

A Hypothesis of Solution of Samson's Riddle

By Felice Vinci* & Arduino Maiuri[‡]

Samson's biblical riddle "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet", referring to honey and a swarm of bees which came out of the carcass of a lion he had torn apart with his bare hands in Timnah, reinterpreted in the light of recent archaeological discoveries in the Timna Valley, where there was an Egyptian shrine associated with ancient copper mines and metallurgical activities, seems to hide a metaphor linked to the world of metallurgy, with particular reference to the smelting of metals: in fact, the smelting furnace "eats" the mineral with the fire, emitting a sort of roar similar to that of lions, and then the copper gushes out, which has a colour similar to that of wild honey. This is confirmed by the examination of analogous myths and tales spread among various civilizations, starting from that of the Nemean lion killed by Heracles and arriving at the Japanese myth in which Susanoo kills a dragon, in whose tail he finds a sword considered one of the treasures of the Japanese imperial dynasty.

Keywords: Samson, Samson's riddle, honey, Timna Valley, metallurgy, Heracles, Nemean lion, Susanoo

In this article we will try to prove that Samson's riddle – with which Samson challenges his wedding guests ("out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet"), referring to a strange lion that he had torn apart in Timnah with his bare hands and from whose carcass honey and a swarm of bees had subsequently come out – could hide a subtle metaphor relating to the smelting furnaces with which metals were produced in antiquity.

We will in fact see that such an interpretation – which was suggested to us by the archaeological discoveries (on which we will focus shortly) in the Timna Valley, the locality where the *Book of Judges* sets the story – seems to be corroborated by the analysis of significant analogies with stories and traditions of cultures even very distant from the Jewish world, using a methodology consisting of a new critical examination of sources not only biblical and classical, but also from other literary contexts.

The biblical episode in which Samson's riddle is inserted is found in the *Book of Judges*, where it is incorporated into a larger narrative about Samson, the last of the judges of the ancient Israelites:

"Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother: 'I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife'. [...] Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the Lord

*Academic Member, ATINER & Independent Researcher, Italy.

[‡]Professor, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done. Then he went down and talked with the woman, and he liked her. Sometime later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass. Now his father went down to see the woman. And Samson made a feast there, as was customary for bridegrooms. When he appeared, he was given thirty companions. 'Let me tell you a riddle', Samson said to them. 'If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can't tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes'. 'Tell us your riddle', they said. 'Let's hear it'. He replied: 'Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet'¹ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Samson Tears the Lion Apart (Cathedral of San Lorenzo, Genoa)*



Behind the apparent strangeness of this story, the suspicion immediately arises that it is a complex metaphor whose real meaning is hidden or lost over time.

Revealing in this regard seems to be the fact that in the Timna Valley, in Israeli territory, 30 km north of the Gulf of Aqaba, in the second half of the twentieth century the Israeli archaeologist Beno Rothenberg brought to light the remains of a copper extraction, which lasted continuously from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages. In particular, he found an Egyptian temple dedicated to Hathor, the goddess of mining, built at the end of the 14th century BCE for the Egyptian miners (Rothenberg 1972, 1988): thousands of hieroglyphics, sculptures and

¹Gdc 14: 1-14.

jewels brought to light prove its importance (Tebes 2007). Notably, in 2013, the year after Rothenberg's death, the "Central Timna Valley Project", also directed by Ben-Yosef of Tel Aviv University, began, which continues the previous work and includes new excavations and surveys designed to address a number of critical issues in the Late Bronze and Iron Age archaeology of the southern Levant (Ben-Yosef et al. 2012, Beyth et al. 2013, Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef 2014, Erickson-Gini 2014, Kleiman et al. 2017, Ben-Yosef et al. 2017, Sukenik et al. 2017, Ben-Yosef 2018, Cavanagh et al. 2022, David et al. 2022a, b, Erickson-Gini 2023).

From this the idea arose spontaneously that Samson's riddle can be interpreted in a metallurgical key, as a metaphor for the smelting furnace: in fact, it seems "to eat", "to devour" the mineral with fire, producing a noise that recalls the roar of a lion, but then the copper gushes out, which actually has a colour similar to that of wild honey: "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet"².

