

FROM JONAH TO PINOCCHIO: ON THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF A LONG-LASTING MOTIF IN SEA EPICS¹

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RIASSUNTO: Il presente contributo (1) analizza il motivo mitico del pesce inghiottitore narrato nel libro biblico di Giona, ponendolo a confronto con episodi simili attestati nelle tradizioni letterarie di età ellenistica e rivolgendo particolare attenzione ai poemi ellenistici greci. L'analisi mira a identificare un contesto storico e culturale plausibile per l'origine di questo motivo all'interno del libro di Giona. Lo studio (2) analizza inoltre la ricezione del motivo nelle tradizioni giudaiche e cristiane antiche, mostrando come entrambe le tradizioni arricchiscano il racconto originario di nuovi elementi che contribuiscono a forgiare un motivo propriamente "epico". A un livello più generale, il contributo offre uno spunto (3) per mettere in discussione l'estraneità alla navigazione tradizionalmente attribuita agli Ebrei nell'antichità e (4) per ripensare la presenza del genere epico all'interno della Bibbia ebraica.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Giona, Salmi, epica ellenistica, Bibbia ebraica, mostri marini, navigazione

ABSTRACT: This paper (1) analyzes the motif of the fish swallowing Jonah in light of similar episodes attested in Hellenistic Greek epics and other Hellenistic literary traditions and myths. In light of this evidence, it proposes a possible context in which the biblical story emerged. In addition, the paper (2) also analyzes how this motif developed in early Jewish and early Christian traditions, showing how both traditions shape this motif to fit familiar patterns of sea epics. From a larger perspective, this study both allows us (3) to rethink the attitudes towards seafaring that were traditionally attributed to Judeans in

¹ This study is a result of research supported by the Charles University through the program PRIMUS/20/HUM/010 "Textuality in the Second Temple Judaism: Composition, Function, and Transmission of Texts". I dedicate it to my friend and colleague Salvatore Medaglia, from whom I have learnt much about undersea adventures in ancient and modern times. I wish to thank Julia Rhyder for revising my English. Abbreviations of the biblical books and transliterations of Hebrew follow the *SBL Handbook of Style, Second Edition*, Atlanta, SBL Press, 2014 (transliteration follows the General-purpose style). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Hellenistic times, while also (4) offering new suggestions as to how we might reposition the epic genre in the Hebrew Bible.

KEY-WORDS: Jonah, Psalms, Hellenistic Epic, Hebrew Bible, sea monsters, seafaring

1. SEA EPICS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

The idea of including texts from the Hebrew Bible in a collection focusing on sea epics might appear as a challenge at a first sight. There are two good reasons for this apprehension. First (1), the relationship of the Hebrew Bible with the literary genre of the epic is debated. Second (2), it is commonly held that ancient Israelites had very little to do with the sea. When it comes to analyzing the presence of the epic genre among biblical texts (1), so far traditional research has pursued a twofold approach.² On the one hand, scholars have attempted to read entire sections of the biblical narrative as constituting a sort of “national epic”; on the other hand, it has sometimes been assumed that old epic poems, orally performed, underpinned the redaction of some biblical texts. Frank Moore Cross was probably the most influential proponent of a reading of biblical traditional narratives through the lens of “epics.” He conceived this category as a sort of “middle way” between a mythical and a historical narration of Israel past, building explicitly on the parallels with the Homeric epics.³ Both methods, the search for national epics and the reconstruction of an ancient epic poetry, built on the so-called documentary hypothesis and the source-critical approach, which imagined the existence of distinct

² On scholarly approaches to epics in the Hebrew Bible, see the excellent summary by CONROY 1980; more recently BULLARD 2013.

³ See CROSS 1973 and CROSS 1983, especially 14-19: biblical epics is for Cross a narration originally performed in an oral form and hence characterized by recurring themes and formulae, focused on past traditions which are considered foundational or “normative” for a given community, and which are reshaped through the narrative in a mythical form, where both humans and gods interact.

sources behind the current and final form of the Hebrew Bible. The authors of these sources would have been responsible for the redaction (and the combination) of large epic narratives, covering the Pentateuch and the Historical books. Challenged since the seventies, the documentary hypothesis has been gradually dismantled, while Hebrew poetry tends to be increasingly considered as a product of a scribal, i.e. written, culture, for which the existence of oral stages is very difficult to prove. Overall, the source-critical approach has undergone (and still undergoes) a large debate. These developments are significant because both oral origins and the presence of an historical-narrative dimension are foundational features of the epic genre, at least in classical literature, which, as we have seen, has so far provided the foundation for defining the constitutive features of ancient epics.⁴ The epic has therefore had a diminishing importance for understanding biblical texts in recent years. At the same time, the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to the study of the epic genre has remained very limited. Except for the two famous poems celebrating the victory of the Israelites against the Canaanites (the so-called “Song of Deborah,” in Judges 5) and the crossing of the Red Sea in the book of Exodus (chapter 15), not much else remains that could be classified as “epic.” Yet, as for the literary genre of these poems, opinions are divided, as several scholars define such texts simply as “lyric” or “hymnic,” hence closer to psalms than to epic poetry.⁵ Moreover, of these two poems, only Exodus 15 could belong properly speaking to the sea epic genre.⁶ And here we encounter the

⁴ For the methodological issues raised by applying the label “epic” as defined in classical literature to other literary, historical and cultural contexts, see the remarks of FERRARI 2020. A further problem in the definition of biblical “epic” traditions is that they recur to prose much more than to poetry: see on this the remarks of ALTER 1980: 144-145 and the response by CROSS 1983: 20-23.

⁵ See, e. g., CROSS 1983: 20; WATTS 2005, KLEIN 2012.

