

# Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 12, Issue 2  
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## Front Pages

ROBERTA PASTORE & ERIKA MARIE PACE

[The Trotula Project: Transmedia Narration and Artificial Intelligence for Inclusive Education and the Dissemination of Mediterranean Culture](#)

KATHLEEN ANN O'DONNELL

[The Democratic Eastern Federation and the Poems of Ossian: Albania](#)

SAUMITRA CHAKRAVARTY

[The Resilience of the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible](#)

FELICE VINCI

[The Astronomical Meaning of the Donkey's Jawbone used by Samson as a Weapon and the Gate of Gaza](#)

# Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies

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Download the entire issue ([PDF](#))

<a href="#">Front Pages</a>	i-viii
<a href="#">The Trotula Project: Transmedia Narration and Artificial Intelligence for Inclusive Education and the Dissemination of Mediterranean Culture</a> Roberta Pastore & Erika Marie Pace	103
<a href="#">The Democratic Eastern Federation and the Poems of Ossian: Albania</a> Kathleen Ann O'Donnell	117
<a href="#">The Resilience of the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible</a> Saumitra Chakravarty	133
<a href="#">The Astronomical Meaning of the Donkey's Jawbone used by Samson as a Weapon and the Gate of Gaza</a> Felice Vinci	153

# Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies

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The current issue is the second of the twelfth volume of the *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies (AJMS)*, published by the [Athens Institute for Education and Research](#).

Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute



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- Submission of Paper: **18 May 2026**

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## **The Trotula Project: Transmedia Narration and Artificial Intelligence for Inclusive Education and the Dissemination of Mediterranean Culture**

*By Roberta Pastore\* & Erika Marie Pace<sup>‡</sup>*

*This study examines the educational project Trotula, which integrates transmedia storytelling and emerging technologies to promote inclusive education and the dissemination of Mediterranean culture. Inspired by the historical figure of Trotula de Ruggiero, the first female physician of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and a key figure of the Scuola Medica Salernitana, the project unfolds through both analogue and digital tools, building a bridge between past and future, tradition and innovation. A specific section of the educational initiative is devoted to Mediterranean culture, explored not merely as an object of knowledge but as a living and narratable experience: children engage with its symbols and values through immersive activities and creative restitutions. The narrative core of the project is the illustrated book Trotula and the Mediterranean Diet: Little Secrets to Grow Up Happy, which serves as a generative matrix. From its narrative structure stem further educational experiments, including the digital avatar Trotula AI Ambassador, a symbolic figure that embodies Mediterranean values in a contemporary key, and the Embassy of the Children of the Mediterranean, a physical and symbolic space where younger generations can narrate and share their cultural heritage. The project is grounded in a glocal vision of education and aims to create learning and play environments that are empathetic, sustainable, and culturally rooted.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education; transmedia storytelling; artificial intelligence in education; Mediterranean cultural heritage; narrative pedagogy*

### **Introduction**

In today's educational landscape—marked by cultural pluralism, global uncertainty, and rapid technological transformations (Banks, 2019)—there emerges an urgent need for didactic approaches that foster inclusion, understood as active participation, a strong sense of belonging, and intercultural awareness (Bruner, 1990; UNESCO, 2013). The *Trotula* project positions itself within this framework, offering a hybrid educational experience capable of blending narrative, cultural heritage, and digital innovation. It is inspired by the historical figure of Trotula de Ruggiero, both real and legendary. This is not merely a symbolic reference but a deliberate choice to transform a feminine and Mediterranean legacy into a contemporary pedagogical tool. Trotula lived in Salerno, then known as *Hippocratica Civitas*, in the 11th century. Belonging to a noble Lombard family, she played an active role in the *Scuola Medica Salernitana* (Medical School of Salerno), a pivotal hub of medieval European

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medicine, secular and open to female participation. However, her figure, is enveloped in a haze of myth and truth, between the certainty of her existence and the philological debate over the authorship, or perhaps *matronymic* authorship, of the texts attributed to her. “For women are by nature weaker than men...,” writes Trotula (Bayon, 1940) at the beginning of the *De passionibus mulierum ante, in et post partum*, immediately positioning herself as a conscious and engaged voice on the condition of women, challenging the taboos and codes imposed by her era. She was an ally to her fellow townswomen and, more broadly, to all women who sought in medicine a path to well-being and self-determination (Cavallo Boggi, 1974). She married the physician Giovanni Plateario and, according to sources, had two sons who also became doctors. Her authority was even acknowledged by ecclesiastical sources, such as the monk Orderic Vitalis, who in 1059 referred to her as *praeter quandam sapientem matronam*. As Professor Pina Boggi Cavallo (1974) has written, Trotula embodies a form of gender medicine *ante litteram*. The *De passionibus*, described by H.P. Bayon (1940) as “the treatise that marks the birth of obstetrics and gynecology as medical sciences,” offers an early example of clinical and empathetic attention to women’s health. Whether the texts were written by her, dictated, or transcribed by students or colleagues matters little: their impact remains revolutionary. The dissemination of these manuscripts between the 13th and 14th centuries and their use in medical settings confirm their lasting influence. And even if, today as then, there are doubts about the absolute historicity of every biographical detail, the figure of Trotula continues to shine precisely because it is capable of holding within itself truth, plausibility, and myth. In 1929, the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* wrote about the *De passionibus*: “The first woman professor has been deprived of more than her chair by the unchivalrous mythoclasts [...] The Good-wife Trotula passed long ago into the fairytales as Dame Trot [...] Alas!” Today, Trotula is not merely a scholarly reference: she is a living figure, one who speaks to children, who guides them through an educational journey made of stories, symbols, nutrition, care, technology, and inclusion. The historical Trotula becomes the educational Trotula: doctor and teacher, analogue and digital, Italian and Mediterranean.

From a contemporary pedagogical perspective, Trotula embodies a profound sense of cultural exchange typical of the Mediterranean: Salernitan, yet influenced by Arab, Greek, and Latin traditions, she becomes a symbol of an open and hybrid culture. The Mediterranean diet itself testifies to this syncretism, serving as a paradigmatic vector of healthy, ritual, and social knowledge. The figure of Trotula amplifies this narrative: not only as a scientist, but as a mediator of traditional and technical knowledge, capable of uniting generations and diverse languages. It is worth pausing to consider the concept of *Mediterraneanness*, not as a simple geographical belonging, but as a cultural and anthropological category, rich with meaning and history. Following Pagano’s (2019) insight, *Mediterraneanness* can be understood as a quality of dwelling and thinking, a symbolic code shaped by the relationships among peoples, shared memory, and the ability to transform differences into connections and borders into opportunities for encounter. This vision, which might at times seem romantic or even naïve, actually aims to become an educational stance. *Mediterraneanness* is the care of plurality, it is the living memory of the Greek, Arab, Latin, Jewish, Byzantine,

Norman, and Andalusian civilisations that have looked out upon this sea. It is, at the same time, a capacity for future-making.

A Mediterranean pedagogy draws nourishment from this complexity: it embraces it as a challenge and transforms it into a formative resource, a pedagogical horizon capable of placing the human being back at the centre in all their depth and fragility. The natural multiculturalism of the Mediterranean today calls for a mature orientation toward a conscious interculturality, charged with values and capable of safeguarding the richness of differences. This interculturality does not merely record the coexistence of ethnicities, idioms, and rituals, but becomes an educational space, a place for deep interaction and mutual belonging. In this perspective, pedagogical reflection, when viewed through a Mediterranean lens, can only become an expression of encounter and dialogue. It is a culture shaped along the routes of merchants and philosophers, among port cities and monasteries, between squares, courtyards, libraries, workshops, and schools. The Mediterranean pedagogical gaze is therefore a stratified one, like the lands from which it arises. Without contradiction, in it survive the topoi of Greek antiquity, Roman rationality, Arab-Islamic wisdom, Norman pragmatism, the Federician vision, Spanish religiosity, and French lucidity. All that the long, intense, and sometimes painful dominations have left as a legacy to Southern Europe has not been dispersed, but sedimented, producing a complex identity that resists linear models. Such a multifaceted anthropology demands a pedagogy capable of holding together individuality and community, difference and belonging, the tragic and the aesthetic. A pedagogy that embraces both *arché* and *telos*, that recognises the difficulty of living and reveals its meaning. Within this horizon, words such as *paideia*, *mémoire*, *skepsis*, *tradition*, and *liminality* regain their strength and freshness. If the Mediterranean is always a space of plurality, contamination, and intersection of cultures, languages, and knowledge, then its pedagogy must inevitably be transversal, diffused, and open to multiplicity. From here, in an entirely natural way, emerges the deep connection between *Mediterraneanness* and *transmediality*: two forms of synthesizing complexity, two ways of inhabiting and criss-crossing knowledge that reject linearity and embrace hybridization as a method.

The starting point of the Trotula educational project is the fairy tale, an archaic and powerfully symbolic narrative form, which acts as a catalyst of meaning and a privileged vehicle of shared values. As Bruner (1996) reminds us, stories help us to decipher the world, to give order to experience, and to generate coherence from fragmentation. The pedagogical fairy tale, with its apparent simplicity and archetypal structure, becomes here a transversal educational device, capable of activating imagination, empathy, and critical thinking.

In the Trotula project, the fairy tale is not confined to the written page but becomes the spark that spreads across multiple media and languages. It becomes a picture book, audiobook, theatre performance, video game, podcast, social media post, urban space, and laboratory setting. It translates into various communicative codes, such as the IN-book in Augmentative and Alternative Communication, designed to ensure accessibility for students with complex communication needs (Light, 1997). It transforms into collective experiences and shared narrative environments, in line with Jenkins's (2006) vision of *convergent storytelling*, in which different media do not compete but cooperate to generate meaning. All of this gives shape and substance to a

transmedia narrative, where each medium contributes something unique to the global story. Sound-based media, like audiobooks and podcasts, enhance imagination and engage often-neglected senses (McLuhan, 1964). Theatre, in its multiple forms - from musicals to puppet shows, activates body and voice, emotion and action, as an embodied pedagogical tool (Boal, 1979; Ackroyd, 2004). Social media amplify the community resonance of the story, connecting families, schools, and local territories (Ito et al., 2013; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). In this mediological ecosystem, each student can encounter their own entry point into the story: visual, auditory, physical, or linguistic. In this way, “affinity spaces” (Gee, 2004) are multiplied—physical and symbolic places where learning occurs through participation, creation, and sharing. Learning becomes a situated, emotional, and relational process, in which humanity is cultivated (Illeris, 2003; Boal, 2006). After all, the Mediterranean, cradle of humanity, has always worked like this: a narrative in constant becoming, shaped by arrivals and departures, by shared knowledge and reinvented forms. Transmediality (Scolari, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013) simply renews, in contemporary terms, this same logic by traversing, contaminating, narrating, preserving, and transforming. Thus, the Trotula project adopts Mediterranean plurality as its cultural grammar, and transmediality as its educational language, in order to make that plurality come alive, accessible and generative, in today’s school systems.

## Literature Review

Over the past twenty years, storytelling has been rediscovered as a central device in educational processes. Bruner (1990) emphasises the role of the narrative mode in knowledge construction, as it allows students to structure experiences and make sense of the world. In this perspective, transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006; Green & Jenkins, 2014) represents a significant evolution: telling a story across multiple media makes it possible to reach heterogeneous audiences and stimulate diverse cognitive modes. Studies, such as Scolari’s (2009), highlight the educational value of transmediality, particularly in inclusive and multicultural contexts. The simultaneous presence of texts, images, sounds, and interactions fosters engagement and allows complex concepts to be explored in narrative, intuitive, and accessible ways.

At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as an educational tool capable of personalising learning paths, supporting teaching, and amplifying access to knowledge (Holmes et al., 2022). The use of intelligent avatars, educational chatbots, or immersive environments broadens the possibilities of storytelling and fosters an affective connection with content.

In the cultural domain, the Mediterranean diet has been recognised by UNESCO (2013) as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. It represents not just a set of dietary habits, but an educational and value-based model grounded in conviviality, seasonality, biodiversity, and family relationships. Authors such as Dernini et al. (2017) propose the Mediterranean diet as a pedagogical tool for promoting health, sustainability, and a sense of belonging.

Finally, the concept of “simplexity” (Sibilio, 2014) offers a theoretical framework for enhancing flexible, accessible educational approaches that build bridges between

different kinds of knowledge and learners. In this sense, *Trotula* can be viewed as a “simplex” approach, capable of integrating storytelling, cultural heritage, and emerging technologies in a synergistic and non-reductionist way.

## Methodology

The section of the *Trotula* project dedicated to Mediterranean identity takes the form of a narrative and immersive educational journey, combining analogue and digital tools, symbolic environments, and real educational spaces. Each component is conceived as an integral part of a learning ecosystem oriented toward inclusion, sustainability, and cultural rootedness.

At the heart of this journey lies the book *Trotula and the Mediterranean Diet*, an illustrated volume divided into two sections. The first section presents the fairy tale that introduces the character and her values through accessible, evocative, and archetypal language in a narrative form. The second section takes on a more informative approach, guiding the reader through a journey between the food and environmental pyramids, addressing themes such as product seasonality, food waste, and the trade routes of Mediterranean cuisine. The text serves as a symbolic mediator between childhood and the world, between memory and transformation.

The story begins in a symbolic Mediterranean location: Cilento (province of Salerno, Italy). Here, driven by her innate curiosity and sense of wonder, Trotula arrives to witness the magical hatching of the *Caretta Caretta* sea turtles. Under a starry sky and beside the slow rhythm of the sea, an adventure unfolds. It is one of discovery and rediscovery to answer the question: what makes this place so special? Along the way, Trotula encounters unexpected and fascinating characters. Some are figures from the past, such as the philosopher Parmenides or the physician Ansel Keys, who engage her in reflections on self-care, care for others, and care for the environment. Others, like the local inhabitants, speak with vivid voices about biodiversity, seasonality, respect for natural rhythms, and the importance of conviviality as a form of emotional and cultural education. The fairy tale concludes with a forward-looking vision, in which a new generation, aware and responsible, becomes the guardian and spokesperson of the Mediterranean’s tangible and intangible heritage. It is, in every regard, a story of emotional education for sustainability, conveyed through the sweet and powerful lens of storytelling.

An *illustrated activity book* is attached to the main volume, conceived as an operational and workshop-style workbook that invites children to explore the narrative’s concepts in a creative and multisensory way. The proposed activities range from writing to dramatisation, from symbolic cooking to ecological reflection, enhancing each pupil’s expressive and narrative potential. The workbook is not merely a didactic support but a space for subjective and collective re-elaboration, where knowledge is intertwined with lived experience.

One of the most evocative expressions of the methodology is the *Trotula Playground* in Pioppi (province of Salerno, Italy), a play area inspired by the Mediterranean that spatially translates the project’s values. Here, play becomes embodied storytelling, and space itself becomes the “third teacher” (Malaguzzi, 2010):

every element of the park recalls the symbols, shapes, colours, and materials typical of Mediterranean culture. It is an environment where children can explore, play, and learn with their bodies and senses, in full continuity with the pedagogy of experience and context.

The *workshop activities* complete and enrich the journey in an approach that emphasises active and environmental learning. These include identifying wild plants, creating small gardens, compiling personal herbariums, extracting natural dyes from plants, and engaging in nature-inspired artistic activities. A guided visit to the Living Museum of the Mediterranean Diet, situated in Pollica and conducted by scientific educators, offers a moment of direct connection between learning and territory, culminating in the symbolic award of the “Biodiversity Defender” certificate.

Another key element of the project is the *Children’s Embassy of the Mediterranean*, which serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it is a physical location in Pollica where intercultural dialogue and peace are celebrated; on the other, it is a symbolic and narrative space that welcomes children’s productions, stories, and questions. Here, values such as conviviality, environmental sustainability, the defence of rights, and educational diplomacy among Mediterranean peoples are actively promoted.

From a technological standpoint, the project is enriched by the *Trotula AI Ambassador*, a digital and interactive version of the protagonist. The avatar, developed using artificial intelligence tools, accompanies students through personalised journeys: it tells stories, guides workshop activities, answers questions, and prompts reflection. Fully integrable with interactive whiteboards in classrooms, the digital Trotula becomes a narrative tutor, a content mediator, and an affective, dialogic presence within the learning process.

The *Trotula* project will be piloted in several primary schools across the province of Salerno, within educational settings interested in enhancing the value of Mediterranean heritage. The pathway is structured around four integrated experiences, each designed to stimulate children's active participation, storytelling, reflection, and emotional engagement.

### **1. Animated reading of the book “Trotula and the Mediterranean Diet”**

The illustrated book is introduced as a narrative guide to present the characters, core themes (care, nutrition, environment, identity), and values of the project. The reading is supported by prompting questions and guided discussions.

### **2. Exploration of the educational workbook**

After the shared reading, students engage with the illustrated workbook, designed as a workshop extension of the story. The book includes activities focused on the body, nutrition, emotions, nature, and relationships. The proposed exercises range from free drawing to creative writing, symbolic worksheets to role-playing games, aimed at enhancing multiple intelligences and expressive channels. Visually rich and narrative in tone, the pages allow children to explore concepts like well-being, seasonality, care, and sharing through their own daily experiences.

**3. Interaction with the digital avatar Trotula AI Ambassador**

Children interact with an educational avatar (Trotula AI Ambassador) through short videos, Q&A sessions, animated stories, and immersive digital environments. The use of artificial intelligence aims to strengthen narrative empathy, make the experience more engaging, and spark curiosity about educational technologies.

**4. Educational visit to the Children's Embassy of the Mediterranean**

The project concludes with a final event, a symbolic "embassy" moment, held either in person at the Living Museum of the Mediterranean Diet in Pollica or virtually. Here, students share what they have learned through exhibitions, stories, drawings, and cooperative games, symbolically joining the Mediterranean community that promotes sustainability and peace through education.

The entire program unfolds over four weeks, with a weekly schedule that allows for progressive and reflective learning, aligned with the long rhythms of experiential assimilation and re-elaboration. The methodological framework of the pilot is based on qualitative tools for observation and narrative documentation, aimed at capturing the deeper transformations in the cognitive, emotional, and relational processes of the participating children.

Specifically, the following tools will be used:

- teachers' journals to systematically record educational dynamics;
- oral and written narratives collected from the children to reflect subjective experiences;
- photographs and graphic productions, understood as visual and symbolic traces of the experience;
- narrative and creative works, serving as tools for individual and collective reflection;
- interviews and questionnaires with teachers and families, to include adults' perspectives in the formative assessment.

