

The Hidden Meaning of Samson's Foxes

Felice Vinci*

Academic Member of Atiner, Italy

*Corresponding author: Felice Vinci, Academic Member of Atiner, Independent Researcher, Italy

Received:  February 26, 2024

Published:  March 13, 2024

Introduction

One of the most singular stories in the Bible is the feat of Samson, who “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” [1].

Until now it has never been possible to make sense of this apparently extravagant undertaking. However, it corresponds to a very similar custom of the Romans [2]: “When the third morn shall have risen after the disappearance of the Hyades, the horses will be in the Circus, each team in its separate stall. I must therefore explain the reason why foxes are let loose with torches tied to their burning backs” [3]. The poet continues by telling the reason for this strange custom, which apparently originated in the city of Carseoli [4], where in ancient times a child had set fire to a fox that was killing chickens, but “she escaped the hands that would have burned her. Where she fled, she set fire to the crops that clothed the fields, and a breeze fanned the devouring flames. The incident is forgotten, but a memorial of it survives; for to this day a certain law of Carseoli forbids to name a fox; and to punish the species a fox is burned at the festival of Ceres, thus perishing itself in the way it destroyed the crops” [5]. And what about the “Sada Festival” in Iran, where animals were set on fire and chased across the countryside [6]? At first glance it would seem impossible to find the common metaphorical meaning hidden behind these bizarre stories, very similar to each other despite coming from very different environments and cultures.

At this point, to understand the meaning of the metaphor hidden behind the relationship between Samson's foxes and fire it is necessary to examine the folklore of Finland: here there is a mythical Fire Fox (Tulikettu), so called because its tail sends out sparks of fire. Not only that: this fox gives its name to the northern

lights, called revontulet (“fox fires” in Finnish), which is caused by sparks when it runs touching the snowy ground, branches and bushes [7]. Let's deal with the northern lights (aurora borealis), which are generated when energized particles from the sun collide with Earth's upper atmosphere and are funneled by our planet's magnetic field toward the poles, where they excite gas atoms and molecules, and the process transforms into a phantasmagorical atmospheric phenomenon, that has always fascinated humans.

Aurora typically begins with a phosphorescent glow above the horizon, then a flaming arc lights up and rises up into the sky, followed by other luminous arcs, along which small waves and curls move. Then rays of light begin to descend from above, forming a sort of flaming draperies or curtains that tremble in the wind and seem to evoke a dance show, or rather, dancing fires that appear, spreading throughout the sky, then disappear and reform. We can see a violet and a red trimming at the lower and upper ends, or the colors all mixed together, woven into each other. Above our head, we can see rays converging to a point in the sky, forming what is called an auroral corona. After 10 to 20 minutes the storm is over and the activity decreases. The bands are spread out, disintegrating in a diffuse light all over the sky, intense enough to make out the details of the surrounding landscapes, as if there were a lit fire. As the minutes pass, the flames of the northern lights fade, becoming increasingly weaker and pulsating, the luminous clouds go out and come back on again, fading more and more, until this gigantic spectacle of flaming lights does not run out by going out completely. Nature's own gigantic light-show is over, vanished into the darkness of the night or the light of dawn [8].

The correspondence, therefore, between the Finnish name of the northern lights and the mythical Fire Fox whose tail emits sparks immediately resolves the mystery of the otherwise incomprehensible burning foxes which are found identical in the

biblical story of Samson and in the world of the Roman Circus: evidently an impressive luminous phenomenon like the one we have just described, which occurs, albeit rarely, even at intermediate latitudes, must have greatly struck the imagination of ancient men. On the other hand, the typical elongated shape of the tail of foxes, especially the red ones, lends itself very well to representing the bright plumes of fire exhibited by the northern lights, or rather, the Nordic fox fires. It should also be noted that the flaming aspect of the northern lights perfectly matches the fiery dimension of the character of Samson, in whose very name, (which in Hebrew means “man of the sun”) [9], we find the Hebrew name of the sun (שֶׁשׁ); this in the past even led to the hypothesis that his hair might represent the sun’s rays [10].