⁶ Such a position could be partly softened if we consider the large portions of biblical poetry that celebrate Yhwh’s sovereignty over the waters; see various Psalms (18:11-16; 29:3; 74:13-14; 104; 107:23-32), Isaiah (27:1) and Job (26:10-13; 38-39), as well as apocalyptic writings (Dan 7). This material is part of a common ancient Near Eastern and Levantine interest in the divine warrior, who secures the order of creation and his kingship through the domestication of waters. However, in such literary contexts mythic elements are clearly dominant, while there is almost no mention of human actors. Therefore, if epic is defined as a genre where humans play a primary role (allegedly, together with gods), it becomes problematic to consider these texts as representative of an epic genre.

second difficulty (2). Unlike the large majority of their neighboring cultures, for a long time ancient Israelites did not have direct access to the sea: presumably, access to sea trade was only made available during the Hasmonean period, from the second half of the second century BCE onwards, when the Hasmoneans conquered Jaffa and accorded great importance to the harbor as their only gateway to the Mediterranean.⁷ Accordingly, all the biblical texts with the exception of Maccabees tend to depict seafaring as an activity that is foreign to the Israelites, and which is instead associated with Phoenicians⁸ and Egyptians.⁹ Biblical Hebrew preserves a relatively low number of terms related to maritime activity,¹⁰ and, most notably, the vocabulary for fish is almost completely absent.¹¹ The foreignness of seafaring remains constitutive of the self-representation of ancient Judeans until Hellenistic times, as is confirmed by the apologetic discourse of Flavius Josephus, who justifies the lack of familiarity of Judeans with seafaring on a geographical basis: «As for us, we do not inhabit a seaside region, nor do we take pleasure in trading, or in any intercourse with others through commerce; instead, as our cities are for the most built inland, remotely from the sea, we take care of cultivating such a fruitful country».¹² It is unclear to what extent this sentence can reflect the reality of Josephus'

⁷ 1 Macc 10:75-76; 12:33-34; 13:11; 14:5. On the history of Jaffa in antiquity see FANTALKIN - TAL 2009.

⁸ See Ezek 27:2-10; 1 Kgs 5:22-23; 10:11; 2 Chr 2:15. A partial exception is represented by the legendary fleet organized by king Solomon (1 Kgs 9:26-27). However, even this fleet is built with the help of the king of Tyre, Hiram.

⁹ E.g., Isa 18:1-2.

¹⁰ On the circulation of nautical vocabulary in the Mediterranean area see ASPESI 1994 and 2006.

¹¹ While the Hebrew Bible seems to be aware that waters are full of numerous and diverse animal species (see Gen 1:21), biblical Hebrew distinguishes only between the generic name for "fish" (*dag*), and larger (and monstrous) aquatic animals (*tannin*).

¹² Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 60. In this passage, Josephus is trying to justify the fact that Judeans are never quoted in Greek literature. His justification is based on two intertwined arguments which explain the lack of occasion for previous encounters between Judeans and Greek: the geographical remoteness of Judeans and their general refraining from sea trade activities. This description of Judeans as inhabiting "inland" implies as representation of people living on the coastline as non-authentically "Judean." Moreover, the Judean foreignness to sea activities is connected with a negative evaluation of people involved in sea trade, such as Phoenicians (*Contra Apionem* 61), and is contradicted by references to Judean trades in Alexandria by Philo (*Flaccus* 57; *Legatio ad Caium* 129). Conversely, the self-representation of Judeans as farmers points toward a Roman

times, when Jewish communities were effectively active in several sites along the Syrian coast and were presumably involved in maritime activities. I will return to this point in the conclusion to this article. At this point, it is enough to observe that, in this context, the story of Jonah appears as particularly striking, in that half of the prophetic book (namely chapters 1-2) is constructed as a genuine sea tale. Moreover, the book preserves what would become one of the most popular motifs in sea epics: the story of a man thrown into the water during a storm and swallowed by a monster at the bottom of the sea, but who miraculously survives. Much has been written about the endurance of this motif until modern times, both in folktales and literature, the Italian novel *Pinocchio* being but the most famous example.¹³ In what follows, I will explore how the epic dimension of this episode in the book of Jonah was shaped by the ancient context in which it took shape. I will explore the “epic” potential of Jonah’s story by comparing it with other ancient myths with which it has been often associated, so as to identify a possible socio-historical setting in which the episode originated in the context of Hellenistic epics. I will then analyze the reception and the development of the motif of Jonah and the fish in early Jewish and early Christian traditions, to show how both traditions shape this motif to fit familiar patterns of sea epics. I will conclude by pointing to some implications of this study, and its contribution to reconsider the meaning and the role of epics as a literary genre in the Hebrew Bible.

ideal of life. The fact that elsewhere in his *Jewish Antiquities* Josephus celebrates the Solomonic control over the Israelite coast reinforces the impression that this passage is entirely functional to the author’s apologetic purposes. Compare *Antiquitates Judaicae* 8.35, 37, 180-181. See on these aspects BARCLAY 2007, 42-43.

¹³ On the popularity of this motif in literature see, among others, FÖCKLING 2011.

2. JONAH IN THE CONTEXT OF HELLENISTIC EPICS

In a certain light, the story of Jonah seems very far from epic sagas. The genre of the book is a debated issue, as it mixes features from prophecy, midrash, novella, and other genres.¹⁴ But despite these various ascriptions of the genre of Jonah, scholars usually do not label the book an epic. Occasionally Jonah has been considered as a “prophetic epic”, to underline the adventurous character of the book.¹⁵ However, Jonah himself is the opposite of an epic hero, since he has none of the “heroic” qualities that characterize other biblical prophets. In this regard, scholars have rightly insisted on the ironic, parodistic and even ridiculous aspects of the book. To name just a few examples: the prophet refuses his mission by running away in the opposite direction to where he is supposed to go, descending from Jerusalem to Jaffa and taking a boat set for Tarshish; all foreign people, sailors included, are depicted as pious men, and Ninevites convert promptly after having heard the shortest oracle of the entire prophetic collection (Jonah 3:4a, half of one verse); the end of the book does not convey the usual message of hope but interrupts the narrative in a puzzling way, leaving an angry and unsatisfied prophet arguing with the deity.¹⁶ Jonah is indeed an atypical prophet and the protagonist of an atypical narrative. This created some issues in the process of canonizing the book, as is confirmed by its “floating” position within the collection of the Twelve minor prophets in the ancient

¹⁴ A comprehensive summary of the huge amount of scholarly literature on the topic lies beyond the scope of the present paper. Among the most useful introductions written in the last twenty years, which also provide a rich bibliography on the main issues the book raises (including its genre), one can consult CRAIG 1999; BEN ZVI 2003; LICHTERT 2005 a and b; STEIGER - KÜHLMANN 2011; WEIMAR 2017: 15-66. Of special interest is the proposal made by Armin Lange to consider the book of Jonah as a paratext, written to comment and expand upon earlier biblical episodes (here specifically 2 Kgs 14:25, which mentions an 8th century BCE prophet named Jonah ben Amittai): see LANGE 2009.

