

# Cronache di Archeologia

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## Cronache di Archeologia

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fondata da Giovanni Rizza

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## **“*Protinus aerii mellis caelestia dona exsequar*”<sup>1</sup>. A short overview on honey in the past**

Giulia Raimondi

### **Introduction**

In this brief preliminary analysis, we aim to highlight how honey (both as a food and as a basic component in ritual and in the medical sphere) and related elements have been used since ancient times<sup>2</sup>. Through various evidences, such as ancient written sources, ancient objects found during archaeological excavations and structures related to honey production, an overview of exemplary cases is thus proposed that call to mind the importance of this food as well as its producers, the bees<sup>3</sup>.

### **Bees' wisdom<sup>4</sup>. Sweet songs from honey's voice.**

Bees are creatures which are often compared to nymphs<sup>5</sup> for their purity and they can be found in pristine places and clear springs<sup>6</sup>. According to what Aristotle handed down, these creatures “do not ap-

proach anything which is dead or corrupted [...], they feed only on sweet juices and prefer to draw water where it purely gushes”<sup>7</sup>. Due to this genuineness and according to the same, these creatures possess a “divine trait”<sup>8</sup>. Taking part in the simplicity of nature, from the “mind [...] they draw their breath from the eternal ether”<sup>9</sup>. They also cram honey into vessels, kept in the nymphs' lair described in the *Odyssey*<sup>10</sup>, and their qualities are sung of in various ways amid metaphors and hyperboles.

A sentence from *Satyricon* will make it easier to understand the ambivalence<sup>11</sup> of honey and bees: *Apes enim ego diuinas bestias puto, quae mel uomunt, etiam si dicuntur illud a Ioue afferre. Ideo autem pungunt, quia ubicunque dulce est, ibi et acidum inuenies*<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, these creatures are a symbol of purity and sweetness, of immortality and, moreover, a symbol of death and characteristic of chthonic environment.

In any case, the honey produced by the bee is a quintessential symbol of sweetness and, from this very meaning, a verse is engraved in a small picture in Pompeii in the “House of the Lovers,” a name derived from the phrase: *Amantes, ut apes, vitam melitam exigunt*<sup>13</sup> (fig. 1).

1 Virgil, *Georgics*, 4, 1. For a general overview on “Aerial Honey”, refer to the studies of C. Mariotti, MARIOTTI 2017, pp. 295-314.

2 It should be noted that there are several important contributions to refer to. These concern honey in the medical sphere and the archaeological findings to be related to honey, bees and the production of the food (both in the economic and ritual sphere) in the ancient world. Refer to LÉVI-STRAUSS 1973; CRANE 1975; CRANE 1983; VAZQUEZ HOYS 1991, pp. 61-93; BALANDIER 1993, pp. 93-125; NIELSEN 1993, pp. 415-419; CARUSO 1994, pp. 9-39; ROSCALLA 1998; CRANE 1999; CRANE 2001; PRESTON 2006; BORTOLIN 2008; GIUMAN 2008; GIUMAN 2014, pp. 75-87; BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50; BEGHINI 2017, pp. 121-165; SANTAGATI 2019, pp. 21-32; BEARZOT 2023, pp. 49-58; RAIMONDI 2023, pp. 219-234;

3 I would thank Alessandro Riccardo Scalia and Giusy Belfiore for the final revision of this paper.

4 The title of the paragraph gets inspiration from the name of a section of Davide Susanetti's book (2019), who brilliantly presents the extraordinary virtues of the bees in the classical sources.

5 The relationship between nymphs and bees will be discussed later on this text.

6 SUSANETTI 2019, p. 53.

7 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, 596 b; refer to SUSANETTI 2019, p. 53.

8 Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, 761 a; see SUSANETTI 2019, p. 53.

9 Virgil, *Georgics*, 4, 219-221.

10 Homer, *Odyssey*, 13, 107.

11 Refer to BECK 1982, see from p. 532; GIUMAN 2014, p. 83.

12 Petronius, *Satyricon*, 56.

13 “Lovers, like bees, lead a life as sweet as honey”. Refer to [http://pompeisites.org/sito\\_archeologico/casa-degli-amanti/](http://pompeisites.org/sito_archeologico/casa-degli-amanti/).



Fig. 1 - Detail of the engraved verse in the “House of Lovers,” Pompeii (WikiCommons).

The honey’s metaphor is certainly one of the most widely used in poetry. The sweetness, persuasiveness, and compositional refinement of those who pride themselves on resorting to such a metaphor, can be attributed to the desire to show how their voice is elevated and inspired by the pleasantness of the Muses. The bee is thus an effigy of poetic activity in Pindar<sup>14</sup>. For Bacchylides, the gift of the Muses and the desire of every poet is to be the “nightingale with the voice of honey”<sup>15</sup>. From written sources, it is possible to read phrases such as “Sweet songs from the voice of honey”, “My tongue desires the chosen flower of sweet honey”, “Liquid nectar, gift of the Muses, I offer”<sup>16</sup>. Poets, such as “Bacchae

draw from rivers of honey and milk”, “draw their songs from sources of honey, from gardens and valleys sacred to the Muses, and bring them to us, flying, as bees do”<sup>17</sup>. The word *méli*, honey, is also associated with *mélōs*, song or melody, and *melizein*: “composing songs chiseled with notes of honey”<sup>18</sup>. This gift is inherent not only to the poet, but also to both the wise man who gives advice and to the ruler enlightened by the Muses, as in the case of Nestor in the *Iliad*: as a matter of fact, “from his tongue the word flowed sweeter than honey”<sup>19</sup>.

Semonides also makes the woman with the best qualities descend precisely from bees<sup>20</sup>, as reported in his satirical iambic composition on women. She is described as the only virtuous one. This quotation is regarded by some scholars as a tribute to Hesiod and the metaphor he used about women and

14 Pindar, *Pythian*, 10, 54.

15 Bacchylides, *Epinikion*, 3,98, despite of the metaphor of the nightingale is not perfectly adaptable to our text. The nightingale, in fact, is seen as a cantor of pain, because it refers to the myth of Procne and Itys. However, the pain is settled by Euripides as a sacrifice to the Muses. Euripides, *Heracles*, 1021-1022; Sophocles, *Electra*, 104-109 and 148-149.