This structure, in line with the qualitative educational research approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), enables the development of a rich and layered interpretative framework, capable of valuing the implicit, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of the school experience. Triangulation of sources and multiplicity of viewpoints will ensure a polyphonic and contextualized reading of the project's educational impact.

To operationalise this framework within the pilot phase, the project envisages the following methodological plan.

The pilot phase of the project will involve three primary schools in the province of Salerno, selected for their willingness to experiment with innovative educational pathways centred on Mediterranean culture. Approximately 60–70 pupils, aged between 8 and 10, together with their teachers, are expected to participate. This constitutes an intentional and focused sample, appropriate to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the initiative. The educational pathway will unfold over a period of four to six weeks and will progress through a gradual sequence of activities. The

initial phase, lasting about one week, will be dedicated to planning and co-design with teachers. This stage will include an introductory training session, contextualisation of the didactic materials, and the shared definition of objectives and operational guidelines. The core phase will focus on the implementation of the educational activities in the participating classrooms. Over the course of three to four weeks, pupils will engage in a set of integrated experiences: the animated reading and guided discussion of the storybook; the exploratory and creative activities proposed in the workbook; interaction with the Trotula AI Ambassador; and a final moment hosted by the Children's Embassy of the Mediterranean, either in person or online. These activities will take place during regular school hours, with an average frequency of one or two sessions per week, allowing for a reflective and gradual learning process. The final week will be devoted to formative evaluation and collective reflection. During this phase, teachers will gather the pupils' productions, compile their observation notes, and conduct short interviews with both colleagues and a selection of families. This documentation will support a shared concluding discussion aimed at highlighting emerging insights, developments and challenges. Data collection will rely on qualitative tools designed to capture the complexity of the educational experience: teacher observations and reflective journals; children's written and visual artefacts; audio recordings of narrative moments and classroom discussions; interviews; and photographic documentation. The analysis will follow a thematic and interpretative-phenomenological approach, beginning with an exploratory reading of the materials, followed by the identification of emerging themes and their organisation into three interpretative dimensions aligned with the pedagogical aims of the project: emotional engagement; narrative and metacognitive awareness; and the development of a sense of cultural and ecological belonging. The methodological plan is conceived to provide an essential yet coherent interpretative framework, capable of accounting for the experiential, systemic and ecological nature of the Trotula project.

### **Expected Outcomes**

In line with the theoretical and methodological framework of the Trotula project, the pilot implementation is expected to generate significant impacts in terms of motivation, intercultural awareness, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and enhancement of narrative thinking. The expected outcomes are structured along four key dimensions, integrating educational, cultural, technological, and identity-based components.

### **Educational and Transversal Competencies**

Through a narrative and hands-on approach, the project aims to foster the development of narrative and metacognitive skills in children, encouraged by activities such as animated reading, creative writing, and symbolic representation. The cooperative nature of the proposed activities will promote intersubjective competencies, active listening, empathetic communication, and collaboration, within the classroom environment. In parallel, nutrition education will not be presented in

prescriptive terms, but as a critical reflection on lifestyle choices, inspired by the principles of the Mediterranean diet (Dernini et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2013), understood as a culture of well-being and self-care.

### **Cultural Awareness and Mediterranean Identity**

One of the most significant anticipated results is the strengthening, among children, of a sense of belonging to a Mediterranean culture, not as a static inheritance, but as a living space for dialogue, exchange, and encounter. The Mediterranean will be presented not only as a geographic frame, but as a symbolic and relational system composed of shared languages, knowledge, gestures, foods, and stories. The internalisation of values such as conviviality, biodiversity, slowness, and seasonality, hallmarks of Mediterranean culture, represents a deep educational goal, aimed at shaping identity and building a collective imagination oriented toward sustainability and coexistence.

### **Development of a Critical Approach to Technology**

The project does not avoid the digital dimension but repositions it as a relational educational environment. The interaction with the Trotula AI Ambassador avatar, designed to foster narrative empathy and personalization of learning, aims to promote critical digital competencies, focused on expressiveness, reflection, and autonomy. Artificial intelligence is tested here not as a mere technical automatism, but as a dialogical mediator capable of evoking emotion, curiosity, and awareness (Holmes et al., 2022).

### **Qualitative Observation and Narrative Evaluation**

The evaluation of the entire program will be conducted using qualitative methodologies, capable of capturing the complexity of the lived educational experience. Tools to be employed include systematic observations by teachers; analysis of children's written, visual, and symbolic outputs; collection of narratives from families; documentation of workshop activities and educational visits to the Children's Embassy of the Mediterranean. The guiding principle will be that of generative evaluation, which does not merely measure but accompanies and reveals the transformative value of the educational process.

### **Discussion**

The *Trotula* project moves gracefully within a fertile and generative frontier space, where tradition and innovation do not oppose each other but engage in dialogue. It is in this liminal zone—between memory and possibility, between

storytelling and algorithms, between the slow gesture of cooking and the interactive rapidity of the avatar—that a profoundly transformative educational proposal takes shape. The goal is not merely to update the languages of teaching, but to reimagine the very meaning of education: to educate as a narrative act, a political act, a poetic act. Recalling the thought of Jerome Bruner, who saw narrative as the privileged mode through which human beings give meaning to their experiences (Bruner, 1990), Trotula does not merely tell a story: it builds a true narrative ecosystem. The picture book, the activity workbook, the workshops, the digital avatar, the Mediterranean Children’s Embassy, the symbolic playground, each element is a tile in a pedagogical mosaic whose full meaning emerges only in its entirety. It offers students and educators a plural learning landscape to be traversed with body, voice, and imagination. The project’s transmedia dimension is not just a communication strategy but a deliberate epistemological choice. In an era where knowledge is increasingly layered and networked, Trotula embraces the plurality of languages, textual, visual, performative, digital, as essential for meaningful and lasting learning. Each medium activates a different sensory channel; each channel opens a unique form of intelligence. It is a pedagogy written with the body, coloured by gestures, heard between the lines of a tale, and touched in the fragrant silence of a freshly planted garden.

In this educational landscape, the historical figure of Trotula de Ruggiero becomes a powerful symbolic device. Not merely an icon to be reclaimed, but a living presence that travels through the centuries to act as guide, interlocutor, and witness. Woman, physician, philosopher, pedagogue *ante litteram*, Trotula becomes a narrating body, an embodiment of knowledge that is simultaneously care, wisdom, and responsibility. Her transformation into an AI avatar, a gentle voice, an interactive guide, an empathetic digital presence, does not betray but rather renews her mission. Artificial intelligence is not used here as a tool of alienation, but as a symbolic extension of the human, a new space for dialogue between experience and technology. At the heart of the project stands the Mediterranean, not as a mere backdrop, but as an active subject. The Mediterranean is envisioned as a cultural metaphor, an inner landscape, an educational grammar. A sea of voices, stories, knowledge, and flavours that teaches slowness, measure, and conviviality. Not merely a diet, but an ethical and aesthetic landscape. As Fernand Braudel wrote, the Mediterranean is “a thousand things together; not a landscape but countless landscapes; not a sea but a succession of seas.” Trotula captures this multiplicity and translates it into pedagogical competence: reading a fairy tale becomes an ecological act, building a herbarium a gesture of cultural resistance, sowing a garden a way of inhabiting the future with care. The Mediterranean education proposed by the project is neither a romantic utopia nor a nostalgic identity claim. It is a pedagogy of humanization, oriented toward *humanitas*, one that does not merely instruct, but shapes, transforms, welcomes, and awakens. It does not fear being perceived as out of step with the times, because it understands that education is by nature always a wager on the invisible. It is an education that dares to believe that beauty can be generative, that silence can teach, that memory can blossom into new forms of creative citizenship.

Ultimately, the Mediterranean that Trotula inhabits is a mental and symbolic place, a threshold between what we have been and what we can still become. A pedagogy that looks backward not to retreat into memory, but to project forward, with

confidence, with competence, with gentleness. And perhaps this is its most precious hallmark: the ability to hold together the depth of time and the urgency of the present, the intelligence of the heart and the responsibility of thought. With a light step and a wide gaze, as befits those who walk along the shores of a sea that has always taught how to welcome.

## **Conclusions**

The Trotula project presents itself as an original contribution to the discourse on inclusive and intercultural education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, offering an experimental model that values storytelling as a pedagogical device, Mediterranean culture as an educational resource, and artificial intelligence as a relational tool. This educational proposal, though rooted in an ancient historical and cultural context, speaks with a contemporary voice to the challenges of the present. Its pedagogical threads are interwoven with history and geography, technology and affectivity, memory and innovation. In this sense, Trotula is no longer simply the name of a historical figure or a school initiative, but a potential paradigm for an education capable of integrating dimensions often kept separate: knowledge and emotion, the individual and the collective, the physical and the digital. Through the figure of Trotula de Ruggiero, woman, physician, teacher, a pedagogy emerges that boldly combines care and competence, tenderness and rigor. A pedagogy that is “feminine” in the highest sense of the term: one that values listening, mediation, and the ability to generate meaning from lived experience. The fact that this figure has also been transformed into a digital avatar capable of speaking to today’s children does not betray her essence but rather represents a natural evolution. Artificial intelligence, when guided by clear ethical and pedagogical goals, can become a powerful vehicle for relationship and learning, returning to technology its proper role as a means rather than an end, as a mediator rather than an imposition. The project’s transmedia structure further enhances its communicative and educational potential.

The synergistic use of illustrated books, workbooks, games, workshops, natural environments, museum spaces, and digital platforms enables engagement with multiple intelligences and sensitivities, allowing for true personalisation of learning. This approach fully reflects the principles of differentiated instruction, making the Trotula project a replicable model in other contexts and adaptable to a variety of school and cultural settings. The Mediterranean, with its symbolic and cultural richness, provides depth and breadth to the educational proposal. Conceived as a place of encounter, exchange, and fertile cross-pollination, it is not only a heritage to preserve but a horizon to aspire to. Mediterranean-ness thus becomes an educational stance, a meaningful perspective that privileges slowness, storytelling, conviviality, and relationship. In a time that tends to reward efficiency and conformity, rediscovering the value of slow gestures, shared words, and knowledge rooted in place becomes almost a subversive act. The project’s transformative value is also reflected in its capacity to activate new forms of citizenship. The children who participate in the workshops, interact with the avatar, and visit the Mediterranean Children’s Embassy are not merely recipients of educational content, they are protagonists in a process of

identity and relational awareness. They learn to recognize themselves as part of a plural community, to develop empathy for others, and to imagine the future as a space of shared possibility. In this sense, Trotula does not merely transmit content, it shapes mindsets. It does not simply teach; it accompanies the process of becoming. The project has been designed to be implementable in real-world school contexts, using flexible resources, free tools, and a strong focus on educational accessibility. The use of the Trotula AI Ambassador avatar represents a pioneering experiment in digital educational mediation, serving as a unique opportunity to reflect on the role of artificial intelligence in stimulating empathetic, narrative, and cognitive processes.

The centrality given to the Mediterranean diet and to the *glocal* dimension of knowledge enables food to become a symbolic code, storytelling to become a map of identity, and the school to become an educational embassy, a space not limited to content delivery, but one that builds meaning, relationship, and citizenship. From a theoretical standpoint, the project rests on a solid and multidisciplinary foundation, integrating narrative pedagogy with the concept of simplicity (Sibilio, 2014), competency-based instruction with aesthetic education, and a pedagogy of care with a Mediterranean anthropology. The use of scientific literature, from Bruner to Jenkins, from Sibilio to McLuhan, is not ornamental but reinforces the epistemological grounding of a practice that is continuously evolving.

Ultimately, the Trotula project poses radical yet necessary questions: How can we educate for complexity without succumbing to chaos? How can we transmit cultural heritage without ossifying it? How can we inhabit technology without being inhabited by it? The answers are never final, but the path this project outlines is clear: to educate is to connect. To connect stories and languages, past and future, body and mind, nature and culture, humanity and algorithms. It means building bridges, just as Trotula did in her time, and as she continues to do today, symbolically, through the voices and gestures of children who encounter her in schools, museums, parks, books, and digital screens.

Perhaps this is Trotula's most precious legacy: the idea that every child can become, in their own way, a little ambassador of the Mediterranean. Not to represent a closed tradition, but to carry into the world a way of inhabiting the Earth that embodies care, beauty, slowness, and hope. A pedagogy that, like Trotula herself, is not afraid to imagine the impossible, the not-yet-realised. Because, as every fairy tale teaches us, sometimes that is exactly where the truth hides. Looking ahead, the model may be adapted and implemented in other Mediterranean regions, generating educational and cultural networks that transcend national borders to build new forms of cooperative and intergenerational learning. In a time dominated by complexity, discontinuity, and hyperconnection, *Trotula* proposes a different pedagogical path: to cultivate rootedness as a precondition for openness, to rediscover slowness as a form of cognitive resistance, and to value care: personal, collective, and environmental as the foundation of every educational process.

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## **The Democratic Eastern Federation and the Poems of Ossian: Albania**

*By Kathleen Ann O'Donnell\**

'Greeks, Albanians, Serbs, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Hellenes, Slavs, Latins, Tatars ... Let us  
unite!  
'England will never be civilised till she has added Utopia to her Dominions.' Oscar Fingal  
O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

*This paper will demonstrate the aims and tenets of the Democratic Eastern Federation set up in 1868, in promoting unity among former foes in the Balkans and Anatolia as a counterweight to the threatened usurpation of the 'divide and rule' policy of Western Imperialism. The secular work of The Poems of Ossian by James Macpherson, promoted by the Irish scholar and lyricist Thomas Moore, exemplified the art of peaceful coexistence of former foes in their fight against tyranny, through the morally empowered warriors, Fingal, Ossian and Oscar. To combat this threat, the Democratic Eastern Federation endeavoured to introduce federalism without monarchy, whose inhabitants in the region would live in equality, fraternity and liberty. To what extent did Albanian intellectuals contribute to the Democratic Eastern Federation? Did they face opposition from religious clerics and Western European Imperialism?*

**Keywords:** 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Translations of Ossian, Hellenism, Unity, Democratic Eastern Federation, Albania, Balkans, Anatolia, Western Imperialism

### **Rigas Velestinlis and the Anatolian Confederation**

The Democratic Eastern Federation would embrace territory from Illyria to Asia Minor and Egypt. Its tenets were based on the work of the Greek Wallachian scholar, Rigas Velestinlis (Velestinlis, 1994) and those of P. J. Proudhon, the nineteenth century French scholar, socialist and philosopher (Hasiotis, 2001). Proudhon was also an adversary of Marx (Voyenne 2004). Both Velestinlis and Proudhon were supporters of federalism, who saw education as the key to progress: 'No Revolution henceforward will be fruitful, if a recreation of public education is not its crowning feature...' (Woodcock, 1972). Rather than capitalism, Proudhon also believed in mutualism, a system that called for justice based on reciprocity (Stanley, 1983). Proudhon was also a supporter of the 1848 Paris Revolution (Proudhon 1970); many Proudhonians participated in the Paris Communes of 1871 (O'Donnell, 2019).

As for Rigas, in order to counter the threat of intervention by the West, he set up a secret organisation in Bucharest in 1780 known as the Anatolian Confederation (Kordatos, 1983). In the nineteenth century, the term 'Balkan' was not in use

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(Svolopoulos, 2000). (However, 'Balkan' will be used in this paper as its meaning is understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.) In his long patriotic song that he composed when ninety-eight per cent of the indigenous people were illiterate (Koulouphakos, 1984) the first two verses became his 'Battle Cry' – with it he called on people of all creeds, including the Ottomans themselves, who were living under the rule of the despotic Sultan, to rise up and replace tyranny with federations that would introduce freedom, brotherhood and equality (Daskalakis 1963). Rigas proclaimed: 'Bulgarians, Albanians, Armenians, Romaics, Arabs, Africans and ... Montenegrins. With one united leap, gird your sword for Freedom against the tyranny of the Ottomans.' [Veletinlis 'Patriotic Song'].

His works include a Constitution, a Declaration of Rights, and one of the first novels written in the Greek vernacular, among his other writings (Veletinlis, 2002). In order to boost the morale of the oppressed, Rigas wrote "School of Delicate Lovers", published in 1790; it is based on the work of Restif de la Bretonne. In another work, Restif de la Bretonne included translations from *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson (O'Donnell 2020). Rigas also published a textbook entitled 'An Anthology of Physics'. In 1802, this work was translated into Arabic in manuscript in Damietta, Egypt, in which he wrote: 'Whoever thinks freely, thinks well.' (O'Donnell 2017). Similarly, like Rigas, Proudhon would proclaim that: 'The law must be the first and only chief leader of the country.' (Proudhon, 1923).

Rigas's works, including his 'Battle Cry', were disseminated in Corfu, Zakynthos, Kephallonia, Kythera, Paxos, Lefkatha and Ithaca. Napoleon liberated them from nearly four hundred years of Venetian rule. These islands had undergone rule by the Russo-Ottomans until 1807, when they became part of the French Empire. From 1815 to 1864, they became a British Protectorate (O'Donnell 2023). Byron spent nearly three months on Kephallonia before his demise in Messolonghi in April 1824.

### **The Democratic Eastern Federation**

The Democratic Eastern Federation was a continuation of Rigas's dream. It was founded by Panayiotis Panas, a Kephallonian scholar and journalist, in Athens and Bucharest in 1868. Panas was head of the organisation in Athens, which was disguised as The Rigas Association. His friend and colleague, Thomas Paschides, an Epirot scholar, educator, and newspaper editor, was head of the organisation in Bucharest. The extracts from the secular *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson, propagated through the Irish scholar and lyricist Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*, were used to instil magnanimity and justice through their heroes, Fingal, Ossian and Oscar, whose skill in uniting former foes enabled them to conquer despotic usurpers (O'Donnell, 2020). To uplift the morals of the long-subjected people in the zone, education was to be based on the Hellenic renaissance and to include the wisdom of Socrates to Plato, the language of Isocrates, whose definition of Hellene suggested intelligence, but not race, applied to those sharing Athenian culture. It also included the works of Xenophon, the Gospels and John Chrysostom (Paschides 1974). Chrysostom was born in Antioch in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and was recognised by the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican faiths. Chrysostom described the 'abuse'

perpetuated by the wealthy and property owners. By the eleventh century, most of these works were absorbed into the Arabic and Armenian cultures through translation (O'Donnell 2017). The Anglo-Scottish poet Byron translated 'Battle Cry' by Rigas; it was published in 1811 (Byron, 1919). Interestingly, in 1873, Panas translated and published 'On Hellenism' by Gustave Flourens, his secret friend; it was published in the Bucharest newspaper 'Iris' (in French and Greek), whose editor was Thomas Paschides. This indicates that the tenets of the Paris Commune, one of whose main leaders was Gustave Flourens (O'Donnell, 2019), continued through Panas, from Kephallonia, where many Albanians moved to in the nineteenth century.

