

THE POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THE PEBBLES WITH INCISIONS  
AND CUPMARKS FROM THE YARMUKIAN  
OF SHA'AR HAGOLAN, ISRAËL

by

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The Yarmukian Culture, considered to belong to the Pottery Neolithic A stage, was first discovered at Sha'ar Hagolan in the central Jordan Valley. Among the numerous finds were over 80 figurines as well as a number of river pebbles with incisions and cup shaped cavities, many of them showing traces of red ochre paint (Stekelis, 1966, 1972). The pebbles display respectively the recurrent features of horizontal incisions combined with shallow vertical lines, parallel linear or wavy incisions, crossing linear incisions, squares and net patterns and cupmarks. Pebbles with incision patterns, similar to those from Sha'ar Hagolan, have in the meantime been reported from Munhatta in the Jordan Valley (Perrot, 1969), from the «Néolithique Ancien» at Byblos (Cauvin, 1972) (1) and from a neolithic site in Iran (Hole, Flannery and Neely, 1969). The fertility concept which apparently motivated the art they represent, appears to have given birth to other basic ideas manifested in a complex of cult symbols.

The artistic motif of the cloud, releasing rain, occurs in regions with warm dry seasons in widely dispersed areas. Gimbutas (1974) writes that symbolic expressions for water were reflected in images in the Balkan Peninsular, particularly in its driest regions, during the sixth millenium. In later contexts it is found as broad painted horizontal

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(1) Cauvin who compared the objects from Sha'ar Hagolan and Munhatta with those from Byblos remarks : «On ne peut que signaler sans pouvoir les interpréter les dessins géométriques incisés dans la pierre, qui sont nombreux dans tous les gisements cités. Parfois aussi les incisions couvrent complètement une face du galet d'un décor géométrique dont la signification symbolique est probable, encore que mystérieuse pour nous» (p. 91).

