



Karahan Tepe

and the Oldest “*Carcancha*” in the World

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TRACCE - Online Rock Art Bulletin

February - 2025

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Introduction

The first time I came across the term “Carcancha”, was when I was preparing my book “The Carcancha and the Apu” (Van Hoek 2013), which deals with the rock art of mainly the Majes Valley in the coastal desert of southern Peru. The term “Carcancha” is still used in the Department of Lambayeque in the north of Peru and in Mexico and refers to a wreck (nearly dead) of an automobile that still functions (still alive). As an analogy to the car, the term “Carcancha” was first introduced by Frederico Kauffmann Doig (1981, 2010) to refer to depictions of the “Living Death” (*un cadáver animado*) in Pre-Columbian iconography.



Figure 1. Three petroglyphs depicting rare examples of the male “Carcancha” icon, recorded by my wife Elles and me at the important rock art site of Alto de Pitis in the Central Majes Valley of southern Peru. [Drawings © by Maarten van Hoek.](#)

Surveying the extensive rock art site of Alto de Pitis on the east bank of the Central Majes Valley, my wife Elles and I noticed a number of relatively large anthropomorphic petroglyphs that clearly showed skeletal properties, like elbow and/or knee joints, ribs and (sometimes) a sternum. However, those “*Carcanchas*” also feature elements that depict life, like the dynamic posture and - above all - the often prominent sexual organs (Figure 1).

Although petroglyphs depicting female “*Carcanchas*” have been recorded in southern Peru (Van Hoek 2025), the “*Carcanchas*” at Alto de Pitis mainly concern sexless figures. Yet there are other rock art regions with images of “*Carcanchas*” that clearly show female sex. For instance, at the rock art site of Eagles Nest, Jubbah, Saudi Arabia, is a large petroglyph showing a female “*Carcancha*” (notice the labia) in combination with an isolated element between the knees/legs that I interpreted as a phallus that is about to penetrate (fertilise) the female (Figure 2).

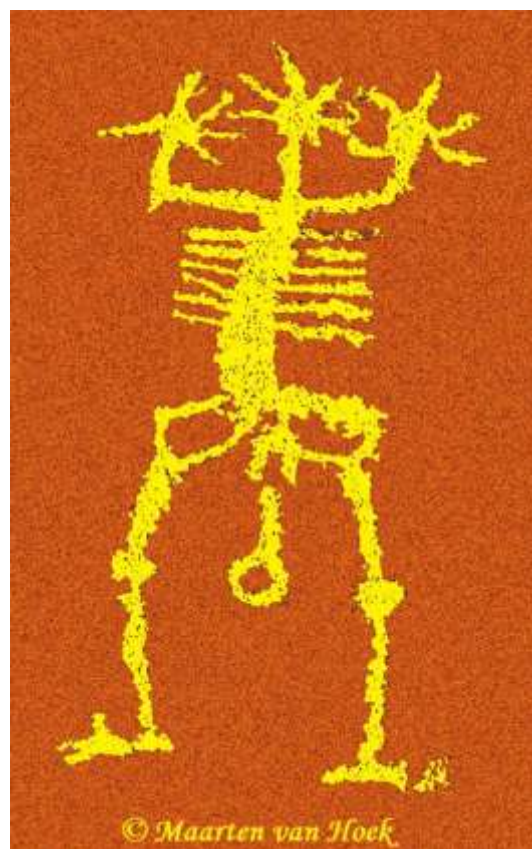


Figure 2. Petroglyph of a female “*Carcancha*” at Eagles Nest, Jubbah, Saudi Arabia. [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph by Samira Mink.

Based on information about “*Carcanchas*” gathered from all over the globe (Van Hoek 2019), I am convinced that in general “*Carcanchas*” symbolise a most important life-death concept, or - in other words - the concept of fertility, regeneration, death and rebirth. Of course this concept is very old. Although the examples from Alto de Pitis cannot yet be dated, they are estimated by me to be about 1500 to 2500 years old, and may be distantly related to the ancient Paracas Culture of coastal southern Peru (Van Hoek 2018a). Yet, the examples at Alto de Pitis are definitely not the oldest representations of the “*Carcancha*”. Recently, an excavation in the south of Türkiye revealed probably the oldest “*Carcancha*” in the world.