### **Fratrions: James Macpherson, Thomas Moore and Lord Byron**

By 1809, Byron had visited Albania, which was at that time part of the Ottoman Empire. As his mother was Scottish, Byron spent his childhood in Scotland, thus enabling him to see many similarities between Albanians and Caledonians, especially in terms of the Celtic language; this reminded him of Morven (Byron, 1850). Morven was the seat of Fingal, the father of Ossian, whose feats were embodied in *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson, published in the 1760s. Macpherson was one of the first scholars to collect oral songs as well as some manuscripts to preserve his ancestral oral literature, which was in the Gaelic language. By translating his findings into English, Macpherson presented Celtic literature to the world, which proved to be a resounding success as it was translated into twenty-seven languages (Stafford, 1988). His work inspired many other European writers to do research into their own oral literature (Van Tieghem, 1917).

In fact, Byron himself translated two Albanian songs from the original, included in the notes attached to Canto Book II from 'Childe Harold' Pilgrimage'. Although *The Poems of Ossian* was later deemed to be a fraudulent work, Byron wrote an adaptation of Ossian based on the epic 'Fingal' Book III, entitled 'The Death of Calmar and Orla', after which he included a footnote stating that although he knew of the controversy as to the authenticity of the poems, he nevertheless believed them to be worthy. Byron's adaptation of Ossian was published in his 'Hours of Idleness' (Byron, 1919).

The Irish scholar, Thomas Moore, was a close friend of Lord Byron: in fact, Byron was godfather to his daughter. Moore wrote the lyrics and music to his 'Irish Melodies', which were translated into many languages. Byron knew them all by heart and included an epigraph from one of them in his poem 'The Giaour' (1813). Moore wrote a biographical account of Byron's life, which is regarded as a literary masterpiece (Thomas Moore Poetry Foundation). After having written 'In imitation of Ossian' in October of the same year, Moore had it published in The Press in Dublin in the same year, for which he was summoned to court before the Irish Revolution in 1798 (O'Donnell 2020). Ireland, a Catholic country, had been colonised by the English since the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Henry VIII, a Protestant, took over Ireland. (Key, 1982) This imitation is the first example of how *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson was used as a political tool. This is known as fratricism (Pittock, 2011), whereby literature is used to oppose the tyranny of Western monarchy. The editor of

*The Press*, Thomas Emmett, supported the union of the nation's different religions. Here is an excerpt:

'But Britannia commands and Oppression is joined to *your* fate! Armies are bound to oppose your peace, and their ranks are filled from the land of strangers; even your brethren of the soil are against you: ...Not so was the court of Fingal – not so were the Halls of Selma! ...for just was the soul of Fingal, and noble were the heroes of Morven' (Clifford, 1984).

Moore's 'Imitation' was republished in 'The Celt' in Dublin and New York in 1857 (O'Donnell, 2020). After that, translations into Greek of *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson were usually translated from Italian or French texts in the nineteenth century, at a time when injustice by foreign oppressors occurred in the Greek-speaking world, which included the Balkans and Anatolia.

Byron's adaptation of 'The Death of Calmar and Orla' is a call for unity and justice. It was translated from French into Greek in 1850 in the journal 'Evterpe', circulated throughout the zone in the year when England blockaded Greece. Without informing Russia or France, who were part of the three 'joint guarantors' after the Greek Revolution, England demanded that the Greek government pay for the loss incurred to the Portuguese Jew Don Pacifico, a money lender, a resident of Gibraltar and thus an English subject for damages caused to his property in Athens to the value of 886,737 drachmas and 67 lepta (O'Donnell 2017). The veteran Macriyiannis wrote: 'They took all our boats, stamped on our flag and people of the islands died of hunger and boat owners cried bitter tears.' (Korthatos, 1973). Whenever a blockade occurred, the power of the Greek Parliament was handed over to the king (O'Donnell 2017).

In 1854-7, Western powers imposed a blockade ostensibly because of the Crimean War (1855-6), but it was mainly because there were uprisings in both Thessaly, Epirus and Crete. The Kephalonian poet and judge Julius Typaldos, whose mother was the famous Italian poetess, Tereza Ringetti, published a book of poetry on Zakynthos in 1856. The first poem is an epic, influenced by Ossian, entitled 'Rigas the Inspirer'. Typaldos also translated from Cesarotti's version of *The Poems of Ossian* (O'Donnell, 2014), two poems from the fragments attached to 'Croma' entitled 'Two Nights', in which he changes the word 'friend' to 'brother' in both poems to cement unity. He was forced to leave the Seven Islands when the English spread the lie that Typaldos had insisted that the Seven Islands, except for Corfu and Paxos, be united to Greece in 1861. This he strongly denied (O'Donnell, 2023). Three Greek patriots took part in the uprising in Thessaly; they would become united in their aspirations, and they were: Dionysius Economopoulos, a Zakynthian, who would become the father of Greek-Egyptian journalism in Alexandria (Nikitaridis 2015), Panayiotis Panas, and Thomas Paschides (Stavropoulou 1987). Their scholarship under the banner of the Democratic Eastern Federation would spread their political and cultural aspirations via the media into the Greek-speaking world. At this time, both Egypt and Romania were self-governed although Ottoman tributaries (O'Donnell, 2017).

### **Balkan Intellectuals**

Evangelos Zappas, born in Albania, was a wealthy landowner and veteran of 1821, who resided permanently in Romania. He bequeathed a huge sum of money to the Rumanians on the understanding that it would be used to further Hellenism in 1860. His cousin, Constantine, continued with his legacy after his death (Neo Domi, n.d.). The uniting of people through the Greek language in the area is evident when the Bulgarian medical student, Gregory Parlitsef (Gregory Stavridis), won the Ambrose Ralli Poetry Prize in Athens. He dedicated his poem 'Armatoli' to Evangelos Zappas in 1860 (Moullas, 1989). In the fifties, he had taught at a Greek school in Tirana. Ten years later, Parlitsef would translate 'Skenderbeg', the Albanian 15<sup>th</sup>-century hero, from Greek into Bulgarian (Parlitsef, 2000). Moving to Bucharest in 1860, Thomas Paschides could write in Greek, Romanian and Albanian.

Born in Janina, in the Ottoman Empire, Paschides attended the Zoisimia School (whose name Byron refers to in 'Childe Harold') there in 1852. Paschides then taught at a Greek school in Berat, Albania. After completing his education at Athens University, he acquired his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Naples. (Hatziphotis, 1974). It is noteworthy that both the Albanian scholars Sami and Naim Frasheri (Frasheri Web) and Jani Vretos (Vretos Web) would attend Zoisimia School a decade later. Like Sami Frasheri, Paschides believed that Albanians were descended, like Greeks, from Pelasgians. Significantly, Thomas Moore states in his 'History of Ireland' that the Japhetan or Pelasgian language was the oldest European language spoken in Ireland, the Highlands of Scotland and Wales (Moore, 1835). In 1860, Paschides published his first work in Bucharest entitled 'The Mass of the Albanian martyr Saint Cosma' (Hatziphotis 1974). He published his own newspaper, 'Decebal Brotherhood of the people of Anatolia' in Greek and French. He was a joint publisher of 'Iris, the newspaper for the people of Anatolia', printed in Bucharest. He was also the editor of several Romanian periodicals. Dedicating his play 'Japhet' to Costas Zappas and the Pelasgians, Paschides translated extracts from Byron's impressions of Epirus. Paschides travelled widely on occasions to many places, including Italy, Spain, Palestine, Syria and Egypt (Hatziphotis, 1974).

### **Monarch, Republicanism and Revolution**

Panayiotis Panas published 'Dar-thula-Lathmon' in Kephallonia, in August 1862, which he dedicated to three Greek heroes who were fighting for a republic in the Cycladic Revolution in March 1862. They had been mown down cruelly by Greek Royalist soldiers in what is recorded as a bloodless coup (O'Donnell, 2023). His dedicatory poem before the translation was influenced by Moore's 'Irish Melodies', published in French by Louise Swanton Belloc (Belloc, 1841). A native of Kephallonia, Panas, after having been tortured and imprisoned under the British Protectorate, travelled to Bucharest and other places in the 1850s (O'Donnell 2020). His compatriot, the radical Kephallonian scholar and journalist, Gerassimus Mavroyiannis, who chose self-exile in Athens after the English atrocities inflicted on Kephallonians in 1848 (O'Donnell, 2023), published 'On Ossian' in Chrysalis in July

1863. Mavroyiannis's use of parts of the preface to Belloc's 'Irish Melodies', written by D. O'Sullivan on the history of Bards in Wales and Ireland, depicts how the English monarchy had silenced them (O'Donnell, 2013). The civil war in Athens, recorded as the 'June events' (Loukatos, 1984), resulted from the foreign Catholic king Otto abdicating after the Cycladic Revolution at the instigation of the English and being replaced by yet another monarch. In return, the English donated the Seven Islands and allowed them to unite with Greece. It was hoped that a republic would replace the rule of a foreign monarchy (O'Donnell 2014). Many Albanians moved to both Kephallonia and Zakynthos in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dandrakis 1956). The Eptanesian, Panayiotis Materanghas, of Albanian descent, a scholar, poet and consul, translated 'Come away with me' from Irish Melodies by Thomas Moore in 1864 (O'Donnell, 2020).

The Albanian Anastasios Koulouriotis (Anastas Kullurjoti), a native of Athens, whose Albanian father had died fighting in the 1821 Greek Revolution, left for the United States in his early twenties and returned having made a fortune. A polyglot, he went to London in 1863 and complained about the rule of the Bavarian king Otto (Othon). In his petition, which was published, he described the neglect in education and the corruption that had existed under Bavarian rule in Greece. He stated: 'We want political and religious freedom.... Religious liberty is one of the greatest privileges that man can possess.' Koulouriotis, however, wished to have Prince Alfred as the new monarch (Skoulidas, 1992), unlike Panas, who regarded this move as a transfer of power by the English from Corfu to Athens, which it became. Soon after, Greece was regarded as a Protectorate after another foreign monarch, a Dane, was selected.

In 1865, Panas moved to Alexandria (O'Donnell 2017). The Albanian journalist and folklorist Thimi Mitko emigrated there in the same year (Elsie, 2010). In 1862, Dionysius Economopoulos worked together with Spiro Ferendinos in publishing the first Greek journal, 'Egyptos' in Alexandria (Nikitaridis 2015). Panas set up the newspaper 'The Egyptian Eagle' with his fellow pupil Spiro Pherentinos (Stavropoulou, 1987), who wrote the epic poem to the first Viceroy entitled 'The erecting of the Statue of Muhammad Ali' (Pherentinos, 1872). Muhammad Ali, the first Viceroy of Egypt, was Albanian. His father was Albanian, and his great-grandfather was from Korca, where Mitko was born and educated (Elsie, 2010). The book of poetry 'Memnon', written by Panas, with an epigraph by Byron, was published by Nile Press in 1865, and owned by Ferdinand Oddi, a former classmate. It was distributed to towns along the Nile and included an extract taken from the epic 'Temora Book IV', which describes two brothers, Cairbar, a tyrant and Cathmor, a just and honest leader. This poem is implicit in its reference to Ismail and Halim. At this time in Egypt, there was turmoil when Ismail, the viceroy and tyrant, sought to install primogeniture by lavishing huge gifts on the Sultan at the expense of his people, so his son would inherit the Khedivship rather than Halim Pasha, his uncle, the rightful heir and son of Muhammad Ali of Albanian descent. After a failed coup d'état in 1866 (O'Donnell, 2017), Halim Pasha fled, hounded by Ismail. Halim was aided in his flight to Istanbul by former classmates of Panas, Oddi and Economopoulou (Hatziphotis, 1999).

In 1866, there was a Cretan uprising. Paschides donated all his inheritance to the cause (Hatziphotis, 1974). Having participated in the revolt after the slaughter at

Arcadi in November 1866, the French scholar and revolutionary Gustave Flourens was chosen as President of the Cretan delegation for unity with Greece (Flourens 1868). Flourens was kidnapped by the Greek Government and deported for holding a public meeting on Hellenism (Hugo, 2002). A colonel in the Paris Communes, Flourens was murdered by Royalist soldiers in captivity in April 1871. Panas was a reporter for *Mellon* in Calafat, Romania. Demos Papathanassios was a supporter of Proudhon. When Papathanassios defended the Paris Commune, Panas was the only reporter of the paper who rushed to his aid to help him in the confrontation with those who attacked him for his beliefs. Panas translated Flourens' article 'On Hellenism', which he published in 'Iris' in Bucharest in 1873 (O'Donnell 2019). Extolling Athenian democracy, Flourens projected the superiority of the federal system, which in his view united the ancient city-states, political freedom and liberation from its religious precepts.

### Hellenism and Christianity

Koulouriotis's next publication appeared in *Mellon* in 1875-6, which was a translation of the Gospels into Modern Greek, and this was the choice of reading matter to support the tenets of the DEF. He tried to defend the British and Foreign Bible Society against the prohibitory circulars of the Church of Greece and the Greek Government. In the introduction to this work, in an ironic vein, he criticises the Greek government, accusing it of being more occupied with material questions such as armaments and economic recovery, while, in his opinion, the strength of a country comes from the introduction of ideas contained in books and newspapers (Skoulidas, 1992). His viewpoint is supported by the following works, recommended in support of the Democratic Eastern Federation, that were translated into Greek.

The writers on Hellenism mentioned above began to be translated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the periodical 'Byron', founded in the same year as the Democratic Eastern Federation in 1868, Kephalonian T. Karousos, Panas's former high school teacher, translated 'The Philosophy of Socrates' by Alfred Fouillee. (*Byron*, 1876). In 1875, 'Isocrates' was translated by Vasilis G. Vithoulas and published in Athens. In 1862, 'Economia' by Xenaphon was translated into both Modern Greek (Legrand, 1912) and Serbian (J. Koumandidis, 1862). The Kephalonian A. Lascaratos translated 'The Life of John Chrysostom' from English in 1866 (Legrand, 1912). Translations in Romanian were done by the Hellenist Greek-Romanian Heliade Radulescu, who translated Isocrates and Plato by Vasilie Bumbac and 'The Apology of Socrates' by Plato by Filaret Scriban (*Dictionarul Literaturii Romane*, 1979). The first three books of 'The Republic' by Plato were translated into Arabic by the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh in the 1870s (O'Donnell, 2017). Byron refers to Chrysostom in his epic poem 'Don Juan'.

Disunity was also created by ecclesiastics. Nicholas Politis, the Greek folklorist and member of the Rhigas Association, was editor of the periodical 'Illysos'. Politis uses examples from 'The Poems of Ossian' in his article 'Superstitions about Ghosts by the People of Greece', including excerpts from 'Darth-thula' among other excerpts, by Panas (Politis, 1870). Politis chose a folk song that was sung all over the Balkans in

his comparison with extracts taken from 'The Poems of Ossian' with the Modern Greek oral song 'The Dead Brother', which was composed in Anatolia. In Serbian, it is known as 'Giovan and Gelitsas'. There are four different versions in Bulgarian, and it was known as 'Constanti and Garendina' in Albanian (Koulouphakos, 1984). The song showed the connection with the East, when daughters were matched in marriage to families as far afield as Babylon, in an area also under Ottoman rule. The metaphorical message of marriage symbolised the quest for unity in the area. It was by pointing out the connection of this folk song, using the symbolism of unity through marriage and comparing it to 'The Poems of Ossian', that a sense of harmony was retained among the ordinary Balkan people, which had been greatly harmed through the machinations of the Orthodox Church, which led to the Bulgarian schism on 18 February 1870 (O'Donnell 2019). To combat this rift, in collaboration with Albanians and Bulgarians, the article 'The Traps of Pan Slavism' appeared in the media in Constantinople, published anonymously one month later, written by Paschides (Hatziphotis, 1974).

When Francis Joseph, an Austro-Hungarian Catholic monarch, deliberately spread turmoil among the minority of Catholics after he visited Herzegovina in the spring of 1875 - the population of Herzegovina at the time consisted of forty per cent Muslim, forty-two per cent Orthodox and eighteen per cent Catholic - his troops were on standby ready to occupy both Bosnia and Herzegovina after his tour was completed (Stavrianos, 2000). In 1875, Panas, alluding to Western monarchical tyranny through Cairbar, published 'The Death of Oscar' from the epic *Temora* Book I, connecting it to his previous translation in 1862. Usnoth, the father of the three slaughtered sons from 'Dar-thula', volunteers to fight Cairbar, under Oscar, son of Ossian, which serves as a reminder of an example of courage in the face of tyranny in 1862. When Cairbar murdered Cathol, Oscar's friend, who had accompanied him in the War of Inisthona (O'Donnell 2019), Oscar then sought to challenge Cairbar in single combat. Having refused to participate, Cairbar plots to kill him as Oscar dines as his guest. There is a reference to Cathmor, connecting this translation to the 1865 translation of *Temora* Book IV, in italics: 'Brave Cathmor came, we said, friends of foreigners, the great brother of gloomy Cairbar...' (Panas 1875). Panas is hinting at Halim Pasha, a possible supporter of the Democratic Eastern, resident in Istanbul. In July 1875, an uprising broke out in Herzegovina. This resulted in a two-month armistice, which would end on 30 May 1876 (Stavrianos, 2000).

### **Unity versus Western Intervention**

In March 1875, Panas translated and published 'The Death of Oscar' in his newspaper 'Exergesis', circulated throughout the Greek-Speaking world, in remembrance of Rigas, celebrated on the national day and as a call to unite against the threat of usurpers. In September 1875, Panas proclaimed, similar to Rigas's call in the previous century: 'Greeks, Albanians, Serbs, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Hellenes, Slavs, Latins, Tartars, all who live in this wide region in the inclusivity of the three seas, the Black, the Mediterranean and the Adriatic and the open lands from the Alps and the Carpathians until Crete and Cyprus. Let us Unite'. This was published in the same

journal as 'The Death of Oscar' six months previously. However, Panas changed the name of the journal from 'Exergesis' to 'Ergatis', which became the nonofficial mouthpiece of the organisation. He pointed out the danger of division of the Balkan people from the Great Powers and the threat of Greece being isolated from other Balkan Countries: 'Our natural allies are the Balkan people, including the Turkish people themselves' (Varban 1995).

