

The book cover features a photograph of several ancient clay figurines, possibly from the Har Karkom site, standing in a desert landscape. The figurines are made of reddish-brown clay and have a somewhat abstract, elongated form. They are positioned on a rocky, sandy ground under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is arid and sunlit.

EMMANUEL ANATI

THE RIDDLE OF MOUNT SINAI

Archaeological Discoveries at Har Karkom

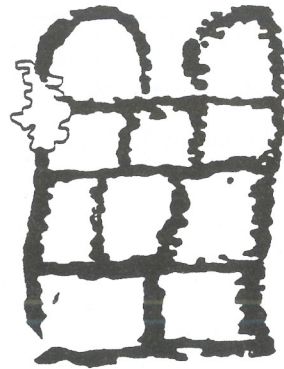
EDIZIONI DEL CENTRO

THE RIDDLE OF MOUNT SINAI

Archaeological Discoveries at Har Karkom

by
Emmanuel Anati

Head, Italian Archaeological Expedition to Har Karkom
Director, Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici



Vol. 21
STUDI CAMUNI
Edizioni del Centro
2001

ope; here, as
on, and their
he Camunian
rock art and
other major
concern the

ES

: KARKOM

THE RIDDLE OF MOUNT SINAI
ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AT HAR KARKOM

by *Emmanuel ANATI*

First English Edition, 2001. Revised and updated text from: *HAR KARKOM, 20 ANNI DI RICERCA ARCHEOLOGICHE*, 1999.

Translation and editing by the author with the collaboration of Valeria Damioli, Liz Nussbaum and Kathryn Pickles.

Copyright © 2001 by Emmanuel Anati. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages and reproduce not more than two illustrations in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper

Key words: Biblical Archaeology; Cult sites; Exodus; Geoglyphs; Hebrews; Israelites; Midianites, Negev Desert; Rock Art; Sanctuaries; Sinai; Shrines; Worship.

Periods: Palaeolithic; Neolithic; Chalcolithic; Bronze Age; Iron Age; Hellenistic; Nabatean.



The archaeological expedition to Har Karkom is carried on within the frame of the Italian Archaeological Project in Israel, with the support of the Direzione Generale Relazioni Culturali, Ministero Italiano Degli Affari Esteri.

The photographic archive is supported by CIPHS, International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies.

Layout and graphics: The graphic laboratory at Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici

Printed in Italy
February 2001
ISBN 88-86621-15-9

EDIZIONI DEL CENTRO
25044 CAPO DI PONTE
VALCAMONICA (BS), ITALY
TEL: (0039) 364 42091, FAX: (0039) 364 42572

I.	Int
II.	Th
III.	Th
IV.	Te
V.	Th
VI.	Th
	Ot
VII.	Er
VIII.	Re
IX.	Pe
X.	C

THE

d Kathryn

ced in any
passages
er
s, Negev

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	p.	7
II.	The Mountain of Sanctuaries	p.	15
III.	The Birth of a Hypothesis	p.	35
IV.	Topography and Exegesis	p.	47
V.	The Testimony of Archaeology	p.	55
VI.	The Human Landscape: Camping Sites and Other Structures from the Bronze Age	p.	73
VII.	Enigmatic Discoveries	p.	103
VIII.	Rock Art and the Cult of Stones	p.	121
IX.	People, Climate, and History	p.	155
X.	Conclusions	p.	173