16 Pindar, *Patheneia*, 2,76; Pindar, *Olympian*, 6, 21 and 7, 7-10; Pindar, *Nemean*, 3, 1-12, see SUSANETTI 2019, p. 50.

17 SUSANETTI 2019, p. 41.

18 Pindar writes “melizémen [...] meligdòupoisi aoidàis”, *Nemean*, 11,18, see SUSANETTI 2019, p. 50.

19 Homer, *Iliad*, 1,249. Refer to SUSANETTI 2019, p. 50.

20 Semonides, *Types of Women*.

men being compared to bees<sup>21</sup>. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Muses pour dew on the tongue of a king protected by Zeus, causing "words of honey" to flow from it, capable of making "even a great strife cease"<sup>22</sup>. For poets, honey is the first nourishment par excellence and the latter is defined by the fact that the early days of Homer, Pindar and Plato were marked by the sweetness of the bees' nectar, which had sprinkled their lips with sweet honey<sup>23</sup>. Again, in the *Odyssey*, bees gather honey for the nymphs<sup>24</sup> in a cave, near the harbor of Ithaca. In the same work, the Sirens boast their voice which can produce a "sound of honey"<sup>25</sup>.

In Greek religiosity, honey is also a symbol of enlightenment and it is the "divine food that fell from the sky"<sup>26</sup>. It purifies and reveals and it is also a means of communication with the divine<sup>27</sup>. Since the early Greek culture, honey is thus comparable to the sweetness of poetics and it is divine inspiration for poets and philosophers<sup>28</sup>.

### Honey between environment and ritual

Associating what the ancient sources report with the natural environment, Varro<sup>29</sup>, Columella<sup>30</sup>, Pliny the Elder<sup>31</sup> and Virgil<sup>32</sup> discuss about the ideal habitat for the hives: a place rich with fruit trees and spring waters<sup>33</sup>. On that vein, Columella, Pliny the Elder and even a papyrus from the Hellenistic age make it clear that nomadic beekeeping is also fundamental to honey production. As a matter of fact, the transportation of hives from one place to another that is more favorable from a naturalistic point of view<sup>34</sup>, makes honey a fundamental element of the production process.

In this regard, several authors from the classical tradition describe the materials used in making a hive<sup>35</sup>. Columella, Pliny the Elder, Varro and Virgil speak of hives made of woven wicker (fig. 2). For example, Columella mentions wooden planks as materials for their construction. Ferula<sup>36</sup> were also used (discussed by Pliny the Elder and Varro), together with manure, bricks and clay. We also have evidence of the use of these materials, depicted in Egyptian tombs (fig. 3) and found in some archaeological finds, such as those from Tel Rehov<sup>37</sup>. For Homer, on the other hand, the stone is the material chosen for the construction of hives<sup>38</sup>.

Honey was also an element used during feasts, and the case of Democritus of Abdera, who decided to starve, is an emblematic example of how crucial it was in antiquity. In fact, the women of his family begged him not to allow himself to die on the days of the Thesmophoric festivals. Then he decided to eat only honey, surviving as long as he ate it<sup>39</sup>. On the other hand, honey was also used during the Thesmophoria in Syracuse, a city in which a sweet was prepared and then carried in procession in honor of the deity<sup>40</sup>. This sweet is described in the *Deipnosophists* and it was composed of honey and sesame, called *mylloi*. Mead was also drunk for the same holidays, of whose containers there are probable archaeological records, such as those found at the sanctuary of Bitalemi in Gela<sup>41</sup>.

Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21,43,73-74.

35 About this topic, refer to BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50 and bibliography.

36 BORTOLIN 2008, p. 84.

37 Several Israeli archaeological finds confirm the latter. In the Beit Shean Valley, the research carried out by the University of Jerusalem and Amihai Mazar led the studies to a turning point. During this mission, archaeologists found a structure for the production of honey, dating back to the Iron Age. This discovery laid a great foundation for studies on ancient beekeeping, in fact it was initially believed that the honey mentioned by the sources referred to date honey. The discovery, however, contradicts this hypothesis given the copious presence of hives. The hives found were made of straw and unbaked clay. This research has also shown connections between Anatolia and the center of Tel Rehov. Refer to MAZAR, PANITZ-COHEN 2007, pp. 202-219; MAZAR 2018, pp. 40-49.

38 Homer, *Odyssey*, 13,105; CRANE 1983, pp. 196-200.

39 Athenaeus 2, p. 46. In this regard, it is known that honey was considered as food that promotes longevity. Refer to the already quoted Abdera's Democritus, and also to Zeno's and Pythagoras' Democritus. BORTOLIN 2008, p. 26.

40 Athenaeus 14, 647a. Refer to ALBERTOCCHI 2015, pp. 102. See also the offerings enumerated in Cholargo's decree concerning the Thesmophoria in LIPPOLIS 2012, p. 91.

41 Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*, 672b, 4-11. Refer to

21 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 588-612.

22 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 83-89. SUSANETTI 2019, pp. 50-51.

23 *Anthologia Palatina* 2, 343; Aelianus, *Varia Historia* 12, 45. SUSANETTI 2019, p. 54.

24 Homer, *Odyssey* 13, 102-112.

25 Homer, *Odyssey*, 12, 178-191.

26 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, 553 b - 554 a.

27 Homer, *Iliad*, 23, 170; Lucretius 3, 888-893.

28 As an example, refer to Homer, Sappho, Pythagoras, Pindar, Plato. Refer to SIMONINI 1986, p. 159.

29 Varro, *De re rustica* 3, 16, 15.

30 Columella, 9,5,1-2; 9,5,3 and 9,5,5.

31 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21,47,80.