On 14 February 1876, Panas translated 'Oina-morul' in which Ossian, aiding a friend in battle against a usurper, forfeits his reward in order to cement peace between former enemies. In this poem is a footnote which implicitly refers to the Democratic Eastern Federation. It is a blueprint for depicting how former enemies can become friends. This poem was published in 'Byron' on the same day as a peaceful agreement between all parties, including Midhat Pasha, the Grand Vizier and possible head of a similar organisation like the Democratic Eastern Federation in Constantinople (Varban 1995); Namık Kemal and Halim Pasha were included in the negotiations (O'Donnell 2016). The agreement was reached, known as the Andrassy Note, named after the Austro-Hungarian Empire's foreign minister, in a meeting in Constantinople after the uprising in Herzegovina the previous year, whereby Christian, Jew and Muslim in the zone would live in harmony as equals (Stavrianos, 2000).

In 1876, furthering the interference of British Imperialism in the zone, Disraeli had obtained the Suez Canal shares via the Rothschild in Paris, sold to the latter by the Khedive Ismail (Bouvier, 1967). Disraeli announced in Parliament that the purchase of these shares would bring peace and security to the zone. But Disraeli, the British Prime Minister, objected to the peaceful agreement reached in Istanbul under Midhat Pasha (O'Donnell, 2017). Disraeli's refusal to sign the Berlin Memorandum brought not only war to the zone, including the massacre of Bulgarians, but also war between Serbian, Herzegovinians and Montenegrins against the Turks, resulting in many deaths fought over 'race and religion' (Stavridis, 2000). Again, Disraeli, while reiterating in Parliament that he wished for peace, he then sent ships to the Hellespont, threatening war. Both Typaldos and Panas wrote scathing poems entitled 'Disraeli'. The former suggested that Disraeli be hanged from a fig tree for destroying peace in both the East and the West. Panas, who first published 'Disraeli-Efendi' in September, 1876 in Rumania, referred to the English treatment of the Irish and challenged Disraeli regarding peace: 'We leave the willing tiger to bully us, having the conviction that it will not delay, when in the East peace will blossom, Statues will be raised in memory of us, - of Disraeli and Midhat to always bless them'. Panas translated four verses from Byron's 'Childe Harold' Book II, which imply that only by fighting unaided can you really be free. These were included in his translation of Angelo Brofferio's 'Greek Scenes' serialised in the 'Telegraph' in July 1877 (O'Donnell 2017). The 'Telegraph' also contained an article written by A. Oikonomidos, a Professor of Law, entitled 'The Democratic Association of Rhigas' in April: The Association had at least five hundred members (O'Donnell 2016).

After the Russo-Ottoman war, which ended in the Treaty of San Stefano in March 1878, Western powers took control, and the treaty was superseded by the Berlin Congress at the instigation of Disraeli (July, 1878), led by Bismarck, the German chancellor. Egypt was on the agenda. This was because of a secret deal whereby Britain, under Disraeli, the Prime Minister, had obtained Cyprus, which was

to have been included in the Democratic Eastern Federation, in return for providing mobile consular services to Ottoman Christians in Anatolia. When it was made public, the infuriated French delegate, Waddington, was ready to walk out. In order to appease his anger, Bismarck suggested that France take Tunisia whenever possible, assured of no objection from the Great Powers, and that both France and England become Dual controllers known as the Condominium of Egypt. Ismail had been deposed for incurring huge debts and thus not keeping to the rules laid down in the Firman. In his place, Halim Pasha, the direct descendant of Muhammad Ali, was chosen as Khedive to instil peace by the Sultan in 1879. This replacement was refused as the English insisted on the son of Ismail, Tewfik, a puppet, remaining as Khedive. The Sultan would make several more attempts at having Halim Pasha made Khedive, but to no avail. As someone who had fought at the 1848 Paris Barricades, who completed his studies at the Military Academy in Paris, had been commander in chief when in power in Egypt, and was of Albanian and Bedouin ancestry, his father's last wife being a Bedouin (O'Donnell, 2017), he was an ideal choice as his rule would have been more democratic and powerful especially when, at the Congress, Bismarck stated that there was no 'Albanian nationality' (Stavrianos, 2000).

### **Banning of the Albanian Language**

In Alexandria in 1875, the Albanian Society of Egypt was founded, named 'First Brotherhood', presided over by Thimi Mitko. (Mitko Web) When the banning of teaching and publication in the Albanian language had been lifted by the Turks in 1878 (Stavridis, 2000), Mitko published the newspaper 'The Albanian Bee' in Greek and Albanian (Elsie, 2012), which coincided with the setting up in July in Istanbul of the 'Albanian League for the Defence of the Rights of the Albanian Nation', whose founding members included the Orthodox Jani Vreto, the Catholic Pashko Vasa, Sami and Abdyl Frasheri and Hasan Tahsini, who were Muslims. Other members included Pandelis Sotiri and Koto Hoxhi (Elsie, 2012). There was also another organisation set up in Istanbul called 'Society for the Printing of Albanian Writing', which was supported by Albanian Muslims, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, founded by Sami Frasheri (Semsettin), writer, philosopher, and playwright, who had worked with Namik Kemal, the Ottoman scholar. (Sami-Frasheri Web) Frasheri believed that Albanian should be written in Greek script as both Greeks and Albanians were descended from the Pelasgians (Elsie, 2012).

Koulouriotis collaborated with Panayiotis Koupitouris, an Albanian from Hydra, in publishing the newspaper 'The Voice of Albania' in Greek from July 1879 until September 1880 (Koulouriotis Web). Koupitouris was a headmaster in Patras, who taught Albanian at institutes in the evenings. His long, erudite thesis entitled 'Albanian Studies – An Historical and Literary Essay about the Albanian Nation and Language' was serialised in *Byron* from March until June 1879 (Koulouriotis, 1879). It was first published and serialised in 'Ephimeris ton Philomathon' (The Journal of the Philomath) in 1867 in Athens. His book, the 'Albanian Alphabet', was also published in the 'Syllogue philologique grec' (The Greek Philological Association) in 1868 (Legrand, 1912). Anastasios Koulouriotis also set up an Albanian political party in Athens, as

well as publishing an Albanian Primer in Athens in 1882 (Kulluriots Web). From a letter he received from Constantine Zappas, who informed him about the formation of the Democratic Eastern Federation, which was more cosmopolitan than just a united Greece-Albania, Koulouriotis writing in December 1878 in 'The Voice of Albania' declared that 'We, consequently, are not willing to divide Albanians from Greeks, but perhaps we will unite them with the unbreakable affiliation of the Eastern Panethnic Federation (the DEF). In February 1880, 'The Voice of Albania' included articles from Thimi Mitko on the language. From February until May, 1880, two literary articles were published, namely that of Wassa Pash (Pashko Vasa) entitled 'La verite sur l'Albane et les Albanians (The truth about Albania and the Albanians) and the story of Scanderbeg by Camille Paganel translated by N. Dragoumi in 1861 (Skoulidas, 1992).

Thomas Paschides, who was the official representative in the uniting of Epirus with Greece, under discussion in the Congress of Berlin (1878-81), drafted a petition to present to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Waddington, in Paris. In 1879, Paschides wrote a paper entitled 'On Epirus and the Greek Question by an Epirot' in French, published in Paris in the same year, which was banned in Epirus. It was translated into Greek and Romanian. In March 1879, Paschides also published two books in Athens. The first was entitled 'The Pelasgians under Hellenism together with Wallachians and Bulgarians', including a chapter, translated into Romanian, into Albanian in Greek script, addressed to the Muslim Skiptarians (Greek-Pelasgians). The second was entitled 'The Anatolian People, including Hebrews, Armenians and Muslims under Hellenism' with an epigraph by Isocrates mentioned above, in Greek, French and Romanian (O'Donnell 2016). The latter was advertised to be presented in a lecture given by Paschides to the literary association of *Byron* in its periodical (Hatziphotis, 1974).

Employed by the Ottoman Empire, Pashko Vasa would become the Governor General of Lebanon from 1882, after France invaded Tunisia. His poetry, written in French and Italian, was greatly influenced by Leopardi, Lamartine and de Musset, who were in turn inspired by 'The Poems of Ossian' (Van Tieghem, 1917). He believed that the Albanian language should be written in the Latin script (Elsie, 2012). There were four types of script used in the Albanian language: Arabic, Greek, Latin and Cyrillic. By the 1880s, this struggle became intense as to which one would be chosen in order to unite all Albanians. This problem was definitively resolved at the beginning of the twentieth century (Skoulidas, 1992).

In the archives of Thimi Mitko in Alexandria, Pashko Vasa's famous poem 'Oh Albania poor Albania', written in Albanian, was found in 1881, when the Albanian league was suppressed. An extract which follows, entitled 'Albania poor Albania' (Elsie, 2012), sums up the plight of all the people who wished for peace in the region:

Some say 'I believe in God', others say 'I believe in Allah',  
 Some say 'I am Turk', others 'I am Latin',  
 Some 'I am Greek, others I am Slav',  
 But you are brothers, all of you, my hapless people!  
 The priests and the muezzins have deceived you  
 To divide you and keep you poor.' [Pashko Vasa]

While the Albanian League wished to remain under Ottoman rule, the Democratic Eastern Federation sought equal union with the Turks. Although the Turks had banned the Albanian League in 1881, the Albanian language continued to be taught and read (Stavridis, 2000).

### **Demise of those seeking Peaceful Unity**

Paschides's final publications were: an article on the hero of Albania, the Pelasgian George Kastrioti Skenderbeg; the Great Map chartered by Rigas Velestinlis and 'The Greek-Turkish Question' published in French and Greek in 1886 (Hatziphotis, 1974). Paschides endeavoured to show similarities among different peoples to promote peaceful brotherhood in the face of destructive control of Western powers as they replaced former Ottoman sovereignty with foreign monarchy: Greece (German 1822; Danish 1864), Bulgaria (Russian 1878; German 1882); Rumania (German 1868 and 1882), Bosnia Herzegovina (Austro-Hungarian 1878) a local monarch in Serbia (1882) (Stavrianos, 2000), Tunisia (France 1881), and Egypt (Britain 1882) (O'Donnell 2017). In his article on the Greek-Turkish Question, Paschides exhorted that the hatred and repugnance among Greeks, Muslims and Jews must cease and be replaced by extending a brotherly hand and that all past grievances of yesteryear be buried (Hatziphotis, 1974). Paschides borrowed this exhortation from a poem entitled 'Besa for Besa' written by the French-Cypriot scholar, polyglot and French consul Gustav Laffon, born in Cyprus, in the Ottoman Empire, who dedicated his book of poetry 'My Songs' to the Greek women of Alexandria in 1896 (O'Donnell 2016). This same message was inculcated by Naim Frasher, who declared that the 'Bektashis are brothers not only among themselves but with all humanity as well. They love the rest of the Muslims and the Christians as their soul, and they get along well with all men' (Elsie, 2012). Albanians demonstrated how their three religious groups could participate with enthusiasm in their culture and literature, writing their language in different scripts until 1886. That year, their language was banned by both the Turks and the Greek Patriarch, with the threat of excommunication to anyone using Albanian (Stavrianos, 2000). In fact, having been deported to Corfu by the Ottomans, Jani Vreto was unchurched by the Orthodox Metropolitan in Gjirokaster for having committed heresy by 'creating an Albanian Question' (Elsie, 2010).

The first victim of those seeking peaceful unity was Midhat Pasha. In exile, he was strangled by Ottoman government henchmen in 1883 (Hasiotis 2001)

In June 1888, Paschides, who had been residing in Constantinople, was arrested on trumped-up charges of slander and was imprisoned there (Hatziphotis, 1974). Similarly, in 1885, Sami Fraseri had to flee from Constantinople, fearing for his life; he eventually died in exile (Elsie, 2010).

Paschides was later exiled in chains to Fezan in Libya, where he was tortured and then murdered in the desert in May 1890 (Hatziphotis, 1974). At this time, Panas translated 'Minvane', a lament published in 'Evdomas'. Minvane, Gaul's sister and daughter of Fingal's former enemy, Morni and now a friend, laments Ryno, her lover and the son of Fingal, who dies in battle against the Danish foe, Swaran. There are several differences in this translation: the first is that the blood covering Ryno's

armour lying at his feet is described as ‘Covered in blood, loving blood’. In Macpherson’s version, we read ‘The bloody spear of Ryno!’ Moreover, ‘barbaric’ instead of ‘mossy’ is used to describe where Ryno died. Panas lamenting Paschides’s murder, which is emphasised in his translation in a footnote, states that Ryno was murdered. In Macpherson’s version, ‘died in battle’ implicitly refers to Paschides as son of Fingal (Rigas), who was killed in ‘barbaric’ Ullin, i.e. Fez, Barbary (O’Donnell 2017).

It is noteworthy that while various scholars of the Albanian organisations were murdered or died in exile, several by religious fanatics, although Anastas Kulluriot died of poisoning during his incarceration in prison in Greece in 1887 (Elsie, 2012) the four principal men of letters and leaders of the Democratic Eastern Federation ‘committed suicide’ in 1889 and 1890 (O’Donnell, 2016), including Panayiotis Panas in 1896 (O’Donnell, 2023).

## Conclusion

The dream of Albania being part of the Anatolian Confederation, set up by Rigas Velesinlis in 1780, was revived when Panas set up the Democratic Eastern Federation in 1868. To propagate unity among people of different religious creeds, including former foes, Panas injected an ethical precept in his translations from the nonreligious ‘The Poems of Ossian’, depicting the high moral order of its warriors. This strengthened the support of the organisation. and encouraged his supporters to emulate them. Panas’s call also included Albanians, whose intellectuals sought to spread knowledge of their culture through the Greek Press, some of which supported the Democratic Eastern Federation. They strove to find a solution to unite the people, even though the religion of the Albanian people included both Muslims and Orthodox and Catholic Christians. Unfortunately, they faced opposition, like the Democratic Eastern Federation, from Western Imperialism, which claimed that there was no Albanian nationality, and later, the Greek Patriarch would ban the Albanian language. In the poem ‘Albania! Poor Albania!’, written by the Albanian scholar Pashko Vassa, who was indirectly influenced by Ossian, clearly shows that those seeking peaceful unity so that Balkan and Anatolian people could live in liberty, equality and brotherhood, without monarchy, were betrayed by Western Monarchy and both Muslim and Christian organisations.

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## **The Resilience of the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible**

*By Saumitra Chakravarty\**

*From women in ordinary life to clan leaders and judges and onward to goddesses and their worship---this essay attempts to study the position of the feminine in the patriarchal, patrilinear society depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Though women were subjugated, enjoyed few privileges beyond the home, were systematically raped and appropriated in conquered populations during Israel's holy wars, forced into incestuous relationships and sacrificed for self-protection by its patriarchs, the Hebrew Bible does provide examples of powerful women like Deborah, the only woman judge of Israel, who defeated the Canaanite army, of Judith's decapitation of the enemy general Holofernes and of Queen Esther's defeat of her detractors. It further shows how the centrality of goddess worship in earlier societies was usurped by the establishment of a monotheistic religious order through incessant wars and conquest and the stern and jealous Hebrew god and his misogynic patriarchs who supplanted it. However, scattered references throughout the Old Testament to older mother goddesses and their anthropomorphic symbols testify to the continued propagation of these cults on the fringes of the new social order. These references include those of Asherah/Ashtoreth associated with the Babylonian Ishtar, goddess of sex, war and fertility, worshipped by King Manasseh, by Solomon's wives and by Gideon's people. Further, there are references to the sacred cult prostitution practised by worshippers of the goddess in the Bible.*

**Keywords:** *Deborah, Judith, Esther, monotheistic, patriarchal, asherah, Ba'al, Ashtoreth, temple prostitution.*

### **Introduction**

The transition from polytheism to monotheism recorded in ancient Hebrew society was to a certain extent the result of the usurping of an earlier centrality of goddess worship by a stern androcentric religious and social order. The incessant wars and the brutal suppression of these settled societies and religious configurations by the nomadic Hebrew tribes as seen in the Bible marked this change as a violent and largely misogynist confrontation. This happened despite evidence of the influence of other polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East in which women played a significant role in the social and religious order. However, scattered references throughout the Hebrew Bible to older mother goddesses, their anthropomorphic symbols and their continued cultic propagation on the fringes of this newly established monotheistic religious order provide ample proof of the continued impact of the earlier religious practices. Such evidence questions the extent to which the attempted eradication of earlier religious influences

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denigrating them as ‘false gods’ and ‘heathen idolatry’ was successful among the common people living far beyond the circle of the social and religious elite, more so among their womenfolk.

The Biblical concept of a single, male God propagated by His prophets whose decrees were codified into Deuteronomistic laws reflects the patriarchal social order which produced it. What was the nature of this dominator culture in Hebrew society which was so sternly reflected in its religious order?

The first part of this essay will attempt to analyse the position of women in traditional Hebrew society. It will outline their systematic subordination right from the alleged role of Eve in the Fall narrative to women’s inferior status within the family at the mercy of their menfolk, from the erasure of their voices in the Hebrew social hierarchy and the Yahwite religious framework to the vilification of independent souls who tried to carve out a niche for themselves or register their protest against the dictates of their patriarchal detractors. However, even in the midst of this largely misogynistic culture, women did emerge from the shadows to register their protest like Esther, to emerge as rulers, judges and warriors like Athaliah, Deborah and Judith and prophetesses like Miriam and Huldah. The voice of the feminine did find a significant place in the Hebrew Bible.

In the second half I will show how religion as it was practised in the Hebrew society was more syncretistic rather than the monotheistic order it was made out to be by the Yahwistic cult and its propagators. Surrounded as it was by such goddess-centric cultures as that of the Canaanites, the Hittites and Amorites, the imposition of a religious order of a single male God and the belief that it would lead to the total eradication of the earlier goddess-worship was impractical and ineffective. Thus, while Yahwism and the Mosaic Law was preached and propagated by Hebrew prophets and high priests, in actual fact, the goddess cult continued to permeate the lower strata of society, particularly among the women. This worship gave these women a sense of religious involvement, space and agency which they had been denied in the society, laws and religion of the Lord God of Israel. In fact, Saul Olyan, in his monograph entitled *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh* in Israel argues that the polemic against the goddess/asherahs is restricted to the Deuteronomistic History or to materials which betray the influence of Deuteronomistic language and theology (Olyan, 1988). Beyond that-- and sometimes despite the decree, women sought to worship their goddesses like Ashtoreth/ Astarte, gather round their sacred asherah poles and trees and offer libations and cakes baked in ashes to her.