logical
o Degli

nistic

MAIN ANCIENT ROUTES CROSSING THE SINAI PENINSULA

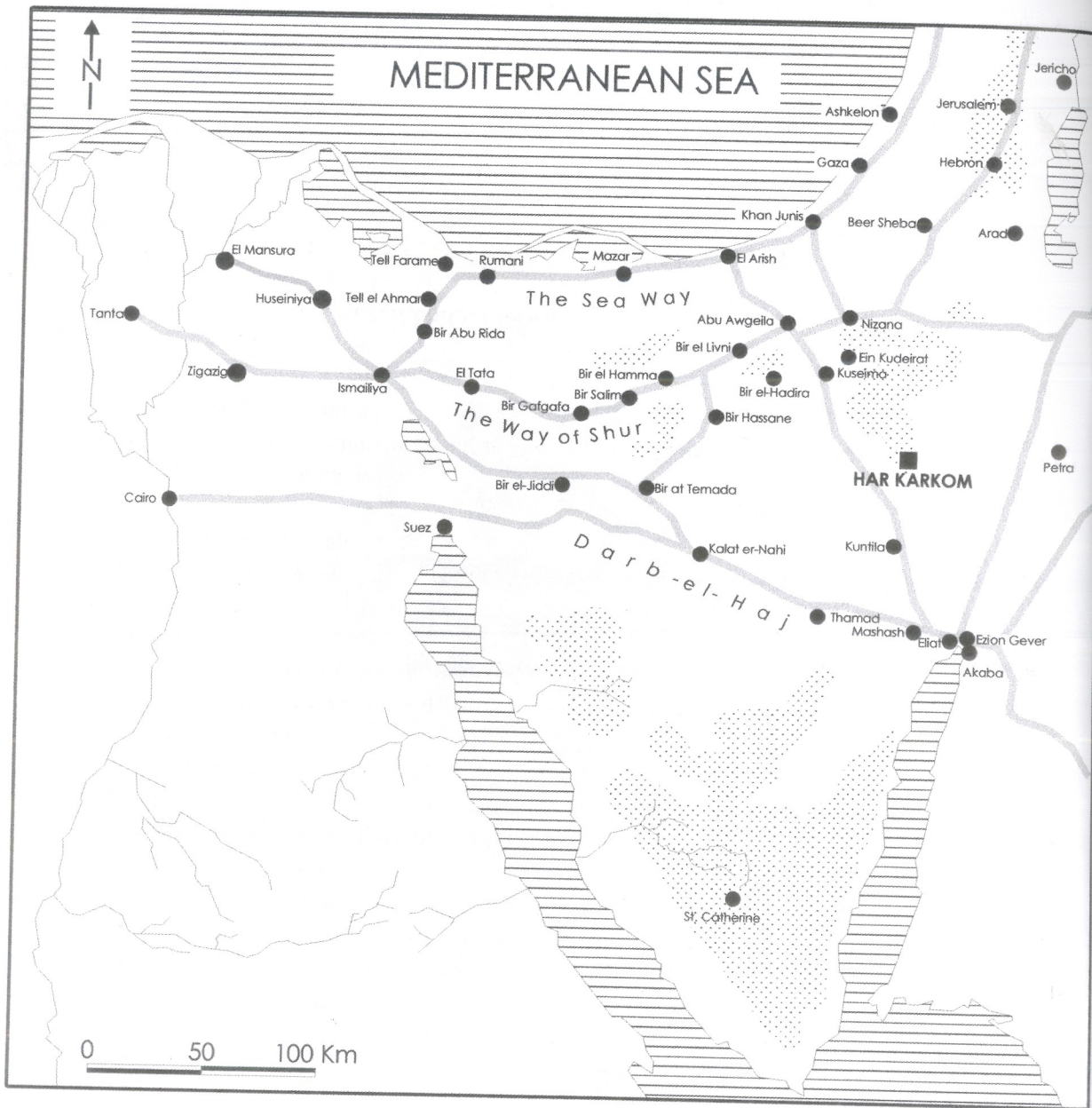


Fig. 1. The location of Har Karkom and the ancient routes crossing the Sinai Peninsula. (HK Archive; WARA W05863).

The s
sprinkled
existing
When w
archaeol
their own
are reveal
fieldwork
which is

Trave
hominids
ages, the
Africa ar
crossed t
prehistor

Stori
transitor
frequent
Asiatic E
pilgrims
stories is
reached E
epic of E
Negev in
for the la
of a dese

Har K
hills at it
rubble co
crossed t
landscap

INSULA



I INTRODUCTION

The scenery is an endless waste of brown rocks, valleys in ochre, eroded wadis sprinkled with bushes, monolithic mountains marking the horizon. Most of the existing roads have been imposed upon this landscape in the last two generations. When we conducted our first explorations in Sinai, in the mid twentieth century, archaeologists in this area did not have the use of any means of transport other than their own legs, and occasionally, when they were lucky, camels. Millenary footsteps are revealed by patinated trails heading in all directions. Years after our early fieldwork we came back to this area, in 1980, to carry on an archaeological survey which is still in progress.

