



## RITUAL IBEX HUNTING IN THE ROCK ART OF THE NEAR EAST

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### SUMMARY

The image of ibex is the most common figure in the rock art of Central and Southern Negev, reaching 60-75% of all figures engraved in all periods on the rocks of this region, since Chalcolithic until the Islamic conquest. It has been reported that ibex is the symbol of the lunar deity "Sin" and the images of ibex are consistent with the cult of the god Nanna, or Sin, expanded from Mesopotamia, where it is attested since 4000 BCE, towards West.

At Har Karkom, in Southern Negev, scenes of ibex hunting are also very frequent, with the maximum concentration in Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age, which apparently contradicts the value of sacred supposed for ibex image. The hypothesis that ibex was hunted in early periods (e.g. during Chalcolithic) - and later on became the object of worshipping - is not fully convincing. According to archaeological evidence, this animal did not represent in any period an important source of food. Rather, gazelle was the most important economic source, even if this animal is rarely depicted in the rock art of Negev. Thus, magic and religion instead of economics would be connected to the images of ibex and to the scenes of ibex hunting as well. This finds a parallel in Yemen, where ibex hunting is documented since the prehistory, being reserved to kings and is interpreted as a pre-Islamic rite of rain and fertility.

By reviewing the rock art of Near East and Central Asia, it becomes evident that the ibex motif and, in particular, ibex hunting scenes, are spread all over the considered area. This rock art was performed by societies with an economy based on herding, and providing food by hunting was only marginal. Moreover, other species of wild animals were more important than ibex as an economic source both on fertile and desert areas. This could account for a ritual meaning of ibex hunting in a large region with few exceptions. The connection between ibex and crescent in cult objects and in rock art scenes strengthens the hypothesis that the ibex image in the prehistoric art was related to the pre-Islamic worshipping of the lunar god in Near East and Central Asia.

### RIASSUNTO:

L'immagine dell'ibex, o stambecco della Nubia, è la figura più comune nell'arte rupestre del Negev centrale e meridionale e rappresenta il 60-75% di tutte le figure incise in tutti i periodi sulle rocce della regione, dal Calcolitico alla conquista islamica. È stato ipotizzato che la figura dello stambecco sia il simbolo del dio lunare "Sin" e che le immagini dell'ibex si riferiscano al culto del dio Nanna, o Sin, esteso verso Occidente dalla Mesopotamia, dove è attestato fin dal 4.000 a.C.

A Har Karkom, nel Negev meridionale, sono molto frequenti anche le scene di caccia all'ibex, con maggior concentrazione nei periodi Calcolitico e Antica età del Bronzo, in apparente contrasto con la valenza sacrale dell'immagine dell'ibex. Non convince completamente l'ipotesi che quest'animale sia stato cacciato in periodi più antichi, e in seguito sia divenuto oggetto di venerazione. Scavi archeologici nell'area indicano che l'ibex non ha mai rappresentato una fonte importante di cibo in nessun periodo della preistoria. Piuttosto, questo ruolo spetta alla gazella, anche se questo animale è rappresentato solo raramente nell'arte rupestre del Negev. Per questo motivo, si pensa che la figura dell'ibex abbia una valenza rituale e religiosa piuttosto che economica, anche quando l'ibex rappresenta la preda in una scena di caccia. Questa ipotesi trova un parallelo nello Yemen, dove la caccia all'ibex è documentata fin dalla preistoria, quando era riservata ai re ed è interpretata come un rito pre-islamico di propiziazione della pioggia e della fertilità.

Esaminando l'arte rupestre del Vicino Oriente e dell'Asia Centrale, appare evidente che la figura dell'ibex e in particolare le scene di caccia all'ibex sono presenti in un areale molto vasto. Queste incisioni rupestri sono state eseguite da società con economia basata sulla pastorizia, per le quali la risorsa di cibo fornita dalla caccia era marginale. Inoltre, altre specie di animali selvatici erano economicamente più importanti dell'ibex sia nelle aree desertiche che in quelle fertili. Questo può significare che la caccia all'ibex fosse un rituale esteso a una grande regione con poche eccezioni. L'associazione fra l'ibex e il crescente in oggetti di culto e nell'arte rupestre rafforza l'ipotesi che la figura dell'ibex nell'arte preistorica sia il simbolo del dio lunare venerato in epoca pre-islamica nel Vicino Oriente e in Asia Centrale.