32 Virgil, *Georgics*, 4,8-12 and 4,18-24.

33 BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

34 Columella 9,14,19; P. Cair. Zen. 59520,10 (see BORTOLIN 2008);

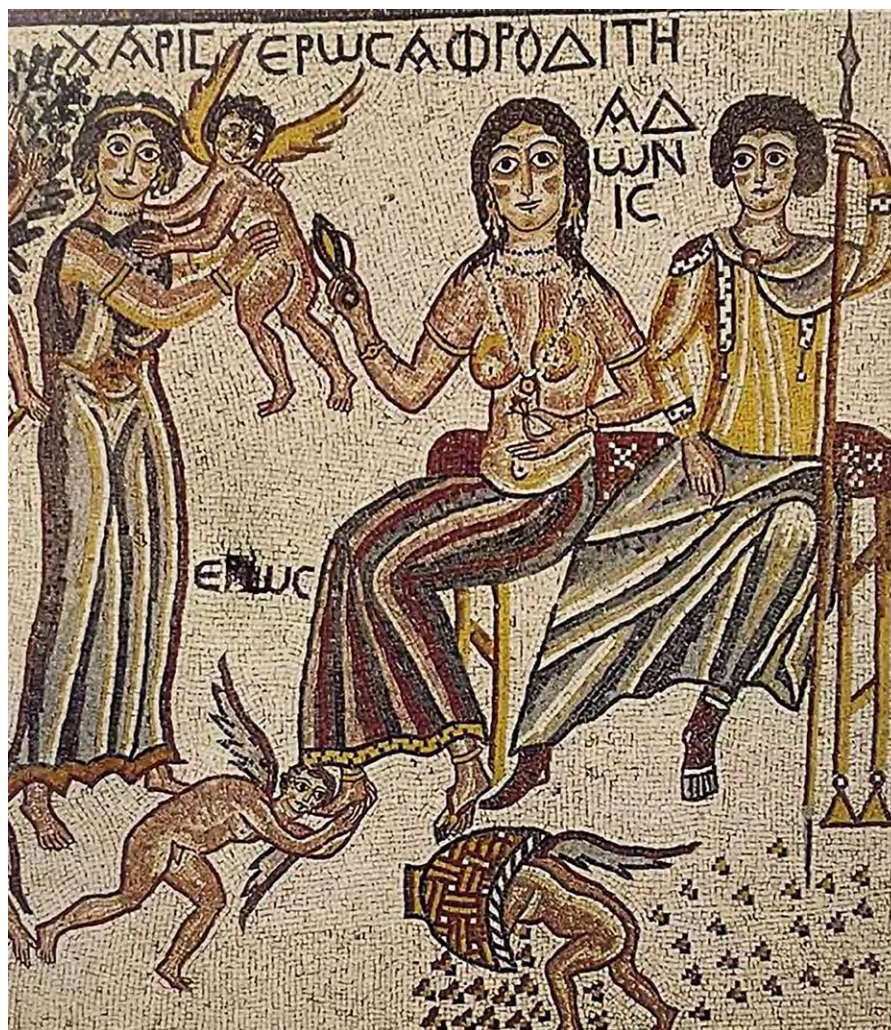


Fig. 2 - Detail of mosaic depicting wicker beehives, Hall of Hippolytus, Madaba (PICCIRILLO 1993).

The σωφοσύνη of the bee was associated with the sobriety of the libation in which honey was used<sup>42</sup>: this information is consistent with the offerings elevated to the gods during ritual events, such as those just discussed. In these cases, blood sacrifices were excluded and wine was not used either. As a proof of this fact, Porphyry, following in the footsteps of Theophrastus, discusses animal sacrifice and a chronology of ritual liquid offerings, used over time and thus listing them: water, honey, oil and in the end wine<sup>43</sup>. In the ritual sphere, Plutarch writes down that honey was a libation be-

fore wine<sup>44</sup>; moreover, depictions on the Theban tomb of Rekhmira (an official of Thutmose III) and an inscription on an altar, hand down the use of two different honey libations: the first to the gods and the second in honor of Zeus Elateros at Paros<sup>45</sup> (figs. 4-5).

Essential components of recipes were honey and other substances such as *galaktar*, oil, sesame, figs and raisins, in order to appease irate deities and spirits of the dead<sup>46</sup>.

Honey, in the most common sphere of its use which is the culinary sphere, was not only used to cook sweets, but its use was also copious in various cook-

ALBERTOCCHI 2015, pp. 95-107; SANTAGATI 2019, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> ASPESI 2002, pp. 919-929.

<sup>43</sup> As an example, refer to the offerings raised in honor of the Eumenids in *Oedipus at Colonus* written by Sophocles, GIUMAN 2014, p. 84. Refer to HARRISON 1980, p. 90 and ff.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*, 672 b, 7.

<sup>45</sup> IG 12,5,1207, refer to SANTAGATI 2019, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> SEMINARA 2016, p. 91.



Fig. 3 - Terracotta beehives. Detail from the tomb of Pebasa, Thebes (VIDALE 2003).

ing recipes, which refer to what today we would call "first" and "second" courses<sup>47</sup>. Several recipes have been handed down to us by Apicius through *De re coquinaria* and many of the dishes have sweet and sour characteristics<sup>48</sup>. *Garum*, vinegar and honey were in fact the three most common components of sweet and sour dishes, made with meat, fish and vegetables<sup>49</sup>.

Honey was a basic ingredient in sauces and jams<sup>50</sup>, but also a component of certain drinks such as

οἶνομέλι<sup>51</sup>, *melitites*<sup>52</sup>, *inveterate aqua mulsa* (or *subita* if made from unfermented must)<sup>53</sup>, μελικρατον and a drink made from milk and honey<sup>54</sup>. Although the present contribution does not focus on the uses of honey in the gastronomic sphere, it seemed relevant to mention, briefly, its importance in it in order to best introduce the equally fundamental role that this substance played in the field of ancient medical science.

### Honey as healthy or deadly food?

Lucretius' witness<sup>55</sup> indicates a preponderant connection regarding honey between poetic and medical art and it can be read in a topical key. He reports that, in order for children to take a bitter medicine, it will be necessary to sprinkle the rim of the cup with honey, and that likewise the poet will have to resort to the "sweetness of the Muses"<sup>56</sup> to enable the listener to understand it. Honey is thus used in various circumstances with therapeutic purposes because of the remarkable properties it contains<sup>57</sup>. Being at the same time a primary nutritional resource, food and medical purposes often tended to combine<sup>58</sup>. It was sometimes also interpreted as a magical and ritual food, due to its medical properties<sup>59</sup>. In reference to the honey being used as an ingredient of ritual-therapeutic foods there are, to cite a few examples, several testimonies concerning the preparations of honey buns at the altar of Asclepius in Corinth<sup>60</sup>. There are many more attestations of the ancient use of honey as an ingredient for therapeutic remedies<sup>61</sup>.

