



The Har Karkom plateau as an open-air worshipping place during Chalcolithic and Bronze Age

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Summary - Har Karkom was a holy place during Chalcolithic and Bronze Age, a sanctuary for the cult of the moon god Sin. The Authors point out as, on top of the mountain, several remains of that period would be related to this cult. In an area of about five Km², there are only many graveyards, some stone structures classified as shrines and rock art wherever. The cult of the moon is evident from rock art, from geoglyphs and from the finding of the “Tumulus of the Moon”, a large tumulus which covered a white stone intentionally chipped in shape of the half-moon, lying over a black altar stone. The rock art includes scenes of human beings worshipping the moon, engraved as crescent and as full moon, or worshipping the ibex, the totemic animal of the lunar god. Ritual ibex hunting is represented as well in the rock engravings, and has been interpreted as a fertility ceremony. The ibex images present in geoglyphs are believed to belong to same period. Living sites, including villages and encampments of the same period, were built up at the foot of the mountain and sacred trails were marked by rock art as roads for pilgrimage to climb up the mountain as an open-air sanctuary of the prehistory.

Keyword: Har Karkom / Moon cult / Sin sanctuary / Chalcolithic / Bronze Age / ibex

Riassunto - Har Karkom fu una montagna sacra nel Calcolitico e nell'età del Bronzo, un santuario del dio lunare Sin. Molti reperti sulla montagna sono testimonianze di questo culto. In un'area di circa cinque Km² sono state rinvenute solo aree sepolcrali, strutture di preghiera e arte rupestre ovunque. Il culto del dio luna è evidente dall'arte rupestre, dai geoglifi e dal ritrovamento del “Tumulo della Luna”. Si tratta di un grande tumulo circolare che ricopriva una grande pietra piatta in calcare bianco, scheggiata intenzionalmente a forma di mezzaluna, adagiata su una pietra-altare nera. L'arte rupestre comprende scene di oranti che venerano la luna, rappresentata come crescente e come luna piena, o scene di venerazione dello stambecco, l'animale totemico del dio lunare. Sono presenti anche scene di caccia rituale, interpretate come cerimoniali di fertilità. Le immagini di stambecco sono presenti anche nei geoglifi dello stesso periodo. I siti abitativi furono costruiti nelle valli ai piedi della montagna e da lì partono sentieri sacri contrassegnati da arte rupestre, vere e proprie vie di pellegrinaggio alla montagna come un santuario all'aria aperta.
Parole chiave: Har Karkom / Culto della Luna / Santuario del dio Sin / Calcolitico / età del Bronzo / stambecco

Har Karkom is the mountain in southern Israel carefully surveyed by the Italian team directed by Emmanuel Anati during a 30-year survey conducted in an area of 200 km² of the Negev highlands that led to the identification and classification of over 1300 archaeological sites from the Lower Palaeolithic to the modern Islamic time (Anati & Mailland, 2009). The findings dating



Fig. 1 - Har Karkom: Complex rock art panel with ibex worshipping associated to a hunting scene. The oldest engraving (light grey) includes an ibex hunting scene in the middle of the panel and a worshipping scene with footprints toward an ibex image right up. RA period III (Chalcolithic). Later elements (grey) of RA IV-A style reinforce the scene with another ibex and dog. Finally, a Hellenistic inscription (black) was added to the panel. Drawing F. Mailland

back to the Early Bronze Age led Anati to the identification of the mountain with the Biblical Mount Sinai (Anati 1986 and 2013, among several other papers). This paper focuses on the findings related to the cult of the moon god Sin, which is documented on the mountain and dates back to an earlier period.

The evidence of a cult of the moon god Sin in the area of Har Karkom was first reported by Rosetta Bastoni (1996) based on the ritual and magic value of the ibex image in the rock art of Chalcolithic and Bronze Age periods on the mountain and the surrounding valleys. Ritual and magic value of the ibex image was then confirmed by Bastoni 1998, Berggren 2004, Bastoni 2013 and Eisenberg-Degen and Nash 2014, including other Negev sites. In a previous report (Mailland 2015a) the consistency of that interpretation from the rock art of Har Karkom with that of a large area including Near East and Central Asia was noted. Worshipping scenes with prayers and footprints directed to ibex image seem to confirm the existence of such a cult, and scenes of ritual ibex hunting have been interpreted as fertility rites directed to the god Sin (Mailland 2015b).

During Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, Har Karkom may in fact be considered as a large open-air worshipping place dedicated to the moon god. In that period, the site was settled by a semi-nomadic society of shepherds and farmers, with over 200 living sites and villages spread in the valleys at the foot of the mountain and all over the surroundings, while the top of the mountain was reserved for the cult, witnessed by the presence of rock art, shrines and graveyards.

The area of plateau interested by those phenomena is that included in the coordinates 124.500-126.000/966.500-969.000 according to the Israeli OIG¹, i.e. about 5 km² in which the careful survey led to the following findings:

ROCK ART SITES

In the HK/32a-b and HK/31, taken as representative samples of all the rock art sites above the plateau, 30 - 40% of the engraved figures belong to the RA periods III and IV-A according to the classification of E. Anati (2015), corresponding to Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures are the most represented subjects in the rock art of these periods, with the image of the ibex being the most frequent, up to 70% of all animal

1 Old Israeli Grid. Israel has lately changed its national grid. Therefore, all map references calculated according to the OIG correspond to NIG (New Israel Grid), by adding 50.000 to the longitude coordinate (calculation relies on a six-digit figure), and subtracting 500.000 to the altitude coordinate (figures below the OIG zero line).

figures (Bastoni & Mailland 2015). Interestingly, about 75% of all scenes belonging to the same periods, mostly representing worshipping, dancing and hunting scenes, are interpreted as fertility rituals. Ibex worshipping and ibex hunting are common to a vast area of Near East and Central Asia (Mailland 2015b). In Har Karkom, ibex worshipping is associated to hunting scenes (Figure 1) and explicit scenes of moon worshipping are present as well (Figures 2-3). Moreover, explicit fertility scenes are also present in the aforementioned sites as well as elsewhere on the plateau, related to the presence of the ibex as image of the moon god. Those scenes include the representation of a man delivering his semen while hunting an ibex (Figure 4), and a parturition scene with father and mother worshipping the god in shape of both an ibex (the crescent) and a swastika (the full moon). (Figure 5, after Mailland 2015a).

SACRED TRAILS

The ancient paths to climb up the mountain are indicated by rock engravings including ibex images and worshipping anthropomorphic figures. All the engravings belong to the RA periods III and IV-A and are evident marks of what may have been a road for pilgrimage in Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age. At least three trails have been recognized, one climbing up from the western valley, the other two from northeast and from southeast (Castelletti 2000).

SITES WITH GEOGLYPHS

Geoglyphs are the manifestation of a less durable form of art than the engraving of rock surfaces or the painting of caves and rock shelters. At Har Karkom, geoglyphs had been drawn for a very long time, taking advantage of the flat surface of the plateau. Some of them are likely to have been done during Chalcolithic and Bronze Age, as they represent the same subjects (ibexes with long, round horns) as the rock engravings. In particular, one is associated with a rectangular shape interpreted as "territory".



Fig. 2 - Har Karkom HK/56 C-7: Anthropomorphic figure with garments and sword, worshipping the crescent. To render the crescent image, the artist enhanced a natural rock fracture. RA period III (Chalcolithic). Drawing R. Bastoni

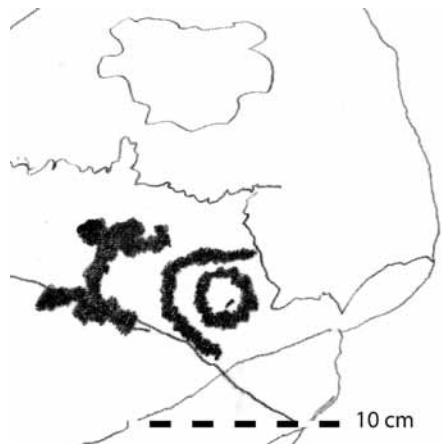


Fig. 3 - Har Karkom HK/56 E-I-3: anthropomorphic figure worshipping the crescent and disk of the full moon. Particular of a panel, RA period IV-A (Early Bronze). Drawing R. Bastoni



Fig. 4 - Har Karkom HK/31-16: Hunting scene: the ithyphallic archer releases the semen while hunting the ibex, assisted by his dog. After Bastoni & Maillard, 2015, p. 244



Fig. 5 - Har Karkom: Scene of moon worshipping during parturition. RA IV-A (Early Bronze). After Maillard 2015a, p. 51

Pebble drawings are also known in the Negev and the Sinai: in the site known as the “Shrine of leopards” (Uvda valley, Southern Negev), near a sanctuary dating back to the late Neolithic period, figures interpreted as leopards and an antelope were drawn by aligning flat stones inserted in the ground in a vertical position. In Jebel Hashem al Taref, (Northeast Sinai), stone

drawings made in a way very similar to that of Uvda valley, near open air sanctuaries, are dated to the late Neolithic period (Mailland 2015c).