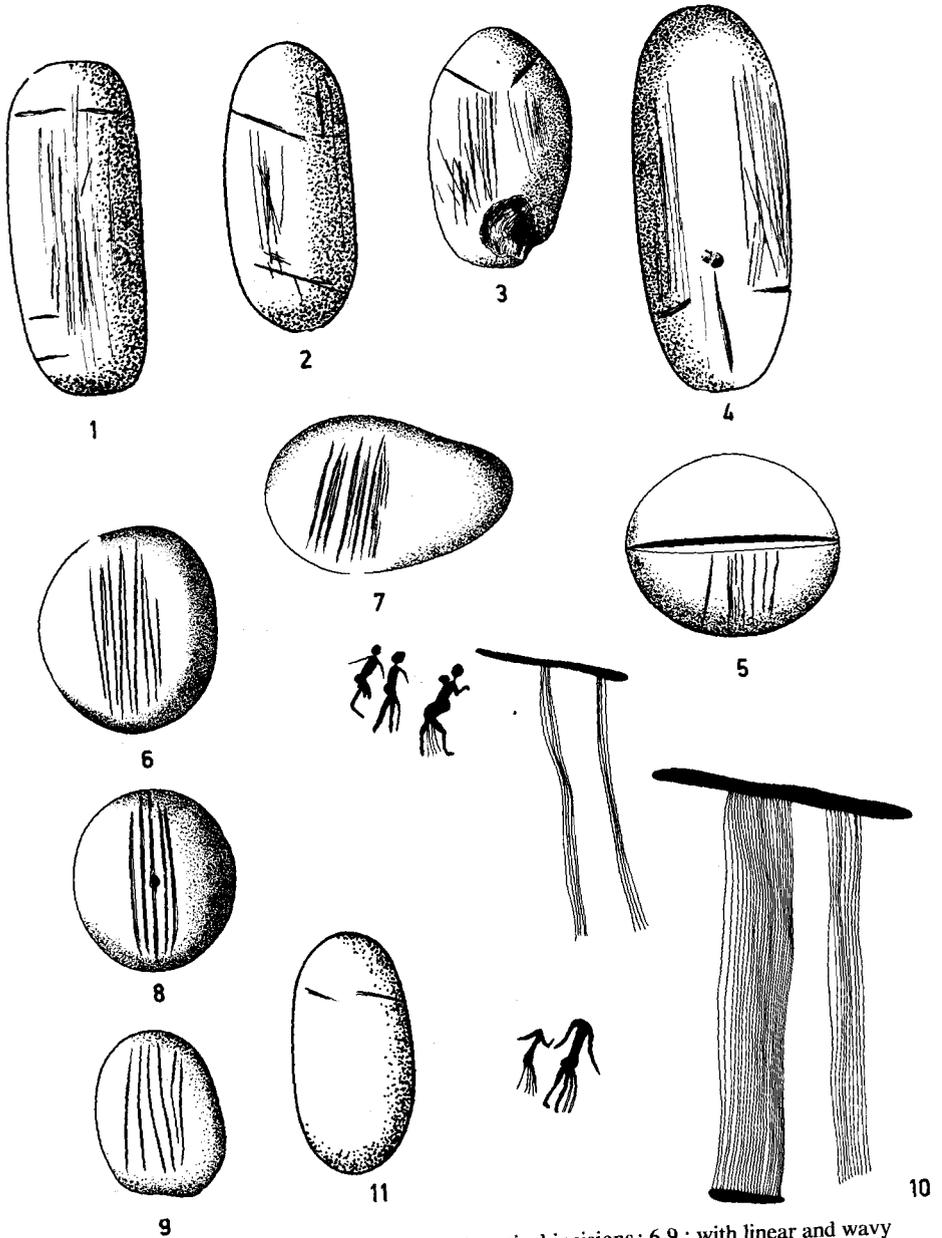


Fig. 1. — 1-4 : pebbles with horizontal and vertical incisions; 6-9 : with linear and wavy incisions; 11 : with horizontal incisions (Sha'ar Hagolan, after M. Stekelis); 10 : clouds releasing rain, rock painting Southwest-Africa (after E.R. Scherz).

«cloud» lines, combined with light, vertical and parallel «rain» lines in Southwest-African Bushman rock paintings, supposed to be 4000 years old, reported by Scherz (1972) and reproduced here (fig. 1, n° 10). Similar motifs are found in early Indian sites in North America's Colorado region (Kueh, 1964). The incision patterns on some Sha'ar Hagolan objects, showing close affinities, can thus be interpreted as cloud-rain ideograms (fig. 1, n° 5). Stekelis reported 14 objects with horizontal incisions «indicating eyes» (op. cit. p. 29) made on elongated or oval pebbles which he regarded as human female figurines or imbued with fertility. Similar pieces from Byblos were described by Cauvin as «idoles sur galets», the incisions being interpreted by him as the representation of the face. I would suggest to consider the Yarmukian pebbles (fig. 1, n° 1-4) and the similar objects from Byblos as closely resembling the symbolic image of the Eye Goddess, known from the Balkan Neolithic, 5500 BC., «whose eyes emerge in association with rain torrents or lines representing water» (Gimbutas : 114). The absence of the rain ideograms on pebbles which have eye incisions only (fig. 1, n° 11) seems to be intentional. It is possible that these figurines may be related to seasons, to the end of summer or the approach of sowing time, when dew should fall and before the rain season begins. It should be mentioned here that prayers for dew and rain are still intoned during the Jewish High Holy Days in autumn, prayers which probably originated in biblical or earlier times and have not lost their meaning in this region even today.

There are 10 round or oval Yarmukian pebbles with delicate and almost parallel incisional patterns (fig. 1, n° 6-9). Scholars, among them Clark (1964 : 31), Kuehn (1966 : 414-416) and Gimbutas (1974 : 113-132) believe that parallel lines, groups of straight lines and chevrons suggest symbolic expression for water and Gimbutas remarks that pottery decoration reflects an obsession with rain and water. They begin to appear in epipalaeolithic engravings and persist into late neolithic cultures. We find them on the rim of a Natufian basin (Perrot, 1960 : 19-20), on clay seals from neolithic Greece (Gimbutas, 1974 : 115) on neolithic pottery from Mureybit, on Hacilar and Syalk vessels, on Schnur ceramics and on the pottery of the Roessen Culture. But we find them as well on the jars from Sha'ar Hagolan and Munhatta (Perrot, 1969 : 54) and on many Yarmukian pottery fragments (Stekelis, 1972, pl. 41, 43).