¹⁵ MOULTON 1896: 504.

¹⁶ See on this aspect of the narrative BICKERMAN 1967: 3-48; BEN ZVI 2003: 80-99. On Jonah as an “anti-prophet” see WIESEL 1981, 105-125.

versions.¹⁷ Yet, at the same time, these distinctive features were responsible for the immense popularity of the story. In this regard, the episode of the prophet being swallowed and vomited by a fish sent by Yhwh is consistent with the humorous tones of the narrative.

However, it has also to be observed that such humorous tones stand in tension with other, less amusing aspects of the book. The first aspect concerns the representation of space in the narrative, which evokes a general sense of foreignness and strangeness: the sea plays a crucial role in creating this atmosphere.¹⁸ The second element worth noting is the strong death symbolism associated with the descent of the prophet into the abyss and Jonah being swallowed by the fish. This symbolism is sustained by several lexical and semantic elements. First, the verb ‘to swallow’ (*blʿ*) is used elsewhere to describe how the earth opens widely and consumes those who rebelled against the will of Yhwh.¹⁹ Moreover, the association between the bottom of the sea, the fish and the netherworld is made explicit in the poetic section of the book, i.e. the Psalm, where Jonah appeals to Yhwh from the belly of the fish (Jonah 2:2-10). The prophet affirms that he is crying out from «the belly of Sheol», and from «the pit»,²⁰ two typical designations of the netherworld. The abysses are defined by the terms *metsullab* and *tehom*²¹ that are elsewhere used to describe Sheol: the latter can be occasionally represented as a swallowing and shapeless monster.²² Furthermore, the apparent death of the prophet is also anticipated by a narrative detail in Jonah 1:5. While the desperate sailors react to the sea storm by invoking «each one his god», Jonah descends into the recesses of the ship

¹⁷ The book is positioned between Obadiah and Micah in the Masoretic Text; the Septuagint locates it between Obadiah and Nahum; one manuscript from Qumran displays Jonah after Malachi, the last of the Twelve prophets (4Q76= 4Q XII^a).

¹⁸ See on this the brilliant study of PERI 2002; BEN ZVI 2003: 95-96.

¹⁹ Exod 15:12; Num 16:32, 34; Deut 11:16. Compare also Exod 7:12 and Jer 51:34.

²⁰ Respectively Jonah 2:3 and 2:7. On the death symbolism of Jonah 2 see recently KOZLOVA 2020.

²¹ Jonah 2:4, 6.

²² Isa 5:14: «Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat, has opened its mouth beyond measure.» Compare Hab 2:5; Prov 1:12. The most famous attestation of *tehom* is Gen 1:2, where the word denotes the abyss preceding the creation. For *metsullab* compare Ps 69:3, 16; 107:26; also Exod 15:5. The symbolic value of Jonah’s sleep is highlighted by SASSON 1990: 100-101 and by WEIMAR 2017: 136-140.

and falls into a deep sleep. The term used in this case is *yerekab*, which in other contexts indicates the innermost and deepest part of the earth and can be paralleled with Sheol itself.²³ The book's representation of sleeping in the lowest part of the ship as anticipating the death of the prophet might be more than a mere narratological expedient. Karen Stern, Alice Mandell and Jeremy Smoak²⁴ have recently reassessed archeological evidence for graffiti depicting ships in various burial caves and funerary complexes of ancient Palestine, dating from the Iron Age (Khirbet Bet Lei) to Hellenistic (Jerusalem) and early Roman times (Beth She'arim). The authors propose that the continuity of this iconographic repertoire in different funerary settings, from the south of Judea to the Galilee, suggests that ship iconography was used to convey the journey into the realm of death or the afterlife.²⁵ Jonah's sleep at the bottom of the boat seems to both reflect and reinforce a similar association.

The death symbolism underpinning Jonah's adventure in the sea contributes to the complexity of the book by adding a second and more profound level of interpretation. Moreover, it provides a different framework to understand the episode of Jonah and the fish. In this regard, scholars have long emphasized the similarities between myths of Greek heroes fighting sea-monsters, especially Perseus and Heracles, and the story of Jonah. These episodes have been sometimes grouped under the shared category of "passage rite".²⁶ Some hypotheses even assume that the motif of the fish would be

²³ See Jer 6:22; Isa 14:15.

²⁴ See especially the remarks of STERN 2013 on the late Hellenistic graffiti in Beth She'arim; MANDELL - SMOAK 2016 (esp. 236-38) for the tomb inscriptions and graffiti at Khirbet bet Lei. Compare also HACHLILI 2005: 148-150 who provides further bibliography.

²⁵ As admitted by Mandell and Smoak, this interpretation suits well the material and social context to which the graffiti in Khirbet Beth Lei and Beth She'arim belong. However, one could ask as to which concerns inform the so-called Tomb of Jason in the Shephelah (Jerusalem), dating to the Hasmonean period. The graffiti here depict war ships and commercial boats, and, together with the sumptuous architecture and the rich funerary kit, seem to point to the status or office of the deceased during his life. See RAHMANI 1967: 69-71, 96, and compare 1 Macc 13:25-29, where Simon Thassi builds a mausoleum for his father and embellishes it with carved ships, «so that it could be seen by all those who sail the sea» (1 Macc 13:29b). The boat here is a sign of prestige and underlines the power of the dynasty that gained the control over the Palestinian coast.

²⁶ SCHMIDT 1907, whose approach was already criticized by FEUILLET 1947: 163-164; WOLFF 1975; DOLÈVE GANDELMAN - GANDELMAN 1986; MOREAU 1992.

“extrabiblical” and directly derived from Greek sources by the redactor of Jonah.²⁷ However, this reading raises two major difficulties. First, while “initiatory” aspects of Jonah’s story belong clearly to its later stages of development, as I will show below, it is uncertain to what extent the original story can be read according to this pattern. The least that can be said is that the second half of the book of Jonah (chapters 3-4) shows that the prophet would have learnt very little from his experience under the sea. In other words, neither his attitude nor his “heroic” profile seem to substantially evolve within the book. Second, such a reading of Greek myths cannot be sustained by a careful analysis of Greek sources.

