

1 **A Hypothesis of Solution to the Riddle of Revelation on** 2 **the Number 666**

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4 *The article presents the results of a study aimed at finding the solution to a*
 5 *famous riddle from the Book of Revelation: “Here is wisdom. He that has*
 6 *understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a*
 7 *man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six”. Revelation proposes this*
 8 *riddle at the conclusion of an episode in which a great, evil dragon appears in*
 9 *the sky and persecutes a pregnant woman, but is thrown to earth by Michael,*
 10 *then two demonic beasts appear. Here it is proposed that the solution to the*
 11 *riddle is "Apophis", the name of the gigantic evil serpent which in Egyptian*
 12 *mythology is the adversary of the solar god Ra. The reliability of this hypothesis*
 13 *is based on the correspondence with the sum of the numbers associated with the*
 14 *Greek letters that make up that name, also considering the analogy of this story*
 15 *with the Greek myth of Leto, persecuted by a dragon before giving birth to the*
 16 *solar god Apollo. It is also corroborated by the fact that the proposed solution*
 17 *in turn allows to immediately resolve another enigma, contained in Dante's*
 18 *Inferno, where a demonic character, Plutus, pronounces a seemingly senseless*
 19 *phrase: “Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe”. It can be deduced that Dante knew*
 20 *the solution to the riddle of Revelation and used it to make his enigma, which*
 21 *has remained unsolved until now. Therefore the proposed solutions of the two*
 22 *puzzles corroborate each other, strengthening their reliability.*

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24 **Keywords:** *six hundred sixty-six, Revelation, Apophis, Plutus, Pape Satàn.*

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27 In this article we will first examine a famous riddle proposed in the
 28 Revelation of St. John, which we will try to solve using a methodology consisting
 29 of a new critical examination of sources not only biblical and classical, but also
 30 from another literary context; subsequently, as a confirmation of the validity of the
 31 reasoning and the solution found, by making use of the latter we will also be able
 32 to discover the true meaning, so far uncertain and controversial, of an enigmatic
 33 verse from Dante's Inferno.

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35 So now we will examine the episode from Revelation, spanning two chapters,
 36 where a great dragon appears in the sky that persecutes a woman about to give
 37 birth (Figure 1), then it tries to kill her newborn son, but is opposed by Michael
 38 with his angelic hosts, who throw it to Earth. The episode continues by recounting
 39 other events in which two beasts linked to the dragon appear, and then ends with a
 40 riddle for which a convincing solution has never been found until now¹: “He that
 41 has understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a
 42 man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six”².

¹Cf. M.G. Michael, *The Number of the Beast, 666 (Revelation 13:16-18): Background, Sources and Interpretation*, Sydney 1998.

²Rev. 13:18.

1 **Figure 1.** *Woman clothed with the sun and the dragon [detail], from “Apocalypse*
2 *of Valenciennes”, IX century (Valenciennes, Municipal Library).*



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In order to find an acceptable solution to the riddle, which is the purpose of this article, it is useful to first read the episode carefully. Here are the highlights of the narrative of Revelation:

9 “And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon
10 under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. And being with child, she
11 cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered. And there was seen another
12 sign in heaven: and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads, and ten horns:
13 and on his head seven diadems. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven,
14 and cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to
15 be delivered; that, when she should be delivered, he might devour her son. And she
16 brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with an iron rod: and her son
17 was taken up to God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness,
18 where she had a place prepared by God, that there they should feed her a thousand
19 two hundred sixty days. And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his
20 angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels. And they
21 prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great
22 dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth
23 the whole world; and he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down
24 with him. [...] And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having seven heads and
25 ten horns, and upon his horns ten diadems, and upon his heads names of blasphemy.
26 And the beast, which I saw, was like to a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a
27 bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his own
28 strength, and great power. And I saw one of his heads as it were slain to death: and
29 his death's wound was healed. And all the earth was in admiration after the beast.
30 And they adored the dragon, which gave power to the beast: and they adored the
31 beast, saying: Who is like to the beast? and who shall be able to fight with him? And
32 there was given to him a mouth speaking great things, and blasphemies: and power
33 was given to him to do two and forty months. And he opened his mouth unto
34 blasphemies against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that
35 dwell in heaven. And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to
36 overcome them. And power was given him over every tribe, and people, and tongue,