SITES WITH TUMULI AND HEAPS OF STONES

Tumuli and heaps of stones were found all over the area described in this report. They are normally organized into groups of tumuli and marked by engraved stones over the tumuli or in the surroundings. They are believed to be burials, even though no organic remains were ever found in any that had been excavated. This has been thought to be due to the particular acidity of the ground, which did not allow the preservation of organic remains at Har Karkom like at other sites in the Negev desert. Interestingly, two out of them present peculiar features which deserve a detailed description.

The first one (HK/6a, after Anati & Mailland 2009: 49-50) is placed by the side of the trail climbing up the mountain from the west. It is a circular tumulus (diameter 2.5m) presumably built during the Chalcolithic period. The structure is a circle of black stones built on the bedrock. In the middle of the circle, a rectangular black stone is surrounded by ashes, indicating that something was burnt on this stone or around it. Then the entire circle was filled in with stones of a light colour. A black stone engraved with two lines of three circular motifs was put on the top of the heap of stones in the centre. This monument seems to illustrate what the Bible calls “heaps of testimony” or “Gal-Ed” to commemorate a specific event, or a special pilgrimage. Some sacrifice was burnt on the altar, and then the heap of stones was built on top of it, covering the altar and the burning sacrifice. The only findings in and around the heap were flint flakes and debris and one fan scraper from the Chalcolithic-Bronze Age period.

The second structure (HK/87a, (the “tumulus of the Moon”, after Anati & Mailland 2009: 117-118) is a large tumulus measuring approximately 4m x 5.5m, which faces the Paran desert from the eastern edge of the plateau. On excavation, two different layers became apparent. The top half consisted of smaller stones. Beneath these (about 90 cm lower) were larger stones (weighing 70-80 kg), which had been apparently intentionally bound with silt. On top of the tumulus was a hollow stone filled with small pebbles and a zoomorphic nodule of flint. Within the tumulus, a light coloured stone was found with a shape of a half circle 60 cm in length, which was done by chipping (Figure 6). The crescent-like stone was lying over a black rectangular stone. Near to it there were a large fan scraper and traces of fire. This tumulus can be seen from a long distance from the Paran desert, as it interrupts the linear horizontal profile of the plateau. It appears as a monument built up in honour of the moon god Sin, with the white limestone chipped in the shape of a crescent lying over a black altar stone.

SHRINES

Another group of structures are cult sites, such as the large ceremonial site HK/106d along the northeastern sacred trail or the “Midianite temple” HK 24 on the top of the mountain (Anati & Mailland 2009). HK/106d is a large ceremonial site on two terraces placed at two different levels along a path coming from the Paran desert and directed to the edge of the mountain plateau. At the first level a private shrine with a stone circle is in front of a pillar. The surface inside the circle has been carefully cleared of stones. Two trails connect the upper with the lower level from North and South. At the lower level there are several stone structures, including a boulder surrounded by two concentric stone circles, a stone alignment in a semi-circle near another boulder, another oval-shaped stone structure and at least five tumuli (Mailland 2001).

The “Midianite temple”: remains of low stonewalls form a courtyard structure with a lateral room. In the middle of the eastern wall there is an “apse”, in front of which there is a rectangular platform, 1 x 1.20 m, maybe an altar, raised 25-30 cm off the ground. Two orthostats are set