## **The Position of Women in Hebrew Society**

### *Eve in Eden*

Regarding the status of women in Hebrew society, scholars believe that the importance allotted to a particular gender in the social and cultural life of these ancient societies was determined by the focus of their worship and vice versa. Therefore, the andro-centric religious order of a stern male God recorded in the

Hebrew Bible would pre-suppose a hierarchical patriarchal system where women were subjugated and their stronger counterparts denounced in every narrative. This begins right from the Hebraic Creation myth and that of the Fall in the book of Genesis. It provides two accounts of the creation of man. In the first, man and woman are created together at the same time from the same dust<sup>1</sup>. “So, God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Making a comparison with creation myths of surrounding cultures, Riane Eisler states that in both Sumerian and Babylonian legends we find accounts of how women and men were created simultaneously or in pairs by the Goddess (Eisler, 1987:64). However, in the second account in the Book of Genesis, obviously the work of a different poet, a hierarchical statement of subordination has been established: “Then the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground...the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs...And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and he brought her to the man” (Genesis 2: 21-22). This narrative of subordination ‘she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man’ (Genesis 2:23) is continued throughout the narrative of the Fall and the expulsion from the idyllic Eden. In the second narrative, her creation is antecedent to man and therefore functional to his cause.

In Jewish folklore, the woman in the first narrative of Genesis 1:27 refers to Adam’s first wife Lilith, created at the same time and from the same dust as he was. Lilith is said to have refused subservience to Adam in the act of copulation, flown away and refused to return to Eden. The Babylonian Talmud sees Lilith as a dangerous demon of the night, which was sexually wanton and stole babies in darkness. She probably originated from the class of demons called *lilitu* mentioned in the cuneiform texts of Assyria, Sumer and Babylon. In the Bible however, only a single mention of Lilith is found in the Book of Isaiah: “Her castles shall be overgrown with thorns, her fortress with thistles and briars...there shall one Lilith repose and find herself a place to rest” (Isaiah 34:14).

The woman in the second narrative of Genesis, created from the rib of Adam is believed to be the woman Adam later calls Eve. Initially this Woman is said to have been created as a ‘helper’ to man. In Genesis 3:20 Adam refers to her as Eve (*Havah*) because she is the ‘mother of all the living’ (*hai*). This is a designation which places her at the very least, as coeval and equal in status to man in the story of Creation. But the fall from grace and the subsequent divine curse reduces her to one who is inferior to, and ruled over by her male consort. Its stern extension into the social order is latent in the divine curse issued to the woman that reduces her from the position of ‘helper’ to man to one ruled by or controlled by man, from near-equal status to ignominious subordination. The pain and burden of child-bearing and-rearing included in the curse creates the primary example of gender stereotyping to be repeatedly invoked in the Old Testament and codified into law in the Book of Leviticus. However, if innocence might be interpreted as a state of enforced ignorance and the tasting of the forbidden fruit the exercise of freedom of choice, its indulgence signifies female insubordination to an androcentric religious order. Moreover, the Fall narrative also signifies a

release of the Woman from androcentric authority, both divine and human, by her independent choice to eat the forbidden fruit. Woman who is created from the rib of Man: ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.... And they become one flesh’ (II: 23-24), becomes an independent entity. Also, it is only after the Fall that Woman is named Eve ‘because she was the mother of all living.’ Man and Woman become aware of each other, of each other’s bodies and nakedness and their capacity for copulation and procreation, an independent creator contextualizing the act of creation into the human domain: ‘Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain’(Genesis 4:1). However, in Genesis 4:1-2a, it says that Eve is said to have ‘created a man together with the Lord’. The Hebrew word used for ‘create’ (*qanah*) is the same as the one used for the creative power of God in Genesis 14:19-22 thus possibly ascribing divine status to her power of creation. For other Hebrew women the words used in the Bible are to ‘bear children’.

Alice Ogden Bellis notes that the negative connotation of Eve and her association with sin came not from the Hebrew Bible but from the apocryphal ‘Wisdom of Ben Sira’ of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. which says:

“From a woman was the beginning of sin  
And because of we all died.”  
(Bellis, 1994)

It is only in the New Testament in I Timothy 2:13-14, that we may find a similar statement: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

### **Subordination of Women - Conflicting Views**

Carol Meyers however prefers to examine God’s rebuke and curse of the woman after her transgression in the context of the conditions within the ancient Israelite society<sup>2</sup>. Here, she says multiple pregnancies as indicated in the narrative of the expulsion from Eden were a pre-condition for the survival of a few, given the high rates of child mortality (Meyers, 1988:102). Life for the rural folk, both the men and the women of Israel during the Iron Age was hard. They were mostly subsistence farmers or sheep and goat-herds and given the harsh conditions, the hilly and barren terrain and the scarcity of water, they had to work hard and produce large families for a bigger work force. Often, they led a nomadic life where advantages were few and the struggle for survival endless. This is reflected extensively across the Pentateuch in such stories of bitterness and feud as the rivalry between Cain and Abel, between Esau and Jacob for the inheritance of Isaac and in the prolonged exploitation of Jacob by his mother’s brother Laban and his kinsmen. The women suffered repeated pregnancies, many of their offspring dying in infancy as borne out by the many women approaching the Lord’s prophets for miraculous cure of a sick child.

Life and activity for the women beyond their household duties centred round the village well where they drew water for household use as well as for their sheep and goats. Hence the many references to the matrimonial alliances

being conducted at such locations. Abraham's servant entrusted with the task of buying a bride for Isaac from among his kin chooses Rebekah when she offers him water at the well. Noting how both men and women had to wage a daily battle for survival in this harsh and difficult environment, Carol Meyers rejects the contention that Israeli women were inferior to, or the chattel of men: 'women's maintenance roles in traditional agrarian societies is translated into certain kinds of power that overlap with or complement male power' (Meyers, 1988). In fact she rejects both terms 'patriarchy' and 'hierarchy' with reference to Israelite society and prefers to use the term 'heterarchy' that does not imply a vertical power structure. Moreover, despite the usual argument of the patrilocal and patrilineal society depicted in the Hebrew Bible, there is evidence also of a matriarchal culture prevalent in Israel at the time. The tradition of matrilineal marriage is seen in Jacob's marrying Rachel the daughter of Laban, his mother Rebekah's brother. Equally, Abraham's refusal to submit to this custom of marrying into the mother's clan, results in him sending his servant to buy a bride for Isaac from his own patrilocal kinsmen of Harran rather than choose a Canaanite woman. We also find evidence of the right of the mother to name her sons in the episode of Hannah naming her son Samuel and offering him up to the Temple to fulfil her vow. In fact, perhaps the continued propagation of Goddess worship in sections of society other than the royal or priestly class could explain the matrilineality or matrilocality mentioned above. James Frazer connects the worship of a female deity to a mother-kinship system, stating that the status and role of women in the ancient female religions in historic times and its close connection to female kinship and matrilineality was perhaps the very origin of its development (Stone, 1976).

However, it is equally true that in the Mosaic laws codified in Leviticus, the subordinate status associated with women is highlighted. In contrast to the economic, legal and social position of women in societies all around them many of which were in constant interaction in some form or other with the Israelites, that of Hebrew women was certainly inferior. A superior position for women could be seen in other cultures such as that of the Ammonites or the Canaanites where they often took part in politics and acted in official capacities. Ugaritic texts show that after a divorce, a woman had the right to keep her own property. The position of women within the family, particularly that of the mother was high. In Israelite society however, a woman could not ask for divorce, she addressed her husband as *adon* or lord. The laws of inheritance did not include either the wife or the daughters except when there was no male heir. Daughters could be sold into slavery. Though incest was sternly forbidden by Mosaic law, women offered themselves to their fathers-in-law as Tamar did to Judah or even to fathers as did the daughters of Lot, since the greatest curse for a Hebrew woman was to die childless. Childless women offered their female slaves to their husbands to produce offspring as Sarai offered her maid Hagar to Abraham and Rachel offered Billa to Jacob. A good wife tamed her body, her beauty and her sexuality and her loins were girded for procreation. Hard labour and self-sacrifice were the greatest virtues of a Hebrew woman whereas beauty and independence in Israel's daughters

were condemned as the qualities of a harlot who opened her quiver to all and fathers were to beware of such daughters. “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain” says the poet of the Book of Proverbs (31:30). Therefore a Jezebel who promoted the worship of Baal in contra-distinction to Yahwitism, a Maacah, the Queen Mother who contributed to the cult of Asherah, a Delilah who seduced and betrayed Samson and exposed the weakness of a man of God, an Athaliah who ruled after destroying her family and defied the patriarchal lineage, are all examples of women who went against the gender stereotyping of traditional Hebrew society and were denounced.

Referring to the absolute binary of the ‘good’ vs the ‘bad’ woman or the ‘virgin’ vs. the ‘defiled’ in ancient patriarchal cultures, Sharon Khalifa-Gueta uses the example of the conflicting figures of Andromeda and Medusa in the Perseus myth in the Greco-Roman one. She observes that representation of Medusa as a snake-haired Gorgon indicates a woman who was too dangerous to exist in the Greco-Roman cultural context, therefore she necessitated control and containment: “Separating Medusa’s female and ‘drakaina’ (female dragon) aspects illuminates the meaning and function of her image in the context of different patriarchal cultures....By demonstrating the reasons that Medusa-Andromeda were fused in the myth of Perseus and comparing the two myths a main theme emerges: the delineation of “good” versus a “bad” woman” (Khalifa-Gueta, 2021).

### **Ritual Uncleaness**

Whereas in earlier Goddess-centric cultures the depiction of menstrual blood linked humans with the mother and ultimately with the Great Mother<sup>3</sup> or the Creatrix, in patriarchal Hebrew culture there were stern taboos associated with it. The ritual uncleaness associated with menstruation is seen in the decree: “When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean in the evening. And everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean” (Leviticus 15: 19-20). And again, “And on the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves and two young pigeons and bring them to the priest, to the door of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her before the Lord for her unclean discharge” (Leviticus 16: 29-30). This association of menstrual discharge with sin requiring not only ritual purification but also atonement, is evidence of the continued association with the role of the Woman in the Fall narrative whereby woman lost her original purity. Moreover, we note the use of menstruation as a simile for the most hated objects. The Book of Esther 14:16 compares Esther’s relationship to the king as being ‘hateful as a menstrual rag’<sup>4</sup> and in the Book of Lamentations 1:17, Jerusalem is as a ‘menstrual woman’. Similar associations of ritual uncleaness occur with childbirth, particularly with the birth of female offspring in Leviticus 12:2-5. All these taboos shut women out of religious rituals and resulted in a powerful statement against goddess cults to establish the supremacy of a male god and his male prophets and patriarchs as the consecrated force behind an evolving civilization.

## **Rape and Subjugation**

The Mosaic Law therefore installed binaries of acceptance and rejection, reward and punishment within its religious and social hierarchy. Women were not only to be dominated and suppressed as biologically weaker and therefore temperamentally fickle and fragile, they were to be vilified as harlots and slaves. The provisions for the protection of a woman's security laid down in Leviticus only served to heighten her dependence on male guardians who controlled her sexuality. Women were offered as sacrifices for self-preservation as seen in the story of Lot in Sodom when he offered his virgin daughters in Genesis 19:8 or in the Book of Judges where the Levite offered his concubine to be raped and slaughtered to placate a violent mob (19:24-5). Abraham introduced his wife Sarai (later Sarah) to the Pharaoh and to the King of Gerar as his sister for self-protection, thus making her vulnerable to sexual assault by ruthless and powerful monarchs. Hence though a woman's virtue was a closely guarded commodity the loss of which entailed death by stoning, male control and exploitation of female sexuality exposed the woman to concubinage, slavery, sale and rape. Women were to be stoned or burnt to death for losing their virginity before marriage. Victims of rape were to be married to the rapist, or if already married or betrothed were to be stoned to death. The public display of blood-stained wedding sheets as proof of a bride's virginity or the enforced proof of a wife's chastity as seen in the story of Susannah in the Book of Daniel, penetrate the narratives of the high-born as well. Accuser, deliverer, beneficiary of the compensation for false accusations, were however all male. Women were spoils of Israel's holy wars against worshippers of false gods, and rape by divine sanction was an effective weapon of subjugation. The Book of Deuteronomy decreed that in a war against a city that refused to surrender, the males were to be put to the sword, while the women and the little ones and the cattle and everything else in the city, all its spoil, "you shall take as booty for yourselves; and you shall enjoy for yourselves..." (Deuteronomy 20:14). The added sexual license provided to the victors in the same book, is evident in passages like this one: "When you go forth to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God gives them into your hands, and you take them captive, and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you have desire for her for yourself as wife, then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and pare her nails" (21:10-12). Thus denuded of her previous identity, after the mandatory period of mourning for her relatives killed in the war, the woman's body became the property of her captor. And the Oracle against Babylon in the Book of Isaiah proclaims that "their houses shall be plundered and their wives ravished" (13:16).

This commodification of female sexuality is deeply embedded into the language of the text. Exploitation of female sexuality was the prerogative of every male within the family and the clan thus ensuring the racial purity and the continuity of the blood line. Childless widows were given to the husband's brothers or their nearest of kin as in the Ruth-Boaz narrative. "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not

marry without unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her and take her to wife, and perform the duty of an husband and brother unto her" (Deuteronomy, 25:5). A tractate of the Jewish Mishnah, the Mishnah Yebamot belonging to the Nashim, refers to the Levirate marriage of a widow to her husband's brother to produce a legal heir for her dead husband. C. Knight in his essay, 'Early Human Kinship was Matriarchal' explains this as 'sibling equivalence'. "In the levirate/sororate, a person steps into the marital role of a deceased sibling with little or no ceremony and as a matter of course. In a sense, the living sibling was 'married' to the deceased's spouse already, since siblings are kin equivalents and marital contracts are arrangements not between private individuals but kin groups on either side" (Knight, 2008).

### **Sagas of Powerful Jewish Women**

However, the Hebrew Bible as a chronicle of male supremacy of a jealous God and his patriarchs intolerant of any perceived threat to the hierarchical power structure is punctuated with the sagas of strong Jewish women. This feminine strength is manifested in many ways, both in women who were rebels against the prevalent cultural and religious ethos and in those who worked within the prescribed confines of patriarchy. Amongst the rebels we have such women as Athaliah, the daughter of Queen Jezebel, who claimed the throne of Judah as her own and ruled for six years before she was violently dethroned even though Hebrew law did not allow women to reign alone. She revived the ancient goddess religion of Ashtoreth, like her mother Jezebel and her grandparents who were the priestess and priest of Astoreth and Ba'al in the Canaanite city of Sidon. Amongst those who manifested their strength within the confines of the established culture of the time, we have Ruth who surrendered her Moabite identity to embrace the God of Israel working hard for a living in its famine-struck land. She united with her dead husband's kinsman Boaz and was rewarded by being recognized as the ancestor of King David. Then there is the prophetess Miriam glorified in the Talmud as one of the three leaders of Israel who was granted the miracle of the Well which would never dry up. She would thus be able to sustain the Israelites during their years of wandering. Her main claim to fame was to re-unite her parents after they separated, with the prophecy of the birth of her brother Moses, the chosen one of God. She led the women of the land in a victory song after the drowning of the Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Like Miriam, Huldah too was a prophetess mentioned in II Kings 22 and II Chronicles 34. The Bible mentions her as one of the seven prophetesses of Israel, the others being Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail and Esther. King Josiah sent his priest Hilkiah to enquire of Huldah for his sake and for that of the people what the Lord in His anger intended for them, since their fathers had not hearkened unto the words of the Lord. And she said to them: Thus, saith the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Tell ye the man that sent you to me, "Thus saith the Lord: Behold I will bring evil upon this place and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the

King of Judah hath read” (II Kings 22:15-16). However, she reassured the King by saying that the Lord had heard his prayer and that he would be gathered in peace unto the grave and that he would not live to see the evil that would befall his people.

Among the high born we have the sagas of women like Deborah, Judith and to a certain extent Esther, who manifest a strength independent of and in contra-distinction to-- the dictates of patriarchy, though their strength arises from their faith in the one true god of Israel. Deborah, the fourth and only woman Judge of pre-monarchic Israel, led her people to victory against the nine hundred iron chariots of the Canaanite commander Sisero. She makes a strong political statement when she tells Barak, “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory for the Lord will sell Sisero into the hands of a woman” (Judges 5:9). The reference is to Jael, who kills Sisero with a tent peg having lulled him to sleep with a drink of milk, earning her place in the Song of Deborah: “most blessed of women be Jael/the wife of Heber the Kenite, / of tent-dwelling women most blessed” (Judges 6:24). This resourcefulness of the women of Israel is seen elsewhere too as in the attack on Thebez by Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine who is killed by a woman dropping a millstone on his head, leading her beleaguered people to victory when the conventional warfare had failed.

Judith was the daring and beautiful widow of Manasses who lead an austere life refusing to re-marry. She thus defied the Mosaic law of marriage to the husband’s kinsman for producing an heir. Upset with her countrymen for not trusting the Lord to deliver them from their enemy oppressors, she dressed in all her finery and went with her maid to the camp of the enemy general Holofernes. She slowly won his trust by promising information about the Israelites and gained entry into his tent. When he was in a drunken stupor, she decapitated him and carried his head back with her. Having lost their leader, the Assyrians fled and the pursuing Israelite army was victorious. Esther was the Jewish queen of the Persian King Ahaseurus, and cousin of his Chief Minister Mordecai. When the king’s grand vizier Haman began a pogrom of revenge to exterminate her people and to send Mordecai to the gallows, she revealed her Jewish identity to the king, exposed Haman’s evil plans and had him executed. Susannah, falsely accused of meeting her lover by two lustful elders as she returned alone after her bath refused to be blackmailed into having sex with them, choosing imprisonment instead. When she was about to be executed, Daniel intervened and exposed the lies of the elders and saved her life.

This society which was largely misogynistic, often with the sanction of the Hebrew God and his Prophetic pronouncements, is what is believed to have contributed to the strong diatribe against the groundswell of goddess worship in the Israelite social order. We now pass on to a discussion on the extent to which this narrative of ‘false gods’ found actual acceptance among ordinary people.

### **The Narrative of ‘False Gods’ and of Goddess Worship**

The religion of the Israelites in the First Iron Age (1200-1000 BCE) had sprung from the ancient Canaanite religion and like all other religions of the ancient Near East had been fundamentally polytheistic in nature<sup>5</sup>. The Canaanites who were a Semitic people like the Hebrews, lived in agricultural communities and worshipped Asherah, the chief goddess of their pantheon, also known as Asherah of the Sea, the goddess Astarte, sometimes associated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar<sup>6</sup> and Anath, called the ‘Mistress of the Sky’. Thus, in the Canaanite religion, goddesses played a leading role and were believed to be the consorts of kings. This influence percolated down into the Hebrew religion from the time of the Hebrew tribes arriving in Canaan right up until the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. After the Israelite conquest of the Canaanite country in the period of mixed Canaanite-Israelite settlement with inter-marriages between the Israelites, the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites and other such tribes, the Hebrews continued to serve their Ba’als and the Asherahs.