1 and nation. And all that dwell upon the earth adored him, whose names are not
 2 written in the book of life of the Lamb, which was slain from the beginning of the
 3 world. If any man have an ear, let him hear. He that shall lead into captivity, shall go
 4 into captivity: he that shall kill by the sword, must be killed by the sword. Here is the
 5 patience and the faith of the saints. And I saw another beast coming up out of the
 6 earth, and he had two horns, like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. And he executed
 7 all the power of the former beast in his sight; and he caused the earth, and them that
 8 dwell therein, to adore the first beast, whose wound to death was healed. And he did
 9 great signs, so that he made also fire to come down from heaven unto the earth in the
 10 sight of men.(13, 1-13; 13, 18). [...] Here is wisdom. He that has understanding, let
 11 him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a man: and the number of
 12 him is six hundred sixty-six”³.

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 14 The riddle of Revelation, therefore, refers to an "old serpent", an abject
 15 incarnation of Evil to the point of being called "devil and Satan", which, after
 16 being "cast unto the earth", reappears in the guise of the two beasts. Here one
 17 immediately thinks of Apep (Ἄποφις in Greek), the great serpent of Egyptian
 18 mythology, image of the forces of darkness as well as bitter enemy of the sun god
 19 Ra (it is no coincidence that its epithet was "enemy of Ra")⁴. At the beginning of
 20 each day Apep-Apophis tried to prevent the rising of the Sun, threatening him as
 21 he sailed on his boat through the Duat, the Egyptian afterlife.

22 Here we will try to demonstrate that it is precisely Apep-Apophis, the sworn
 23 enemy of the sun god, that the riddle that concludes the episode of Revelation
 24 could allude to. In fact the sum of the numbers corresponding to the Greek letters
 25 (A-P-O-Ph-I-S) that make up that name is equal to 667 (A = 1, P = 80, O = 70, Ph
 26 = 500, I = 10, S = 6), from which, however, 1 (the number of the initial A) must be
 27 subtracted because, according to Revelation, "I saw one of his heads as it were
 28 slain to death"⁵, which in Egyptian mythology corresponds to an account in which
 29 Apophis is defeated by Ra in the form of a cat⁶ (Figure 2). The sum is 666.

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 31 **Figure 2.** *Apophis slain by Ra in the form of a cat, from the Papyrus of Hunefer*
 32 *(ca. 13th-12th cent. BC).*



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³Rev. 12:1-9; 13:1-13; 13:18.

⁴Cf. G. Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002.

⁵Rev. 13:3.

⁶G. Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002, p. 107.

1 As for that initial A, in the Greek numerical system of the Hellenistic age, the
 2 letter alpha was used to indicate the number 1; it derived from the Phoenician
 3 letter *aleph* (also corresponding to the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet),
 4 indicating "ox".⁷ Therefore the A in Apophis represented its "head", because it was
 5 the initial letter of the name and it was the first in the Greek alphabet. On the other
 6 hand, its very shape recalls the stylized representation of an ox head, precisely
 7 aleph-alpha, **A**, with the horns pointing downwards.

8 On the other hand, Greek mythology tells a very similar story: we are
 9 referring to the dragon Python who persecutes⁸ the goddess Leto, pregnant and
 10 about to give birth to Apollo (the solar god who corresponds to the Egyptian Ra,
 11 also due to the fact that then Apollo killed Python⁹) and his twin Artemis.
 12 Incidentally, here a suggestive supposition arises (which however cannot be
 13 proven): given that Saint John, traditionally considered the author of Revelation,
 14 would have lived in Ephesus, where there was the Artemision, i.e. the great temple
 15 of Artemis – whose remains still exist (it was considered by the ancients one of the
 16 seven wonders of the world) – at this point it would be natural to wonder whether
 17 the image of the great red dragon that "stood before the woman who was ready to
 18 be delivered"¹⁰ could have been inspired by one of decorations of the Artemision.