Karahan Tepe

Karahan Tepe is an archaeological site in Şanlıurfa Province in the south of Türkiye (Figure 3), located at about 700 m above sea level (Çelik 2011). The area - a semi-desert - may be regarded to form the northern part of Mesopotamia, because it is situated between the upper courses of two well-known rivers: the Euphrat(es) and the Tigris.

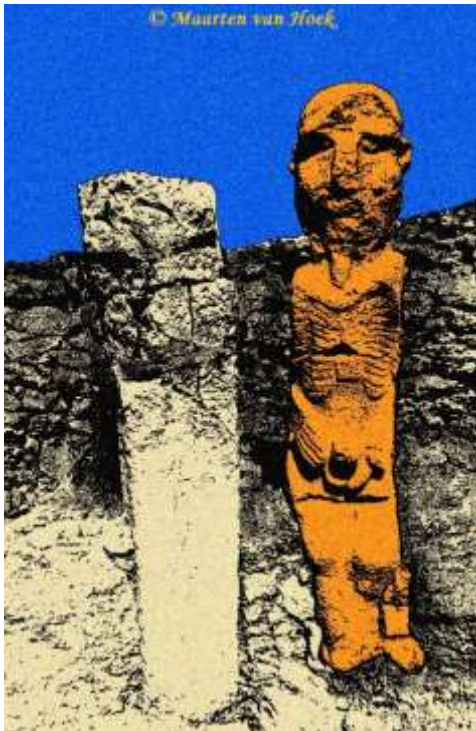


Figure 3. The location of Karahan Tepe in the south of Türkiye (exact location in Google Earth 2024: 37° 5' 33.07" N and 39° 18' 13.13" E). [Map © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on the map © by [OpenStreetMap - Contributors](#).

The site was first discovered in 1997 (Çelik 2011), but (partially) excavated a few years later. The site is close to Göbekli Tepe, a similar site located about 36 km to the NW of Karahan Tepe, and archaeologists believe that the two sites (and several more related sites in the area) are culturally connected, especially because of the huge T-shaped pillars (several decorated with specific engravings and sculptures) that have been found at both (and other) sites. Interestingly, the people of Karahan Tepe were hunters and gatherers (not farmers). It is now important that Karahan Tepe may be the earliest known human megalithic construction, roughly dating to between 9.000 - 12.000 B.C.. It most likely once was a very important ceremonial site.

The Karahan Tepe “*Carcancha*”

Among the rubble at Karahan Tepe archaeologists unearthed an incomplete, small statue (a figurine rather) depicting an apparently sitting anthropomorphic figure with hands touching his phallus (Çelik 2011: Fig. 16). More importantly, another statue of about 2.3-meter tall and broken into three parts (the lowest part found sitting *in situ* on a ledge; the other two parts found recumbent in the rubble, [URL](#)) of an anthropomorphic figure was excavated (in 2023) and reconstructed upright at Karahan Tepe. This huge free-“standing” statue (looking SSW) is possibly about 11.400 years old, making it one of the oldest examples of a realistic human sculpture, if not the oldest (so far). But it is sensational that this statue also turned out to represent the oldest known “*Carcancha*” in the world (again, so far).



The “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe (Figure 4) clearly depicts a male, apparently sitting on the edge of a paved recess behind him (probably without ever having had a roof). The imposing statue is fully frontally depicted, the rough (and slightly damaged) head having ears, a nose, a mouth (?), two eyes, hair and a possible beard. Most importantly, its thorax clearly displays a ribcage (with a sternum and shoulder-bones?), below which seems to be an “empty stomach”. The sides of the statue reveal the arms that end in hands (each showing five fingers) that are clutching the male genitalia, the phallus of which showing a small hole at the end of the “*glans penis*”. The erect phallus is (in relation to the general size) rather short (intentionally?, out of fear of a life-size example to easily breaking off?).