The image of ibex (*Capra ibex nubiana*) is the most common figure in the rock art of Har Karkom, where it is present in 50 to 80 percent of all engraved figures depending on different periods. The largest proportion is referred to the art of late hunters and that of pastoralism, which correspond to the Rock Art styles RA III and IV-A, engraved during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium

BCE according to the classification of Emmanuel Anati (ANATI 2006, p. 101; ANATI, MAILLAND 2009, pp. 22-24). Ibex is always represented as an adult male and is considered the totemic animal figure of Har Karkom. Its image has been related to the cult of the lunar god which was spread from Mesopotamia to the entire Near East, with the earliest evidence in Mari on

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4000 BCE and the latest in Southern Arabic peninsula during and at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. The ritual and magic significance of the ibex image in Har Karkom petroglyphs was proposed by Rosetta Bastoni first in a symposium held in Milano in 1977 (BASTONI 1998, pp. 25-34). In those engravings, the ibex images are provided with long horns which recall the crescent. Many worshipping scenes depict human beings having upright arms in front of an ibex, or footprints connected with an ibex image.

Scenes of ibex hunting appear to be inconsistent with the above interpretation. Among a sample of 533 figures engraved in the rocks of sites HK/32a-b and HK/31, spread in an area of about 10,000 square meters in the middle of the plateau, 20% of represented images belong to scenes, hunting in almost 80% of cases (BASTONI, MAILLAND 2015 in press). Hunting scenes include the hunter with bow and arrow, assisted by one or more dogs: the prey is always a male, adult ibex. More frequently, scenes represent dog(s) attacking an ibex, which was interpreted as "hunting scenes without hunter" (EISENBERG DEGEN, NASH 2014). As an attempt to explain the apparent contradiction between ibex worshipping and ibex hunting, it had been proposed (BASTONI 1998) that hunting scenes belong to Chalcolithic, and were drawn by a society of late hunters: then, ibex worshipping started in the Bronze Age by a pastoralist society after the circulation of new religion and beliefs. Nevertheless, recent data revealed that the proportion of ibex hunting scenes is quite similar in the two rock art styles, RA III and RA IV-A, as well as in the two a.m. prehistoric periods. Furthermore, according to archaeological findings, arrowheads were rarely present among the flint artifacts of both periods in Har Karkom. Finally, according to Hakker-Orion (1999, pp. 327-335; 2007, pp. 285-302) ibex did not represent in any period an important source of food. Rather, gazelle was the most important economic source, even if this animal is rarely depicted in the rock art of Har Karkom and Negev. Thus, hunting scenes were depicted by a pastoralist society and magic and religion would be connected to the images of ibex and to the scenes of ibex hunting as well.

An explanation of what appears as a contradiction has been recently provided by Bastoni (2013) who found a parallel between the hunting scenes of Har Karkom and the ritual ibex hunting reported in an inscription near Ma'rib in Yemen (GARBINI 1971, pp. 146-148). There, the cult of Moon god Sin was in place since at least 2000 BCE, and ibex hunting was a special ceremonial rite reserved to initiated persons, and performed directly by the Sabean and Hadramautian kings. Moon cycle was connected with fertility of women, as well as with rainfalls and soil fertility. After Bastoni, also Eisenberg-Degen and Nash (2014, pp. 15-16) made a parallel between ritual ibex hunting in Negev and in Yemen.

The most explicit confirmation of the symbolic value of ibex hunting depiction and fertility rituals comes again from an engraving of the site HK/31 at Har Karkom (Fig. 1): an ithyphallic man releases his semen while at

the same time he hunts an ibex with bow and arrow, assisted by a dog. The link between the depiction of ibex hunting and the fertility ritual is well evident here.

According to Bastoni (1998, pp. 25-34), Mount Karkom was sacred to the god Sin during the Bronze Age and this would support the origin of the name Sinai as (territory) of Sin, or (dedicated) to Sin. In other words, the Mount Sinai of the Bible, identified by Emmanuel Anati (1986; 2013) in the Mount Karkom during 30 years of research on the mountain, would have been a mount sacred to the god Sin before the revelation of the Exodus. Mountains sacred to god Sin during Bronze Age could have been more than one as rock art engravings of ibexes are spread over a large geographic region including the whole Near East and Central Asia.