There are several reasons to support this thesis, both in the Bible and in myths and legends of other peoples, even very distant ones. First of all, it is precisely the character of Samson who appears closely related to fire, starting from his very name, which means "man of the sun" or "little sun" (Eynikel and Nicklas 2014), but also in the antecedents of his miraculous birth, announced to his mother (which until then had remained barren) by an angel of Lord who subsequently, at the end of a sacrifice, "as the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, ascended in the flame"³; not to mention when "he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves"⁴. Immediately afterwards the Philistines burned his wife and father-in-law alive: this too fits well into the igneous dimension of the famous riddle.

Turning now to the Greek world, the correspondent of the imprudent lion killed by Samson is the Nemean lion, the protagonist of the first labour of Heracles⁵. We immediately see that this lion was also very strange, because its fur was impenetrable, but the very strong Greek hero is eventually able to strangle him to death (Figure 2).

²Here is the riddle in the Bible language: לְכֹאֵם אֵצִי לְכֹאֵם ("out of the eater came something to eat"), וְקִרְתָּם אֵצִי זֶעֱמֶן ("and out of the strong came something sweet").

³Gdc 13: 20.

⁴Gdc 15: 4–5.

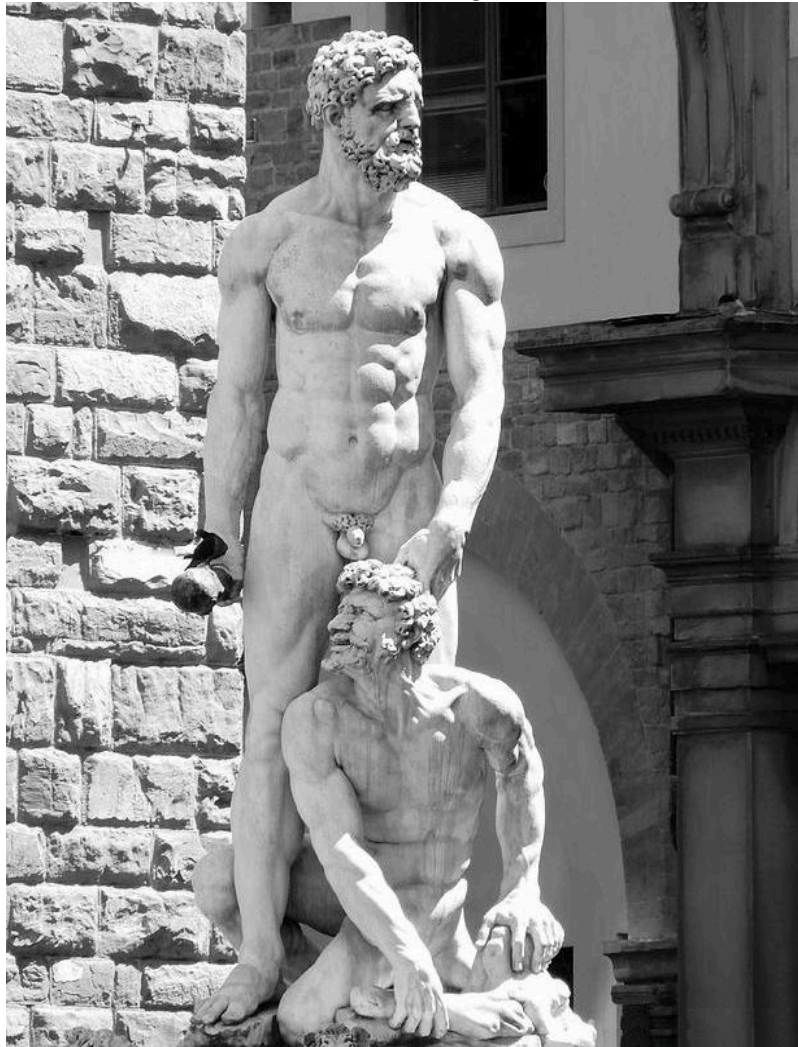
⁵Hes., *Theog.* 327–332.