51 Or *mulsum*. This honey wine was also prepared with the Falernian wine. ANDRÉ 1981, pp. 166-174. *Mulsum* was also used in the medical field. Pliny the Elder *Naturalis Historia* 22,53.

52 Pliny the Elder *Naturalis Historia* 14,11,85.

53 ANDRÉ 1981, p. 175.

54 BORTOLIN 2008, p. 24 and ANDRÉ 1981, pp. 63 and p. 175.

55 SUSANETTI 2019, p. 52.

56 SUSANETTI 2019, p. 52. Lucrezio, *De Rerum Natura*, 1,947-950.

57 NIELSEN 1993, pp. 415-419.

58 Marcus Gavius Apicius sometimes describes the medical recipes, such as the ones for digestion and swelling, refer to *Apicius* 3, 18, 3 in BORTOLIN 2008.

59 BALANDIER 1993, p. 108; BORTOLIN 2008, p. 26. On honey in the medical field, please refer to RAIMONDI 2023, pp. 219-234.

60 Refer to LANG 1977, p. 13.

61 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, 9, 40, 627a; Varro *De re rustica* 3, 16, 23; *Apicius* 3, 18, 3; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 12, 16-17, 32. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 4, 8, 20-21, see SANTAGATI 2019, p. 23.

47 ANDRÉ 1981, p. 122.

48 BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

49 The kidney, cooked with water and honey, was also considered a delicacy. ANDRÉ 1981, p. 122.

50 Such as quince jam, or sauces for preserving fruits and meat. ANDRÉ 1981, pp. 69, 175.



Fig. 4 - Scenes of bee-keeping from the tomb of Rekhmira, Thebes (FRASER 1951).

Mention has already been made of the ritual connotations of the substance that is the subject of this paper, yet this food counts several attestations in the mythical sphere regarding its uncommon uses. Honey and bees, for example, are also often linked to the infancy of divine beings, and bees are often associated with nymphs<sup>62</sup>.

In Crete, Zeus was fed on honey thanks to bees or, according to others, thanks to Melissa<sup>63</sup>. Dionysus, on Mount Nisa in Helicon, was also fed on honey thanks to the nymphs Macrides, Nisa, Erato, Bromie and Bacche<sup>64</sup>. The name of the priestesses, according to another version of the myth, would have been transmitted by the first priestess, Melissa precisely, daughter of the Cretan king Melisseus<sup>65</sup>. Zeus *Kretagenes* was fed on goat's milk and honey<sup>66</sup> in a cave on the island where bees

originated, according to Nicander<sup>67</sup>. Following that genesis, in the Hellenistic account of Mnasea, bees teach humans to feed on honey and not just meat. Another "Melissa" is also mentioned, who was the discoverer of honeycombs and the first to instruct other nymphs about insects, which she called *melissai*<sup>68</sup>. In reference to the sacredness of the matter, it was associated with deities in various ways, such as in the case of the cult of Zeus *melichios*, which was professed in cities like Argos, Athens and Selinunte<sup>69</sup>.

On the other hand, the misuse of honey is the main contrivance in a whole series of narrations, based on subjects abusing the pleasure whose substance is emblematic.

Since the Homeric tales, the gifts of Aphrodite have been called *melicha*, "honeyed"; this seductive sweetness leads, in several Greek myths, to abuse of the seductive power and sinful excesses. In ref-

62 See the connection between the ash nymphs, the *Melie*, and the honey. As a matter of fact, the nymphs and the bees can be found in the same environments, such as the caves. Refer to COMBA, AMATEIS 2019, pp. 196-199.

63 Diodorus Siculus, 5, 70 and Callimachus, *Hymn to Zeus* 49; Virgil, *Georgics*, 1, 149; Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 19.

64 Refer to GRAVES 1960.

65 Melisseo's daughters, Melissa, Amalteia, Adrasteia, Ida, Kynosoura were called *Melissai*, "Bees". Refer to CARUSO 1994.

66 Lactantius, *Institutiones Divinae*, 1, 22; Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 19. Please refer to CARUSO 1994, p. 21: "They say that in Crete there is a cave, inhabited by bees, where Rea gave birth

to Zeus, according to the myth [...] They inhabit the cave of the sacred bees, nurses of Zeus [...]" Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 19.

67 Columella, *De re rust.*, 9, 2, 4. About the origins of the bees, refer to BEGHINI 2017, pp. 121-165.

68 SIMONINI 1986, p. 171.

69 GABRICI 1927, p. 381.; PICARD 1943, p. 97; CUSUMANO 1991, p. 19; BENNETT-PAUL 2002, p. 87; GROTTA 2010. Refer to SANTAGATI 2019, p. 28.



Fig. 5 - Scene of honeycomb offering from the tomb of Rekhmira, Thebes (NEUFELD 1978).

erence to the myths of Tereus<sup>70</sup> and Polytechnos<sup>71</sup>, honey has a negative connotation. Moreover, in the myth concerning the transformation of Polytechnos, the sweet substance is the cause of man's sorrows<sup>72</sup>. In fact, Strabo also tells of some varieties of honey, obtained from poisonous flowers that possess harmful properties, even capable of driving men crazy<sup>73</sup>.

70 Refer to Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 45; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6, 420-675, Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 3, 14,8; GRAVES 1960.

71 Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 11.

72 About this punishment, refer to Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 8, 22 and CAZZANIGA 1949, pp. 1-5, flies and ants attack the offender sprinkled with honey.

73 WILKINS 2006, p. 261; refer to the of Strabo, 12, 3, 18 in which honey is the "bringer of madness"; refer also to Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 21, 43, 74; 21, 45, 77; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 4,8, 20-21. On the "Mad honey" refer to HARISSIS, MAVROFRIDIS 2013, pp.

In the context of mythology, it can be found the figure of Glaucus<sup>74</sup>, son of Minos, who fell into a *pithos* full of honey, drowning in it and later being brought back to life by Polydeus<sup>75</sup>. The myth of Glaucus recalls the typical Cretan funeral ceremonies of burying the dead in vessels containing honey<sup>76</sup>, according to some scholars. In this regard, this idea would recall the episodes described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* concerning the funerals of Patroclus and Achilles. Moreover, according to Apostolius<sup>77</sup>, the myth recalls an episode whose subject was an alleged indigestion of Glaucus. The latter, after ingesting too much honey, was allegedly cured by Polydius with various medical herbs<sup>78</sup>.