On the other hand, we had already focused on the close relationship of the biblical hero with fire in a previous article [11], starting from the antecedents of his miraculous birth, announced to his mother by an angel of the Lord who subsequently, at the end of a sacrifice, “as the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, ascended in the flame” [12]. Furthermore, this fits perfectly into the metallurgical dimension which, as we have still seen in that article, is the key to solving Samson’s famous riddle, “Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet” [13], referring to honey and a swarm of bees from the carcass of a lion that the hero had killed at Timnah. In fact, reread in the light of archaeological discoveries in the Timna Valley [14], where there was an Egyptian sanctuary associated with ancient copper mines and metallurgical activities, that riddle hides a metaphor linked to the world of metallurgy: the smelting furnace “eats” the mineral with fire, producing a dull noise reminiscent of both the roar of the lion and the buzz of the bees around the hive, and then copper flows from it, which has a color similar to that of wild honey.

Not only that: still in that article we had also shown that the very close relationship of the character of Samson with fire has evident analogies in similar myths and stories spread among various civilizations, of which here it is worth mentioning the Nemean lion killed by Heracles, the fire-breathing giant Cacus suffocated by Hercules between puffs of smoke and flames [15], as well as the Japanese myth in which Susanoo, brother of the sun goddess, kills a dragon - exactly as does the Caucasian fire god Amirani (who in turn has many points of contact with Prometheus) [16] - in whose tail he finds a sword considered one of the treasures of the Japanese imperial dynasty (it is no coincidence that Susanoo was defined as “the Japanese Samson”) [17].

More generally, the correspondence between a celestial phenomenon - which in this case is the aurora borealis - and the attempt to reproduce it on Earth is often found in the mythologies of the ancient world and can be summed up with the famous phrase “as above, so below”, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. An example is given by the correspondence between the seven Pleiades and the Seven Hills of Rome [18], but there are also other important ancient cities, several of which are considered sacred (such as Jerusalem, Byzantium, Mecca, Armagh, Tehran, even Macau and so on), whose location on seven hills can be traced back to the same idea of making

the Earth correspond to the Sky [19], which attests to the spread of this concept even in places very distant from each other.

On the other hand, even in the case of foxes we have found interesting analogies in four different mythologies: Jewish, Roman, Iranian and Finnish; and it is certainly no coincidence that we found the solution to the problem in the Finnish Fire Fox - in which the memory of the original meaning remained alive to the point that in the Finnish language the name of the northern lights recalls that mythical animal - presumably following the fact that in northern Finland the auroras are a very frequent phenomenon, whereas in other cases they are much rarer, which led to the loss of memory of the original meaning of the burning foxes. Incidentally, this could also make us reflect on the hypothesis that several millennia ago - when in the far north, now plagued by frost, the Holocene Climate Optimum (HCO) gave a much more temperate climate than today’s (for example, in one locality of the Svalbard islands it was found that there was an average temperature of +6°C compared to the current one) [20] - a prehistoric civilization could have flourished, which subsequently moved further south due to the collapse of temperatures, as proposed by the highly cultured Hindu Brahmin Bal Gangadhar Tilak [21] at the beginning of the last century. This would immediately explain the loss of memory of the original meaning of Samson’s foxes, which instead in the far north of Europe, as we have just seen, has still remained vivid to the point of allowing us to finally resolve this age-old problem.

Conclusion

We have ascertained that the bizarre story of the foxes unleashed by Samson with torches tied to their tails in the fields of the Philistines, as well as the similar case of the foxes with lit tails unleashed in the Circus of ancient Rome, can be explained immediately by comparing them with the mythical Fire Fox of Finnish mythology, believed to be the cause of the northern lights because its tail emits sparks, which corresponds to the fact that in the Finnish language the name of the northern lights is *revontulet*, which means “fox fires”. From all this, therefore, it is easy to deduce that these foxes with their lit tails represent an extraordinary metaphor for the aurora borealis, which when it occurs seems to set the night sky on fire with its intense bright, colourful and changing reflections. On the other hand, the fact that the protagonist of the biblical story concerning those foxes is Samson is perfectly consistent with the links that he has both with fire and other mythical characters also linked to fire, although belonging to distant mythologies.