Travelling through the harsh land of the Sinai Peninsula and the Negev Desert, hominids arrived in Asia from Africa over one million years ago. In the following ages, the Sinai and the northern Negev became an enduring passageway between Africa and Asia for clans and tribes of migrating peoples. Groups of *homo sapiens* crossed this region from Africa to the Near East for over 40,000 years, and various prehistoric, proto-historic, and historic peoples followed in the ensuing millennia.

Stories and myths remain as the vestiges of these human migrations and transitions. Oral and written records preserve the movements of some groups, like the frequent military expeditions of the Egyptian pharaohs into the land of Canaan, the Asiatic Hyksos who dominated Egypt in the seventeenth century BC, or the Muslim pilgrims who still cross this territory from Africa to reach Mecca. Among these stories is the biblical narration of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who reached Egypt from Mesopotamia and Canaan. Another of these biblical stories is the epic of Exodus, according to which the children of Israel crossed the Sinai and the Negev in their flight from Egypt and passage to the "Promised Land." In this territory for the last twenty years an Italian archaeological expedition has carried out a study of a desert mountain: Har Karkom.

Har Karkom is a mesa or high plateau ringed in precipices, with two prominent hills at its centre. Its silent landscape is a stone desert characterised by *hammada*, flint rubble covering the surface of the plateau, while around the mountain, valleys are crossed by wadis. Today these riverbeds are dry over 300 days a year. The contrasting landscapes of the plateau and the surrounding valleys give them aspects of two

insula. (HK) ✓

separate worlds. Aside from the concentrations of rock engravings, which are found both on the mountain and in the valleys, the archaeological finds are different in these two areas in the same way that the landscapes are different. On the plateau, a large number of Palaeolithic sites are found, while similar remains of that time are quite rare in the valleys. The plateau also has many cult structures, such as altars, standing stones, and small shrines. The surrounding valleys, meanwhile, have remains of villages from the Bronze Age, which evidence the occupation of large human groups.

About fifty years ago, in the early 1950s, an archaeological survey led to the discovery of the first known rock art sites of the central Negev Desert. The subject of rock art was completely new to the Negev zone; it rapidly aroused interest, and in 1954 rock art surveys were expanded to the southern Negev. A major concentration of rock art was discovered on a mountain known as Jebel Ideid. To local Bedouins, this name signifies the *Mountain of Celebrations*, or *Mountain of Multitudes*.

Twenty-five years later, in 1980, the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Israel started a survey of this mountain and its surrounding valleys, and this research has been in progress for two decades. By the time the archaeological survey began, the mountain's name had been changed from the previous Arab name to the Israeli Har Karkom, which means the *Mountain of Saffron*.

From the beginning of the research, this desert mountain proved a rich source of diversified archaeological remains. As findings accumulated, the image of ancient Har Karkom that rapidly formed was one of a vital centre of worship: Har Karkom was a major cult site of the past, a sacred mountain for the people of the desert.

Exploration and archaeological excavations still continue, and the mountain has not ceased to yield remarkable finds. Every year unique discoveries are unearthed. A Palaeolithic "sanctuary," 40,000 years old, identified in 1992, stimulated new considerations on this mountain's ancient role. It became clear that Har Karkom had been a holy site ever since the arrival of the first *homo sapiens*. In other words, its cult role was not just a Bronze Age episode as previously assumed, but it was always a sacred mountain: it reflects millennia-long successions of events and traditions, revealing to us one of the oldest known high-places of human religious behaviour.

In 1993 new features of Har Karkom's plateau came to light as aerial surveys identified large geoglyphs, or surface drawings made with pebbles and stones. Some are lines, geometric arrangements, or abstract shapes; others are anthropomorphic figures or representations of quadrupeds more than thirty meters long. For years the expedition members had walked across these figures without realising their existence. Their function is still a mystery. It was thought that they might have been offerings to an invisible celestial entity. It has also been suggested that they indicated holy domains that were symbolised by these images. Some of the sites have traces of trails around them and may have been locations demarcated for performances evoking mythical choreography.