Figure 2. *Heracles and the Nemean Lion (Attic Amphora from Cerveteri)*

Rereading this story in parallel with that of Samson, it becomes clear that the metaphor is analogous, and indeed in the case of the biblical hero it appears much more explicit, albeit through the cover of the riddle (which, moreover, seems to attest to the awareness of who first told the episode).

On the other hand, in the vast casuistry of the Greek hero's adventures there is another one, handed down from Roman mythology, which could also be part of an igneous–metallurgical dimension: we are referring to Hercules's struggle with the monstrous, terrible Cacus in a cave on the Aventine hill. Cacus was a huge giant, thief and cannibal, who terrorized his neighbours with his misdeeds, until he had the bad idea of stealing some of the herds of Hercules, who had arrived in Lazio with the oxen of Geryon. However, despite his misdirection attempt (Cacus had dragged them into his cave making them walk backwards to confuse their tracks), Hercules reached him, grabbed him and lifting him squeezed him with superhuman strength, to the point that, as Virgil recounts, while the monster he was choking in his death grip, his eyes popped out of their sockets and the blood dried in his throat⁶ (Figure 3).

⁶Verg., *Aen.* VIII, 260–261.

Figure 3. *Hercules and Cacus (Piazza della Signoria, Florence)*

And it's always Cacus who in his dramatic duel with Hercules shows an implication that connects him directly to fire (aside from the fact that he had been fathered by Vulcan, the god of fire): in an attempt to blind his opponent he suddenly began to erupt smoke and flames, to the point that his “large cave was filled with a black cloud”⁷.

In short, the way of fighting between the two, which culminates with the chase in Cacus's cave and his strangulation by Hercules, seems very similar to the adventure of the Nemean lion, in which Heracles chases, hunts down and strangles that very strange animal with impenetrable fur. The parallel, therefore, with the hypothesized “metallurgical lion” slain by Samson, from which a “honey” corresponding to the copper that flows from the smelting furnace comes out, is corroborated by the smoke and fire in the cave of Cacus, which could be the last

⁷Verg., *Aen.* VIII, 258. Cf. Jármi (2013). The Roman heroic tradition preserves four important testimonies of the divine nature of the element fire: the founding Fire Caeculus, the thieving Fire Cacus with his sister Caca – exact equivalent of the Roman goddess Vesta and the Greek Hestia – and the guardian Fire Cocles (more details in Haudry 2012).

memory of a primordial forge on the slopes of the Aventine. Moreover, Cacus's relationship with the fire finds significant confirmation by his ruse of stealing animals by making them walk backwards, that is, the same trick devised by Hermes, the inventor of fire⁸, when, according to the *Homeric hymn* dedicated to him, he stole Apollo's fifty cows.

On the other hand, according to Georges Dumézil, in the sacrificial area of the Vedic world, in addition to the two main fires (one male, "quadrangular", and the other "female", circular) there was a third fire, the "hungry" one, considered a "devourer", which had guard functions and which should be identified in the Roman Vulcan (Dumézil 1977, pp. 284–285)⁹. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the fire of the smelting furnace, with which the weapons that protected the community were produced, fell within this case, to which the metaphor of the "eater" found in Samson's riddle is very well suited. Moreover, this makes the sacrifice that the Flamen Vulcanalis officiated in homage to Maia on the first day of the month of May even more significant, confirming the close relationship between the blacksmith's forge, which manufactured the weapons for the defense of Rome, and Maia, who in one of our previous studies we identified as the secret tutelary deity of the city itself (Vinci and Maiuri 2017).

Dumézil also underlines the distinction between the *quirites* (the ordinary citizens) and the *milites* (the soldiers, i.e., the citizens under arms), typical of the Roman world (Dumézil 1977, p. 108). This finds confirmation in the Greek myth of the birth of Zeus, in which the Curetes appear, linked to the mysteries of metallurgy, as well as (in a variant reported by Károly Kerényi) certain gigantic bees (Kerényi 1979, p. 410), called *melittai* in Greek, whose extraordinary analogy with the "stings" of soldiers (*milites* in Latin) cannot be overlooked. This metaphor – which, moreover, would authorize us to propose an unpublished etymology of the Latin word *miles* ("soldier") and also of the numeral *mille* ("one thousand"), both possibly derived from a metaphor suggested by the swarms of bees – can be found also in Ethiopia, where a legend tells that at birth King Lalibela was covered by a swarm of bees, a symbol of the soldiers who would later have defended him (Jarzombek 2007).