Figure 4. The “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe (coloured-in by the author). [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph in the [National Geographic](#).

The combination of the ribcage (symbolising death) and the strong emphasis on the male genitalia (signifying life) definitely make the statue to represent a true “*Carcancha*”. Interestingly however, the ribcage and the purported “empty stomach” may also point to a famine threatening the community, a possibility I will return to later in this study.

The Site Context

Before I start to attempt at interpreting the context of the “*Carcancha*” statue at Karahan Tepe, I have to emphasise that I never visited the site and that I am not at all an expert regarding the archaeology of the site and the area. What now follows are my own (often subjective) interpretations (based on some scientific publications and many photographs found on the internet). Thus my interpretations may well be incorrect, but hopefully still constructive.

The Karahan Tepe “*Carcancha*” seems to have been part of a ceremonial space (Figure 5) comprising a narrow, raised recess flanked by two free-standing pillars of stone (each with vertical grooves on the thin, much weathered fronts), and - immediately to the right (east) - the “*Carcancha*” (assuming that all the features are *in situ*). In front of the raised area is a lower and smaller raised bed on which two small stone discs are visible. They might have been intended to receive offerings. This small “altar” is flanked on the east side by the excellently crafted statue of a bird (60 cm in height), said to depict a vulture (orange in Figure 5). Some photos show the spot without the bird. It has been removed (because of its small size [easily stolen]?) to the Archaeological Museum in Şanlıurfa, the nearest town in the area. On ground level, to the right of the bird, is a larger, circular stone disc (possibly ritually associated with the bird and the “*Carcancha*”). Into the back-wall of the narrow recess, a large, circular slab of (now fragmented) stone has been built-in (yellow in Figure 10). It has a large, definitely anthropic hole in its centre (comparable to a similar ring-stone at Göbekli Tepe). Holes in stone slabs are often regarded to function as “soul-holes”, through which shamans, or the souls of the deceased, could travel to the Upper World, where their ancestors and/or gods resided.



Figure 5. The ceremonial space at Karahan Tepe. The eyes of the vulture do not show.

[Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph in [Nowa Turystyka](#).

Considering the whole (still only partially excavated) complex at Karahan Tepe, there are more indications that most (if not all) structures and features at Karahan Tepe once had a ceremonial function, apparently dominated by male symbolism, and that the “*Carcancha*” discussed above is not an isolated case. I already mentioned the phallic statue illustrated by Çelik (2011: Fig. 16). Moreover, Ayaz *et al.* reported the sculpture of the seated man with his phallus extended almost down to his knees (2022: 132), but it is unknown to me whether this sculpture also showed skeletal properties. Karahan Tepe is also well known for its many allegedly (often rock-cut) phallic-shaped pillars, a number of which almost completely fill a small ceremonial rock-cut room, thus confirming even more the masculine dominance of the site. Also the well-known Urfa Man Statue (also known as the Balıklıgöl Höyük Statue, after its finding spot elsewhere in the area) involves a figure reaching with both hands to its genitalia.

More importantly, [Eastern Turkey Tours](#) reported another possible male “*Carcancha*”, said by them to have been removed from Karahan Tepe to the Archaeological Museum in Şanlıurfa. It is a very thin slab of stone on which - on the very narrow front-side - a faint rib-cage, an “empty stomach”, and its male genitalia are visible. The broader sides feature the legs, the extensions of the ribs, and the arms (with fingers) that - importantly - reach for the “empty stomach”. The head is missing and the broad side of the slab is pierced by two small anthropic holes.

Finally, at several spots at Karhan Tepe are groups of rather large anthropic depressions (up to 30 cm in diameter) that have ritually been cut into the bedrock. One group of somewhat smaller cupules is found surrounding a structure that is said to be a bath-house; other groups occur on outcrops in and around the site. Similar cupules have also been found on the upper surface of the horizontal bar of the T-shaped megaliths at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2010: Fig. 23).