As a matter of fact, there is no evidence for Perseus or Heracles being swallowed by a sea monster in any written source from the Archaic or Classical periods. This motif is occasionally attested on Attic and Etruscan iconography, and it is found on a funerary vase in the necropolis of Cerveteri, dating to the 4th century BCE (figure 1).²⁸ The

presence of this theme in a funerary setting, and precisely on a vase that contained the ashes of the dead, suggests a strong association between the sea monster and the realm of death. However, it must be observed that in these cases the hero is portrayed as actively drawing or cutting the tongue of the fish, or approaching its mouth with a sword or a weapon: it is therefore hard to actually speak of

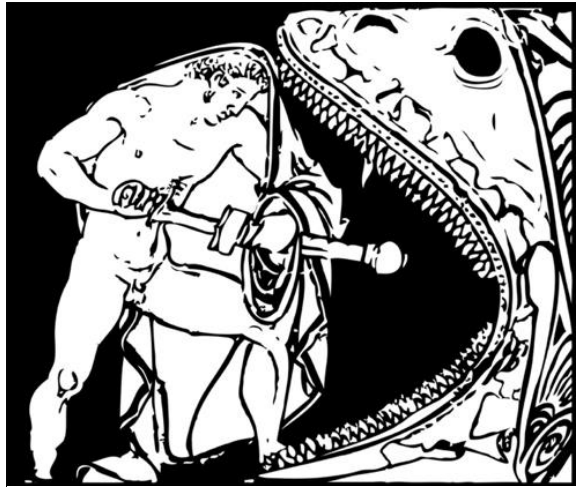


Figure 1

²⁷ E.g. SCHIMDT 1907; STEFFEN 1982: 46.

²⁸ *Kelebe* from Perugia, Archaeological National Museum, Palazzone necropolis, 350-325 BCE, painter of Hesione, LIMC 8, *Hesione* 6; LIMC 5, *Herakles/Hercle* 266, 293; MONTAGNA PASQUINUCCI 1968: 100, CI fig. 130. Heracles is recognizable from the backside of the vase, where he is represented with his typical attribute (the club), rescuing a young girl from the rock. Drawing by Matthieu Pellet.

an act of being swallowed. A clearer connection with the “ingestion” motif is attested, albeit exclusively in iconography, for Jason when he tries to elude the control of the dragon watching the golden fleece in Colchis. Since the 7th century BCE Corinthian iconography represented the hero as being swallowed by the snake or dragon, and hence the motif entered Attic and Etruscan ceramics: on a famous Attic plate Jason is depicted emerging unarmed from the snake’s mouth.²⁹ Some scholars have drawn attention to the similarities between the story of Jonah and the Jason’s saga described in the Hellenistic epics of Apollonios Rodios, the *Argonauts*.³⁰ Indeed, the two stories share a significant number of motifs and themes, and one might wonder if these similarities have to be interpreted as deliberate, and perhaps ironic, allusions.³¹ But again, as for the representation of the dragon in Jason’s iconography, most cases the hero is depicted as keeping an active posture and standing fully armed when he enters the dragon’s mouth (figure 2);³² moreover, there is no reference to the sea here. Such discrepancies point to a more general methodological issue. The mythical motif of a human swallowed by an ani-



Figure 2

mal is widely attested in several ancient and modern cultures and folktales, and can in turn be declined according to diverse cultural patterns. However, merely observing

²⁹ See PONTRANDOLFO - MUGIONE 1999: 332-334; LIMC 5, *Jason* 32-35.

³⁰ See HAMEL 1995 and COOK 2019: 250-253.

³¹ I find relevant the suggestion by Stephen Derek Cook (COOK 2019: 90-96), who interprets such allusions in light of the Hellenistic “mock epic”, as it is attested for example in the *Batrachomyomachia*. In this case, the references in Jonah to well-known epic motifs would strengthen the parodistic character of the book.

³² Etruscan gem, 480-450 BCE; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 21.1203; LIMC 5, *Jason* 33. Drawing by Sebastiano De Gennaro.

structural parallels fails to capture the essential meaning of these stories in each specific context, and, more importantly, it does not help in identifying the correct register against which such parallels have to be interpreted.³³

That being said, Hellenistic sources attest to a strong convergence between Greek and Jewish ways of representing both myths related to sea monsters and activities related to seafaring, especially sailing along the Palestinian coast. To begin with, some signs of a change in the treatment of Greek myths appear in Hellenistic epics, which offer closer parallels to the Jonah traditions. The obscure and erudite poem of the Alexandrian poet Lycophron on Cassandra, active in the Alexandrian Library under Ptolemy II Philadelphus,³⁴ provides the first written witness of the mythical version, according to which both Perseus and Heracles were accidentally swallowed by a sea monster they were fighting against. They succeeded in killing it from the inside, thus confirming the mythic tradition that was already present in iconography. Interestingly enough, in both cases the author refers ironically to the monster as if it were “giving birth”.³⁵ Moreover, the author says that Heracles lost his hair, as if it had been boiled by the heat of the fish belly:

Alas! hapless nurse of mine
burnt even aforetime by the warlike pineships of the lion
that was begotten in three evenings,
whom of old Triton's hound of jagged teeth
devoured with his jaws.
But he, a living carver of the monster's liver,
seething in steam of cauldron on a flameless hearth,
shed to ground the bristles of his head.³⁶

³³ In this regard, the conclusions of HAMEL 1995 are problematic and should be taken very cautiously.

³⁴ For a discussion of the chronology of Lycophron see the remarks of André Hurst in FUSILLO, HURST - PADUANO 1991, 17-27 and GIGANTE LANZARA 2002: 5-21, and related bibliography.

³⁵ Lycophron, *Alexandra* 470-478 (Heracles); 834-843 (Perseus). For a detailed discussion of these passages see ANGELINI 2018: 135-144.

³⁶ Lycophron, *Alexandra* 31-37 (trans. A. W. Mair, Harvard, LCL 129).

