fittings, pins, cups and small fittings are highly decorated over their small surface area. Representations of animals are common, especially goats or sheep with large horns, and the forms and styles are distinctive and inventive. An example of a standard flat and openwork, decorated with a two-headed ibex, is displayed in Figure 6. Taking the groups in what is now generally considered to be their broad chronological sequence, the first are the "animal finials", with two rampant confronted animals, generally a pair of large-horned ibex (or goats or mouflon sheep) or felines, facing each other with a central tube or open rings (formed at the junctions of their front and hind feet) between them. Compared to later types, the animals are more naturalistic, especially the ibex group. In some examples the figures are "demons", with human features except for their large horns, as per the definition of MUSCARELLA (op. cit.). Whether the two-headed image was still believed as a myth or just remained as a decorative element in Luristan art, remnant of the art of ancestors, is unclear.

Nonetheless, the element remained for at least another millennium in Persian area and is found even in seals of Sasanid period. The one presented in Figure 7, finely carved in an agate stone and dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, presents a two-headed ibex in a naturalistic way, except for the contradiction between the two halves of the animal figure which run in opposite directions. The figure is full of movement, the anatomical details are well defined: the eyes, mouth, ears and hooves of the fantastic animal are clearly visible, and the long curve horns with several growth rings account for an adult male.

#### WINGED IBEX

The twin-headed ibex is not the only fantastic image of the animal in the protohistoric art. Winged ibex is a very frequent image in Luristan bronzes. The one proposed in Figure 8 is a cheek plaque of a horse bit, from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Ohio). The representation of the winged animal certainly refers to its divine origin and confirms the religious value linked to these images in prehistoric and protohistoric art. The Moon god is a god of the sky and as such is able to fly. In prehistoric art, the representation of the ibex on the rocks of the highest mountains configures the closest place to the sky and, being a mountain animal, ibex is the best candidate to represent the main aspect of the Moon god. Other images of winged ibex are very frequent in Sasanid seals, among which some are presented in Figure 9c, 9d and 9f. Of note, the images d and f represent the crouching animals, also because the representations follow the oval outline of the seal: anatomic particulars are present, the long horns with many growth rings again allude to an adult male. The image of c presents only the muzzle with horns, the neck and the wings finely carved in an extreme synthesis of the winged ibex figure.

<sup>3</sup> EPSTEIN 1978, cited by MOOREY 1988.

#### SPHYNX, ANTHROPO-ZOOMORPHIC FIGURES

The image of the winged ibex is reworked in anthropo-zoomorphic figures. The sphynx displayed in Figure 10 was found during the excavations of the site of Karkemish (Turkey), located on the west bank of Euphrates River. It is a ca. 80cm high basalt slab, finely carved and depicting a sphynx, with the body of a winged ibex, and a man face with beard, turned back. It belongs to the neo-Hittite period of the city, beginning of 1st millennium BC.

Nevertheless, this is not the oldest figure of such a chimeric entity: the seal drawn in Figure 9e, cylinder seal made of red stone from Jemdet Nasr (southern Iraq), dates back to 3,000 BC. The cylinder seal presents the figure of a winged horned ungulate animal with human face. The Moon crescent is depicted over the sphynx and a naturalistic ibex image precedes the sphynx in a sort of procession.

Another anthropo-zoomorphic entity is depicted in the seal of Figure 9a (British Museum). The seal has been carved in an agate stone. The carving represents a winged standing ibex with man face, beard and horns, associated with a crescent and an ankh. The ankh is a symbol of life and prosperity, and was often associated with divine figures in the ancient Egyptian world, but not only. The provenance of this seal is not declared, but the inscription in cuneiform characters suggests that it comes from the same cultural horizon as the previous one.

All the above figures are clear representations of the Moon god Sin, made in a period preceding the iconoclasm.

Another figure is discussed here, a limestone scaraboid stamp seal of the Neo-Babylonian period (7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BC), for the strong analogy with the previous ones, although in this representation the human and the animal figures are disjoint (Figure 9b). In the scarab, the god Sin is represented as a standing man with a long robe, beard and headdress. He carries a large cornucopia on his shoulder. A prancing ibex, the crescent Moon and two triangles are associated with this figure. Although the meaning of the triangle has not yet been clarified, however this symbol is also associated with the ibex in Har Karkom rock art and is believed to be an attribute of the Moon god, as is the cornucopia in later images, symbol of prosperity and wealth.