Karahan Tepe: Rock Art or Architectural Art?

Several stone surfaces at Karahan Tepe, whether involving dressed outcrop or anthropic (T-shaped) pillars, bear images of mainly zoomorphic images and some anthropomorphic figures. Because those surfaces are an integral part of the ancient construction, they all are regarded by me to represent architectural art. However, on the floor of a room at Karahan Tepe archaeologists also discovered the engraving of a wild donkey (20 cm in width) on a (ritual, domestic?) grinding stone. This case presents a possible problem. Was the slab used as a grinding stone, and later engraved at the very spot where it was found, or not? The slab could also have been decorated outside the complex of Karahan Tepe (on a loose slab, or even on one of the many outcrops in and around the site, quarried later and then transported to the megalithic room) and if this was the case, it could have been an instance of rock art (which I think it is).

Earlier I published several papers describing cases that present the same dilemma. The first case concerns two blocks of stone with petroglyphs (?) built into the wall of the ancient settlement of Aldea de Ramaditas in the middle of the Atacama Desert of northern Chile. The possibilities have been fully discussed by me, and have also been put into the context of the regional rock art, which I think is essential (Van Hoek 2011a; see also Van Hoek 2009).

Another case analyses a case of missing (most relevant) information regarding one petroglyph (?) allegedly unearthed *in situ* (!) in an ancient settlement along the river Majes in the coastal desert of southern Peru. Unfortunately, the leading excavator did not provide any detail or any illustration and she did not put the engraving into the context of the rich rock art repertoire of the valley. Again, it could be rock art (most likely in my opinion, but I cannot prove it, lacking information), or architectural art. In my paper I demonstrated in detail that it is essential in many respects to document such an important and unique find as much as possible (Van Hoek 2022).



The last instance concerns an engraving first discovered by my wife Elles and me at the ancient temple complex of Kuntur Wasi in the north of Peru (thought to have been constructed around 1000 to 700 B.C.). Four decorated lintels of the sunken courtyard bear the menacing, mirrored heads of felines of the so-called MSC-Style (Van Hoek 2011b) that originated along the Pacific Coast. One of those lintels also bears an image that could have been added after the lintel was placed at the courtyard, but equally it could have been manufactured on an outcrop that was later quarried to provide the lintels (Van Hoek 2016). Besides the four decorated lintels, Kuntur Wasi also has some monoliths, one of which fits into the scope of this paper.

Figure 6. The “*Carcancha*” monolith at Kuntur Wasi, northern Peru. [Photograph \(retouched\) © by Maarten van Hoek.](#)

The Global context

It is impossible to discuss all examples of statues and (rock art) images that may be *graphically* related to the “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe (for more details see Van Hoek 2019). Therefore a small selection will be made, demonstrating that the “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe is not an isolated case, starting at Kuntur Wasi, Peru. One of the anthropomorphic monoliths at Kuntur Wasi (it may not be *in situ*) clearly features a ribcage (and sternum?), while its large hands reach for the genital area (covered by a loin-cloth) The menacing, grinning feline-face exposing a mouth with ferocious fangs, is very much alive (Figure 6). Its function is unknown to me.



Further south along the Pacific coast of Peru is the recently discovered temple complex of Vichama, (about 3800 years old), located only a short distance south of the mouth of the river Supe (the heartland of the ancient Caral Culture). On its adobe walls have been sculptured several anthropomorphic figures, clearly depicting famine and death. Several sculptures show an “empty stomach”, others seem to have been decapitated or are in an inverted position (indicating death). At least two sculptures depict anthropomorphs with arms raised (in despair?) and a ribcage below which is a large cavity indicating the “empty stomach”. Another sculpture at Vichama - actually an almost complete skeleton - also shows a ribcage with an “empty stomach” below (Figure 7). The impressive frieze was likely done towards the end of a drought-famine period (caused by an El Niño?) that the Caral civilization experienced.