Temples of cult of god Sin during Iron Age are known from Harran in Turkish Kurdistan, and from Hazor in Palestine. Previous evidences of this cult would have been the rock engravings of the Bronze Age. We put the hypothesis that the cult of lunar god Sin represented in the shape of an ibex was spread all over the a.m. region. We reviewed the available data on the rock art of Bronze Age of a vast area: the prevalence of ibex images among other wild animals in the rock engravings and ibex as the preferred or sole hunted prey in hunting scenes support the hypothesis that those images were representing rituals related to the cult of lunar god. The connection between ibex and lunar crescent in cult objects or in rock art scenes further supported the a.m. hypothesis.

The region considered in this review is represented in Fig. 2. It includes Near East and part of Central Asia. The figures of ibex are spread all over the entire region, but in particular they represent the most frequent depictions of wild animals in the sites evidenced on the map. The most ancient figures were vascular painting from Mari (V millennium BCE) and Susa (IV millennium BCE). Ibex images are always related to adult male animals, and are provided with exaggeratedly long horns which reach the entire length of the animal body, resembling the shape of the Moon crescent.

Bronze age rock art sites from Iran are very rich in ibex engravings. Those from Gharghab, Marzaki and Kurdistan are very similar in shape to those of Har Karkom & Negev style IV-A, being represented as silhouette or as linear figure, and likely belong to Early or Middle Bronze. Scenes of hunting are also well represented there, and ibex is the sole or far the most common prey of hunting (Fig. 3). The hunter is armed with bow and arrow, the bow may be simple or compound. There is a frequent connection with images of trees, which is known also from Negev. An example of such a connection is given in Fig. 4. The rock engravings from Louristan have a characteristic shape of two triangles bound by vertex, and parallel with the shape of bronze objects dated to Late Bronze, ca. 1000-650 BCE.

The engravings of Mount Ughtasar in Armenia are also very close to those of Har Karkom, with linear images of ibexes close to those of Negev style IV-A. They are hunted by archers assisted by dogs, and scenes appear to having been reinforced in later periods, by adding

some figurative elements, recognized by lighter patina, related to the original scene.

East of the considered region, the three symbols ibex, crescent and swastika in connection with a human figure with spear are engraved on the Big Rock site from Wakhan corridor (Afghanistan). There, the ibex image is clearly connected with the lunar phases (crescent and full Moon) and have a parallel on a panel of Har Karkom. Here, further to the image of ibex, swastika (Moon disc) and human being (likely a male) with spear touching the ibex horns, a woman is apparently delivering her child while with upraised arms she is praying for god's protection. Still in Wakhan corridor, the rock engravings of the Mud Place gallery depict scenes of hunting where the prey is the male adult ibex: the hunter is an archer with bow and arrow and is assisted by dogs. Bows are simple, composite or appear to have curved tips (MOCK 2013). The movement of archers is in contrast with the figures of animals, which are static. By comparing those images with those from Negev, they appear to belong to the same horizon of those from style IV-A, and date likely to Early Bronze Age, too. Similar ibex images and hunting scenes are reportedly (MOCK 2013) present in the rock engravings of Tajikistan, Kirgizstan and Ladach (Fig. 5).

Two bronze incense burners likely coming from Ma'rib, in the southernmost corner of the region considered in this paper, are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum and of British Museum, respectively. Both have a figure of ibex with exaggerated head and long, curved horns, which serves as handle. Beyond the ibex horns, on the censer wall, there is the figure of crescent and full Moon. In addition to the above cited inscription on ritual ibex hunting, the two cult objects, dated at the middle of the first millennium BCE, further

strengthen the link between ibex image and the Moon. The Central Arabic peninsula appears not to having being involved in the cult of the lunar god. Rock art from that region depicts different kind of animals, and hunting scenes represent different animal species as hunted preys, among them optionally ibex hunting is engraved. Same for rock art of Anatolia and of Eastern Desert.

Finally, images of ibex hunting come from Southern Jordan and Wadi Rum. Interestingly, an archer hunting an ibex is in connection with a pair of footprints pointed towards two large anthropomorphic figures on top of the panel (Fig. 6). The engravings are Nabataean. They depict a clear worshipping scene, and ibex hunting is part of this worshipping ritual. The two large figures should represent deities, likely the Sun and the Moon, as Dushara, the solar god, was the most important in their pantheon, and the hunting scene recalls the worshipping of lunar god.