In reference to the myths concerning bees and their connection with life and death<sup>79</sup>, Aristeus<sup>80</sup> is a shepherd, a bee breeder par excellence, who tries to bring his bees back to life after seeing them perish as punishment for his sins against Eurydice, a young woman loved by Orpheus<sup>81</sup>.

### Bees and oracles. Honey as a sacred beverage

The value of honey as divine food causes bees to have prophetic powers<sup>82</sup>, like the nymphs did<sup>83</sup>. This characteristic may also depend on the closeness of the sacred animal to the chthonic world. In fact, the aforementioned name Melissa was also an epithet attributed to Pythia: in her temple, bees were worshipped as sacred animals<sup>84</sup>. Apollo also had been nurtured by three winged virgins who lived on Parnassus, and it was on Parnassus that an

730-733. Refer to RAIMONDI 2023, pp. 219-234.

74 GIUMAN 2014, pp. 75-87. Refer also to PERSSON 1942; BELFIORE 2000, p. 196.

75 Apollodorus 3,17 and Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 136. Refer also to LEVI 1945, p. 304 and ff.; CORSANO 1992, p. 113; CARUSO 1994, p. 35.

76 TURNER 1969; BLOCH, PERRY 1982, p. 35; CASLTEDEN 1990, p. 51. Refer to GIUMAN 2014, pp. 78 and 82 for the attestation of burials in *pithos* in Caria and in Crete since the third Millenium BC.

77 Apostolius 5, 49. Refer to PALADINO 1978, p. 292. A similar story is handed down by Palaephatus, *Incredibilia*, 26 (ed. by A. Santoni 2000).

78 PALADINO 1978.

79 CARUSO 1994, p. 34.

80 In reference to the presence of the cult of Aristeus in Sicily, refer to SANTAGATI 2019, p. 22.

81 BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50. Virgil, *Georgics*, 4, 425-463.

82 In this regard, refer to GIUMAN 2008, p. 43 and ff. and GIUMAN 2014, p. 77.

83 Virgil, *Georgics*, 4, 220.

84 Pindar, *Pythian*, 4, 59-60.

oracle of Hermes was known. It was known in the context of which honey was offered for the purpose of optimal reading of the flight of the bees “exulting in their swift wings”<sup>85</sup>. These nymphs, like Apollo’s nurturers, subsisted on honey and they acquired the gift of prophecy<sup>86</sup>. Indeed, in *Hymnus in Mercurium* we read that Hermes is assigned with three gods by the god Apollo, who feed on blond honey and later bestow prophecies<sup>87</sup>. These “bees,” if deprived of honey, are no longer able to issue correct prophecies, making honey an essential element for the activities in the oracular sphere. There is philological and archaeological<sup>88</sup> evidence of these activities. For example, there are several finds of meals and flatbreads made from the substance<sup>89</sup>. The prophet Iamus was also fed with honey<sup>90</sup> and the oracle of Trophonius<sup>91</sup>, in Boeotia, was discovered as a result of the flight of a swarm of bees<sup>92</sup>. Furthermore, from Pausanias and Philostratus we learn that the bees themselves taught Apollo divination<sup>93</sup>. On the connection between oracular art and honey, there is still the example of the Homeric episode in the *Odyssey* having Circe and Odysseus as protagonists<sup>94</sup>. In fact, the sorceress tells the hero that, in order to question Tiresias and obtain a prophecy from him, he will have to scatter white flour and offer libations of *melikratos*, water and wine<sup>95</sup>.

The sacredness of bees is still made known in Porphyry, who calls “bees” not only nymphs but also souls<sup>96</sup>. Moreover, for Porphyry, honey is symbolic of nymphs due to their purity, as mentioned above. As the philosopher analyzes the Homeric antrum, he also discusses the verb *tithaibossein* (to store honey), which is defined as storing bees’ food in

amphorae, filled with honeycombs. He writes about the theologians’ use of honey, considering the preservative and purifying properties of the substance itself, which is also used in the preservation of certain foods and in the already discussed medical field. In addition, honey is the very substance present at the banquet organized by Rhea-Demeter, who inebriates Chronos to such an extent that it renders him helpless and allows him to be emasculated<sup>97</sup>. Porphyry quotes Sophocles while discussing the nymph-souls which, as it has already been said, he calls “bees”<sup>98</sup>. Not all souls were referred to as “bees”, but only the righteous ones who would return to their place of origin after performing actions pleasing to the gods. For the ancients, honey also symbolized death, whose chthonic connotation is evident from what has been discussed. It was in fact used along with milk in funeral libations<sup>99</sup>. In this regard, for Pythagoras souls feed on milk and they come to generation led by the libation of sweet honey mixed with milk<sup>100</sup>.

On a comparative level and in reference to the Dionysus’ cult, honey takes on a symbolic value similar to that which in Mithraic art applies to the Indo-Iranian *soma* or *haoma*, a sacred drink that confers immortality<sup>101</sup>. Also, in Sanskrit, honey is called *madhu*, “effect”. It is in fact a symbol of the interdependence of cause and effect, of the autonomy of bees producing the substance on which they feed and the doctrine of honey, “la più ardua da impartire [...] è una meditazione sull’universo come alveare secondo la mistica del cinque, presso gli indù”<sup>102</sup>.

85 *Hymnus in Mercurium*. LARSON 1995 and SIMONINI 1986, p. 173. Refer also to COMBA, AMATEIS 2019, pp. 196-199.

86 *Hymnus in Mercurium*.

87 *Hymnus in Mercurium*, 555-560.

88 Refer to GIUMAN 2008; BORTOLIN 2008; URIEL 2011.

89 Refer also to COMBA, AMATEIS 2019, pp. 196-199 in reference to the “nymphoholepsy” as “divine madness” induced by the nymphs. In this regard, refer to LARSON 2001, p. 13.

90 Pindar, *Olympian* 6, 45, 57.

91 About this topic, refer to FALLEA 2023, pp. 21-38.

92 Pausanias, 9, 40, 2. Refer to GIUMAN 2014, p. 77.

93 Pausanias, 10, 5, 9; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, 6, 10, 2.

94 Homer, *Odyssey*, 10, 516-520.

95 Homer, *Odyssey*, 10, 516-525 and 11, 24-33. Refer also to GIUMAN 2014, p. 84.

96 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 19. In GIUMAN 2014, pp. 85-86 and in GIUMAN 2008, p. 36 we read that the souls are defined also as *melissai*, buzzing bees such as the “swarm of the dead”.