Figure 7. One of the clay sculptures on an adobe wall at Vichama, northern Peru. [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph by [Andares Magazine](#) (2024).

Much later the Moche Culture on the north coast of Peru became well-known for their most sophisticatedly decorated ceramics. Importantly, many images on their ceramics depict “*Carcanchas*”, showing dead people with skeletal rib-patterns and skulls, while the sexual organs are displayed, often quite prominently. In painted or sculpted vessels, animated skeletons dance, embrace, play music with flutes and rattles, carry funerary offerings, or are engaged in sexual activities. Several Moche ceramics also show “*Carcanchas*” that grasp their phallus.

Much further north, in Mexico, many artifacts depict skeletons, including “*Carcanchas*”, like the stone figurine of a nude, travelling merchant found buried at Loma Alta, Zacapu, central Mexico (Figure 8A). It clearly combines aspects of life (the active posture of travelling and - more importantly - the prominent male sexual organs) with physiognomies of death as it also shows a ribcage. An even more telling and impressive figurine has been found at Tlatilco, Mexico City. It comprises a seated anthropomorphic figure, the right half (painted-in in orange by the author in Figure 8B) depicting life, while the left (blue) half represents death, clearly indicated by the ribcage, the bones of the arm and leg and the skull exposing teeth.



Figure 8. A: The Loma Alta figurine, Mexico. [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on an illustration in Carot and Hers (2011: Fig. 18). **B:** The Tlatilco figurine, Mexico. [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph by an author unknown to me (now untraceable).

Malta, a small archipelago in the Mediterranean, functioned for ages as a stepping stone between continents. Thus possibly also the concept of the “*Carcancha*” may have travelled from Türkiye to those islands. At least two figurines found at Malta depict nude, pregnant women with large breasts and a distinct vulva. Importantly, at their backs the backbone and the ribs are clearly marked (Figure 9). The concept of the “*Carcancha*” is thus expressed by the combination of the front of the figurines that clearly symbolise birth and fertility, while the back probably symbolises death. Each figurine may therefore also symbolise rebirth.

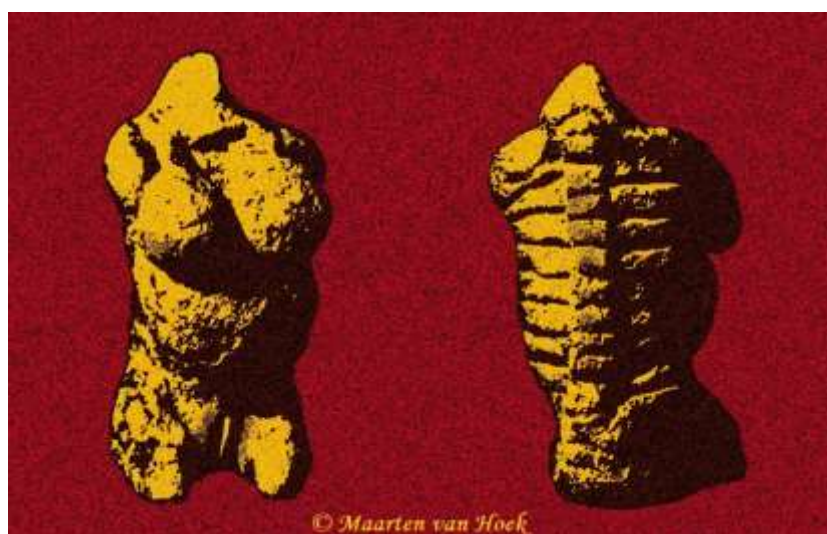


Figure 9: Clay figurine from Mnajdra, Malta. [Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on an illustration in Bondesson and Bondesson (2014: Fig. 2).