References

1. Jdg. 15: 4-5.
2. The analogy has already been noted by scholars such as G de Santillana, H von Dechend (2003) *Il Mulino di Amleto. Saggio Sul Mito e Sulla structure del tempo*, Adelphi, Milan, pp. 203-204. Or. Ed. (1969) *Hamlet’s mill: an essay investigating the origins of human knowledge and its transmission through myth*, Gambit, Boston.
3. *Tertia post Hyadas cum lux erit orta remotas, / carcere partitos Circus habebit equos. / Cur igitur missae vinctis ardentia taedis/ terga ferant volpes causa docenda mihi est* (Ov., *Fast.* 4, 679-682).

4. Ancient Carseoli is the current town of Carsoli, 40 miles away from Rome.
5. Urentes effugit illa manus:/ qua fugit, incendit vestitos messibus agros;/ damnosis vires ignibus aura dabat, / factum abiit, monumenta manent; nam dicere certa/ nunc quoque lex volpem Carseolana vetat;/ utque luat poenas gens haec Cerialibus ardet, / quoque modo segetes perdidit, ipsa perit (Ov. Fast. 4, 706-712).
6. F Liebrecht (1879) Zur Volkskunde, Alte und neue Aufsätze, Henninger, Heilbronn, p. 261.
7. E Ojanen, S Linnea (2019) Suomen myyttiset eläimet, Minerva, Helsinki pp. 44-46.
8. Daglis, S Akasofu (2004) Aurora. The magnificent northern lights «EGU (Newsletter of the European Geosciences. Union) Iss. 7, March 2004, 12-18.
9. K Van der Toorn, T Pecking, P van der Horst (1999) Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan p. 404.
10. G Mobley (2006) Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East, T & T Clark, New York, p. 7.
11. F Vinci, A Maiuri (2023) A Hypothesis of Solution of Samson's Riddle «Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies» 9(1): 271-278.
12. Jdg. 13:20.
13. Jdg. 14:14.
14. Cf B Rothenberg (1972) Were These King Solomon's Mines? Excavations in the Timna Valley, Stein & Day, New York; Id. (1988), Researches in the Arabah, 1959-1984: The Egyptian Mining Temple at Timna, Thames & Hudson, London; E Ben-Yosef (ed.) (2018) Mining for Ancient Copper: Essays in Memory of Professor Beno Rothenberg, Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv.
15. Verg Aen 8: 259.
16. Cf G Charachidzé (1986) Prométhée ou le Caucase. Essai de mythologie contrastive, Flammarion, Paris.
17. G de Santillana, H von Dechend (2003) Il Mulino di Amleto. Saggio sul mito e sulla struttura del tempo, Adelphi, Milano p. 205.
18. F Vinci, A Maiuri (2017) Mai dire Maia. Un'ipotesi sulla causa dell'esilio di Ovidio e sul nome segreto di Roma «Appunti Romani di Filologia» 19: 19-30.
19. E Nissan, A Maiuri, F Vinci (2019) Reflected in Heaven, Part Two «MHNH. Revista Internacional de Investigación sobre Magia y Astrología Antiguas» 19: 87-166.
20. L. Beierlein, O Salvigsen, B Schöne, A Mackensen, T Brey (2015) The seasonal water temperature cycle in the Arctic Dicksonfjord (Svalbard) during the Holocene Climate Optimum derived from subfossil Arctic islandica shells, The Holocene 25 (8): 1197-1207.
21. Cf B G Tilak (1903) The Arctic Home in the Vedas, Poona.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License

To Submit Your Article Click Here: [Submit Article](#)

DOI: 10.32474/JAAS.2024.09.000307



Journal Of Anthropological And Archaeological Sciences

Assets of Publishing with us

- Global archiving of articles
- Immediate, unrestricted online access
- Rigorous Peer Review Process
- Authors Retain Copyrights
- Unique DOI for all articles