The «lion» Heracles is «steamed» in the womb of the «dog of Triton» (i.e. the sea monster) as if he were in a cauldron. Both the birth metaphor and the baldness bear striking resemblances with the traditions concerning Jonah's fish (see *infra*, 3.1). Yet in the case of Heracles the birth metaphors are highly sarcastic and the loss of hair is not connected to any sort of new birth, but is rather the distinctive mark of a hero.

Moreover, a number of Hellenistic authors, such as Josephus, Diodorus of Sicily, Strabo and Pausanias indicate that the myth of Perseus rescuing Andromeda from the sea monster did not take place in Ethiopia, as indicated by older sources (Andromeda being the daughter of the Ethiopian queen Cassiopeia), but in Jaffa, precisely the place where Jonah had left for Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). According to Josephus, the chains that were used to tie Andromeda when she was offered to the sea monster were still visible on the rocks in Jaffa's harbor.³⁷ The Roman historian Pomponius Mela adds that the bones of the monster were still displayed at that site.³⁸ René Bloch has therefore suggested that Josephus' setting of the mythical story in Jaffa, and his insistence on the presence of material remains there, reflects the willingness of Judeans in late Hellenistic times to appropriate mythical *mirabilia* and to anchor them to local traditions, so as to promote Palestine as an attractive travel destination.³⁹ While Bloch is certainly right in his interpretation of Josephus, it has to be kept in mind that the location of the myth of Perseus and Andromeda in Jaffa has a more ancient history: it is first attested in a geographical work attributed to Skylax of Karyanda that dates back to the 4th century BCE, when the city was under Phoenician control.⁴⁰ The change of the mythic setting aligns with the increasing importance of Jaffa in Hellenistic times. It is named as a key trade harbor in the papyri from the Zenon archive⁴¹ and acquired the right to mint coins

³⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum* 3.420. See also Strabo, *Geographica* 1.42; 16.759; Pausanias, *Periegesis* 4.35.9. Plinius, (*Naturalis Historia* 9.11) reports that the bones of the monster were moved to Rome under the consulate of Marcus Scaurus (58 BCE).

³⁸ Mela, *Chorographia* 1.64.

³⁹ BLOCH 2017: 26-31.

⁴⁰ Ps.-Skylax, *Periplus* 104, cod. 93; See on this KAIZER 2011: 326. On the myth see also HARVEY 1994.

⁴¹ P.Cair.Zen 1.59011; 1.59093; PSI 4.406; P.Lond 7.2086.

under the Ptolemies⁴²: as noted by Ted Kaiser, the fact that scenes from the myth of Andromeda entered the iconographic repertoire of Jaffa's civic coinage in Roman times confirms that this myth had become part of the identity of the city.⁴³

Further to this, several ethnographic reports describe close encounters with sea monsters of an extraordinary size. Particularly famous was the episode of Alexander the Great's fleet led by his officer Nearchus, who during an exploration in the Indian Ocean met a school of sea monsters. Returning to Macedonia, the historian Onesicritus, who had followed the expedition, wrote that the most amazing thing (*to paradoxotaton*)⁴⁴ on the trip was the large number of monsters they saw, and also their size, which was comparable to that of a trireme. The sailors were allegedly paralyzed by fear, because the ripple of water caused by the passage of the fish lifted the sea's waves, as if a storm was about to come.⁴⁵ Stories of this kind reflect the taste for paradoxography that was typical of the time, which favored the presence of incredible, curious, and out-of-the-ordinary elements in historical and ethnographical accounts. These accounts culminated in the hyperbolic and parodist description of Lucian's True History in the 2nd century CE, where an entire fleet was swallowed by a sea monster and remained in its belly for several days.⁴⁶ It must be noted that the fascination for the sea *mirabilia* also made its way into the biblical texts. Some late passages in Psalms describe the sea as a place for navigation and trade, and make explicit references to the sea monsters that inhabit it:

Here is the sea, large and wide from all sides,
innumerable creeping animals are there,
and living creatures both small and large;
ships travel there, (and) Leviathan,

⁴² See on this FANTALKIN - TAL 2009: 253-257.

⁴³ KAIZER 2011: 333.

⁴⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca* 17.106.6.

⁴⁵ See also Arrian, *Indica* 30. 7; Strabo, *Geografica* 15.2.12 c 725; Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 10.1.12; Aelianus, *Natura Animalium* 17.6; Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 9.5; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 3.57.

⁴⁶ Lucian, *Verae Historiae* 1.30 ff.

that you created to play with him.⁴⁷

This passage refers to a late tradition that imagined Leviathan as having been created by Yhwh. This tradition builds on Genesis (1:21), where it is said that Yhwh created the fish and all the inhabitants of the sea, including the sea monsters. A similar motif is echoed in Psalm 107:

Some go down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters,
they see the works of Yhwh,
his marvels in the deep.⁴⁸

The passage belongs to a section of the Psalm (vv. 23-32) that speaks about people who trade on the sea and face sea storms: similarities between this section of the Psalm and the setting of Jonah's story have long been noted. The most explicit and powerful passage is found in the Wisdom of Ben Sira:

Those who sail the sea report its dangers,
and when we listen, we cannot believe our ears,
incredible and marvelous things (*paradoxa kai thaumasia erga*) are there,
every sort of animals, and the race of sea monsters.⁴⁹

Although the full text is preserved only in the Greek translation of the book, the passage is also partly attested in fragments of the Hebrew text.⁵⁰ This confirms that, at least by Hellenistic times, the motif was established in wisdom traditions. More importantly, it shows that Judeans shared with Greeks a certain interest in paradoxography. In light of

⁴⁷ Ps 104:25-26. On the Canaanite (rather than Egyptian) nature of this motif see UEHLINGER 1990.

⁴⁸ Ps 107:23-24. On the late redactional nature of this Psalm see HOSSFELD - ZENGER 2011: 101-102.

⁴⁹ Sir 43:25-26.