#### INCENSE BURNERS

Incense burners with the image of the ibex in high relief are the most conspicuous archaeological finds that allude to the sacredness of the ibex from Mesopotamia to South-Arabia. The bronze incense burners from Ma'rib (Saba) have already been discussed in a previous paper (MAILLAND 2015b, p.50). Two such objects, one kept in the British Museum and the other in the Metropolitan in New York, likely to have been part of the set of temples dedicated to the Moon, are almost identical and carry the ibex figure in high-relief, associated with the crescent and disk (waxing and full moon) in both censers and in the one of Metropolitan also associated to two snakes on the sides of ibex. The

association to the snake figures is a clear reference to water and is a remnant of the symbolism of the vascular painting of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium, where the ibex image is associated with snakes and with comb (the rain). Ibex-snake-comb association is present in the rock art of Mount Ughtasar (Armenia) and ibex-disk association is present at Har Karkom (Figure 11), but also in the Sacred Rock of Haldeikish (Hunza Valley, Pakistan). Ibex-crescent association is also present in the rock art of Afghanistan and of Iranian Kurdistan (MAILLAND 2015b, pp.48-50).

Pottery incense burners with ibex in high relief, belonging to the Hurrian period (1300-1000 BC) were unearthed at Tell Bazmusian (Dukan, Iraqi Kurdistan). Specimens of this type of censer are kept at the Sulaymaniyah Museum and at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. A wild goat is topped by a 2-3 story house model with a chimney (Figure 12).

Similar such cult objects, carved in limestone, or in sandstone, or in basalt, were found in other sites of the Near East and are kept in British Museum and in Istanbul Museum. All of them carry images of ibex, or of crescent and disk or all symbols together. Of note, one of those incense burners unearthed in south Arabia, and decorated with a bas-relief of prancing ibexes, crescent and disk and a bull muzzle, carries an inscription where the sons of Dusares (Dushara, the Sun god of Nabataeans), invoke the god Akhtar (Moon god) to bring rain, and rain is a symbol of fertility in the agricultural world.

#### CONCLUSION

The lunar deity in the Mesopotamian and Near East area was always represented as an adult male, either as a human or animal figure. When represented as a human figure, the god is depicted as an adult man with a beard and a couple of horns and the crescent Moon within the frame of horns. When represented as a zoomorphic figure, the lunar god is depicted as a bull mostly in Mesopotamia, Assyria and Akkad, or as an ibex in Mesopotamia, in the rest of the Near East and Central Asia (MAILLAND 2016 p.55). The dimensions of the horns and of the ridges always allude to a male adult animal, either on a ceramic picture, bronze casts or rock engravings. It is rarely represented with a penis. The ibex figure is often associated with the crescent and/or full Moon, the latter being represented as a disc, cross, swastika, disc with a dot in the centre or just a dot. Thus, all combinations of the above symbols are found in the rock art of the Near East and Central Asia.

The representation of the winged animal is certainly later, becoming evident in the art of Iron Age, but of course it refers to the same religious ideas, obviously reworked over the millennia that have passed since the beginning of the lunar cult in the late Neolithic. In the art of the origin, the representations are naturalistic, while later on it starts the idea of the god as a creature with supernatural characteristics: the two-headed ibex, the winged ibex respond to that belief. The representation of anthropo-zoomorphic winged

creatures responds to the same pattern and to a further evolution not so much of religious ideas, as of the way of representing the personification of divinity as a human being. In the Iron Age the representations of the god Sin also begin as a human being, with characters of a person of rank, but no longer with supernatural characteristics such as those described.

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Fig. 1 - Ibex figure in association with comb (rain), snake (water), Moon disk and life tree. (height 11 cm). Indus valley, mid 3rd millennium BC, private collection.



Fig. 2 - Painted jars Naqada II (mid 4th millennium BC). Pushkin museum, Moscow.

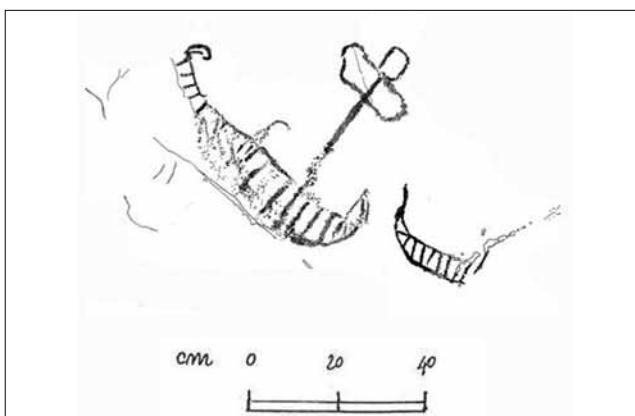


Fig. 3 - Detail of engraving from the rock of Narli: the ships. Mid 2nd millennium BC. (Caria, Turkey) Contact tracing.



Fig. 4 - Two-headed ibex engraving from Har Karkom site HK/4. RA-III, Chalcolithic period. The vertical double line is a later addition.