The presence of bees in a context linked to metallurgical mysteries also has a significant parallel in the Finnish *Kalevala*¹⁰, according to which iron comes from black, red and white milk, which correspond precisely to the three traditional colours of the alchemy, *nigredo*, *rubedo*, *albedo* (which, probably not by chance, are the colours corresponding to the various phases of metal incandescence). So, it is no coincidence that the blacksmith Ilmarinen uses the honey of the Mehiläinen bee to temper the metal.

A similar interpretation to the one only just indicated can be extended to the Japanese myth in which the god Susanoo – a figure that has been compared to Samson (de Santillana and von Dechend 2003, p. 205), whose name seems to be similar – kills and dismembers a dragon, in whose tail he finds a sword, so

⁸Hermes is a central figure in the Greek *pantheon*: cf. Kuhle (2020). Useful insights into his original characterization as a god of fire can be found in Vinci and Maiuri (2022).

⁹On this ancestral divine figure see Capdeville (1995).

¹⁰In this case the reference is to the 9th rune, in which the myth of the origin of iron is narrated.

important to be considered one of the treasures of the Japanese imperial dynasty (Marega 1938, p. 154, n. 218). Here too the metallurgical aspect is evident, also considering that Susanoo is the brother of Amaterasu, the sun goddess.

In conclusion, notwithstanding that this fascinating topic will require other investigations and insight in the future, we have ascertained that Samson's riddle can be easily deciphered in terms of a metallurgical metaphor of the copper smelting furnaces, as the archaeological discoveries in the Timna Valley attest, also considering that this new interpretation of the riddle finds confirmation in the mythologies of other cultures, including the Greek one (where the Nemean lion corresponds to that killed by Samson), the Roman one, the Finnish *Kalevala* and even the mythology of ancient Japan. Not only that: we also believe it probable that future studies could extend these correlations to other mythologies as well.

References

- Ben-Yosef E (Ed) (2018) *Mining for ancient copper: essays in memory of professor Beno Rothenberg*. Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University: Tel Aviv.
- Ben-Yosef E, Langgut D, Sapir-Hen L (2017) Beyond smelting: new insights on Iron Age (10th c. BCE) metalworkers community from excavations at a gatehouse and associated livestock pens in Timna, Israel. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 11: 411–426.
- Ben-Yosef E, Shaar R, Tauxe L, Ron H (2012) A new chronological framework for Iron Age copper production at Timna (Israel). *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 367: 31–71.
- Beyth M, Segev A, Ginat H (2013) *Stratigraphy and structure of the Timna Valley and adjacent ancient mining areas*. Jerusalem: Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, Geological Survey of Israel. Report number: GSI/15/2013 = Idd. In E Ben-Yosef (ED), *Mining for Ancient Copper: Essays in Memory of Professor Beno Rothenberg*, 3–20. Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University.
- Capdeville G (1995) *Volcanus: recherches comparatistes sur les origines du culte de Vulcain*. (Volcanus: comparative research on the origins of the cult of Vulcan). Paris: De Boccard.
- Cavanagh M, Ben-Yosef E, Langgut D. (2022) Fuel exploitation and environmental degradation at the Iron Age copper industry of the Timna Valley, southern Israel. *Scientific Reports* 12(1): 1–15.
- David M, Kislev M, Melamed Y, Ben-Yosef E, Weiss E (2022a) Food provisioning, offerings and dietary items as reflected by the Late Bronze and Iron Ages archaeobotanical remains from Timna. In R Galili, H Ben-David, LK Horwitz, E Ben-Yosef (Eds), *Studies in Desert Archaeology in Honor of Uzi Avner. Negev, Dead Sea and Arava Studies* 14(2–4): 188–200.
- David M, Kislev M, Melamed Y, Ben-Yosef E, Weiss E (2022b) Plant remains from Rothenberg's excavations in Timna: smelters' food and cultic offerings at the turn of the first Millennium BCE. *Tel Aviv. Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 49(2): 230–249.
- de Santillana G, von Dechend (2003) *Il Mulino di Amleto. Saggio sul mito e sulla struttura del tempo* (1969), *Hamlet's mill: an essay investigating the origins of human knowledge and its transmission through myth*. Boston: Gambit/Milano: Adelphi.