What was the nature of the newly formed Israelite identity and of its God? In the transformation from a polytheistic to a monotheistic religious order, why should the new God of the Israelites who was conceived as an Absolute Being have a gendered identity? Was it the natural outcome of a patriarchal, patrifocal, patrilinear society where the Godhead was perceived as the patriarch of the community? Was it an attempt to counterbalance the polytheistic influence of neighbouring tribes? Raphael Patai argues that since the concept of the One and Only God of Israel is not only that of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent one but of an aphysical Being, “to say that God is either male or female is therefore completely impossible from the viewpoint of traditional Judaism. (Yet) The two Biblical names of God, Yahweh (pronounced, out of reverence for its great holiness, as ‘Adonai’ and usually translated as “the Lord”) and Elohim (or briefly El, translated as ‘God’) are masculine. When a pronoun is used to refer to God, it is the masculine ‘He’ (Patai, 1967).

We know that with the emergence of the monarchy, there was a promotion of Yahweh, the family god of the kings as the national god around the time of the Second Iron Age (800-600 BCE). The monotheistic revolution was therefore a rather late entry into the religion of the Israelites and an elitist one created by the priestly class as noted by Yairah Amit<sup>7</sup> (Amit, 2006). It was an attempt to forge a stern and independent Israelite identity to counteract the combined trauma of conquest and the Babylonian exile. It produced a distinctive literature of its own expressed in new genres in which an androcentric religious system of a single male God was the central focus. The laws that it promulgated claimed to be the revelations from this God through his prophet Moses. The narratives it bred envisioned a patrilineal and patrifocal society with little space for the role of women beyond the home and then too under the guardianship of male members of the family as seen in the earlier section of this essay.

With regard to the authorship of the Hebrew Bible, three sources have been ascribed to it: the P or the priestly source, the J or the Yahwite source and the E or the Elohist source. Much of the Pentateuch is believed to be derived

from the priestly sources put together by an all-male group of hereditary priests centred round the Temple of Jerusalem far from the lives of the ordinary men and women in distant rural areas. Carol Meyers, explaining the androcentric nature of the Hebrew Bible surmises that in addition to this, much of the Deuteronomic history which runs through from the Book of Joshua to 2 Kings and forms the core of the Hebrew Bible, was probably based on court records or traditions of royal circles within the palace (Meyers, 1988). The next narrative account of Israel's national existence, she says, from 1-2 Chronicles through Ezra and Jeremiah echoes the Deuteronomic account and follows it into the post-exilic, post-monarchic period. In the Hebraic society as depicted in the Bible therefore, the establishment of Yahweh as the sole and unrivalled object of worship, the association of earlier goddess cults with the negative construct of false gods and idol worship and the systematic destruction of earlier symbols associated with the goddess, reveal an extreme form of intolerance.

Against such a background of an andro-centric religious order, Sallie McFague argues that the particular problem that feminist theologians have with Western religious language is its patriarchal character. It is not just that "God the Father" is a frequent appellation for the divine, but that the entire structure of divine-human and human-human relationships can be understood only in a patriarchal framework. 'The complex of 'male' images has long functioned in the Christian West—but it has done so in a way that is oppressive for all but (privileged) men. So, the notion of God as the 'father', 'lord' or 'king' now seemingly, unavoidably conjures up oppressive associations of ownership, obedience and dependency and in turn dictates, consciously or otherwise, and a whole complex of attitudes and behaviours on the part of theistic believers' (McFague, 1982). While there was an acknowledged role for priestesses in neighbouring civilizations like the Assyrian or the Phoenician such as the one for Ishtar's priestess in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Hebrew temples did not admit female priests.

However, far from the Temple in Jerusalem and the royal courts several aspects of the popular religion continued to flourish through folk religions and women's cults, particularly in the rural areas. The rural masses continued to worship their earlier gods. The major deities among them included El, Ashe'rah, Yahweh and Ba'al. Repeated references to 'the gods of the fathers' in the Hebrew Bible provide ample evidence of a religion based on the cult of ancestors and the worship of family gods, an example of which may be found in Rachel carrying with her these family gods stolen from her father Laban (Genesis 31:19). Commenting upon this contradiction in the Jewish religious practice of the time, William Dever concludes that biblical monotheism is an artificial phenomenon which did not affect the lives of the common people (Dever, 2005). It will be the purpose of this section of the essay to highlight the many examples of the resilience of feminine power in its divine and human forms that challenged the exclusivity of this patriarchal order.

In this context, it is important to try to understand why this substratum of cultic worship of goddesses as well as other 'pagan' gods like Ba'al continued

to permeate Hebrew society despite the negative connotations of apostasy that had been attributed to it in Israel's stern monotheistic adherence to Yahweh.

### **The Survival of Older Religious Cults and the Narrative of False Gods**

Regarding the other gods worshipped in the Canaanite pantheon from which the religion of the Israelites had emerged in the Iron Age, El or Elohim was later fused into Yahweh. Hence as noted by scholars the Yahweh-Elohim fusion was translated as 'the Lord God' as distinct from God. We also have the reference to El Shaddai which translates into 'God Almighty' found repeatedly in the Bible. The Canaanite pantheon harboured powerful goddesses like Ashe'rah. Syed Waqas notes that the supreme goddess of Canaan was perceived as the goddess of all goddesses and the female counterpart of Baal. He also says that the propagation of goddess worship and the temple-prostitution associated with it originated from fertility cults which will be dealt with later in this essay (Waqas, 2022). In a Sumerian inscription from 1750 B.C. Ashe'rah is called Ashratum the bride of Anu, the Father god of Heaven. Since the Sumerian Anu has been identified with the Ugaritic El, she is called the consort of El. Several Ugaritic tablets unearthed from the ancient port city of Ugarit, the modern Ras Shamra, bear testimony to that.

However, a considerable amount of modern scholarship is also inclined to link Asherah to the Hebrew Yahweh. Proponents of this viewpoint base their assumption on archaeological evidence, mainly inscriptions and drawings recovered from Kuntillet Ajrid, an Iron Age site in the Sinai Peninsula discovered in 1975. The inscription found on large storage jars in Hebrew and Phoenician texts contains the phrase "I have blessed you by Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah."<sup>8</sup> Z. Meshel himself, the archaeologist who was part of the excavation admits that the goddess Asherah may have been Yahweh's consort in some circles. Saul Olyan and archaeologist William Dever claim that this evidence proves the association with Asherah in the cult of Yahweh and that the linking of Asherah with Ba'al<sup>9</sup> was a polemic initiated only within Deuteronomistic circles to propagate the narrative of 'false gods'. In Israelite folk religion too Ashe'rah functioned as the goddess and the consort of Yahweh.

Asherah was the principal female deity and patroness of mothers. Her images were probably used among Israelite women as talismans to aid in conception, childbirth and lactation. She has been called the 'creatress of the gods', numbering 70 of the Ugaritic pantheon. Scholars like John Day have associated these seventy sons of Ashe'rah mentioned in the Ugaritic Ba'al myth with those of the Canaanite god El, later fused into Yahweh (Day, 2002). In this context, Genesis 6:3 makes mention of the Nephilim who were apparently the offspring of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men". They were huge in size and great in strength and later lived in Canaan. In Deuteronomy 32:8 we find a similar reference to "When the Most High gave to nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God." (*beneelohim*)

Thus Asherah, used both as a proper and a common noun in the Hebrew Bible, indicates both the Goddess and her symbols used in worship. One of the Asherah symbols was the sacred tree, probably the date palm. Jeremiah 17:3 talks of “their Asherim, beside every green tree...” It also included sacred pillars as indicated by the Lord’s command in the line from Exodus 34:13: “You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Asherim.” These pillars were upright stones which stood near Ba’al shrines. Many verses talk of such Asherah poles installed in the Temple, which were probably sacred wooden symbols to honour the goddess of fertility. These poles became the sites of social gatherings and events to include religious worship and sacrifice. In private worship women used clay figurines of a naked goddess holding her breasts and her stomach as an image of fertility.

II Kings: 23:7 says of King Manasseh’s grandson Josiah who restored Yahweh worship: “and he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord where the women wove hangings for the Asherah.” These hangings probably indicated either tent-shrines or garments for the goddess. Many of these were erected by the Israelites in the pre-monarchic period throughout Israel and Judah. The divine decree “You shall not plant any tree as an Ashe’rah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make” (Deuteronomy 16:21) perceives the totemic symbol of the goddess as a threat. Sjojo and Mor, noting that this *ashe’rah* represented the Goddess as Urikittu, the ‘green one’, the Neolithic mother of all vegetation, claim that their later systematic destruction was the political hostility of the nomadic pastoral Hebrew people and their priesthood to the settled matriarchal cultures and their Goddess beliefs (Sjojo & Mor, 1991).

She was worshipped as the Queen of Heaven as the people’s protest against the prophet Jeremiah’s divine decree notes: “But since we left off burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything...” (Jeremiah, 44:18) And vs 19 of the same book says “...we made cakes for her bearing her image”. We find the same reference in Jeremiah 7:18, “The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven.” In the cities of Judah, these cakes called ‘kamanu tumri’ were thin unleavened loaves of fine flour, baked in ashes without yeast. Star-shaped cakes along with libations of wine were also offered to the Babylonian-Assyrian goddess Ishtar, the Canaanite Astarte. This tradition continued into the Christian era in the cult of the Virgin Mary where she is worshipped as Stella Maris, (the Star of the Sea) in Syrian Churches with blue and white star-shaped cakes.

In I Kings, which covers a period beginning with Solomon’s reign in 971 B.C. to Ahaziah’s reign ending in 851 B.C. we see evidence of the worship of the goddess even in royal circles. Solomon’s seven hundred wives were of a variety of cultural identities, probably as political alliances between neighbouring tribes. They were Moabites, Ammonites, E’domites, Sido’nians, Hittite women and the daughter of Pharaoh. They were worshippers of goddess cults and eventually led him away from Israel’s God. “Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sido’nians and after Milcon the abomination of the Ammonites” (I Kings, 11:1,5).

In the II Bk of Kings which covers the period from the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, we find intermittent examples of goddess worship, though there were also Yahwite rulers who tried to eradicate it. While King Hezekiah's reign showed a marked tilt towards Yahwism, destroying Asherah poles and banning her worship, his son Manasseh re-introduced goddess worship in Judah, offered blood sacrifices of his son to Baal, a practice referred to in Jeremiah 19:7: "...and have built the high places of Ba'al to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Ba'al...". Manasseh "did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord, he built altars in the house of the Lord to all the host of heaven..." II Kings 21: 2-3, "And he burned his son as an offering, and practised soothsaying and augury and dealt with mediums and with wizards...And the graven image of Asherah that he had made, he set in the house of which the Lord had said to David, in this house, "I will put my name for ever." His grandson Josiah on the other hand, commanded the high priest to bring out these sacrificial vessels from the temple of the lord together with the Asherah poles and he burned and broke them and cast the dust into the graves.

Gideon's people-built altars to Ashtoreth. In some of these references, however, the names of Ashe'rah and Ba'al, her consort appear together. During a famine, Eli'jah told Ahab of God's punishment for the worship of false gods: "Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ashe'rah, who eat at Jez'ebel's table" (I Kings 18:19). The confrontation between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel marks one such occasion, where a temple was constructed for Baal by Jez'ebel along with an altar for sacrifices and a sacred pole. The Book of Judges also contains references to Ba'al and Ashe'rah: "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Ba'als.....They forsook the Lord, and served the Ba'als and the Ash'taroth." (Judges 2:11, 13) In the Book of Samuel, Samuel said to all the House of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord; and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." (I Samuel 7:3) In the Book of Jeremiah however, it was mainly the women involved in goddess worship who defied the threat of destruction by Yahweh to continue to burn incense to the 'queen of heaven' and pour libations to her in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, which in the past had ensured their prosperity and security from misfortune. "We will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our priests, in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem; for then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no evil." (Jeremiah 44:18) All these references indicate that despite the stern indictment against the 'worship of false gods' and the negative construct of idolatry and apostasy being given to any god other than Yahweh, worship of the goddess continued in Israelite circles even within the priestly or royal elite.

## The Tree and the Serpent

Feminist theologians have pointed out the systematic denigration of goddess symbols in the Biblical Creation myth. This is evident in the narrative of the tree of knowledge and the forbidden fruit as the cause and the serpent as the agent of the Fall and the loss of primal innocence. We note that Ashe'rah has been called the 'lady of serpents' in addition to being associated with trees. The symbols connected with the goddess, like the snake and the tree in the Fall narrative have been systematically devalued and reviled by patriarchy in both Hebrew and Graeco-Roman myth<sup>10</sup>, perhaps much more so in the former. Jehovah's curse of the serpent as an agent of evil in the Fall can be attributed to the perceived threat to the supremacy of the male from older goddess-centric religious orders<sup>11</sup>. Its trampling underfoot into the dust is the re-location of the Goddess/Earth Mother into a subordinate position. This is Yahweh's first statement of victory over earlier goddess cults.

In the book of Numbers, the punishment of snake bite against a murmuring and dissatisfied people of Israel during their forty years of wandering is negated by Moses by making a bronze serpent and setting it up on a pole, and later the people began to worship it. The bronze serpent, Nehushtan<sup>12</sup> was an object of popular worship during the Israelite monarchy. II Kings 18:4 says that King Hezekiah in obedience to the Lord's decree, "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses<sup>13</sup> had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it; it was called Nehushtan."

In Hebrew society the punishment for worship of these 'false gods' or of their totemic symbols was death by stoning as seen in Deuteronomy 17:5. Thus it may be said that despite the tribulations of the Hebrews under foreign rule being attributed to divine judgement on the practice of idolatry, despite incessant warfare and systematic conquest of neighbouring tribes in order to establish the supremacy of the male god of the Hebrews and the expressly negative construct attributed to other forms of worship in biblical terminology (*avodahzarah*, namely, 'false gods') and the sternness of the punishment for the improper conduct of religious rituals, references such as those quoted in this essay bear witness to the continued attempts to propagate the worship of the goddess.

## Temple Prostitution

Also associated with the temple of the goddess is the practice of sacred prostitution. The union of the high priestess of the Temple of Ishtar with the king in a ritual called 'hieros gamos' represented an ancient fertility ritual by re-enacting the marriage of the sky god with the earth goddess for the earth's bounty<sup>14</sup>. Though Deuteronomy 23:17 expressly forbids this sacred cult associated with the worship of the goddess Ishtar<sup>15</sup>: "There shall be no cult prostitution of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel", Tamar the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah, who later fathered a child by him,

was a worshipper of Ishtar and a cult prostitute. (May, Metzgar, 1977). In the Book of Ezekiel, the word ‘harlot’ is used multiple times. It refers both to the fallen state of Jerusalem with its people worshipping ‘false gods’, misusing the divine favours that the god of Israel had bestowed upon them and to the actual practice of cult prostitution: “Is it too slight a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abomination which they commit here” (Ezekiel 8:17). In fact, this cult/temple prostitution had both a spiritual and a commercial connotation. Waqas observes that these women offering themselves to the pilgrims in the sacred niche of the temple, provided both spiritual bliss and sexual satisfaction after the prolonged physical trauma of the pilgrimage and the separation from their families (Waqas, 2022). There were references to male prostitutes (‘qadesh’) too. I Kings 14:24 notes: “For they also built for themselves high places, and pillars, and Asherim...and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land.” II Kings 23:7 states: “And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord.” ‘Qedeshah<sup>16</sup>’ is a Hebrew word which is used for a sacred prostitute or temple prostitute. However, Merlin Stone in *When God was a Woman* has objections to the use of the term ‘ritual prostitute’ or ‘cult prostitute’ as a translation of the word *qadesh* which really means ‘holy’. In her view it suggests a total lack of comprehension of the theological and social structure of earlier Goddess oriented cultures. This term originally indicated the women who followed the ancient sexual customs of the goddess and were venerated as sacred by their cultures (Stone, 1976).

## Conclusion

The singularity of Yahweh in the Hebrew religious order introduced what Riane Eisler calls the dangers of a ‘dominator culture’ that she and many other scholars including Stone, Sjoo and Mor associate with a male God and His priestly and ruling class. Its attempt was to sharply divide Hebrew society into binaries of light and darkness, good and evil as opposed to the more inclusive and comprehensive social orders of earlier goddess-centric cultures. It is important to note that while in most other civilizations of the time the change-over was relatively gradual so that the earlier supremacy of the Goddess evolved into the Goddess’ role of consort or mother to the newly dominant male God, the Hebrew religion strove fiercely for the total annihilation of all traces and symbols of goddess worship. Along with the goddess the position of women also declined significantly in Israelite society. However, the ground reality remains that change happens more slowly than the elitist writers of the Hebrew Bible cared to admit. Thus, despite all this, examples from both the Hebrew Bible and from Hebrew folklore, folk cults and legends, provide ample evidence that goddess worship continued among the common people even under the shadow of threats from the prevailing andro-centric religious and social order. This reflects the pervading influence of neighbouring civilizations possibly passed on through the nomadic life style of its people, despite Israel’s incessant wars and conquests recorded in the Bible. It also reflects the ground reality of a people unwilling to break their ties with an earlier religious tradition which was more compassionate and

certainly more colourful than the rigid, harshly punitive and intolerant one now imposed upon them.