The linear crossing lines have a wide geographic distribution and appear already in palaeolithic times (Grotte Rocher de Potots, Ile de France, Koenig, 1965). Maria Koenig believes that from the straight

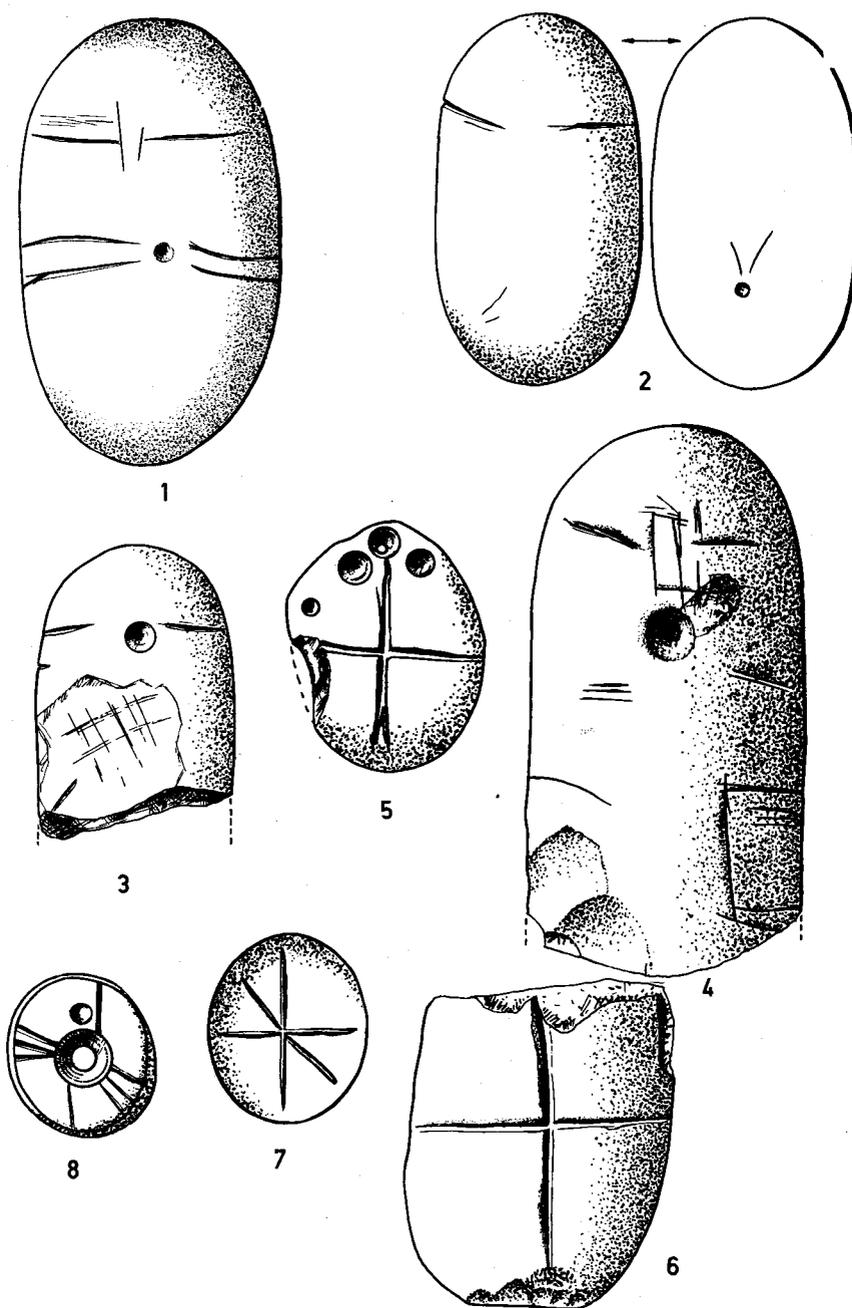


Fig. 2. — 1-2 : incisions combined with cupshaped cavities; 3-4 : incisions combined with cusphaped cavities and squares; 5-8 : with cross pattern (Sha'ar Hagolan, after M. Stekelis).

crossing lines two basic symbolic concepts have sprung. The first emerged from the point made by the crossing lines which thereby became the centre of an individual, the navel, or, in space, the zenith overhead. The second idea, dealt with later in this paper, found its expression in square patterns as the ideogram of the universe.