- Dumézil G (1977) *La religione romana arcaica, con un'appendice sulla religione degli Etruschi* (1966), *La religion romaine archaïque, avec un appendice sur la religion des étrusques*. Paris: Pavot. (The archaic Roman religion, with an appendix on the religion of the Etruscans). Milano: Rizzoli.
- Erickson-Gini T (2014) Timna', Site 2 revisited. In JM Tebes (Ed), *Unearthing the Wilderness: Studies on the History and Archaeology of the Negev and Edom in the Iron Age*, 47–84. Leuven: Peeters.
- Erickson-Gini (2023) Timna', Site 2 – 2016–2019: Final Report. In *Hadashot Arkheologiyot. Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 135. Available at: http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26291&mag_id=135.
- Eynikel E, Nicklas T (Eds.) (2014) *Samson: hero or fool? The many faces of Samson*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Haudry J (2012) Les feux de Rome. (The fires of Rome). *Revue des Études Latines* 90: 57–82.
- Jármi V (2013) A horrendum monstrum: an interpretation of the figure of Cacus. *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 49: 203–218.
- Jarzombek M (2007) Lalibela and Libanos, the King and the Hydro-Engineer of 13th-Century Ethiopia. *Thresholds* 34: 78–81.
- Kerényi K (1979) *Miti e misteri* (1950), Torino: Ed Brelich A. Einaudi. (Myths and Mysteries). Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Kleiman S, Kleiman A, Ben-Yosef E (2017) Metalworkers' material culture in the Early Iron Age Levant: The ceramic assemblage from Site 34 (Slaves' Hill) in the Timna Valley. *Tel Aviv. Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviva University* 44(2): 232–264.
- Kuhle A (2020) *Hermes und die Bürger: der Hermes kult in den griechischen Poleis*. (Hermes and the citizens: the cult of Hermes in the Greek poleis). Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Marega M (Ed) (1938) *Ko-gi-ki. Libro base dello Shintoismo giapponese*. (Ko-gi-ki. Basic book of Japanese Shintoism). Bari: Laterza.
- Rothenberg B (1972) *Were these King Solomon's mines? Excavations in the Timna valley*. New York: Stein & Day.
- Rothenberg B (1988) *Researches in the Arabah, 1959–1984: the Egyptian mining temple at Timna*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Sapir-Hen L, Ben-Yosef E (2014) The socioeconomic status of Iron Age metalworkers: animal economy in the 'Slaves' Hill', Timna, Israel. *Antiquity* 88(341): 1–16.
- Sukenik N, Iluz D, Amar Z, Varvak A, Workman V, Shamir O, et al. (2017) Early evidence (late 2nd millennium BCE) of plant-based dyeing of textiles from Timna, Israel. *PLOS ONE* 12(6).
- Tebes JM (2007) A land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. The exploitation and circulation of copper in the Iron Age Negev and Edom. *DavarLogos* 6(1): 69–91.
- Vinci F, Maiuri A (2017) Mai dire Maia. Un'ipotesi sulla causa dell'esilio di Ovidio e sul nome segreto di Roma (nel bimillenario della morte del poeta). (Never say Maia. A hypothesis on the cause of Ovid's exile and the secret name of Rome, in the two thousandth anniversary of the poet's death). *Appunti Romani di Filologia* 19: 19–30.
- Vinci F, Maiuri A (2022) A proposal upon the figure of Hermes as an ancient God of fire (according to the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*). *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 8(2): 107–116.