

When the rest of the world thought male ibex, why did the people of San Giovenale think female sheep?

by

Kristina Berggren

To Geltrude Mantovani and Felice Tedeschi, Blera



Fig. 1. Ibex. Detail of petroglyph from Har Karkom, site 29. Drawing by R. Bastoni Brioschi.

Abstract:

It is commonly believed that images without text cannot be interpreted. However, I have discovered that using the technique of dream interpretation worked out by C.G. Jung and practiced by psychologists of his school all over the world, some knowledge can be gained. In this article, I present two prehistoric images, the ibex and the ewe, one male, the other female; one found as a petroglyph in all the high mountains of Asia and South-West U.S.A, or incised on Near Eastern seals; the other made in pottery and found only in the pre-Etruscan site of San Giovenale in Central Italy. The ibex goes back to the Palaeolithic Period, while the ewe is only present during three- or four hundred years in the Late Bronze Age. They stand in opposition to each other, giving two different – and similar – answers to the eternal question of the significance of life and death.

[First unnumbered note:] I was given the rare privilege to present my work both orally and with a poster for which I give my warmest thanks to the director of the Swedish Institute, professor B. Frizell. I am particularly grateful to Mrs. Rosetta Bastoni Brioschi from the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici who, among other things, has given me permission to publish some of her drawings from Har Karkom. The hypotheses are my own. It is with greatest joy that I dedicate this work to *la commare*, Mrs. Geltrude Mantovani and *il compare*, Mr. Felice Tedeschi, Blera, who have taught me much more than they realize.

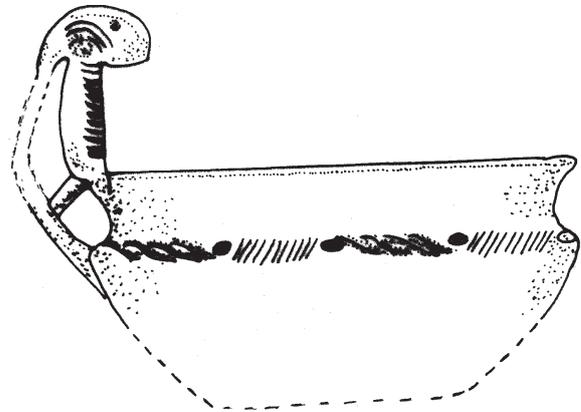


Fig. 2. Pottery cup with handle in form of a ewe. San Giovenale inv. no.V57:37. Reconstruction and drawing by K. Berggren.

All over the northern hemisphere – in Asia and in North America¹ – above the places where goats have their habitat we find petroglyphs of the male ibex (*Fig. 1*). The earliest one, from the Upper Paleolithic period, is on the mountain of Helan Shan, in the province of Ninxia, in North-West China;² other early ones, dated in the Neolithic period, have been found in Kilwa, on the frontier between Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and inside the Grotta Palandi in East-Central Turkey.³ All the others are probably made between the third and early first millennium BCE.

However, the ibex is not only engraved on rocks, but also on seals especially in the Near East. Here one or two of them often stand below a tree underneath the lunar crescent.⁴ From here the image travels to Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece where it survives into the early sixth century BCE on pottery made on the island of Rhodes, in Corinth, and exported to the Etruscans.⁵

Central Italy shows another picture. The Swedish excavations of the pre-Etruscan village in San Giovenale have brought forth many pottery handles belonging to cups and representing ewes (*Fig. 2*).⁶ In the late eighth century BCE, they are replaced by handles depicting rams then common all over central Italy.



Fig. 3. Ibex from two different periods. Har Karkom, site 38:2, detail of petroglyph. Drawing by R. Bastoni Brioschi.

In this paper I will present my hypothesis about the significance of the two so different animals as the horned ibex in Asia and North America and the ewe in San Giovenale using the same technique worked out by C.G. Jung that I have used in an earlier paper.⁷ This means that I'll consider the images not only as images of ibex and ewes, but as symbols, that is, analogies taken from our physical world to answer such unanswerable questions as: Where was I before I was born? What happens in death? What does it mean to be human? It is a language that most of us, Europeans and North Americans, have forgotten. The Chinese still understand it; Hindus, Buddhists and Taoists express themselves in it; all other people except us use it and my hypothesis is that this is a valid interpretation of prehistoric images. This does not, however, make it easy for us to learn because, although, as Alleau points out it is a logical language, its logic is not the one we are used to.⁸ A symbol is not a sign and neither is it an allegory. A symbol always associates other symbols to itself and asks new questions – and to complicate the issue the symbol also includes the opposite of itself, that is, not only birth but also death; not only peace but also violence.