In conclusion, ibex motif and, in particular, ibex hunting scenes are spread all over The Near East and Central Asia. This rock art was performed by societies with an economy based on herding, and providing food by hunting was only marginal. This could account for a ritual meaning of ibex hunting in a large geographic region, with few exceptions. The archaeological evidence shows that the cult of lunar god Sin, represented as the ibex image, was born in Mari about 6000 years BP, and spread in all directions during the following centuries, likely to accompany migration of peoples from Mesopotamia to more fertile lands. This cult, which apparently ended with the advent of Iron Age on northern and eastern regions, was still attested at the end of the pre-Christian era in Nabataean and Sabaean peoples.

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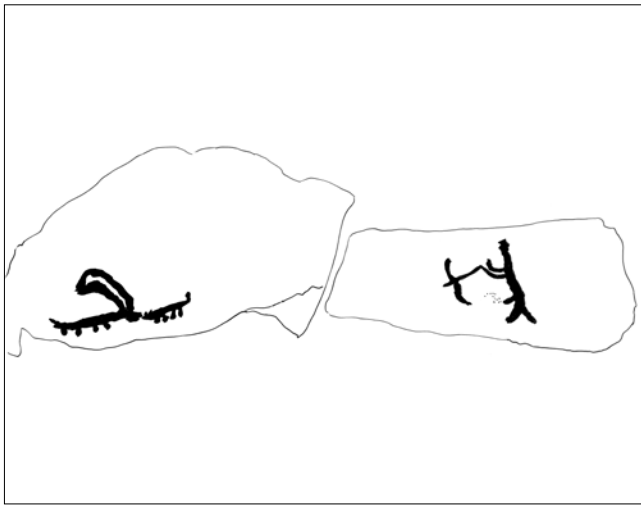


Fig. 1 - Rock engraving from Har Karkom. An ithyphallic archer is releasing his semen while hunting an ibex with the help of a dog. There is a clear connection between fertility ritual and ibex hunting (Drawing by Mailland).

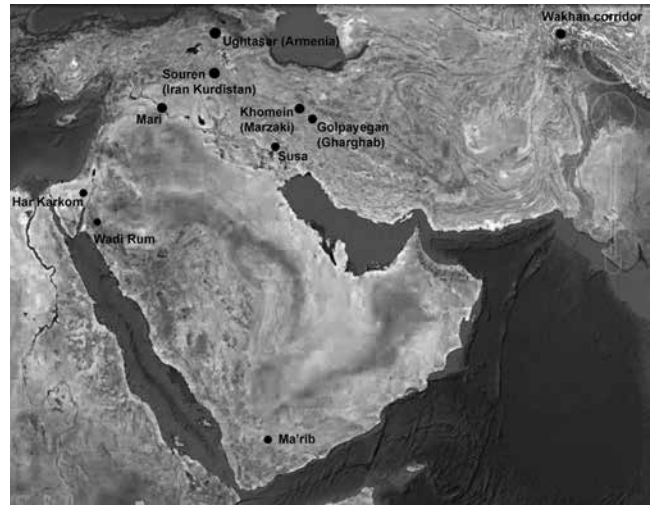


Fig. 2 - Map of the sites in Near East and Central Asia with reference to the cult of lunar god in rock art.

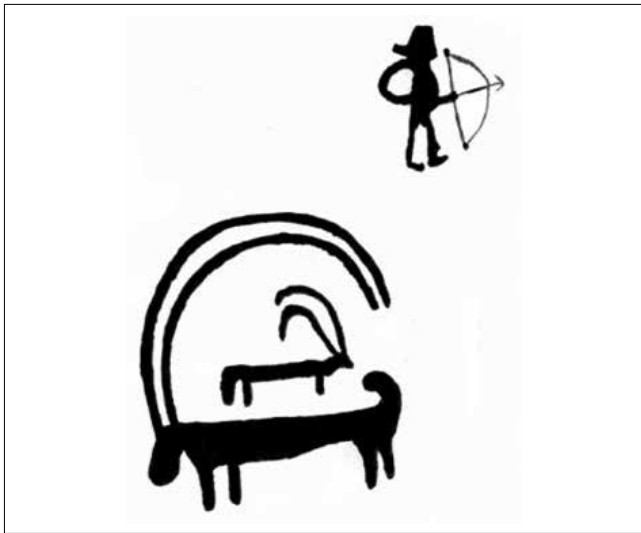


Fig. 3 - Petroglyph from Souren (Kurdistan Iran, After Lahafian 2013).