Final Observations

First of all I again emphasise that I am not at all an expert on the archaeology of the Göbekli Tepe Culture (or Taş Tepeler Culture), nor of Karahan Tepe. It is certain that I missed a lot and that a lot will have been excavated recently and will be excavated in the area in the near future. I certainly did not discuss all artifacts found in the area, like the frieze at Sayburç that included two large felines threatening the sculpture of a man (featuring ribs or a V-shaped necklace?) one hand grasping its genitals, the other his stomach. Therefore, in the previous paragraphs I only presented a selection of objects and images found at Karahan Tepe and at sites world-wide.

Moreover, all my theories are just what they are: theories. But there are also facts. Based on my definition of the “*Carcancha*” icon, there are indeed a few “*Carcancha*” statues found in the very old megalithic structures of the Taş Tepeler Culture in the south of Türkiye. And in my opinion they may have a story to tell.

This study demonstrated that the huge anthropomorphic statue at Karhan Tepe (Figure 4) represents the oldest known example of a “*Carcancha*” in the world. It definitely is a “*Carcancha*” as it displays death-properties (the ribcage), as well as life-elements (the male genitalia). However, it is more likely that the statue does not per se incarnate a dead person or death itself, but that it is rather a sign of large-scale malnourishment and/or imminent famine in the region. Especially the “empty stomach” feature seems to symbolise this idea. Yet, the statue may - also because of its height - be an important personage, a (shamanic?) mediator perhaps, who is trying to persuade the deities of the Karahan Tepe community to end the starvation. Very near the statue a stone disc is found on the ground. Perhaps it was used to put (food) offerings on, in order to propitiate their gods. Thus there might be a spiritual link between the “*Carcancha*” and the large disc (as is subjectively shown by link #1 in Figure 10).