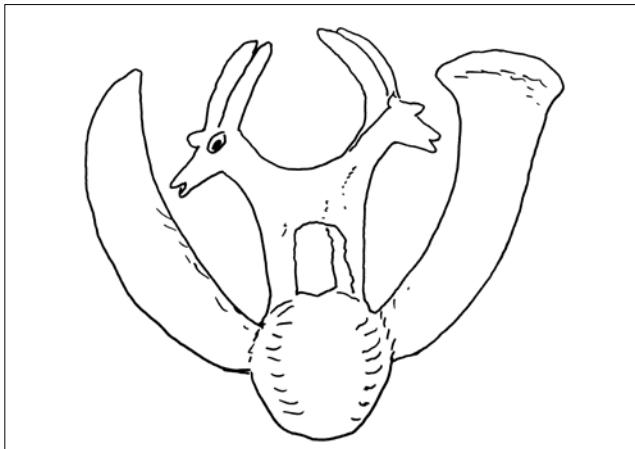


Fig. 5 - Copper standard in shape of mace head (height: 11 cm) from Chalcolithic hoard of Nahal Mishmar cave. (copper lost-wax casting) (2nd quarter 4th millennium BC). Drawing from photo of Israel museum, Jerusalem.

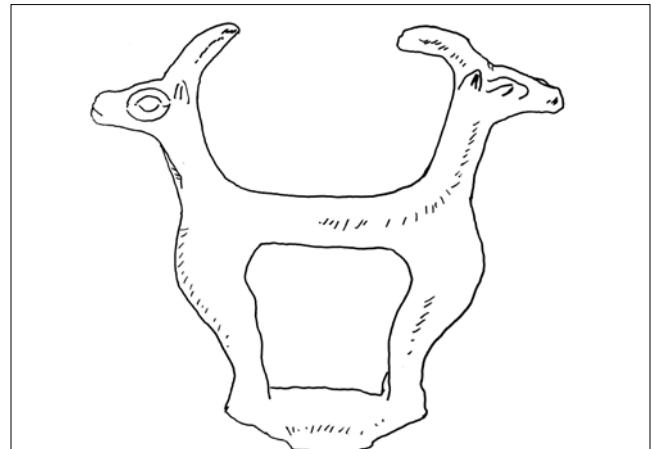


Fig. 6 - Bronze standard in shape of a two-headed ibex (Luristan, beginning of 1st millennium BC). Drawing from photo, private collection.



Fig. 7 - Sasanid agate seal engraved with two-headed ibex. 1st century BC, private collection.



Fig. 8 - Cheek plaque of a horse bit, Luristan bronze (ca 800-600 BC). Drawing from photo, Cleveland Museum of Art (Ohio).



Fig. 9 - Images of god Sin in stamp seals. a, e: anthropozoomorphic image of moon god in shape of ibex with man face, in association with crescent (Jemdet Nasr). b: human figure with cornucopia in association with prancing ibex, triangle and crescent in a neo-Babylonian seal. c, d, f: winged ibex in Sasanid seals.



Fig. 10 - Bas-relief on a basalt slab (height ca. 80cm) depicting a sphinx, with the body of a winged ibex, and a man face with beard (god Sin). Karkemish, (Turkey), neo-Hittite period, beginning of 1st millennium BC. Drawing from photo.



Fig. 11 - Ibex-disk association in Har Karkom rock art. The disk has a different pecking style and lighter patina. The figure in front of ibex is also a later addition.

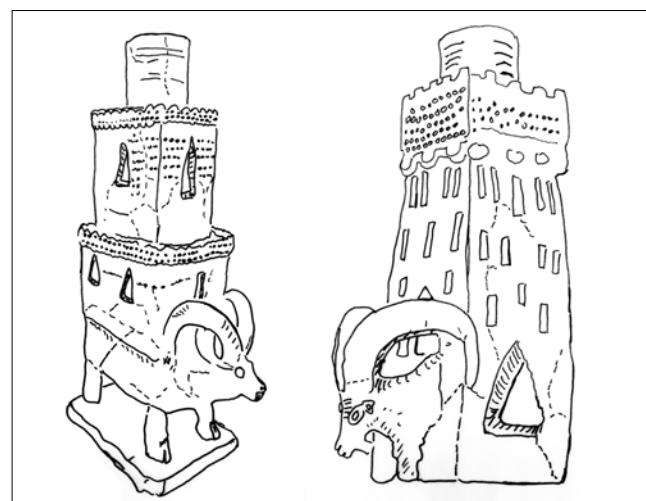


Fig. 12 - Incense burners from Tell Bazmusian (Iraq), Hurrian Period (ca. 1200 BC). Drawing from photo.