19 What corroborates the plausibility of this solution to the riddle, that is, that the
 20 name of Apophis is hidden behind the number 666, is the fact that it in turn could
 21 give us the key to solving another age-old literary enigma. We are referring to the
 22 debated meaning of the opening verse of the VII canto of Dante's *Inferno*: "*Papè*
 23 *Satan, papè Satan aleppe*", an apparently senseless phrase that Plutus, a demonic
 24 being – expressly defined as "the great enemy"¹¹ – says when he meets Dante and
 25 Virgil (Figure 3).

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 27 **Figure 3.** *Plutus drawn by Gustave Doré*



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⁷Cf. G. Roskam, *Plutarch on the alpha*, in "Les Etudes Classiques", 99 (2020), pp. 285-300.

⁸Ps.-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 140.

⁹Ovid. *Met. I*, 438-444.

¹⁰Rev. 12:4.

¹¹Inf. VI, 115.

1 Over the centuries, exegetes have grappled with those incomprehensible
 2 words of Plutus, giving them the most disparate interpretations¹². At this point, to
 3 evaluate whether they can be related to the solution to the riddle of Revelation, it
 4 seems appropriate to cite the entire context in which Plutus utters those words:

5
 6 “Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn, Aleppe!”
 7 Thus Plutus with his clucking voice began;
 8 And that benignant Sage, who all things knew,

9
 10 Said, to encourage me: “Let not thy fear
 11 Harm thee; for any power that he may have
 12 Shall not prevent thy going down this crag.”

13
 14 Then he turned round unto that bloated lip,
 15 And said: “Be silent, thou accursed wolf;
 16 Consume within thyself with thine own rage.

17
 18 Not causeless is this journey to the abyss;
 19 Thus is it willed on high, where Michael wrought
 20 Vengeance upon the proud adultery.”

21
 22 Even as the sails inflated by the wind
 23 Together fall involved when snaps the mast,
 24 So fell the cruel monster to the earth.¹³

25
 26 From these verses one can immediately deduce that:

- 27
 28 1. Plutus has only begun a speech, which is immediately cut short by Virgil
 29 (*Thus Plutus with his clucking voice began*);
 30 2. Virgil perfectly understands the true meaning of Plutus' words (*that*
 31 *benignant Sage, who all things knew*). Incidentally, this is very important,
 32 because it indicates that the sentence said by Plutus is not at all meaningless;
 33 3. what Plutus expresses is a strong feeling of anger (*Consume within thyself*
 34 *with thine own rage*);
 35 4. the demon's anger scares Dante (*Let not thy fear/harm thee*).

36
 37 At this point, recalling what emerged earlier about the dragon and the
 38 diabolical beasts in Revelation, it is revealing that here the poet, in saying that
 39 “Michael wrought/vengeance upon the proud adultery”, makes an explicit allusion
 40 to that episode, with particular regard to Michael and his victorious fight with the
 41 dragon.

42 Not only that: it is precisely in listening to those words, with which Virgil
 43 recalls the defeat of the devil, that Plutus also feels defeated, to the point of
 44 immediately overturning his aggressive attitude: “So fell the cruel monster to the

¹²Cf. G. Sasso, *L'enigma di Dante: il significato di Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*, Bologna 2021.

¹³Inf. VII, 1-15 (Transl. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow).

1 earth”. Here we find a perfect parallel with the image of the fall of the devil in
 2 Revelation: “He was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with
 3 him”¹⁴.

4 On the other hand, perfectly consistent with the picture just outlined is also
 5 the expression, already mentioned a little while ago, with which Dante, in the last
 6 verse of the canto preceding the one we are examining, had presented the character
 7 of Plutus: "the great enemy" . It fits well with the image of the Rebel Angel, whose
 8 dimension as a sworn enemy of God and men is reiterated several times in the
 9 episode of Revelation that we previously examined.

10 At this point, considering both the attitude of Dante's Plutus, with his obvious
 11 references to that episode, and what previously emerged regarding the solution to
 12 the riddle of the number 666, in this light it is not difficult to decipher the hidden
 13 meaning of the expression “Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe”, which the poet
 14 attributes to his diabolical character: it wants to express the identification, repeated
 15 twice, of Apophis (“Pape”) with Satan, proclaiming at the same time his
 16 glorification (“Pape Satàn is the alpha, *aleppe*, that is, the first, the number one”).