97 “Drunk for the work of the buzzing bees”. Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 16. Refer also to COMBA, AMATEIS 2019, pp. 196-199.

98 It also discusses those priestesses of some cults, such as the demetrians, whose names reflected the context akin to that of bees and honey (for instance *Melissai*, the priestesses of Demeter and Kore herself *Melitode*). Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 18-19. In addition, the nymphs that follow Kore in the mythology were called *melitodes*, which means “as sweet as honey”. Refer to CRESCIMANO 2015 and SANTAGATI 2019, p. 29.

99 BURKERT 2003, pp. 171-173. Honeycombs were also found, made in terracotta and offered to the dead, see DAVARAS 1984, pp. 55-95.

100 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 28.

101 Refer to the comment to Porphyry, SIMONINI 1986, p. 146.

102 SIMONINI 1986, p. 156, i.e. “the most arduous to impart [...] is a meditation on the universe as a beehive according to the mysticism of five, among Hindus”.

Honey is also a sacred ingredient of κυκεών<sup>103</sup>, the sacred beverage of the Eleusinian mysteries<sup>104</sup> and it is also assimilated to *soma* in the *Vedas*<sup>105</sup>: as a matter of fact, those who eat honey, nectar and ambrosia become immortal<sup>106</sup>. In the *Vedas*, honey is an offering par excellence: it is both drink and deity and, by Indra's will, he who eats it becomes *rsi*<sup>107</sup>, seer, sage and poet<sup>108</sup>.

### Material culture as historical research on honey and bees

In ancient daily life, honey plays a prominent role in various fields. This substance is a sweet nourishment and a magical food used in the medical field. It is also accompanied by the bee, its producer.

The specific type of bee mentioned here is also the only one capable of producing honey in the Mediterranean area, namely the *apis mellifera*<sup>109</sup>. There are several testimonies from Mesolithic and Neolithic times concerning the collection of wild honey, a prior practice than beekeeping<sup>110</sup>.

Literary, epigraphic and even toponymy sources help to distinguish the areas of production. R. Bortolin divides them into eight areas: Egypt, Greece<sup>111</sup> and the Aegean Sea, Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>112</sup>, North Africa, Spain, Sicily and Malta, the Italic Peninsula and Tyrrhenian Islands, Germany and Noricum<sup>113</sup>.

On historical grounds, honey was a key resource for the Hittites and their trade; in fact, it was exported from Mari and it was measured by amphorae along with wine and oil<sup>114</sup>. Here and in Egypt, beekeeping was practiced as far back as the 3rd millennium<sup>115</sup> and honey was also one of the substances that made up the *kyphi*<sup>116</sup>. It is also mentioned in the Harris papyrus and among the offerings to Pharaoh Thutmose III and Pharaoh Ramses III at various shrines<sup>117</sup>. Thus, beekeeping is attested in Egypt as early as 2400 B.C.<sup>118</sup> and we learn about it easily through three reliefs and some commercial and legal inscriptions in the solar temple of Ne-user-re<sup>119</sup> at Abu Ghorab (fig. 6). These texts highlight how important the substance is for medical, economic and cultic purposes<sup>120</sup>; moreover, the bee from 3000 B.C. to 350 B.C. is a symbol of Lower Egypt<sup>121</sup>. The various uses of honey are already emphasized by examining the scenes depicted in these bas-reliefs, it being emblematic of such fundamental cosmic symbols as the sun and moon, along with milk<sup>122</sup>.

On the evidences gathered from the Ptolemaic field, the latter was a period rich in written records and papyri of great historical interest, which provide a lot of information concerning the legislation related to the production of honey and the economic implications arising from it<sup>123</sup>.

In the Greek context, Attica was renowned for the thyme honey of Hymettus<sup>124</sup>, and the honey

103 Ciceon was a drink composed of several elements. Some compounds have been discussed in the medical sphere, calling them "ciceones," but in this case its use in the sacred sphere was preparatory to ritual initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries. See KERÉNYI 1991.

104 Honey and bees symbolically are often placed in relation to mystery deities. For further comparisons, see SIMONINI 1986, p. 169.

105 ETERAF-OSKOUËI, NAJAFI 2013, pp. 731-742.

106 SIMONINI 1986, p. 160.

107 A way of referring to the ancient hymn singers of the Veda, which is attributed the prerogative of revealed poetry.

108 SIMONINI 1986, p. 160.

109 CRANE 1983; CRANE 2001; PRESTON 2006, p. 11.

110 CRANE 1983, p. 30; CRANE 2001, p. 19; BORTOLIN 2008, p. 57.

111 About honey in ancient Greece refer to GIUMAN 2008. Generally see SODDU 2009.

112 Refer to ETERAF-OSKOUËI, NAJAFI 2013, pp. 731-742 for a focus on Islamic medicine and the use of honey. Indeed, from the text we read about the importance of honey also discussed in the Quran "And thy Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees, and in (men's) habitations; Then to eat of all the produce (of the earth), and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord: there issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colors, wherein is healing for men: verily in this is a sign for those who give thought", ETERAF-OSKOUËI, NAJAFI 2013, p. 733.

113 BORTOLIN 2008, pp. 40-48.

114 SEMINARA 2016, p. 91.

115 ARAVANTINOS 1985, p. 13.

116 FORBES 1966, p. 83; CHOULIARA RAÏOS 1989, pp. 22-23; SEMINARA 2016, p. 92; RAIMONDI 2019, p. 154.

117 ARAVANTINOS 1985, pp. 13-17.

118 CRANE 1983, p. 36.

119 5th Dynasty. Refer to the works of CRANE 1999, p. 160; HODEL-HOENES 2000, p. 143; BORTOLIN 2008, p. 18; KRITSKY 2015; SANTAGATI 2019, p. 21.

120 KUENY 1950; ZECCHI 1997; BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

121 CRANE 1983, p. 43.

122 Just think that honey became a royal symbol of Lower Egypt, and the formula "He [who reigns] over the reed and the bee" that has been handed down to us seems emblematic, considering that the reed represented precisely the royal power over Upper Egypt. SANTAGATI 2019, p. 21.