Relevant cross pattern, resembling schematic drawings of the human figure are found on pebbles from Sha'ar Hagolan (fig. 3, n° 5, 6) and Byblos (Cauvin, 1972 : 91). In n° 5, the base is split as though indicating the feet, and the perforation, possibly intended for suspension as amulet, is exactly in the place the head would occupy. A similar object from Byblos is described by Cauvin (p. 91) as a pendeloque. The cross, being furthermore supposed to indicate the four points of the compass, along with its middle point, the navel, linked man with the celestial sphere, his head, arms and feet symbolizing the four quarters of heaven (fig. 2, n° 1). According to Gimbutas (p. 89-91), the cross is a universal symbol, created or adopted by farming communities in neolithic times and extending into present day folk art. It is found among others on a stone basin from neolithic Khirokitia in Cyprus (Mellaart 1965, p. 56) as well as on chalcolithic ivory objects from Beer Sheva, Israel (Ussishkin, 1970). One Yarmukian pebble shows an additional incision, crossing the centre, thus forming twice three lines (fig. 2, n° 7). In another, the pair of three lines converges towards the beautifully perforated middle (fig. 2, n° 8). Both pebbles are rounded, n° 8 having been carefully worked to almost perfect roundness. A like object from Byblos is described by Cauvin as representing probably a cosmic significance (p. 93, n° 5) and a round ceramic piece from Tepe Sabz, Iran, has been reported by Hole et al. as a spindle whorl (p. 208). Thus we can discern a resemblance to the wheel-symbol so frequently encountered from neolithic till historical times. This symbol became accepted as expressing the rhythm of the seasons in nature and in human life, or, as it is enclosed in roundness, the cosmos.

The number «Three» is regarded as symbolizing the three phases of the moon (Koenig, 1965 : 19) or the three nights when the moon does not appear (Kuehn, 1966 : 417). It is the magical number of shamans, wizards and plays also an important part in mythology, legends and religions. It is interesting to note that three lines or dots have been painted in late palaeolithic cult caves, or incised on Magdalenian reindeer teeth and painted with red ochre on Azilian and late mesolithic pebbles from Parpallo. It is significant that the two Yarmukian pebbles reproduced here, combine the number three with the cross motif.

Koenig considers the «Three» as reflecting the principle of time-adjustment (Zeitordnung) and the cross as that of space-adjustment (Raumordnung).

The ideogram of the universe as expressed in the square and net patterns may have developed by way of the four corners of heaven as a symbolic entity, apart from man's other cosmic conceptions. Squares with net patterns, resembling the Yarmukian objects, are known from the Grotte Malesherbes, Isle de France (Koenig, 1965 : Perrot, 1969), from Parpallo (Marshack, 1972 : 345), Tepe Sabz (Hole et al., 1969 : 201), Catal Hujuk (Mellaart, 1967 : 84) and on Sumerian seals (Mallowan, 1962 : 75). An Akkadian text says that the gods «hold the net of sky and earth in their hands» (Pritchard, 1950).