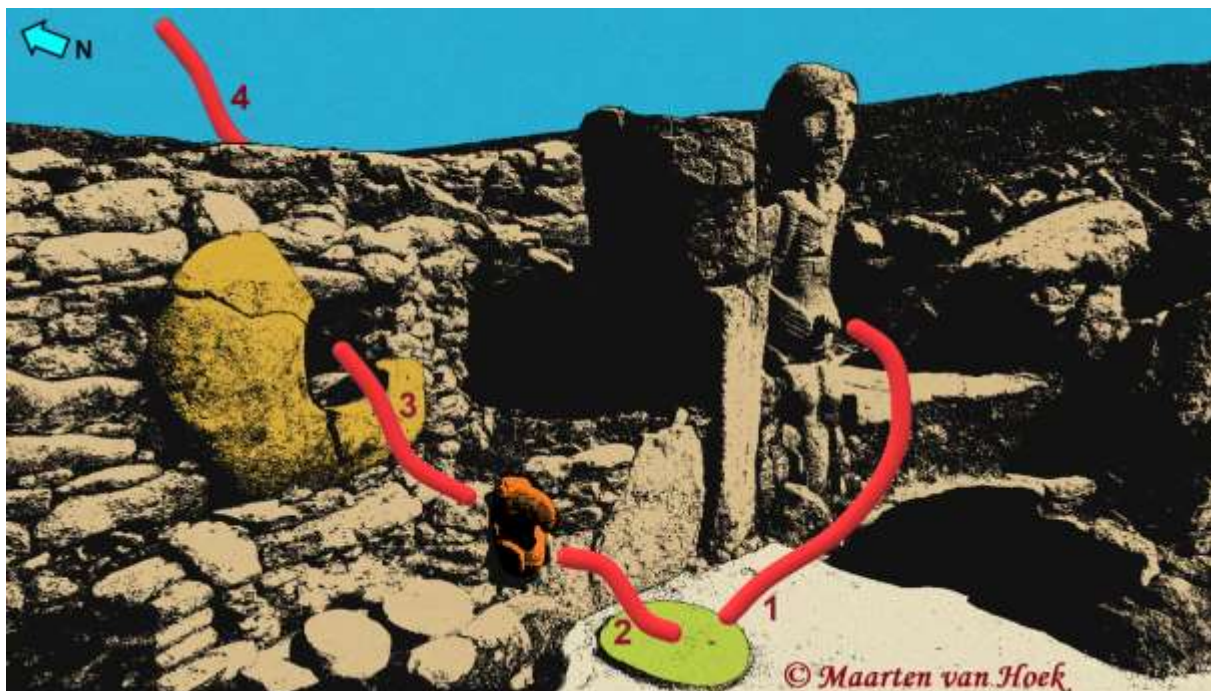


Figure 10. The possible spiritual connections between the several features at Karahan Tepe.
[Drawing © by Maarten van Hoek](#), based on a photograph in [Taş Tepeler](#).

The idea that ancient images depict the concept of famine and imminent death via “*Carcanchas*” is not far-fetched. It is - for instance - also symbolised in the many reliefs on the impressive friezes of the temple complex at Vichama on the coast of northern Peru. The combination of “*Carcanchas*” with inverted (dead) figures (anthropomorphs and fish), persons apparently decapitating themselves and many figures displaying an “empty stomach” (some ominously torn open by their own hands) seems to indicate that (because of a severe El Niño) there existed a direct threat of a famine in a society that largely depended on marine food supplies. Thus the sculptures more express increased ferocity from famishment rather than death. I now argue that the same concept seems to be present at Karahan Tepe, a suggestion which I now will explain.

Besides the “*Carcancha*”, the ceremonial space at Karahan Tepe also features a small “altar” with two small stone discs that may also have been used to receive (food) offerings. To the east of this “altar” was the small statue of a big-beaked bird, said to represent a vulture (see also Schmidt 2010: 248; Fig. 17). It may be spiritually linked with the stone disc (link #2 in Figure 10). Also the small discs on the “altar” may be related to the Vulture (not shown in Figure 10).

Importantly, in many ancient cultures birds are said to be messengers to the gods, and even to be able to function as a mediator between the Middle World (the world we live in) and the Upper World (the realm of the ancestors and deities; often the sky). For instance, the rich rock art repertoire of the Majes Drainage of southern Peru features - besides many petroglyphs of “*Carcanchas*” - numerous petroglyphs of birds and felines, that in my opinion - especially when carrying a “Trophy” Head (the soul of the deceased) - function as mediators between the Middle World and the Upper World; the summit of *Apu Coropuna*, Peru’s highest volcano and Sacred Mountain (Van Hoek 2013; 2018b; 2021a; 2021b). The important role of birds (and felines!) in Andean cosmology - also in relation to the concept of the “spiritual flight” of souls to the top of a Sacred Mountain - is also confirmed by the study by Scott Smith who argues (discussing specific Tiwanaku imagery) that “*The use of a puma effigy vessel for ritual at the summit of the sacred Step Mountain makes sense when we recall that felines were the mediators between the earthly and spiritual realms.*” (2012: 48), and also that “*... birds were conceptualized as being able to transgress the boundaries between the earthly and spiritual realms.*” (2012: 51).

It is thus very likely that the Vulture at Karahan Tepe - also because of its planned position near the small “altar” - was thought to be able to travel (taking with it the offerings; the messages) via the large hole in the circular stone at the back of the small altar (link #3) to the Upper World (link #4). Also the location of the “*Carcancha*” on the very top of the hillock of Karahan Tepe seems to confirm the idea that the ritual complex, and especially the space featuring the “*Carcancha*”, served to contact the ancestors and deities that resided up in the sky.

The connection between the several realms also may have been depicted on the so-called Eight-Fingers-Pillar found in Structure AH at Karahan Tepe (now removed to [Sanliurfa](#)). At first sight the engravings show arms (both ending in eight fingers) and shoulder of an anthropomorph. However, the ensemble has been executed in such a manner as to suggest that the shoulders actually represent a bird’s head, possibly of a vulture (able to travel between the Upper World and the Middle World!), while the arms have the appearance of a curling snake (capable to enter the Lower World and to rejuvenate itself by shedding its skin). The pillar might even symbolise the transformation of a shaman into a bird-snake-mediator. More, similar engravings have been found in the area; one (now in the museum at Şanlıurfa), possibly showing ribs as well.