The ancient meanings of the word “symbol” makes this clear. The word is usually said to mean a coin divided in two pieces, but as the excavations in the Athenian Agora have shown, it was really a small flat piece of pottery divided while the clay was still moist so that only these two pieces could fit together.⁹ One stayed with the host; the other went to a friend in another city. In a time when it really was important to have friends in other cities, these tokens were important enough to be inherited.

However, this is not the only use of the word. “Symbol” was also used as a nautical term, referring to the joint where the vertical and horizontal beams holding the sail are united and in *The Republic* (425c) Plato uses the word meaning to make a deal, a contract. Making a contract means that many different and opposite words flow together between the seller and the buyer until with a handshake they are all united in one deal. The idea of words flowing together is similar to Pausanias' description of the boundary between Lacedaemon and Tegea in the North of Peloponnesus: “The river Alfeios is be-



Fig. 4. Ibex. Har Karkom, site 45. Detail of petroglyph. Drawing by R. Bastoni Brioschi.

tween Lacedaemon and Tegea. It begins in Phylace and not far from its source another stream flows into it from many springs. Therefore this place is called ‘Symbols’” (8.54.1). The flowing of many waters into one place is a symbol as are the words that make up the deal.

In his *Roman Antiquities* (8. 38), Dionysius of Halicarnassus uses the word about the statues of the gods. The gods are the identity-cards of the believers and the focal point of the city united round the symbols, the statues of the gods. To speak in symbols therefore means to unite two different things into a whole: Two strangers, the vertical with the horizontal beam, two opinions making one deal, two streams of water, the physical statues of the gods incorporating their non-physical presence, the image of a horned ibex or a ewe with the question what life is about.

Looking for analogies to the ibex, we are helped by the petroglyphs found on Har Karkom in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula. According to Emmanuel Anati, who has lead the work here since 1980, this is the mountain that the editors of Exodus have described as Sinai, the mountain where Moses receives the Tables of the Law.¹⁰ The word Sinai means “the place of Sin,” the Sumerian lunar god, Sin-Nanna, often depicted on Near Eastern seals using the new lunar crescent as a boat. On Har Karkom/Mount Sinai (*Figs. 3-5*), at least seven thousand images of the horned ibex have up till now been cataloged constituting 57,5% of all the animals there.¹¹ More petroglyphs of the horned ibex have been found here than anywhere else in the world. Thus the hypothesis proposed by Rosetta Bastoni Brioschi that the male ibex is the lunar god Sin in his animal form seems to me to be a very strong one.¹² It also explains the presence of the moon together with the ibex on the Near Eastern seals and its near absence in the rest of the world, as if there was no need to engrave the lunar crescent together with the lunar animal, the ibex. The only two instances outside the Near East where the lunar crescent is present together with the ibex are on a vase from the fourth millennium BCE found in Krutoborodintsi, Ukraine (*Fig. 6*) and on a petroglyph – contemporary with those found on Har Karkom – on Saimaly Tach in Kyrgyzstan (*Fig. 7*). A coincidence, perhaps, but as

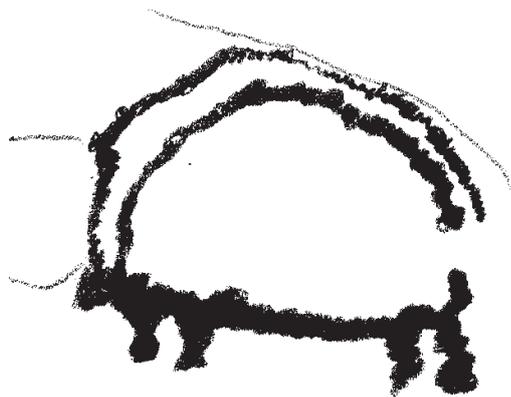


Fig. 5. Ibex. Har Karkom, site 56:C5. Detail of petroglyph. Drawing by R. Bastoni Brioschi.



Fig. 7. Detail of petroglyph from Saimaly Tach, Kyrgyzstan. After Martynov 1992, fig. 94. Drawing by K. Berggren.

a psychologist I have found that coincidences always carry a meaning.

The story in *Genesis 22* of how Abraham instead of his son, Isaac, sacrifices a male ibex, symbol of Sin, to his own god El¹³ thus takes on a new significance. He sacrifices the old god to the new one. From a psychological point of view Abraham performs a dangerously symbolic act: He kills a god, a symbol, but symbols cannot die and forgotten symbols have a tendency to turn into their opposites.