123 BORTOLIN 2008, p. 41. On this attestation, see also CHOULIARA RAÏOS 1989, pp. 146-150 as there are numerous medical recipes reported in papyri of the Greco-Roman period.

124 Columella, 9,14,19; Ovid, *Ars amatoria*, 2, 517; Petronius, 38; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 11, 11; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 11,13,32; Pausanias, 1,32,1. Refer to Pedanius Dioscorides, *De materia medica*, 2, 82, 1 on honey from Hymetto, the Cyclades and Sicily.

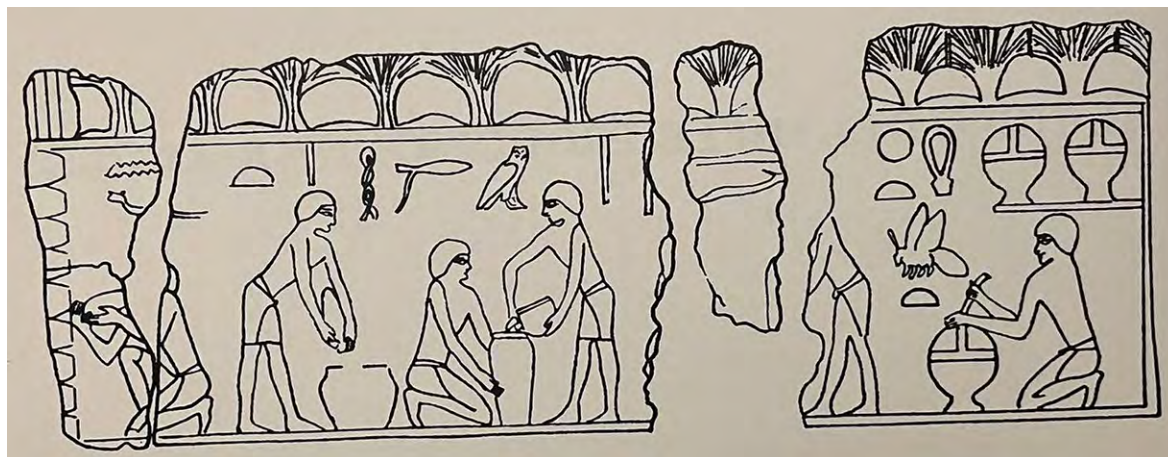


Fig. 6 - Scenes of honey extraction, harvesting and storage from the Solar Temple of Ne-user-re' in Abu Ghorab (KUÉNY 1950).

of Kalymnos, near Kos<sup>125</sup>, was also particularly famous. Columella writes down that swarms of bees were moved from Achaia to Attica and from Euboea and the Cyclades to Scyros<sup>126</sup>. Pliny the Elder also records that the best kinds of honey came from Crete and from Attica. According to the author, the honey from Crete was considered miraculous and thus he wrote of it: *Aliud in Crete miraculum mellis: mons est carma VIII passuum ambitu, intra quod spatium muscae non reperiuntur, natumque ibi mel nusquam attingunt. hoc experimento singulare medicamentis eligitur*<sup>127</sup>. In reference to Attica's honey, he said it was used for ointments, useful for ophthalmological problems<sup>128</sup>.

Some very important archaeological finds give us an idea of how the bee symbolized royalty on the one hand and purity on the other. Some examples are given by the Cretan pendant found during the excavations at Chrysolakkos<sup>129</sup>, the signet ring with bee found in Albania in a tumulus (in Shtikës)<sup>130</sup>, or

again, the Hittite myth of Telipinu<sup>131</sup>, in which the bee of the goddess Hannahanna found the sleeping god that others had failed to find<sup>132</sup>.

As concerns the attested use of donating terracotta honeycombs as grave goods, there is evidence among objects found in some Lucanian tombs of Catacombs<sup>133</sup>, and others from a Punic tomb in Carthage<sup>134</sup>. The best-known archaeological finds concerning the Aegean area, Cyprus, Crete, and Rhodes are those of terracotta beehives found during investigations of the farm of Vari (fig. 7), active from the 4th to the 3rd B.C. and located in the very area of Hymettus<sup>135</sup>. Here, in 1966, the *British School at Athens* worked on a rural settlement of the Hellenistic period<sup>136</sup> and found several elements attributable to the *Combed ware* class.

There are some information from the texts of M. Ventris, J. Chadwick and L.M. Bendall<sup>137</sup> in reference to the different ways of using honey. Bendall discusses wine and honey, as part of an analysis concerning the resources used in Mycenaean palaces. The scholar analyzes the contexts of Knossos,

125 BORTOLIN 2008, p. 44; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 11,13,32; Strabo 10,5,19.

126 Columella, 9,14,19.

127 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 21, 47, 80.

128 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 25, 92, 144; 28, 27, 94-95; 28, 47, 167; 32, 4, 33; 32, 13, 31; 32, 24, 70; Claudius Aelianus, *De Natura animalium*, 1, 42. BORTOLIN 2008, p. 26. See also RAIMONDI 2023, pp. 219-234.

129 BLOEDOW, BJØRK 1989, p. 9; BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

130 Thanks to Prof. Skender Aliu for the information about the excavation he directed at the Shtikës mound. Many details are still being published; however, Prof. Aliu has discussed with the writer the materials found during his excavation during one of the reconnaissance surveys of the Fortified Landscape in Eastern Albania (F.L.E.A) project. See also ALIU 1994, pp. 5-86; ALIU 1996, pp. 57-58.

131 ROSCALLA 1998, pp. 16-25; BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

132 MAZOYER 2003; NORRIE 2016.

133 RUSSO 2006.

134 VAZQUEZ HOYS 1991, p. 75.

135 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 11,14,33; JONES, GRAHAM, SACKETT 1973, pp. 355-443; CHOULIARA RAIOS 1989, p. 81; BORTOLIN 2008.

136 JONES, GRAHAM, SACKETT 1973, pp. 355-443; BORMETTI 2014, pp. 7-50.

137 VENTRIS, CHADWICH 1959; BENDALL 2007.



Fig. 7 - Terracotta beehive from Vari, Attica (JONES, GRAHAM, SACKETT 1973).

