Symbolism of the ibex motif in Negev rock art

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1. Introduction

Thousands of rock engravings are found in the Negev desert of Israel. In a few areas of this desert they have been systematically recorded: at Har Karkom (Anati, 1993:61–91, 1996, 2001:121–128, 154, 2015), Timna (Rothenberg, 2001, 2003), Har Miḥia, ‘Ezuz and Ramat Matred (Eisenberg-Degen and Rosen, 2013; Eisenberg-Degen and Nash, this volume), while in the broader region, surveys are currently being undertaken by members of the Negev Rock Art Center (Razy Yahel of Sde Boqer and Lior Shwimer of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority). Though absolute dating of petroglyphs is problematic, relative chronology is possible based on superimposition and varying shades of patination of engravings on a given panel. Additional information regarding their date can be obtained from the presence of period-specific images such as domestic animals. Since the approximate time of appearance of domestic animals in the region is known from archaeozoological studies and other sources, they can supply a terminus post- quem for these images. Based on these parameters, different times have been suggested for the beginning of the Negev Rock art; the Early Neolithic, ca. 10,000 BCE (Anati, 2015:16, 58) or from the 6th millennium BCE (Eisenberg-Degen and Nash, 2014:16). However, in many rock art sites, more exact dating of engravings is possible when comparing their patination to that of adjacent inscriptions (Fig. 1a–d), written in Thamudic (1st and 2nd centuries CE, Halun, 1990:36), Nabataean (2nd century BCE to 4th century CE, Negev, 1991:209; Healey, 2007) and Early Islamic (7th–8th centuries CE, Sharon, 1990:9*). As a result, we learn that much of the Negev rock art is only 1000–2000 years old, while the remainder is either earlier or later.

The identification of ibex amongst the zoomorphs depicted in Negev rock art is unambiguous, due to its portrayal with extremely arched and large horns, often exaggerated (Figs. 1 and 2). Given the current situation of petroglyph surveys in the region it would be premature to present detailed statistics for the region as a whole, but the impression is that the adult, male ibex is the most commonly depicted zoomorphic motif. For example, according to Anati and Mailland (2009:25) ibex account for 57.5% of all zoomorphic elements at Har Karkom. They comprise 74% of horned ungulates depicted in all engraving phases at Har Miḥia; 78% of all horned ungulates portrayed at Giva’t HaKetovot (Eisenberg-Degen and Rosen, 2013:245–246); and ca. 40% of all zoomorphic motifs in the Nahal Nizzana catchment (Schwimer, 2015: calculated from Fig. on pg. 113). Moreover, as noted by these researchers, on many panels, images of ibex have been reworked, indicating their importance throughout the entire chronological span of the Negev rock art. In contrast, depictions of female ibex and domestic goat...
are extremely rare. Interestingly, irrespective of period, the male ibex recurs with the same combinations of motifs. For example; ibex attacked by dogs or other predators - either from behind or in front (Anati, 1999:26–27; Degen-Eisenberg and Nash, 2015: Fig. 7); ibex hunted by archers and/or riders (Rothenberg, 1972:120; Anati, 1999:26; Eisenberg-Degen and Nash, 2014: Fig. 5); ibex with human footprints (Anati, 1999:32; Degen-Eisenberg and Nash, this volume); orante figures (anthropomorph with raised arms) (Eisenberg-Degen and Nash, 2014: Fig. 6); ibex with celestial symbols (Schwimer, 2015:113–114), amongst others. All these associations are meaningful, especially since they are common in both rock art and the general art of the greater Near East (e.g. Porada, 1948; Vishniac, 1949; Anati, 1972; Clark, 2001:60; Abdul Nayeem, 2000:202; Schmidt, 2009: Figs. 4, 5 and 9; Vahdati, 2011: Fig. 6:9). In this paper, only two associations are addressed, the ibex-dog or ibex-dog-hunter, and ibex with celestial symbols.

2. Background to the Negev ibex

The species of ibex found today in the Negev desert, and most probably in the past, is the Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*, SI Fig. 1). This species is well adapted to arid and hyper-arid environments, but restricted to steep mountainous terrain (Harrison and Bates, 1991:180–83; Habibi, 1994:46–54, 63–69). Ibex in the Negev and surrounding areas were almost decimated due to massive hunting with firearms following World War I (Yom-Tov and Mendelsohn, 1988; Paz, 2001), but since then greatly recovered due to prohibition of hunting in Israel. In the past, the numbers of ibex in the Negev desert were probably higher than today, given the abundance of their remains in prehistoric archaeozoological record. For example, in three Natufian sites (14,000–9500 BCE) in the Negev Highlands, ibex bones are dominant and comprise 26% of the osteological assemblage from Upper Besor 6, 36% from Rosh Ḥorsha and 66% from Rosh Zin (Butler et al., 1977; Horwitz and Goring-Morris, 2000). In the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (ca. 8500–6400 BCE) site of Nahal Ḥarish in the southern Negev, ibex bones comprise the majority of animal remains (Goring-Morris and Gopher, 1983). From the Late Neolithic (6400–4600 BCE) onwards, however, the composition of archaeo-faunal assemblages in the Negev changes drastically, with ibex bones absent or very scarce. In the Southern Negev, a small faunal assemblage from the Late Neolithic cemetery of Eilat contained no ibex bones (Horwitz in press) as was the case in the 5th-3rd millennia BCE sites in the Uvda Valley (Horwitz, unpublished data). In the northern Negev, no ibex bones were found in Chalcolithic sites (ca.
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