What does it mean to regard the ibex as an analogy with the moon? What does the moon symbolize? Nowadays we seldom notice the moon, once we did. Already thirty thousand years ago, people made notes of the changes of the moon.¹⁴ Contrary to the sun that only changes a little with the seasons and which has an one-year-long cycle, the lunar cycle is 18.61 years long. In addition to this long cycle the moon also has a monthly and a yearly one. Not only does it change shape over a 29.5-day cycle, but it varies its relationship to the sun at the same time. When it is new, it stands near the sun; when it is full it is opposite to it. This means that we see the new crescent during the night, but when it grows old it shows itself pallidly during the day. Every night and day the moon changes.¹⁵ Every month it is born, then it grows into a circle, fullness, then it grows old and dies. After the three black nights when the moon is dead, it

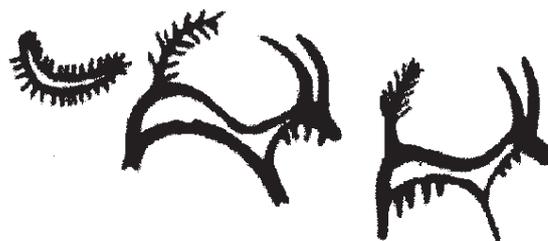


Fig. 6. Pottery jar from a tomb in Krutoborodiretsi, Ukraine. 4th millennium BCE. Detail of decoration. After Gimbutas 1982, fig. 121. Drawing by K. Berggren.



Fig. 8. The emblem of the kanton Graubünden, Switzerland. Drawing by K. Berggren.

is born again and again, every month without failing. Death swallows life, but a new birth follows. The crescent horns of the male ibex can thus be seen as images of the lunar crescents and analogies to birth and death – and hope that death is not the end of life.

As little as the horned ibex is identical with the lunar god Sin, as little is it identical with the moon. It is neither Sin, nor the moon, nor an allegory of lunar god or the moon. It is an animal and as such it both belongs to our world and lives outside it. It can do what we can only dream about doing could we be free from our limitations as human beings. In its difference from us lies its similarity to us and it is not difficult for us to imagine taking its animal form, but it is also as far from us as we are from the moon and thus a fitting symbol of a concept that is too large to be expressed in any other way but through analogies taken from our physical world.

We can only guess the other symbols: exuberant life, energy to overcome difficulties, strength to survive in inhospitable regions. To catch sight of this elusive animal, to glimpse its beauty, and to dream about it seems to have given the prehistoric engravers of the petroglyphs the same feeling of abundant life that survives in it being used as an emblem of Graubünden in Switzerland (Fig. 8).

Now let me return to Central Europe. Images of lunar crescents have been found in abundance, but in the valleys leading up to the Alps stags takes the place of the horned ibex. In Italy, horned handles are common, but they have no similarity to the curved horns of the ibex or the goat.¹⁶

Most of the petroglyphs were made during the Bronze Age. In Central Europe, this is the time when a new religion spreads from Hungary to Belgium and to Scandinavia in the North and Italy in the South. Outside Italy it continues with some modifications until Christianity takes over. It is based on the symbols of transformation

inherent in fire and water and thus cremation for a time becomes the only funerary ritual.¹⁷

Around the beginning of the last millennium BCE, the people living on the hill, which is now called San Giovenale, adopt this religion. Their village is a very prosperous and conservative place, so conservative that no religious change happens during at least three hundred years. The only figurative images that seem to have been permitted are those of stylized sheep characterized as female by the curve of their heads (*Fig. 2*).¹⁸ They constitute the handles belonging to shallow cups, but their heaviness upsets the balance of the cup and their shape makes it impossible to use the cups for drinking.

The urns in which the cremated bones were placed before they were buried in the earth are made of the same pottery as the cups with sheep handles. Both the clay and the water are taken from the earth and thus they belong to the earth and with the logic of *pars pro toto* – that is, the part represents the whole as a drop of water represents all the water in the rivers, lakes and oceans – they represent the Earth that receives the deceased into the tomb of her womb. Inside the urn that I propose we look at as also being a symbol of the womb both the one buried in the Earth and belonging to the Earth, the deceased is transformed from a separated being (the bones in the ossuary; the water in the jar) into a being not separated but still different from her (like the water mixed with the clay) and at the same time intimately connected with her (the unity in the clay of earth and water).

In the same way as the pottery symbolizes the Earth and the urn her womb, both the ceramic and the alive ewe partake of this symbolism. The real sheep that lived very close to its owner on the hill of San Giovenale is a good mother. She gives birth to lambs and nourishes both them and the human owner with her milk, but she does more than that: she allows the owner to comb the hair¹⁹ and after having spun the wool weave it into a cloth.