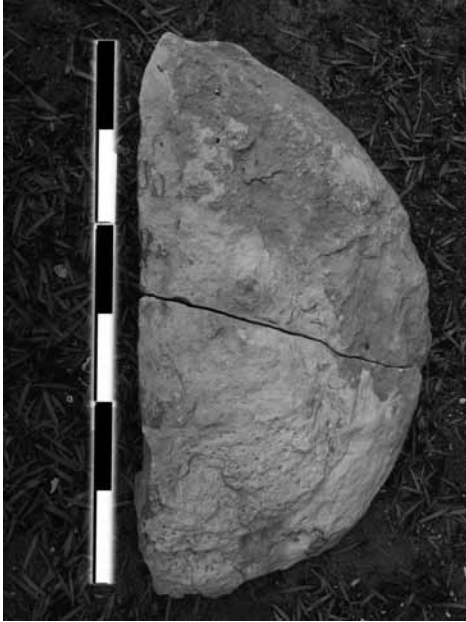


Fig. 6 - Har Karkom HK/87a: White limestone carefully chipped in shape of half Moon from the "Tumulus of the Moon". Photo F. Mailland

near to this structure. Several piles of stones, presumably tumuli, are encompassing it. The soil next to the "altar" is sterile. A number of rocks that are in the courtyard and next to the structure have natural anthropomorphic shapes and seem to have been intentionally brought there by man. A trench of 15x1m revealed five standing stones at a depth of 60 cm from ground level, still standing in an upright position. They are likely to represent "family spirits" or *terafim*. Also the remains of a pillar-hole have been identified in the centre of the central courtyard, which may have been covered by a roof of organic material supported by the pillar.

Other shrines are characterised by pillars, surrounded by circles of stones, spiral structures and a cleaned surface. They may be isolated on the top of the mountain, or in the vicinity of funerary areas with tumuli, or placed along the sacred trails; small structures ("private shrines") have rarely been found within or in the vicinity of the dwelling sites.

The remains found in the Har Karkom area, both above the mountain and at its foot, strongly suggest that the mountain was a holy place during the 4th and 3rd millennium BCE.

The climate of that period was better than today and allowed some life in the marginal areas, including the Negev desert. Semi-nomadic tribes of herdsmen and of farmers settled the area during the reported period, and left a number of villages around the mountain. Those villages, mostly in shape of courtyard sites, or of hamlets, were dated in general on the basis of material culture found in the sites, including several flint tools and a few ceramic or metallic (bronze or copper) vessel fragments. In the vicinity, animal pens indicate the presence of shepherds there. Other findings, including threshing floors and grindstones, witness the life of farmers. Their villages or encampments were put on the upper natural terraces of the *wadis*, in order to take advantage of the infrequent rains. Terraced agriculture is also confirmed. The life at Har Karkom, like in other parts of Negev highlands, lasted a couple of millennia: before, there were isolated settlements during the Neolithic period (Mailland I. et al. 2009). After the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, a sudden climate worsening rendered the area so arid that no life was possible there for the whole of the 2nd millennium.

The findings on top of the mountain reveal that the plateau during the same period was reserved for a restricted number of persons, a large holy area dedicated to the moon cult and to graveyards. The moon cycle from waxing crescent, full moon, new moon and crescent again symbolizes the eternal opposition between life and death, and at the same time a new life originating after the death. Life beyond death is at the basis of all modern religions and it would have been the central belief since the origin of *Homo sapiens*. The analogy between the duration of the moon cycle and the menstrual cycle of women accounts for the belief in the moon as a protector of fertility and strengthens the relationship between the moon and the origin of life. The fertility

of the earth and animal breeding further strengthens the connection between the moon and life in a pastoral/agricultural society.

The ibex motif and ritual ibex hunting scenes are spread all over the rock art of Near East and Central Asia. In certain cases the relationship between ibex and crescent/full moon images has been explicitly described in the rock engravings of societies with an economy based on herding, for which providing food by hunting was only marginal. Har Karkom may not have been the only mountain dedicated to the moon god Sin during the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age. Parallels in Armenia (Mount Ughtasar) in Upper Tibet, in Afghanistan and in Iran Kurdistan (Mailland, 2015a and 2015b) may be consistent with the hypothesis that during a couple of millennia, while this cult was spread from Mesopotamia to the four cardinal directions, different mounts were holy places dedicated to the moon god. The top of a mountain is the nearest point to the sky, a natural place to worship the moon. Moreover, it is visible from a large surrounding area. Finally, it is the natural environment of ibex, the totemic animal of the deity.

Har Karkom responds to the above characteristics and the "Tumulus of the Moon" may have been the mark point of the holy place visible from a large surrounding landscape. Further investigations may be needed to confirm the hypothesis of other mountains having been sanctuaries of moon worshipping.

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