Another intriguing finding came about in 1994: a cave on Har Karkom yielded

evidence
the cave
phase bet
and a bo
near the f
and part
that his t
been eith
the cave,
It is likel
remains o
(2125 BC
provides
concernin
forty day
hermitag

In the
strong bil
that find

In 19
removed.
white sto
circle or
significan

Sever
identified
eastern s
for more
culture to
space. O
rock eng
plateau e

Arch
hundred
season a
each nev
informat
1954 we
archaeol
campsite
geoglyph

evidence of habitation by a single individual. Along with a flattened area for sleeping, the cave held the remains of a fireplace, shards of a water jar dating to a transition phase between the ancient and middle Bronze Age (ca. 2200 BC), two flint blades, and a bone spatula. The mysterious cave dweller was well organised; bones found near the fire indicate that he fed himself with the meat and eggs of birds such as quail and partridge, as well as of small mammals. From the remains of his diet we know that his time of occupancy included a period of birds' migration, which may have been either autumn or spring. He was likely to have had a source of water not far from the cave, and this suggests that his presence took place in the winter or spring season. It is likely, therefore, that the cave was occupied in the spring. Among the other remains of food, ostrich eggshells provided a carbon-14 dating of 4130 +/- 50 BP (2125 BC). We will never know the name of this "hermit," but the cave's evidence provides archaeological testimony to an episode parallel to that described in the Bible concerning Moses, who "went up to the mountain: and Moses was in the mountain forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:18). Today we know that this practice of hermitage indeed existed in the Bronze Age.

In the course of years, more and more rock engravings have come to light with strong biblical analogies. They represent a sort of 'comic strips' referring to episodes that find parallels in the Pentateuch. We shall elaborate on this point in later chapters.

In 1998 a peculiar tumulus was excavated. Once the heap of stones had been removed, it was found that it did not contain a burial, but an altar on top of which a white stone had been positioned, intentionally cut into the distinct shape of a half-circle or a half-moon. We shall also return to this discovery and try to understand its significance.

Several ancient trails leading from the surrounding desert to the mountain were identified during our investigations. In 1999 an additional trail was found on the eastern side of the mountain leading from the Paran Desert to the plateau. Along it, for more than a kilometre, ceremonial stations were dated by artefacts of material culture to the early Bronze Age. Two sites had a standing pillar in front of a cleared space. One had a large stone circle surrounding fallen boulders, several others had rock engravings and traces of cleared areas. While going up or coming down from the plateau early Bronze Age people made stops to perform various ceremonial actions.

Archaeological expeditions have allowed systematic surveying of the two hundred square kilometre area of our archaeological concession. Each research season adds new findings and stimulates the rethinking of previous discoveries. Also each new visit to an already surveyed site provides new insight and additional information. In 1980, when we started this survey, the ten rock art sites discovered in 1954 were the only archaeological finds known in the area. Today over 1,200 archaeological sites have been recorded. These include the remains of villages, campsites, places of worship, rock art areas, inhabited rock-shelters, burial grounds, geoglyphs and others.

In 1983, thirty years after the initial archaeological discoveries and with the abundant information from four years of field surveys, we suggested the identification of Har Karkom with the biblical Mount Sinai. The proposal aroused a vigorous debate that had both scientific and emotional dimensions. Biblical experts, historians, and Near Eastern archaeologists had opposite positions for or against the hypothesis. At the beginning the majority of researchers were definitely against the proposed identification, but with the progress of research growing numbers have expressed an increasing willingness to allow the possibility of its truth. Most scholars today accept the evidence that Har Karkom was a paramount sacred mountain in the Bronze Age and in other early periods, but, like all good historical discourse, the controversy is not solved. Is this the mountain that the Bible calls Sinai? What are the arguments in favour for and against such a hypothesis? How can archaeological evidence help solve the questions regarding what happened or did not happen on this mountain?

The hypothesis that identifies this mountain with Mount Sinai was first discussed in a series of articles, and subsequently in a book, *Har Karkom* (1984). Two years later another, more detailed book, *The Mountain of God* (1986) was published. Additional volumes followed: *I Siti a Plaza di Har Karkom* (1987), *Har Karkom in the Light of New Discoveries* (1993), *Esodo tra Mito e Storia* (1997), the proceedings of the conference on *Har Karkom and Mount Sinai, Archaeology and Myth* (1998), and a number of articles which are listed in the bibliography at the end of this book.