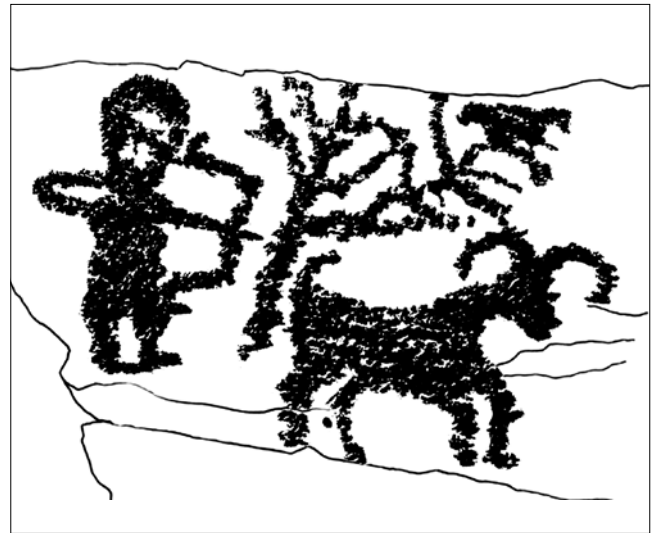


Fig. 4 - Rock engraving from Khomein (Markazi, Iran). An archer hunts the ibex by bow with curved tips. The tree of life in the middle underlines the religious meaning of ibex hunting (Photo by M. Naserifard; Drawing by Mailland).

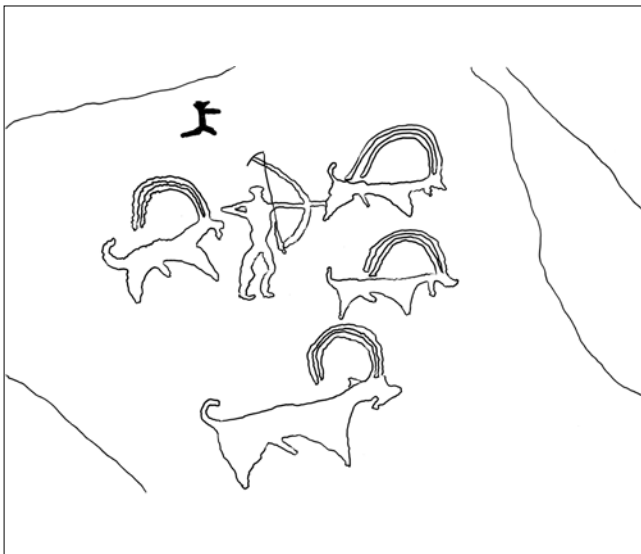


Fig. 5 - Rock engraving from Alchi (Ladakh). An archer hunts the ibex (After P. Dorjay, 2007; Drawing by Mailland).

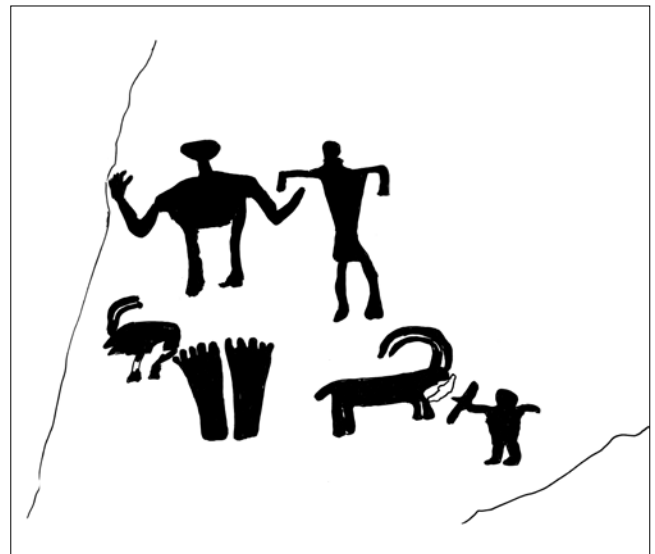


Fig. 6 - Rock engraving from Wadi Rum (Jordan). An archer hunts an ibex in the context of a worshipping scene (Drawing by Mailland).