## Notes

- 1) Joseph Campbell compares this with an ancient Sumerian myth in which heaven (An) and earth (Ki) were in the beginning a single undivided mountain of which the lower part was female and the upper, male. But the two were separated (like Adam into Adam and Eve) by their son Enlil (in the Bible by their creator Yahweh) whereupon the world of temporality happened as it did when Eve ate the apple. Campbell, Joseph, 2001, 'Occidental Mythology', Souvenir Press, London
- 2) Carol Meyers translates God's punishment to Eve in Genesis 3:16 as "I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies". She negates the theory that this implies future subjugation of women as well as that of the curse of the pain of childbearing upon Eve by examining the words of the verse in the context of the harsh and difficult life of both men and women of the region during the Iron Age and the necessity to produce many children for a sizeable work force to till the barren soil with the added burden of a scarcity of water. She also notes that the Hebrew word 'izavon' used in God's punishment for Eve is the same as that used for Adam. "Discovering Eve: Israelite Women in Context", Carol Meyers, OUP, New York, 1988.
- 3) Menstrual blood was linked to the Great Cosmic Mother as a symbol of life-giving energy and the forces of creation and fertility, often associated with the celestial rhythms of lunar cycles.
- 4) This reference is found only in the additions to the canonical Book of Esther
- 5) Strict monotheism is believed to have emerged among priests of the Temple establishment during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. At this time circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance gained greater importance as symbols of Jewish identity.
- 6) Ishtar/Inanna, a Mesopotamian goddess of sex and fertility was worshipped in Sumer as Inanna, and by the Assyrians, Akkadians and Babylonians as Ishtar, the 'Queen of Heaven'. Her marriage to Dumuzid/Tammuz was also celebrated as a fertility rite. This reference is found in the Hebrew Bible. It is also found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. She influenced to a large extent the Ugaritic Ashtart and the later Phoenician Astarte. She was worshipped by women with offerings of cakes baked in ashes, a reference also found in the Hebrew Bible.
- 7) Yairah Amit notes that if the new monotheistic religion sprang from the destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the encounter with the Assyrian Empire, it would have begun in the northern kingdom of Israel around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This monotheistic revolution, an intellectual rather than a popular one, gave rise to new forms of expression, new genres and a distinctive literature without parallel in the Near East. Some of the best Biblical literature dates back to this period.
- 8) In one crude drawing on Pithos A excavated from the Kuntillet Ajrid site showed three naked figures, two of whom standing together have been interpreted as Yahweh and Asherah.
- 9) The Semitic word Ba'al means "Lord" and from it was derived 'Bel', also meaning 'lord', a name Marduk of the Creation epic 'Enuma Elish' came to be known by. He was the chief god of the city of Babylon.

- 10) Apollo represented light and purification, one who brings the process of renewal into the world by slaying the python-servant of the Goddess, earlier depicted as the dragon of darkness, now as the symbol of chaos and evil.
- 11) The Tiamat myth as seen in 'Enuma Elish' is one of the earliest versions of a battle between a culture hero (Marduk) and a sea monster, dragon or serpent, symbolic of the dethronement of the Goddess and her associated symbols.
- 12) Nehushtan, means 'a brazen thing'. In Book of Numbers 21:4-9. God told Moses to erect this bronze serpent on a pole so that the Israelites could be protected from the bites of the 'fiery serpents' which God had sent to punish them for speaking against God and Moses. In II Kings 18:4, however King Hezekiah ordered the destruction of the brazen serpent erected by Moses, 'for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.'
- 13) One of the origins of the name Levi associate it with Leviathan. Moses, identified as a descendant of Levi himself used a staff given to him by Yahweh to show the wonders of his god. When confronting the Egyptians who sent snakes towards him, the staff changed into a mighty serpent which devoured the Egyptian snakes. Snake cults had also been well established in Canaan in the Bronze Age.
- 14) This is part of a Mesopotamian fertility cult representing the fertility god Tammuz/ Dumuzid who is the consort of the goddess Ishtar. The anger of Ishtar sends him into the underworld during the hot dry months of summer causing women to lament him. His return renews the earth's bounty in the annual cycle of vegetation. Ezekiel 8:14 says "Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the Lord; and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz."
- 15) In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamhat serves in the Temple of Ishtar in a similar capacity and is sent out to seduce and tame the wild man Enkidu and initiate him into the arts of civilization.
- 16) The Hebrew Bible uses the term 'kedeshah/qadesh' for sacred prostitution as opposed to the term 'zonah' for ordinary prostitutes.

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## **The Astronomical Meaning of the Donkey’s Jawbone used by Samson as a Weapon and the Gate of Gaza**

*By Felice Vinci\**

*This article follows on from previous articles, in which we demonstrated that some of the bizarre exploits of the biblical hero Samson can be explained astronomically. Here, we will demonstrate that this approach also allows us to give logical meaning to other strange events in his life. Indeed, we will first see that the jawbone with which Samson slaughters his enemies corresponds in various mythologies to the Hyades star cluster, which is shaped like a jaw and often appears during solar eclipses. This is consistent with the fact that in a previous article, we showed that his hair, which holds the secret of his extraordinary strength, represents a metaphor for the solar corona, which indeed appears during total solar eclipses. We will then see that the doors of the Gaza Gate, which Samson carried to the top of the hill that faces Hebron, could allude to an astronomical gate, delimited by the two points on the eastern horizon of Gaza corresponding to the sunrises on the days of the solstices. This is a very ancient concept, present even in Homer and attested by archaeological finds dating back to the Early Bronze Age. In short, Samson's adventures, even that of the millstone he was forced to turn before the dramatic end of his life, make sense when reinterpreted from an astronomical perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Samson, Sun, Sun’s corona, jawbone, Hyades, gate of Gaza, Hebron, World Mill*

### **- Introduction**

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In this article, we will develop the hypothesis that some of the seemingly bizarre exploits of the biblical hero Samson—particularly the one in which he uses a donkey's jawbone as a weapon to slaughter the Philistines, and the one in which he carries the doors of the gate of Gaza “to the top of the hill that faces Hebron”—can be interpreted astronomically. We will see, in fact, that there is no shortage of reasons to suppose that both the jawbone and the Gaza Gate are astronomical metaphors, behind which lie, respectively, the constellation of the Hyades and an astronomical gate mentioned by Homer, for which archaeological evidence dating back to the Early Bronze Age has been found. These findings should therefore be added to those of previous articles, in which we have verified that other exploits of Samson can be interpreted in the same way.

To this end, we will adopt a methodology that consists of a new critical examination of reliable sources, not only classical but also from other literary and archaeological contexts, comparing and exploring analogies and similarities, as well as anomalies and enigmas. These, particularly in the field of mythology, can sometimes reveal hidden metaphorical meanings capable of opening new hermeneutic horizons.

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Indeed, a comparative reading of these testimonies with elements typical of other cultures fosters a broader and more transversal interdisciplinary approach to the issue as a whole, both diachronically and in the search for mythological, anthropological, and historical-religious connections. Furthermore, throughout this work, we will always keep in mind that, to adequately address issues such as the one in question, "a rationalistic approach is sterile without the effort to immerse oneself in the mentality of the times and people with whom we are dealing" (Ferri, 2010, p. 219).

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides background information on the figure of Samson, cites attempts by other authors to demonstrate that Samson was a solar figure, and then summarizes the conclusions of our previous articles, in which we demonstrated the plausibility of an astronomical interpretation of some of Samson's exploits. The subsequent section explains why the donkey's jawbone, which he uses as a weapon, can be interpreted as an astronomical metaphor. The following section focuses on another of Samson's exploits, when he "took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them apart, bar and all. He lifted them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron", demonstrating that this too involves an astronomical dimension, supported by literary and archaeological evidence, which can be extended even to some final events of his life. The final section offers concluding remarks.

### **The Figure of Samson and His Astronomical Dimension**

Samson is a biblical hero who was given superhuman powers by God in the form of extreme strength, and performed several exceptional feats, told in the Book of Judges (chapters 13-16), fighting against the Philistines, enemies of the Hebrews.

In the past, especially in the second half of the 19th century, some scholars proposed that Samson was a solar hero, as also suggested by the fact that the sun is present in his very name. In this regard, George Albert Cooke, an influential English academic, wrote that

The worship of the sun prevailed at one time in the neighbourhood of Samson's traditional home; and such indications as these seem to imply that sun-worship was familiar to the Israelites of the district, if not actually practised by them, until the religion of Jehovah gained supremacy (Cooke, 1913, p. 137).

But Cooke (p. 129) also argued that the idea that the figure of Samson could be traced back to a solar hero "is only an artificial ingenuity". Indeed, this idea was later virtually abandoned, as it did not seem to be based on sufficiently solid foundations. Here is how Gregory Mobley recently expressed himself on the subject:

Apart from the imaginative but forced allusions to astral activity—Samson's hair as the rays of the sun; the donkey jawbone as lightning; Delilah as a lunar goddess—the evidence for solar ideas in the narrative is minimal (Mobley, 2006, p. 7).

Meanwhile, the idea that Samson is a Hebrew variant of the same Near Eastern folk hero, who inspired the Mesopotamian Enkidu and Gilgamesh and the Greek

Heracles, has gained wide acceptance among contemporary scholars. Regarding the characteristics of this folk hero, Mobley (pp. 12-13) claims:

The basic pattern can be said to include four elements: (1) a special birth; (2) an alienating crisis in youth; (3) adventures in a foreign land, battle, or nature; and (4) a return to society. (...) Samson has three of the four aspects of the hero. He has: (1) a special birth (a divine message announces an imminent birth to a formerly childless couple in Judg 13:2-24); (3) adventures abroad in Philistia and nature (14:1-16:30); and (4) a return to Danite society (although with Samson it is only his corpse that makes it home in 16:31).

In any case, according to current scholars, the story of Samson “has extraordinary aspects and in some respects can be compared to that of Hercules” (De Capoa, 2019, p. 256). In turn, Philippe Wajdenbaum focuses on “the well-known similarities between Samson and Hercules” (p. 223), also recalling that both killed a lion and tore down the gates of a city (p. 227). But it has also been hypothesized that the story of Samson derives from an ancient Canaanite tale (Reinach, 1997, p. 661).

However, in attempting to make full sense of some of Samson's strange exploits, and taking advantage of scientific advances in the fields of archaeology and ethnography, we have recently become aware that some of his otherwise incomprehensible stories can be very satisfactorily explained in astronomical terms, although in a very different way than previously attempted.

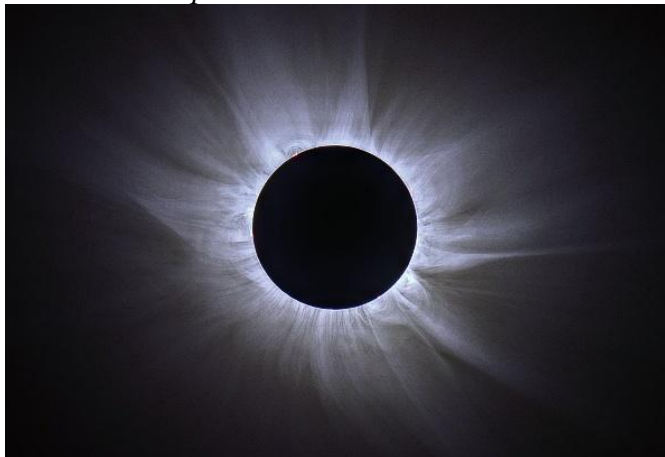
Therefore, before addressing, in the next section, the question the true meaning of the jawbone with which Samson slaughtered the Philistines, we believe it is useful to briefly summarize the articles we have published so far on the subject.

Let us begin with the fact that Samson's name, שמשון, in Hebrew means “man of the sun” (van der Toorn et al., 1999, p. 404). It contains the Hebrew term for the sun (שמש). On the other hand, it is certainly no coincidence that Samson's relationship with fire is attested by the antecedents of his miraculous birth, which was foretold to his mother by an angel of the Lord who later, at the end of a sacrifice,

as the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, (...) ascended in the flame” (Jdg. 13:20).

That being said, in a previous article (Vinci, 2024a) we demonstrated the plausibility of the hypothesis that behind the image of Samson's hair, which Delilah cuts off to weaken him and deliver him into the hands of the Philistines (who will soon thereafter blind him), lies an extraordinary astronomical metaphor of the solar corona. It becomes visible at the height of a total eclipse, when the sun, hidden by the moon—to which the character of Delilah appears in many respects comparable—seems to be weakened (in fact, it loses its light and heat) and blinded (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** *The Solar Corona Appears as a Glowing Head of Hair at the Height of Total Solar Eclipses*



As for the identification of Delilah with the moon, we have devoted ample space to it, finding numerous clues of great relevance (Vinci, 2024a), while the only argument that Heymann Steinthal—one of the most important nineteenth-century supporters of the solar dimension of the character of Samson—was able to adduce to prove this identification was that

Delilah may also signify the ‘Relaxed, Vanishing’, as a Moon-goddess (Steinthal, 1877, p. 405).

Furthermore, considering that a close connection between the solar and igneous-metallurgical dimensions is found in the myths of the Dogon of Mali, according to which the Sun was considered a large vessel of molten copper (Griaule, 1968, p. 25), all this fits perfectly into the metallurgical dimension which, as we have seen in another article (Vinci & Maiuri, 2023), is the key to solving the riddle that Samson posed to the Philistines: “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet” (Jdg. 14:14), referring to honey and a swarm of bees in the carcass of a lion that the hero had previously killed at Timnah (Jdg. 14:8).

Indeed, this riddle, reinterpreted in light of archaeological discoveries made since the last century in the Timna Valley (Ben-Yosef, 2018), where there was an Egyptian sanctuary associated with ancient copper mines and metallurgical activities, hides a metaphor that can be traced back to fire and the world of metallurgy, since the smelting furnace “eats” the mineral with fire, producing a dull noise, reminiscent of both the roar of a lion and the buzzing of bees around the hive, and then from it flows the copper, which has a color and appearance similar to that of wild honey.

It is important to note that this interpretation of Samson's riddle was not possible in the 19th century, since at that time the sanctuary, dedicated to the goddess Hathor and attesting to the importance of metallurgical activities at Timna as early as the 2nd millennium BC, had not yet been discovered. The same can be said of the information we have today about the culture of the Dogon people of Mali, which we owe to research conducted by Marcel Griaule in the last century.

Likewise, we have seen that the bizarre tale of the fiery foxes released by Samson to set fire to the Philistine fields (Jdg. 15:4-5), similar to that of the foxes with burning tails unleashed in the Circus of ancient Rome (Ov. Fast. 4, 679 ff), can be immediately explained (Vinci, 2024b) by comparing them with the Fire Fox of Finnish tradition, believed to be the cause of the Northern Lights. In fact, the tail of this mythical animal emits sparks when it runs and touches the snowy ground, branches, or bushes. This corresponds to the fact that in the Finnish language the name of the Northern Lights is *revontulet*, “fox fires” (Ojanen & Linnea, 2019, p. 44). Moreover, the elongated shape of the fox’s tail, especially that of red foxes, lends itself well to representing the bright tongues of fire typical of the aurora borealis, that is, the Nordic “fox fires”.

At this point, we note that the meanings we have attributed to some of Samson's singular events are consistent with each other and converge with an astronomical, solar, and metallurgical interpretation. This interpretation, however, is much more credible today than it was a century ago because, as we have already noted, it is based on updated knowledge in several crucial fields, such as archaeology and ethnology, combined with the greater ease with which scholars from all disciplines can now access it almost in real time.

In this regard, we also note the growing importance of astronomy in deciphering myths. Indeed, it has been fundamental in enabling us to propose rational solutions to the meaning of the Phoenix (Vinci, 2026) as well as to the ancient enigmas of the number 666, cited in the Apocalypse of John (Vinci, 2025a), and of the star that, according to the Gospel of Matthew, guided the Three Wise Men to the cave of Bethlehem (Vinci, 2025b).

But now, having made these premises, the time has come to try to understand the original meaning of the donkey's jawbone that Samson used as a weapon.

### **Samson and the Donkey's Jawbone**

The Philistines went up and camped in Judah, spreading out near Lehi. The people of Judah asked, “Why have you come to fight us?” “We have come to take Samson prisoner,” they answered, “to do to him as he did to us.” Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, “Don’t you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?” He answered, “I merely did to them what they did to me.” They said to him, “We’ve come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines.” Samson said, “Swear to me that you won’t kill me yourselves.” “Agreed,” they answered. “We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you.” So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. Then Samson said, “With a donkey’s jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey’s jawbone I have killed a thousand men.” When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi. Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the Lord, “You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi (Jdg. 15:9-19).

At this point, we must verify whether in any mythology, even outside the world of the Bible, there is a jawbone somehow related to the one used by the biblical hero. In this regard, we note that a jawbone, which is used as a weapon and is also closely linked to the sun, appears in a New Zealand tale (Grey, 1885, p. 26). It tells of the hero Maui, the protagonist of many Polynesian myths, who went to visit his ancestor Muri-ranga-whenua, from whom he obtained a jawbone “with which great enchantments can be cast” and with it he decided to capture the sun. Armed with this magical jawbone and a large length of rope, he and his brothers set out eastward until they reached the place where the sun slept at night. There, they built a great clay wall, with huts made of tree branches at each end for hiding. They then made the loops of the noose and lay in wait until

The sun came rising up out of his place, like a fire spreading far and wide over the mountains and forests; he rises up, his head passes through the noose, and it takes in more and more of his body, until his fore-paws pass through; then were pulled tight the ropes, and the monster began to struggle and roll himself about, whilst the snare jerked backwards and forwards as he struggled. Ah! Was not he held fast in the ropes of his enemies! Then forth rushed that bold hero, Mau-tikitiki-o-Taranga, with his enchanted weapon. Alas! The sun screams aloud; he roars; Maui strikes him fiercely with many blows; they hold him for a long time, at last they let him go, and then weak from wounds the sun crept along its course. Then was learnt by men the second name of the sun, for in its agony the sun screamed out: ‘Why am I thus smitten by you! Oh, man! Do you know what you are doing? Why should you wish to kill Tama-nui-te-Ra? Thus was learnt his second name. At last they let him go. Oh, then, Tama-nui-te-Ra went very slowly and feebly on his course (Grey, 1885).

It should be noted that here, in addition to the jawbone, we also find the ropes used to bind the sun, which appear in Samson’s adventures both in his adventure with the jawbone (Jdg. 15:13) and in the one in which Delilah cuts off his hair (Jdg. 16:8; 16:12).

We find a similar tale in the mythology of an Australian aboriginal people, the Adnyamathanha. They had a savage and cannibalistic sun deity, to the point of roasting her victims over a fire, until two lizard-men intervened, one of whom, Kudnu, struck her with a boomerang and wounded her, causing her to disappear and leaving the world in complete darkness. But when Kudnu threw another boomerang eastward, a great ball of fire arose and slowly traveled across the sky until it disappeared below the western horizon, and thus day and night were created (Pianka & Vitt, 2003, p. 286). Here it should be noted that the boomerang has the same shape as a jaw.

But why did some cultures see a jawbone or boomerang in the sky? The answer lies in the fact that the Babylonians called the Hyades cluster in the constellation Taurus “the jawbone of the Taurus” (de Santillana & von Dechend, 2003, p. 201). In fact, its five brightest stars form a “V”, or jawbone, shape within the cluster, clearly visible in the night sky between Orion and the Pleiades (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** *The Constellation of the Hyades, between Orion and the Pleiades*

It is, therefore, not surprising that also in Norse mythology the Hyades cluster is called “the wolf’s jaw”:

A direct reference of the association in Scandinavian sources between the Hyades and the Old Norse wolf is found in an Icelandic manuscript (GKS 1812 4<sup>th</sup>, *De ordine ac positione stellarum in signis*), in its section dated 1192 AD, there is mention of the constellation of the Hyades using their native name, before Christianization: *Ulf's Keptr* (wolf’s jaw). The detail of the wolf’s jaw is fundamental in the narrative of Ragnarok (Langer, 2018, pp. 7-8).