⁵⁰ Mas VI, 19-20; B XIIIr, 9-10, where *pl'wt*, 'marvels,' is legible.

this evidence, it is problematic to speak of a direct borrowing from Greek myths and traditions by Jewish scribes. In some instances, such as the writings of the erudite Lycophron working in Hellenistic Alexandria, the direction of influence could potentially have been the reverse. It seems most likely that both Greek and Jewish Hellenistic sources shared a common sensibility toward seafaring and sea adventures, which turns out to be significantly shaped by the literary taste of the time. Such shared literary interests have long been noted in the case of the writings of Egyptian Jews, such that it comes as no surprise to find this motif, for example, in the Greek translation of the book of Jonah. However, the evidence collected above seems to suggest that in early Hellenistic times this sensibility also affected literary circles in Judea, such as those who were responsible for the redaction of the book of Jonah. Such a background provides a fitting context for the motif of the prophet in the sea storm, swallowed and ejected by the fish. To be sure, these remarks do not contradict the evidence of the diverse interpretation of similar motifs and metaphors in ancient Greek and Jewish traditions; they were sustained by different, or even conflicting, paradigms. The Hebrew Bible constantly highlights the domination of Yhwh on the waters, and insists on the fact that even the presence of the sea monsters is an act of divine creation (and a marvelous one). This allows for the fish to become an instrument of salvation for Jonah and even to serve in later traditions as a metaphor for birth or as a vehicle for knowledge, as I will show in the next section. On the other hand, *kete* in the Greek myth express only the most scary aspects of the sea and the mortal dangers related to sailing.

3. THE “EPIC DIMENSION” OF JONAH’S STORY: FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

While several aspects of Jonah’s adventure in the sea resonate with motifs typical of Hellenistic literature and poetry, Hellenistic epics included, the episode of Jonah within the fish also served to stimulate the imagination of its readers in both early Jewish and early Christian communities. The reception of the motif of the prophet swallowed and ejected by the fish followed three main patterns in antiquity, each of them expanding the

“supernatural” features of the story and positioning Jonah’s travel as an epic adventure.⁵¹ (1) A tradition shared by Jews and Christians interpreted Jonah’s story as an experience of death and resurrection; (2) other Jewish sources associated Jonah’s stay within the belly of the fish with a journey in the netherworld; (3) a third stream of tradition, attested almost exclusively in Christian literature, read the events that befell the prophet according to the model of a heroic combat with a sea monster.

3.1 Trajectories in Early Jewish and Christian receptions of Jonah’s story

The interpretation of Jonah’s story as an experience of death and resurrection was certainly the most pervasive in ancient Christianity: this is due to a reference to Jonah’s fish in the Gospel of Matthew, which explicitly compares the adventure of the prophet, devoured and returned to life unharmed, with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel specifically considers Jonah’s adventures to be a *semeion*, i.e. a ‘sign’ prefiguring what would befall Jesus.⁵² The story of Jonah was therefore interpreted by early Christians as the new birth par excellence: the prophet became a favorite subject of sarcophagi carvings and catacombs paintings, as his image in early Christian art was seen to point to the survival in the afterlife and evokes baptism.⁵³ A similar interpretation is equally attested in early Jewish traditions. Third Maccabees cites the children in the furnace, Daniel rescued from the pit of lions, and Jonah saved from the fish as the three paradigmatic examples of people saved from certain death by divine intervention.⁵⁴ Later

⁵¹ On the reception of Jonah and the fish in Jewish and Christian traditions see WOLFF 1975; NARKISS 1979; STEFFEN 1982; BEN ZVI 2003: 137-143. On Jonah’s fish in Christian literature see also DUVAL 1973; CICCARESE 2002: 191-199; for the motif in Christian iconography see WEITZMANN 1979: 397-407; JENSEN 2000. Compare also SNYDER 1999.

⁵² Matt 12:38-41.

⁵³ See, e.g., the wall frescoes of the catacombs of Saint Peter and Saint Marcellin in Rome: <www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/archeo/italiano/documents/rc_com_archeo_doc_20011010_cataccrist_it.html>.

⁵⁴ 3 Macc 6:8-8.

sources, such as the Babylonian Talmud and the Zohar, confirm that the stay of Jonah in the fish's belly was interpreted by the Rabbis as a journey in the netherworld.⁵⁵ In some midrashim Jonah is identified with the son of the Shunammite widow, resurrected by Elisha.⁵⁶ However, in Jewish contexts Jonah's story is associated not with resurrection so much as with birth more broadly. This association derives from the exegesis of Jonah 2:2-3, where the fish belly is called *me'eh*, 'uterus,' and *beten*, 'womb,' words which can be used metonymically to indicate pregnancy.⁵⁷ Always within this frame, the medieval Jewish philosopher Rashi explains that Jonah was first swallowed by a male fish, who spat him out, only for him to be swallowed again by a female and pregnant fish.⁵⁸ Still today, the book of Jonah is read to Jewish women as they give birth, and small portions of the text are placed as a good omen under their pillows.⁵⁹ Accordingly, several sources mention that Jonah came out naked from the fish, and sometimes he is represented as being bald. A midrash attributes his baldness to his prolonged stay in the fish womb, where the prophet lost his beard and hair because of the hot environment.⁶⁰ The loss of hair could then be considered the distinctive mark of a successful initiation. However, it seems more likely that Jewish and Christian traditions interpreted baldness and nudity as references to the condition of a newborn. This interpretation could have been supported by a passage in the book of Job, where the protagonist shaves his head as a sign of mourning and cries: <<Naked I came out from my mother's womb (*beten*), and naked shall I return

⁵⁵ *Babylonian Talmud*, 'Eruvin 19 a, where it is said that Gehenna has three doors: one to the desert, one to Jerusalem, and one to the sea. For the latter Jonah 2:3 is indicated as a source. The same passage is also used to confirm that Gehenna is an equivalent of the netherworld. Compare *Zohar* 2.199. See on this PERI 2002: 14-23.

⁵⁶ 2 Kgs 4:8 ff.; *Midrash on Psalms* 29:7; *Pirque' de Rav Eliezer* 33; *Yalqut* 550.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Gen 15:4; 25:23 (*me'eh*); Hos 9:11 (*beten*).

⁵⁸ *Midrash on Jonah* 2:1; Rashi, *Commentary on Jonah* 2:1. Rashi also builds on a gender discrepancy in the biblical text concerning the gender of the fish, which is masculine in Jonah 2:1 (*dag*) but feminine in Jonah 2:2 (*dagah*). For a recent proposal to understand the form *dagah* as preserving a locative suffix, instead of being read as a feminine noun, see TIEMEYER 2017.

⁵⁹ I owe this information to Maria Luisa Mayer Modena (personal communication).