17 Not only that: in reality the most important concept hidden by Dante in that
 18 sentence is the detachment of the “head” (*aleppe*, i.e. “alpha”, **A**) from the rest of
 19 the body di A-pophis (“pape”, i.e. *pophis*). But this is precisely the key that had
 20 allowed us to solve the enigma of Revelation, since this is how the name
 21 "Apophis", deprived of the initial A, corresponds exactly to the number 666.

22 On the basis of this interpretation, corroborated by the verses following
 23 Plutus’ strange words, which until now had appeared incomprehensible (but which
 24 Virgil had instead perfectly understood), we can now affirm that Dante certainly
 25 knew the solution to the riddle of Revelation on the number of the beast's name
 26 and he ingeniously proposed it again – still in enigmatic form! – in that line of his
 27 Comedy.

28 On the other hand, the poet often loved to express himself through riddles and
 29 word games (just like Shakespeare a few centuries later), and in this case he even
 30 plays at building his enigma starting from the solution of another much older one
 31 (here you almost have the impression that Dante is winking at the one who rereads
 32 Plutus' strange words after finally understanding their meaning...).

33 This also explains why the meaning of Plutus' words has never been clarified
 34 until now: to solve it it is necessary to have first solved the riddle of the number
 35 666 in Revelation, and therefore the very fact that both problems have been solved
 36 together – or rather, one immediately after the other – constitutes in itself a further
 37 indication of the validity of the reasoning developed here.

38 In conclusion, we have solved the riddle of Revelation by comparing the
 39 demonic images of the dragon and the evil beasts appearing therein with Apophis,
 40 the diabolical serpent enemy of Ra, the god of the sun in Egyptian mythology, and
 41 then verifying that the sum of the numbers corresponding to the Greek letters of its
 42 name correspond to the number 666. Proof of this is also the fact that to make the
 43 calculations correct we had to exclude the initial A from the addition, because the
 44 head of the Beast of Revelation was "slain to death", which finds confirmation in
 45 the fact that Apophis is also depicted with his head cut off.

¹⁴Rev. 12:9.

1 A further confirmation of the reliability of this solution lies in the fact that it
2 in turn gives us the key to solving another age-old problem: in fact it has allowed
3 us to give a complete meaning to the words, considered incomprehensible until
4 now, pronounced by Plutus, a demonic character of Dante's *Inferno*. Therefore the
5 proposed solutions of the two puzzles corroborate each other, strengthening their
6 reliability. Here it could also be added that both are plastically represented by the
7 image of figure 2, where Apophis is depicted at the moment in which he is
8 beheaded.

9 Still regarding the enigma of the words spoken by Plutus, which as we have
10 just seen is closely connected to the previous one, the question still remains
11 whether it was Dante himself who was the first to understand that the name hidden
12 behind the number 666 was Apophis, or whether he had been told by someone
13 else, and, in the latter case, how and from whom he had received such information.
14 This is an extremely difficult problem (which in some ways recalls, for example,
15 that of the sources he drew on to construct the enigmatic character of the
16 "heavenly Messenger" in the IX canto of the *Inferno*¹⁵, as well as the character of
17 Geryon in the XVII canto¹⁶), but it seemed right to propose it to remind us that in
18 every field of human knowledge the solution to any problem often involves having
19 to face new ones.

¹⁵F. Vinci, A. Maiuri, *Parallelismi tra Dante e Omero: il Messo celeste nel IX Canto dell'Inferno* (Parallels between Dante and Homer: The heavenly Messenger in the IX Canto of Hell), in "Appunti Romani di Filologia", 23 (2021), pp. 47-56.

¹⁶ F. Vinci, A. Maiuri, *Possibili fonti inedite del personaggio di Gerione nell'Inferno dantesco* (Possible unpublished sources of the character of Geryon in Dante's *Inferno*), in "Appunti Romani di Filologia", 25 (2023), pp. 55-61.