In short, there is no shortage of reasons to consider plausible the hypothesis that the enigmatic jawbone of Samson, “the man of the sun”, has an astronomical dimension, as we have already seen with the story of his hair, that of the fiery foxes, and the riddle he posed to the Philistines.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask whether the theme of the jaw and that of the solar eclipse are also related in Norse mythology, and, in particular, whether there is a direct astronomical connection between wolf’s jaw, the Hyades, and eclipses. Here is the answer:

By analyzing the occurrence of ten solar and lunar eclipses during the Early Middle Ages (which were at that time visible in Scandinavia), we have found that nine of these phenomena occurred between 713 and 894 AD, and happened close to the Hyades cluster (interpreted by us as the constellation of Wolf’s jaw to the Norse people). In the case of total eclipses of the sun (...) the cluster was visible (at the time of totality, when the whole sky got dark), and in the case of eclipses of the moon, it was visible throughout most of the night (...) In the mythical tale, the first cosmic event that precedes the battle field Vigrid is the time when wolves swallow the Sun and the Moon (*Gylfaginning* 51), a clear reference to eclipses of both celestial corps (...) After Jörmungandr (also called “sea dog” in some poems) arose out of the sea and into the earth, Fenrir runs with its mouth open and its jaw protruding from earth to heaven. This is a crucial detail in the story, because soon after Odin is killed by the wolf, and then his son Vidar steps with his foot in Fenrir’s jaw and then divides it with his hands, killing the beast (*Gylfaginning* 51). Earlier, during Fenrir’s imprisonment, the gods have inserted a sword in his mouth (*Gylfaginning* 34).

All these details converge to a strong symbolism of the wolf's jaw (Langer, 2018, pp. 13-14).

All this shows that both the story of Delilah's betrayal, who cuts off Samson's hair, and the episode of the donkey's jawbone conceal a metaphor for the solar eclipse.

This interpretation is also confirmed by the conclusion of the story of the jawbone, which tells us that Samson, after throwing away the jawbone after the massacre, "was very thirsty," and the Lord caused a spring to gush forth there, which "is still there in Lehi". Indeed, in classical mythology, the Hyades, or, as we have just seen, the jawbone, are closely linked to rain (which feeds the springs), and in ancient Greek "to rain" is *hyein*, which has the same root as the name of the Hyades. Here is what Ovid tells us about it:

The head of the Bull sparkles radiant with seven flames,  
which the Grecian sailor calls the Hyades after the word for rain (Fast. 5:165-166).

In conclusion of this section, we believe it is appropriate to mention here the interpretation that Heymann Steinthal gave of this episode at the time (which, in our opinion, immediately explains Mobley's skepticism about the old solar hypotheses about Samson, as we saw in the previous section):

For surely the jawbone cannot be anything but the Lightning, just as in Aryan mythology the head of an ass, or still more that of a horse, denotes a storm cloud, and a tooth, especially the tusk of a boar, signifies the lightning (Steinthal, 1877, p. 402).

Let us now return to our interpretation of the jawbone episode. It is entirely consistent with the interpretative framework emerging from Samson's other adventures analyzed previously, and so at this point it seems natural to ask whether even what might be considered the strangest of his bizarre exploits, the one in which he carried the doors of the gate of Gaza to the top of a hill, can be interpreted astronomically.

### **Samson and the Gate of Gaza**

Here is Samson's feat that the Book of Judges tells immediately after the one with the jawbone and before Delilah cuts off his hair:

One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron (Jdg. 16:1-3).

Even in this case, if we interpret the gate of Gaza literally, as if it were a real city gate, Samson's enterprise appears senseless, indeed even more absurd than the others we have previously examined.

However, considering the now-established solar dimension of the character, which has allowed us to give full meaning to his other adventures and is reflected in his very name, we can now try to see if ancient mythologies speak of “gates” in an astronomical sense, and then verify whether it is possible to give full meaning to this story as well.

Let us read, therefore, a passage from the Iliad, which refers to the moment when the goddess Hera comes out from Olympus with her chariot:

Hera swiftly touched the horses with the lash, and self-bidden groaned upon their hinges the doors of heaven which the Hours had in their keeping, to whom are entrusted great heaven and Olympus, whether to throw open the thick cloud or shut it to. There through the gate they drove the horses (Hom. Il. 5, 748-752).

Here the movement of the celestial vault is admirably visualized, regular as a clockwork and marked by the Hours (Ἵρῶται in Greek, that is, the seasons). We find the same concept in a phrase that the Latin poet Ovid has Janus, the god of gates (whose name corresponds to the Latin word *ianua*, “door”), say:

I sit at Heaven’s Gate with the gentle Hours,  
Jupiter himself comes and goes at my discretion.  
So I’m called Janus (Fast. 1, 125-127).

Before continuing, it is worth noting that the two faces with which Janus is represented can be interpreted as the result of a long development process, starting with the Sumerian cultures, from the two solar pillars located on the eastern side of the temples, each of which marks the direction of the rising sun on the dates of the two solstices respectively. In particular, the southeastern pillar corresponds to the winter solstice, and the northeastern one to the summer solstice:

Janus is two-faced because, for an observer positioned appropriately with respect to the two pillars, he represents the direction of the rising sun at the summer and winter solstices (...). In Egypt, the temples were positioned so that the rising sun would be between the two columns located in front of the entrance. In Jerusalem, the gate of Solomon’s Temple faced east and was flanked by two bronze pillars called Yachin and Boaz. On Mount Lycaeus, in the centre of the Peloponnese, the altar of Zeus was framed, on the side of the rising sun, by two columns adorned with golden eagles (...) All three are open towards the east and preceded by two columns, which delimit the stretch of the sky where the sun rises every morning (...) Every day the sun rises from a different point, but this oscillation has as its limits two fixed points: the summer solstitial east to the north-east, and the winter solstitial east to the south-east, where the sun stops before reversing its course. (...) They were naturally conceived as the jambs of a door (...) From a fixed place, rigorously marked on the ground, the observer notes the variations in the point where the sun rises. The two solstitial points are marked by two poles. Every day the sun rises between these poles and, at each solstice, in correspondence with one of the two, conceived as the uprights of the gate through which the sun enters (...) The Japanese *torii*, consisting of two poles joined by a double transverse beam and erected in front of the doors of the temples, corresponds as well to the scheme of the monument with two pillars as the Gate of the Sun of the classical tradition (Audin, 1956).

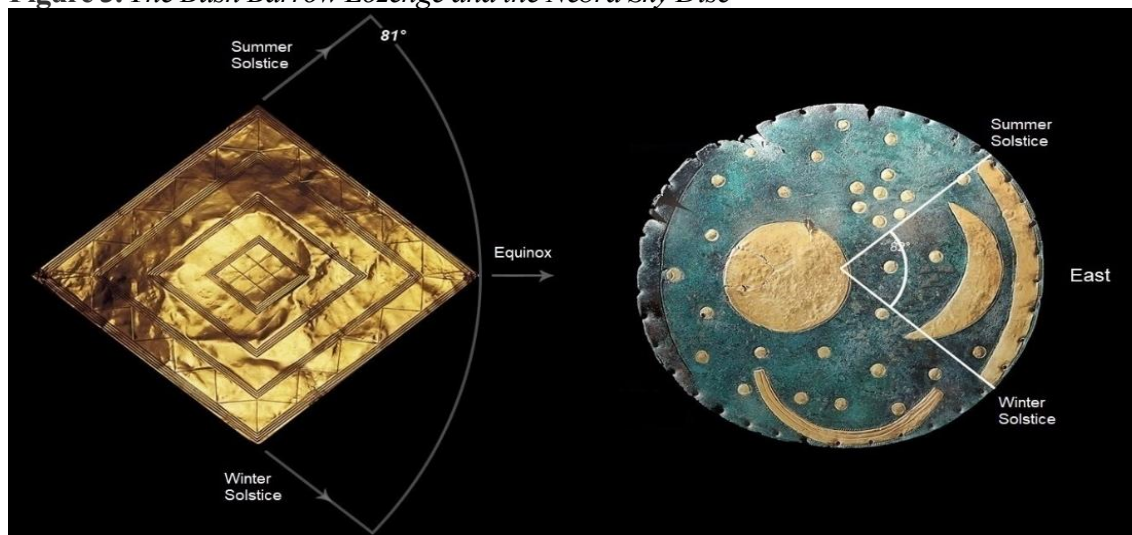
In short, an astronomical gate, or solstitial gate, can be defined as the arc of the horizon between the two points where the sun rises from a given location, at the winter solstice and the summer solstice respectively. Thus, the arc marks the entire range of points on the horizon where the sun rises in a solar year (Garrow & Wilkin, p. 146), and its extent depends on latitude. At the center of the arc is the point on the horizon from which the sun rises on the days of the two equinoxes, which corresponds exactly to the east of the location in question.

Archaeology tells us that the issue of the solstitial gate must have been known as early as the second millennium BC, as attested by two important finds, both dating to the Early Bronze Age. We are referring to the Bush Barrow gold lozenge and the Nebra sky disc. The Bush Barrow lozenge is an ancient diamond-shaped carved artefact, 184 mm long and 156 mm wide, found in a burial mound near Stonehenge. It is very interesting for our purposes because it was found that

the pair of acute angles of the basic diamond pattern [of the Bush Barrow lozenge] to be  $81^\circ$  (...). This was the angle between midsummer and midwinter sunrises (and sunsets of course) on a low horizon at the latitude of Stonehenge ( $51.17^\circ$  N) four thousand years ago (MacKie, 2009, p. 31).

The Nebra Sky Disc is a circular bronze plate 32 cm in diameter, with gold applications, also dating to the Early Bronze Age. It was found in a cave on the Mittelberg hill, near Nebra (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany), and is considered the oldest representation of the sky. For our purposes, the most interesting aspect of this disc is the "horizon arc" applied to its right edge, marking an angle equal to that between the points where the sun rises at the winter and summer solstices at the site where it was found (Figure 3). The arc spans an angle of  $82^\circ$ , correctly indicating the angle between the positions of sunsets at summer and winter solstice at the latitude of the Mittelberg (McIntosh, 2010, p. 16).

**Figure 3.** *The Bush Barrow Lozenge and the Nebra Sky Disc*



In short, "both the Nebra disk and the Bush Barrow lozenge appear to be designed to reflect the annual solar cycle" (MacKie, 2009, p. 41). Therefore, these two archaeological finds, both dating to the Early Bronze Age, support the possibility that behind the gate of Gaza lies a metaphor for a solstitial gate, perfectly in line with the solar dimension of Samson's character that we have already highlighted in his other adventures.

But now we must see more precisely how the concept of the solstitial gate can be applied to the world of Gaza. Let us return then to Samson, who "lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron".

This corresponds to the situation of an observer who, looking eastward from Gaza at dawn, glimpses the Hebron Hills (Figure 4) on the eastern horizon. Hebron actually lies almost exactly east of Gaza (these two cities, both very ancient, are at nearly the same latitude: Gaza at 31°30'N, Hebron at 31°32'N), approximately 60 km away.

**Figure 4.** Gaza (bottom left) and, to the East, the Hebron Hills on the Gaza Horizon



Thus, reading that Bible verse in the astronomical key discussed earlier, that is, considering the solstitial gate as it appears from Gaza along the horizon toward Hebron, one immediately realizes that the two "posts" of the gate are marked by the two hills from which the sun rises at the respective solstices, and that the two "doors" correspond to the two halves of the "gate". The latter, in fact, like any double-door gate, is made up of two equal, adjacent, and symmetrical halves, divided in the center by the point where the sun rises on the days of the two equinoxes. Indeed, this equinoctial point east of Gaza (i.e., on the same parallel) lies almost exactly in the direction of present-day Hebron.

In this picture, "the top of the hill that faces Hebron" can only refer to the center of the solstitial gate, that is, the point where the sun rises at the two equinoxes, which, looking from Gaza in an eastward direction, actually

corresponds to “the hill that faces Hebron” which, located on the horizon line of Gaza, is on the parallel of the latter, that is, exactly east of Gaza. Furthermore, to complete the metaphor, “the bar” carried by Samson with the doors and the posts represents the stretch of horizon that extends between the “posts” of the two “doors”, that is, between the two points, seen from Gaza, corresponding to the two solstices on the horizon line.

We would like to emphasize that in this case it is the biblical text itself that provides us with clear proof of the astronomical dimension of the episode, when it mentions "the hill that faces Hebron", which, therefore, can only be located exactly east of Gaza (if the text had indicated a different direction, this interpretation would have left room for doubt).

In short, the solstitial gate east of Gaza has provided us with the hermeneutic key that allows us to immediately open an interpretative gate that had remained closed for millennia.

But now let's also see what Steintal's interpretation was in this case:

Samson broke open the gates of the well-bolted Hades (...) The cause for which Samson went down into the netherworld was forgotten, and a new motive was invented by the legend for his visit to Gaza, in keeping with the licentiousness of his character. The fact that he starts at midnight, and does not sleep till morning, is certainly not without significance, but contains a remembrance of the circumstance that the deed took place in the darkness, i.e. in the netherworld. And the feature of the story which tells that Samson carries the gates to the top of a hill, must have been suggested by some local peculiarity in the form of the rock (Steintal, 1877, p. 404).

Here too it comes naturally to observe that this interpretation by Steintal, comparable to the one reported above regarding the jawbone with which Samson massacred the Philistines, immediately explains the reason for Mobley's very sceptical judgment on the old hypotheses regarding the solar dimension of the figure of the biblical hero.

On the other hand, the very fact that, as we said before, this feat of Samson's appears at first sight completely surreal and utterly absurd—while the astronomical interpretation, supported by both archaeological and literary evidence, fits it like a glove—makes even more plausible the idea that this hermeneutic key is truly the only one applicable to this hitherto enigmatic character.

At this point, it is reasonable to suspect that even the final events of Samson's life, following Delilah's betrayal, can be interpreted astronomically. Indeed, the Philistines, taking advantage of his weakness, seized him, gouged out his eyes, took him down to Gaza, binded him, then set him to grinding grain in the prison mill. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved. Then the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to their god and to celebrate, because he had delivered Samson into their hands. So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. But when he was then made to stand between the central pillars on which the temple rested, Samson, bracing himself against them, prayed to the Lord, said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” Then he

pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it (Judges 16:21-30).

Here we note that the sequence of events in the final part of Samson's story, from the cutting of his hair (which we have likened to a solar eclipse) to the catastrophic conclusion, seems to correspond in Norse mythology to the eclipse in which "the wolf will swallow the sun" (*Gylfaginning* 51), which will mark the beginning of the terrible Ragnarok, the end of the world.

Thus, also considering the overall picture that has emerged of the figure of Samson and the importance of the astronomical dimension connected to it, which has allowed us to give a complete meaning to the main events of his life, it seems reasonable to suppose that the mill to which he was chained (and which in the unfolding of events shortly precedes the final catastrophe) can be compared to the World Mill, mentioned in many mythologies, including the Norse one. It is

the very image of time that incessantly grinds the eras, bringing to completion the measure assigned to them (...) The mill par excellence of the Norse myth is Grotti, who grinds the prosperity and abundance of the god of fertility (...) The World Mill disappears into the depths of the celestial ocean when the old cycle must be replaced by the new (Chiesa Isnardi, 1996, p. 183).

The World Mill is closely connected to astronomy:

The idea of the World Mill originated as a result of the seasonal revolution of the constellation of the Great Bear (MacKenzie, 1926, p. 88).

In short, the cosmic-astronomical dimension we have highlighted in so many seemingly bizarre episodes of Samson's life is also found, with admirable coherence, in the final feat of the biblical hero who, after being forced to turn the mill, is then led into the temple where he causes everything around him to collapse. Indeed, this final episode truly seems to allude to the end of an era.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have attempted to examine whether some of Samson's adventures, the unfolding of which often seems to defy common sense, can be interpreted astronomically using information recently made available to scholars by science, as we have already observed in previous articles regarding other equally bizarre exploits attributed to him in the Book of Judges.

In the first case examined here, in which Samson, armed only with a donkey's jawbone, slaughters his enemies, we were led to an astronomical interpretation by indications from various mythologies according to which the Hyades star cluster is called the Jawbone, due to its characteristic V-shape. In particular, in Norse mythology, the Hyades were called "the constellation of the wolf's jawbone", which appears to swallow the sun at the height of a total solar eclipse. This is because the Hyades, given their proximity to the ecliptic plane, are

often found at the time of a total eclipse in the area of the sky where the sun appears to temporarily disappear.

Subsequently, we found several pieces of evidence (both literary, starting with Homer, and archaeological) that what the biblical text calls "the gate of Gaza" does not refer to what is commonly understood as a city gate, but to a sophisticated astronomical reality, already known since the Early Bronze Age, as demonstrated by some archaeological finds from that period. It is, in fact, identifiable with the arc of the eastern horizon—which in this case is the horizon seen from Gaza in the direction of Hebron—which extends between the point where the sun rises on the winter solstice and the point where it rises on the summer solstice.

All this, moreover, makes it plausible to compare the millstone to which he was chained shortly before the catastrophic outcome of his last enterprise to the World Mill, mentioned in various mythologies, which marks the destinies of the eras that cyclically follow one another, from their beginning to their inevitable end.

We believe, therefore, that we have verified that this particular astronomical dimension of Samson's character, which also emerges from the meaning of his very name, can immediately reveal the metaphorical meaning of the most bizarre events of his life. Retracing them according to the order proposed in the Book of Judges, they are: the riddle posed to the Philistines regarding the lion's carcass in which he had found bees and honey; the no less enigmatic episode of the foxes with flaming tails; the massacre carried out with that extraordinary, deadly donkey's jawbone; the seemingly absurd moving of the gate of Gaza to the top of a hill; the secret of the immense strength connected to his hair; the obligation to turn the millstone, which is a prelude to the catastrophic end of him and his world.

In any case, given the novelty of this approach to the biblical figure of Samson, we believe that everything that has emerged so far on this topic should be further verified by specialists in the field and, if the outcome is positive, considered not as a point of arrival, but as a starting point for further investigations, from which new surprises may emerge in the future.

In particular, we believe it is appropriate for future studies to thoroughly investigate the possible direct or indirect contacts between the various civilizations involved in this research, whose mythologies have revealed surprising convergences. This broader context is beyond the scope of this analysis, but we believe it merits further exploration and future research. After all, it is well known that in every field of knowledge, a proposed solution to a problem often leads to the need to address new ones.

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