The connection with the sky also seems to be suggested by the construction of the site. It notably seems that at Karahan Tepe (and also at Göbekli Tepe) representations of calendars and time support an astronomical interpretation of their symbolism (Sweatman 2024). Although I do not have the expertise to check his findings, even the remote possibility that the construction of Karahan Tepe involves astronomical alignments to celestial bodies (the sun, the moon or specific stars), seems to confirm the link with the sky, the Upper World.

The “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe (and other statues and shaped pillars at Karahan Tepe and other “nearby” sites of the same culture) seem to confirm a masculine imperative of the area. Schmidt noted that also at Göbekli Tepe, distinctly feminine motifs are lacking from both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations (2010: 246). It proves that in general depictions of female figures and female sculptures are exceptional in the area (although there are possible exceptions; see Schmidt 2010: 246). I know of only one engraving of a female (a petroglyph or ancient graffiti?) on a stone slab, which has been excavated at Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2010: Fig. 13). It has a mushroom-shaped head, which *might* be an indication of the consumption of hallucinogens by the ancient peoples in the area, possibly (but not necessarily) by the shamans of the Göbekli Tepe Culture as well.

Concluding, the ceremonial space at Karahan Tepe, housing the huge male “*Carcancha*” Statue (the Shamanic Messenger?), several stone discs (receiving the offering, storing the Message?), the small Vulture Statue (the Mediator conveying the Message?) and the large Ringed Portal Stone (the Entrance to the Upper World?), almost certainly served to contact the gods, possibly to ward off the imminent starvation caused by a drought or famine, literally and metaphorically embodied by the “empty stomach” of the “*Carcancha*”,. However, the exposed male genitalia of the “*Carcancha*” at Karahan Tepe (together with similar statues in the area) may as well be interpreted as a plea for fertility.

Although my tentative suggestions about the meaning of the Karahan Tepe “*Carcancha*” may be acceptable to a certain extent, it is certain that the often much differing manifestations of the “*Carcancha*” (found all over the world) will no doubt also express many different contexts and symbolisms. And yet the basic message - contacting their gods and/or ancestors - remains the same in most, if not all examples. For instance, the “*Carcancha*” petroglyphs manufactured at Alto de Pitis by the Majes People of the Majes Valley of southern Peru (Figure 1) are the graphical means through which the souls of the deceased travel to an enormous dormant volcano located 80 km further NNW, the Sacred Mountain of *Apu* Coropuna, where their gods and ancestors reside (for full details see Van Hoek 2013).

It is now possible that the alignment of the structure featuring the “*Carcancha*”, the Vulture and the large Stone Ring at Karahan Tepe is oriented on purpose on a natural landmark or an astronomical feature on the horizon to the NNE of the site. The people of Karahan Tepe may have believed that their ancestors and deities resided at that landmark, or - even more likely - could be contacted at a celestial body (a star?) in the sky visible above the (otherwise featureless) horizon. The contact with their ancestors and deities could have passed through the “*Carcancha*”, the Vulture and the large Stone Ring. And is that not what we have always done, in prehistoric times, as well as in historic times? Contacting the different gods (also of Christianity, the Islam, Hinduism, etc.)? On top of that we now have added new “gods” to a world-wide digital pantheon: the internet, the smartphone and (most unfortunately) AI.

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TRACCE (ISSN 2281-972X) *Online Rock Art Bulletin* è edito dalla Cooperativa Archeologica *Le Orme dell'Uomo*, anche indicata come *Footsteps of Man* e che ha sede in Valcamonica (piazza Donatori di Sangue 1, Cerverno, BS - I).

TRACCE (ISSN 2281-972X), an Italian word for “Tracks”, since 1996 is the first online Rock Art Bulletin. It is maintained by *Footsteps of Man* archaeological society (Valcamonica - I).