⁶⁰ *Midrash on Jonah* 4:3; Ibn Ezra, *On Jonah* 4:6. See KOMLÓS 1950: 54-55; BEDINI - BIGARELLI 1999: 138. For a detailed iconographic survey see ANGELINI 2018: 122-128.

there.>>⁶¹ The representation of the bald prophet is widespread on funerary monuments in the first centuries of the Common Era. The persistence of this iconography is demonstrated by the fact that it occurs on medieval manuscript miniatures as well.⁶² This theme was still very popular in the late Middle Ages, as is attested by the *Specula Humanae Salvationis* and *Biblia pauperum*, i.e. large illuminated books of several chapters that were designed for the illiterate, and which paired scenes from the Old and New Testaments. These books are based on the principle that each episode of the New Testament is prefigured by an event of the Old Testament, and also constitutes its fulfillment. In a manuscript from Darmstadt dating back to 1360 CE, the chapter depicting the deposition of Christ is paired with the image of Jonah thrown into the fish's mouth; on the register below the manuscript text, Jesus's exit from the tomb mirrors Jonah coming out, bald, from the fish.⁶³

Although the association of Jonah's story with themes of birth and resurrection is known to Jewish traditions, the most popular interpretation of this episode in early Judaism develops the idea of a journey made by the prophet through the abyss. The so-called "Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer" (a midrash attributed to the wise Eliezer son of Hyrcanus, active between the 1st and the 2nd century CE, although the actual text dates to Medieval times) compare the mouth of the fish to a large synagogue, where «the two eyes of the fish were like two windows of obsidian and made light. A pearl was hanging in the bowels of the fish, making light and Jonah saw all that was in the seas and in the depths».⁶⁴ The reference to the synagogue suggests that swallowing is intended to be a prodigious means to acquire a superior and secret knowledge. The possibility of obtaining extraordinary insight is underlined by the similarity between the eyes of the fish and the windows of obsidian, a volcanic stone with reflective properties that was used to

⁶¹ Job 1:21.

⁶² See the incipit of the book of Jonah in the Heisterbach Bible (Cologne, ca. 1240): ms Berlin, SBB, Theol. Lat. fol. 379, f. 377 v. Compare ANGELINI 2010: 241.

⁶³ APPUHN 1981: 66-67. For the so called *Biblia Pauperum* see KOCH 1950.

⁶⁴ *Pirqe' de Rav Eliezer* 10. Compare also Midrash on Jonah (JELLINEK 1938, vol. 1: 98 ss.). See BEDINI - BIGARELLI 1999: 57.

build mirrors, and, according to the orphic lapidaries, to draw small oracles.⁶⁵ Moreover, the pearl, whose extraordinary brilliance was due, according to the ancients, to the fact that it absorbs the sun's rays, functions as a lamp: the whole story turns on the theme of brightness.⁶⁶ The origin of the midrash is, as per usual, an inconsistency in the biblical text. Ancient commentators from the Hellenistic and Roman period, such as Josephus and Philo, already observed that Jonah's prayer (Jonah 2:3-10) more closely resembles a song of praise and thanksgiving for salvation than an actual request for help. This is demonstrated by the use of verbal forms with a perfective aspect: «In my anguish I invoked Yhwh and he answered me; from the depths of Sheol I cried out and you heard my voice.»⁶⁷ On this basis, each verse of the psalm is interpreted in the midrash as one of the four secret corners of the world that Jonah had the opportunity to visit.⁶⁸ It is difficult to evaluate precisely when this reading arose, although the dating of the extant sources attests that it found success in early medieval times. This is further demonstrated by the fact that Jonah's exploration of the abyss has also parallels in the Koranic commentaries to the story, which interpret the fish belly is either as a prison or as a mosque. According to some medieval Arabic exegetes, «the god made the skin of the fish thin/transparent, precisely so that the prophet could look outside».⁶⁹

⁶⁵ On the reflective qualities of the obsidian see Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 36.196. According to the Orphic Lapidaries (285-290), the stone was used in recipes to obtain oracles. Compare also Rashi, *On Jonah* 2:6: «The eyes of the fish were similar to two windows through which Jonah could look and observe all that was in the sea».

⁶⁶ On the extraordinary brightness of the pearl see also Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 9.107; Aelianus, *Natura animalium* 15.8 and the Latin *Physiologus* (37).

⁶⁷ Jonah 2:3. See, e.g., Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates* 9.213-214.

⁶⁸ *Midrash on Jonah* 2:3-7: «The fish showed him a great river from which the waters of the Ocean came, as it is said: "and a river enveloped me" (Jonah 2:4). He then showed him the paths of the Sea of the Reeds through which Israel passed in the midst of it, for it is said: "the seaweed clung to my head" (Jonah 2:6). She showed him the Gehenna as it is said: 'You have brought my life up from the pit'; she showed him the Temple of the Lord, as it is said: "I went down to the roots of the mountains" (Jonah 2:7) [...]. Eventually it showed him the foundation stone anchored in the abyss». Compare also *Pirque' de Rav Eliezer* 10.

⁶⁹ See KOMLÓS 1950: 56-60 and the detailed study of ZILIO-GRANDI 2006, especially 307-315.

3.2 *The combat with a sea monster*

A third stream of tradition was especially successful in Christian hagiography, where stories of being swallowed and miraculous survival became part of the heroic pedigree of various saints. One clear example is provided by the story of Saint Margaret from Antiochian, which is preserved in its most detailed version by the 13th century chronicler Jacobus de Varagine's *Legenda Aurea*.⁷⁰ However, the legend is certainly older, as it was part of the collection of *Acta Sanctorum*.⁷¹ Margaret is swallowed by a dragon and comes out unharmed from its womb, thanks to the magical and spontaneous growth of her holy cross, which cuts the belly of the animal (and eventually kills it). It is therefore no coincidence that Saint Margaret was attributed maieutic virtues in the Middle Ages: as was the case for the book of Jonah in Jewish contexts, the biography of Saint Margaret was read to Christian women giving birth, or put directly on their bellies. Women invoked the saint so that the baby could safely come out of the womb, just as Margaret had come out of the dragon's belly with no pain.⁷² While the motif of being swallowed echoes Jonah's story, a major difference concerns the function of the animal, which is clearly Margaret's enemy. This animal is an image for the devil, which is usually identified either with a sea monster or with a dragon: this also explains why the holy cross has the power to kill it. To understand such a shift in the reception of the motif in Jonah, we need to look back to the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. In the Septuagint the «big fish» (*dag gadol*) is rendered by «large sea monster» (*mega ketos*). The Greek translator of Jonah was probably influenced by the numerous stories involving sea monsters attested in Greek myth, poetry, ethnography and iconography, and a *ketos* would have been the most appropriate candidate to describe a fish capable of

⁷⁰ Jacobus de Varagine, *Legenda aurea* 12; 93 (ed. VITALE BROVARONE - VITALE BROVARONE 1998).