I therefore propose that the ewe at San Giovenale symbolizes the Earth as a mother, but this hypothesis raises more questions. What is a mother? Which mother? How are we given life by the mother? Are all mothers always good? Does not the Earth send earthquakes, famines, droughts, flooding? Does not the Earth kill? Are we not frightened by the thought of the tomb that also belongs to it and will receive all of us? The symbol raises other symbols. The ewe at San Giovenale may be understood as an image of the Earth that gives birth and nourishes her children and at the end of their lives takes them – transformed by fire – back into her womb to be transformed into new life, like the old seed planted in the earth must die in order to give birth to the new plant, and the dead hairs of the ewe are spun and woven into warming garments for human beings.

When the culture in Italy begins to change due to the arrival of Greek and Phoenician traders in the same way as the impressions gained by Greek traders in the Near East had changed Greek culture a hundred years earlier,

the ewe loses its place to the more imposing ram with big horns shaped like spirals. One of these has become the proud emblem of this conference.

The elusive, strong and beautiful ibex with its lunar horns presents the prehistoric people in Asia and U.S.A. with a different image of life and death than the one the ewe gives the shepherd people of San Giovenale. However, both the images give the same answer: life is born again as the new moon is born again after the three dark nights of death and new leaves put forth out of dead matter.

The study of symbols is scientific work that puts flesh on dry bones and gives a thin layer of significance to the finds from archaeological excavations. Without the texts it enables us to learn a few things. However, it is also a study that cannot be kept at a distance. It always forces us back into the sometimes frightening, present situation. The duality between the horned ibex found in the East and the sheep in the West is of no importance for a very long time. The images and with them what they symbolize are forgotten. However, symbols that are forgotten have the evil tendency to remain alive sleeping in the collective unconscious. Without raising into consciousness, they suddenly wake up as emotions so strong as to be virtually impossible to resist. How many times has the Lamb of God attacked the Eastern Devil – half a man and half a goat in Christian belief – and let us not forget that the ibex belongs to the family of goats. How many times have we used the Jews, to whose story the lunar ibex on Sinai/Har Karkom belong, as scapegoats? Morgan Strong likens the threatening war between U.S.A. and Iraq to Armageddon, the last battle, but I wonder if it isn't the old battle raging in the unconscious of the Western soul between the domesticated sheep, the Lamb of God, and the wild ibex, symbol of the Moon. It does not make the threat less frightening.

Kristina Berggren Ph.D.
Pacifica Graduate Institute, California, U.S.A.
Istituto Svedese di Studi Classici, Roma, Italia

¹ Petroglyphs of male goats have been found in Spain and Scandinavia, but as it is difficult to determine if they belong to the ibex family (*capra ibex*), I don't include them.

² Anati 1994, fig. 9.

³ Kilwa: Anati 1979, frontispiece; Grotta Palandi: Anati 1972, fig. 30.

⁴ For example, Danthine 1937, figs. 155, 157, 787, 790. Demisch 1977, figs. 155, 166.

⁵ For example, Schiering 1957, fig. 4; 1998, figs. 62, 63; Szilágyi 1982, figs. 1, 3.

⁶ The pre-Etruscan village on San Giovenale belongs to what is either called the Protovillanovan culture or the Final Bronze Period dated in the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BCE. However, as I have shown, it also belongs to the European Urnfields and continues without break into the Etruscan culture. Berggren 1982, 1991.

⁷ Berggren 1990, 27.

⁸ Alleau 1976, 11f.

⁹ Thompson 1950, 31f.

¹⁰ Anati 2001, 35-43, 125-128, 158-166.

¹¹ R. Bastoni Brioschi, oral information.

¹² Bastoni Brioschi 1998.

¹³ The Hebrew word *ayil* – used twice more (*Gen.15.9* and *Ex.29.32*) – can mean either male sheep, male goat or ibex. The Christian translations use ram or aries seeing this sacrifice as an allegory with Christ, the Lamb of God. Personally I think that it is more probable that Abraham after three days of climbing the mountain finds an ibex caught in a bush than a domesticated ram or goat, neither of which are or were allowed to wander freely about. My thanks to Dr. T. Fonti, Ben Gurion University, Israel for her help. R. Bastoni Brioschi, citing W. Beyerlin, *Feste religiosi per lo studio dell'Antico Testamento*,

Brescia 1992, 68, points out that *Yah* in a prayer to the moon god Thot-Yah from the 19th dynasty in Egypt is of semitic origin. My hypothesis may therefore be invalid, but as there are still many problems concerning Yah, I let my hypothesis stand.

¹⁴ Marshack 1991, 127-130.

¹⁵ Williamson 1984, 44f.

¹⁶ For example, Berggren & Berggren 1981, Pls. 11.61; 13.16.

¹⁷ Alexander 1979, 215-28; Fokkens 1997, 261.

¹⁸ Berggren & Berggren 1980, figs. 94-96, 135; 1981, Pls. 27.79; 32.22.

¹⁹ Shears must be made of steel and did therefore not come into use until in the third century BCE. Berggren 1995.

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