There are 12 pebbles from Sha'ar Hagolan with cup shaped cavities, most of them combined with either rain ideograms or cross and net patterns (fig. 2, n° 1-5, 8 and fig. 3). The cavities resemble the cupmarks frequently found here on rock faces near caves or inside caves. Stones with cupmarks (Schalensteine) occur already in the Mousterian as at La

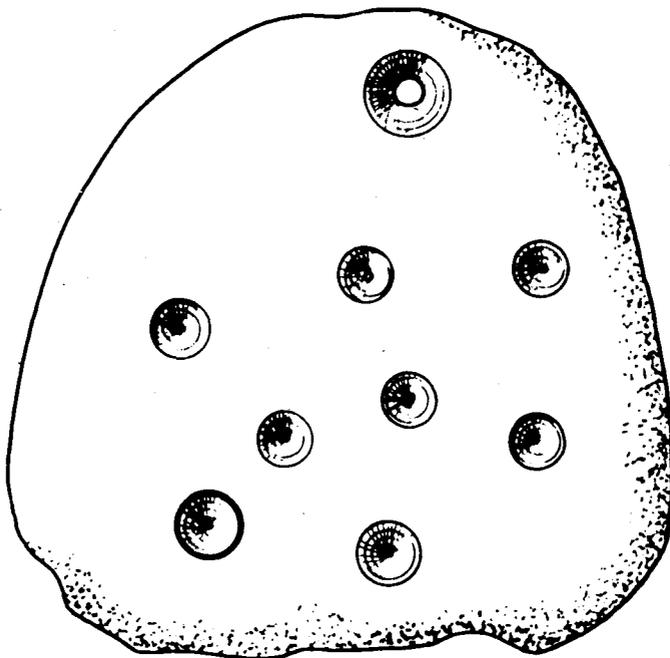


Fig. 3. — Object with cupshaped cavities and perforation probably for suspension as amulet (Sha'ar Hagolan, after M. Stekelis).

Ferrassie, where such a stone was found placed with the cavities downward on the skull of a child burial. An artificially rounded stone had been found besides the skull in a human burial at La Quina. Small disks, made on limestone or mammoth bones have been discovered in a late palaeolithic burial at Brno. It has further been observed that in Lascaux animals were painted with their horns pointing towards a hole in the ceiling. In the round houses of the Prepottery Neolithic at Nachal Oren flat stones with one to four cupmarks have been encountered as standard equipment. It can be assumed that cupmarks are part of a symbolic complex and do not seem to have served as utility installations. The emphasis laid on «roundness» in general, also well illustrated by the Yarmukian examples, points probably towards a cosmic concept as an important element in the symbolic behaviour pattern of prehistoric humanity.

#### CONCLUSION

So far the Yarmukian has been found in five sites in the Jordan valley. This region has dry summers with very high temperatures and presently a mean yearly rainfall of 400 mm only. So that there is sufficient rainfall during the winter season; and more so its distribution during the rain period is vital for man, animal and plants, especially for neolithic settlers there and for neolithic farming communities everywhere. We should furthermore be aware that, as it is assumed, between 6000 BC.-5000 BC., drier climatic conditions prevailed than those at present. Thus for the Yarmukian people, water meant life and if the gods denied it, it spelt drought and starvation. This found expression and representation not in the fertility figurines alone, but in a whole complex of interconnected abstract symbols. It seems even likely that the Yarmukian villagers, as well as the Byblos settlers, preferred river pebbles for their figurines and ideograms, not only because of their availability and form but because of their association with flowing water.

The importance of the exceptionally rich material from Sha'ar Hagolan lies in its variegated nature. The many tools found there convey the technical abilities and economic aspects of Yarmukian society. But conceptions and beliefs cannot be deduced directly from tools. «Cult is ritual in word and action. The word is no more, of action we know very little, sometimes the visible image (Bild) remained» (Koenig, 1965). This seems to be what fortunately did happen in Sha'ar Hagolan, a site whose remains enable us to catch a glimpse into the spiritual world of these early village communities, a world which

embraced not solely bonds with soil and seasons, but apparently included some perception of man's place in the universe beyond the fertility complex *sensu stricto*, which nevertheless was an essential part in it. It seems evident from the archaeological record that these peoples could and did draw from a widespread cultural heritage of ideas and practices they had become aware. The affinities and similarities in the symbolic expressions of the neolithic settlers in the Jordan Valley with that of past and contemporary groups elsewhere illustrate the existence of cultural links as well as independent creations or adaptations to local conditions.

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