Fig. 2. The base camp in the western valley at the foot of Har Karkom. (EA93: XXI-23; E.A. 1994, fig. 7; WARA W05864).

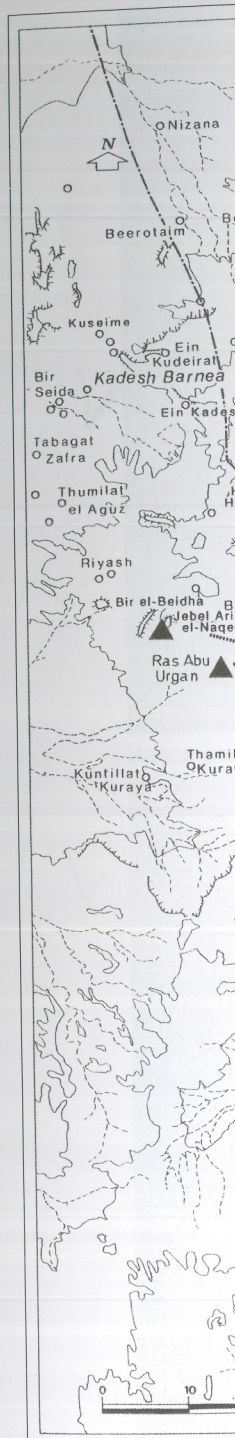


Fig. 3. Main feat. W05865).



✓



✓

The present
consideration
archaeology

The analysis
aspects of
contribute
mountain,
a gathering
alone could
is the only
evidence of

The area
Camuno
Antiquities
the Cultural
the wide
by the CA

Since
average of
assistance
Banca Lo
of the me
where all
annually

Fig. 4. Gro
between th
One of the
surrounde
106d; phot

Fig. 5. One
mountain.
position by
flat space
Below that,
on both s
background
these phot
Paran De
XVIII-7; W

Fig. 6. Bot
partially r
man. Visi
the trail to
(Site HK 1
W05868).

The present volume provides a synthesis of the main discoveries and related considerations as well as of the controversies which have arisen over twenty years of archaeological field survey at Har Karkom.

The analysis of data, palaeo-environmental studies, research conducted in various aspects of geology, topography, and geography, and the joint effort of the teams, have contributed to a rich collection of evidence. In one sentence it can be said that this mountain, with its plateau of shrines and its valleys dotted with ancient villages, was a gathering place for the multitudes at the desert's heart, where economic resources alone could hardly have attracted so many people. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only mountain known in the Sinai Peninsula displaying so much archaeological evidence of having been a paramount sacred mountain.

The archaeological research at Har Karkom is carried on by the CCSP (Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici in Valcamonica, Italy) in co-operation with the Antiquities Authorities and the Archaeological Survey of Israel, with the support of the Cultural Relations Department of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with the wide participation of volunteers. From 1983 to 1985 the research was sponsored by the CAB Foundation in Brescia.

Since then the expeditions have been supported mainly by the participants - an average of thirty scholars and volunteers who share the expenses each year - with the assistance of funds from occasional donors. In 1999 a contribution was given by the Banca Lombarda of Brescia. Every year the team establishes a base camp at the foot of the mountain, where the nearest water tap is one hundred kilometres away and where all necessities, from petrol to food, must be brought along desert trails that are annually eroded by winter floods.

Fig. 4. Group of boulders, fallen along the trail between the mountain and the Paran Desert. One of them, with a heap of rocks at its foot, is surrounded by a circle of stones. (Site HK 106d; photo EA99 XVIII-19; WARA W05866).

Fig. 5. One of the stations along the trail to the mountain. Above, an orthostat is held in position by smaller stones. A bit lower, an oval flat space is surrounded by heaps of stones. Below that, a small, cleared space is delineated on both sides by large stones, and in the background is the access trail to the site where these photographs were taken. Beyond is the Paran Desert. (Site HK 106d; photo EA99 XVIII-7; WARA W05869).

Fig. 6. Boulder with an anthropomorphic face, partially natural and partially completed by man. Visible in the background are traces of the trail to the plateau from the Paran Desert. (Site HK 106d; photo EA99 XVIII-20; WARA W05868).