⁷¹ The *Acta Sanctorum* were first edited by Boninus Mombritius in the 15th century, and are accessible through a reprint from 1910 (vol. 2: 192, 31-52). The motif of the dragon was already found in a Greek passion of Sancta Marina (an alternative name of Margherita), dating back to the 9th century or even earlier. See *Bibliotheca Agiographica Graeca* (BHG 1165) and TORTORELLI 2008: 4-10.

⁷² RÉAU 1958, vol. 3: 877-882.

swallowing an entire human being. However, the same term *ketos* appears elsewhere in the Bible, alternating with «dragon» (*drakon*), to translate the name of various sea monsters, such as *tannin*, Leviathan, and others:⁷³ this created some overlap between the two categories in subsequent traditions.⁷⁴ Moreover, the Church Fathers unanimously interpreted Leviathan as a symbol for the devil: hence, the fish of Jonah became an infernal monster, too, which needed to be actively fought.⁷⁵ While Jonah is not a fighting prophet, as has been shown above, classic models of Greek heroes fighting sea monsters, like Heracles, Perseus, and Jason provided a fitting repertoire of themes to inspire the idealized construction of saints in ancient Christianity, and hence to reinterpret the motif of the swallowing by a fish or a monster according to a heroic pattern.

4. CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude by pointing briefly at two implications of the present study, which address the two “challenges” presented in the introduction. The first implication concerns the context of production of the book of Jonah and the relationship between Judeans and seafaring. I argued above that the motif of Jonah swallowed by the fish is not simply and directly borrowed from Greek mythology, nor does it arise from some—otherwise unattested—folkloric legends associated with sailors’ reports. Rather, it is a product of the literary creativity of Judean circles embedded with Hellenistic culture. As such, it can be read against the background of other biblical sources, such as Psalms and Hellenistic wisdom traditions, which attest of an increasing interest for the sea as a place

⁷³ E.g. Job 3:8; Rahab, another sea monster, is rendered by *ketos* in Job 9:13; 26:12. On the ambiguity of *ketos*, which can mean both ‘large-sized fish’ and ‘sea monster’ see ZUCKER 1997.

⁷⁴ For a detailed treatment of this issue see ANGELINI 2018: 104-114; 165-172; compare also NOEGEL 2015, according to which the Hebrew text of Jonah makes an indirect allusion to the traditions concerning Leviathan. See also HARL ET AL. 1999: 117-161, especially 147.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Augustine, *Expositio in Psalmos* 65.6, and the sources collected by CICCARESE 2002: 191-199. The first identification of the fish with a whale is instead later. To the best of my knowledge, it goes back to the *Chanson de Roland* 226, vv. 3096-3109.

of marvels. That being said, the self-representation of Judean literati which emerges from the book of Jonah still presents an image of Judeans as a people who has little involvement in sailing. As I mentioned above, the whole adventure of Jonah on the sea is characterized as an experience of strangeness and othering. As the book predates the Hasmonean period,⁷⁶ at the time of its composition Jaffa was a Phoenician harbor (or at the very least a Ptolemaic harbor), and sailors driving the boats are characterized as non-Israelite. In this regard, the picture presented by the book of Jonah displays strong continuities with the apologetic discourse held by Josephus; however, there is some margin to advance the hypothesis that, in their everyday lives, Israelites might have known more about the sea than the literati let on. Scholarly attempts to demonstrate a stronger familiarity of ancient Israelites with seafaring remain methodologically dubious, as they treat the description of the Solomonic kingdom as if it mirrored historical reality, which is far from proven.⁷⁷ In addition, they tend not to carefully distinguish between biblical texts and evidence that stems from later periods.⁷⁸ These works should therefore be approached cautiously. Nevertheless, and in light of the evidence presented here, the possibility that the early Hellenistic period saw a change in Judean attitudes towards the sea warrants further exploration.⁷⁹

A second implication of this study concerns the possible contribution of Jonah's story to the understanding of epics in the Hebrew Bible. The analysis conducted does not aim at detecting a strict connection between the book of Jonah and the epic genre, nor it wish to resuscitate a reading of the overall book as a "prophetic epics". Despite the adventurous nature of the story and the presence of elements typical of Hellenistic epics, such as the fish episode, epics does not seem to be the defining feature of the book. In this regard, defining the literary genre of Jonah certainly remains a complex task, notably

⁷⁶ Most scholars agree that the final form of the book dates to the postexilic period, although opinion are divided between the Persian or Hellenistic period. See e.g., SASSON 1990: 11-26, BEN ZVI 2003: 8, GERHARDS 2006, MULZER 2017. At any rate, the book of Jonah is likely quoted by Ben Sira (49:12) and Tobit (14:4,9,15).

⁷⁷ E.g., STIEGLITZ 2000.

⁷⁸ E.g., PATAI 1998.

⁷⁹ See on this issue the sound remarks of SPERBER 2000.

because it offers multiple levels of interpretations. Conversely, the analysis of the motif of Jonah and the fish is of interest to rethink the presence and the role of epics in the Hebrew Bible more broadly. While the search for large epic narratives, “poems” or “cycles” underpinning the composition of biblical poetry or entire books remains methodologically problematic, an approach that focuses on the analysis of epic themes and follows the historical and literary developments of epic motifs seems to offer more fruitful potential. In this regard, the book of Jonah represents a relevant study case. On the one hand, such an approach allows us to overcome the limits of a too-strict definition of the epic genre, which is inflexibly fixed by the notion of *epos* inherited from classical literature. On the other hand, thorough research of epic themes within a larger timeframe can illuminate their literary and cultural specificities, while at the same time allowing us to retrace the growth of such motifs and their popularity in antiquity.

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