

ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY STAR-LORE IN THE ROCK ART OF THE NEGEV DESERT

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological record of the Late Neolithic – Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age of the Negev Desert exhibits prevalent east to west orientations. This is understood in literature as an expression of preoccupations that characterized emerging pastoralist elites, namely: after-life beliefs, mortuary cult and ancestor worship. Such archaeological remains are generally explained as astronomical alignments and are tentatively related to the position of the setting sun on the day of the summer solstice. Orientation seems to be also the central theme in the oral traditions of contemporary pastoralists. While the material remains exhibit orientation in space, the oral traditions, which are illustrated at their best in star-lore, exhibit an orientation in time: the cyclic renewal of seasons is observed in the east to west passage of stars and asterisms. As material and spiritual expressions of the beliefs that characterize pastoral nomads, the archaeological record and star-lore seem to be closely related. However, due to polar shift and the precession of equinoxes, contemporary star-lore orientates itself differently from its Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age forerunner, therefore it cannot reflect the spatial orientation exhibited by *tumuli* fields, walls, *masseboth* and other remains from the said periods, except in a very approximate manner. A significant precession of equinoxes occurred in the early phases of the Middle Bronze Age. The event apparently left a deep mark on cultures worldwide and it was likely paralleled by shifts in symbolism. Moreover, in the Negev, the precession was also accompanied by a climatic deterioration. Nomadic mythology and star-lore had to re-adjust to the new coordinates that superseded an apparently perfect previous order. The majority of the rock art corpus in the Negev is dated – based on stylistic considerations - to the period that preceded the shift. However, a few of the engravings attributed to the Early Bronze Age become meaningful only when related to the changes that occurred during and after the precession of the equinoxes. Other petroglyphs reflect precisely Chalcolithic – Early Bronze Age realities, but their symbolic implications outlived the astronomical context in which they were conceived and are still meaningful to the Bedouin pastoralists of today.

KEYWORDS: *Aldebaran, Antares, astronomical alignments, equinoxes, petroglyphs, polar shift, precession, star-lore*