Chania and Pylos<sup>138</sup>, from which there are both archaeological and Linear B evidences<sup>139</sup> (fig. 8). Honey is defined as *me-ri* in Linear B<sup>140</sup>, and it was used as an offering in both Knossos and Chania. Many of these attestations concern contexts of religious offerings and, in the case of the ones investigated and also from Knossos, amphorae containing honey are mentioned for the deity Eileithyia in Amnisos: one for all the gods and one for a recipient whose name has been lost<sup>141</sup>. The same tablets also show the use of honey in Knossos, as part of the aforementioned production of perfumes<sup>142</sup>. It was in fact used to prepare a perfumed paste, used during maceration for lining jars or covering hands that came into contact with oil, in order to avoid unwanted odors<sup>143</sup>. In this regard, several amphorae of honey are listed in the tablets from Crete, as offerings in honor of Dionysus and Zeus<sup>144</sup>. There are several hypotheses in reference to the use of honey in Pylos. The only direct mention of honey is found in Un 718, containing the genitive *me-ri-to* /*melitos*/ in the fifth line<sup>145</sup>. A further attestation comes from a seal of the Wine Magazine of Pylos,

which confirms to us the use of wine treated with honey<sup>146</sup>. Again, the tablets of Pylos reveal what a landowner, or possibly a type of beekeeper, was called: *me-ri-te-wo*<sup>147</sup>.

The name of the superintendent of honey supplies, the *me-ri-du-ma-te*, actually appears in the list of temple servants. Such a source is useful for the understanding of the value of the substance within the Mycenaean economy<sup>148</sup>. Sometimes, the word "honey" is not written in the tablets, but the syllabogram *ME* appears, used as an ideogram. Generally, this graphic representation is used in tablets concerning ritual offerings, perfume and banquet<sup>149</sup>. Also in Crete, bees and honey turn out to be connected to the aforementioned ancestral myths, and in the Peloponnese they are the same creatures that make humans stop cannibalism, bringing them closer to the foods provided by nature. Several findings of ceremonial cups from Deskaloyianni, Chania and Armenoi attest to the tradition of drinking "Honey mead" with resinated wine and beer from barley<sup>150</sup>. Around the 1190-1130 B.C. in Chamalevri, wine residual has been found, resinated with honey in a tripod<sup>151</sup>.

In Sicily, a beekeeping tradition was well developed, with a continuation until today. The Hybla thyme

138 VENTRIS, CHADWICK 1959; BENDALL 2007, pp. 140-151.

139 RANSOME 1937; CRANE 1975; CRANE 1983; CRANE 1999; DAVARAS 1984; AMOURETTI, BRUN, EITAM 1993; EVERSLED *et alii* 1997; MELAS 1999.

140 Such mention has not been found in other inscriptions outside the island of Crete, see BENDALL 2007, p. 150.

141 BENDALL 2007, p. 142.

142 BENDALL 2007, p. 144.

143 FOSTER 1977, p. 30; SHELMEERDINE 1985, pp. 19-23.

144 Specifically, from Chania Gq 5.2 and from Knossos Gg. See HALLAGER, VLASAKIS, HALLAGER 1992, p. 75; DUHOX 2010, p. 110; SEMINARA 2016, p. 94.

145 BENDALL 2007, p. 150.

146 About the discussion on the term *me-ri-ti-jo* see PALMER 1994, p. 63 and PALMER 1995, p. 275. See also SHERRATT 2004, p. 203.

147 Ea 481, -711+. See CHADWICK 1976, pp. 125-126; BENDALL 2007, p. 150.

148 Py An 424 (Pylos Anthroponym 424), in SCAFA 1995, p. 141 and BENDALL 2007, p. 150.

149 BENDALL 2007, pp. 150-152.

150 SEMINARA 2016, p. 93.

151 SEMINARA 2016, pp. 93-94.



Fig. 8 - Tablet in linear B from Knossos mentioning honey (Minoans and Mycenaeans 1999, n. 267).

honey was cited by Varro<sup>152</sup> and some toponyms (such as the ones from the island near Sicily<sup>153</sup>, Malta<sup>154</sup>). These toponyms contributed to the enclosure of this short overview about the uncommon usage of honey and about the acknowledgment provided regarding the substance. In reference to the latter, a very important contribution is represented by the studies on Hyblaeon Honey<sup>155</sup> of E. Santagati, provided in the areas of Siracusa and Ragusa<sup>156</sup>. The Hyblaeon gold (as defined by the sources<sup>157</sup>), is also cited by Statius<sup>158</sup>. This mention still recalls what has been discussed in this text, from the antibacterial properties<sup>159</sup> to its use for embalming<sup>160</sup>. Statius reports that Augustus wanted to visit Al-

exander the Great's grave<sup>161</sup> after the victory of Actium. In reference to the latter, he writes as follows: *Duc et ad Emathios manes, ubi belliger urbis / conditor Hyblaeo perfusus nectare durat*<sup>162</sup>. Thus, the Hyblaeon Honey was adequate to preserve Alexander the Great's bare<sup>163</sup>, such was the economic importance of the product<sup>164</sup>. The scholar finds a good starting point in the honey for the bond between Sicily and Crete. Such analysis, supported by sources and archeological finds, leads to wonder about the essential socio-economic importance that such a nourishment has had during the course of time in different places. For this purpose, it is relevant (and it is important to refer to the dedicated studies) the discovery of a possible "Bees' Farm" along the lower course of the Irminio River<sup>165</sup>.

## Conclusions

This short analysis aims to inform how the honey, which is a well-known nourishment from antiquity, was particularly relevant in different fields, moving from the medicine to the ancient rituality. The

152 Varro, *De re rustica*, 3,16,13-14; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 11,13,32.

153 References about Sicily and Malta as honey producers are found in Al-Idrisi, which mentions Caltagirone and Montalbano. AMARI 1880, pp. 52-117; AMARI, SCHIAPPARELLI 1883, pp. 21-61.

154 In fact, the island of Malta was called by the Greek name "Melita," and some places with toponyms of Arabic origin such as, for example, Imgiebah (transl: apiary) have given us back apiaries from the Punic age. Again, on the same island, near the villa of St. Pawl Milqj, is the locality of Wied El Aafel, or the "honey stream."

155 Strabo 6, 2, 2, "αἱ μὲν οὖν πόλεις οὐκέτ' εἰσὶ, τὸ δὲ τῆς Ὑβληος ὄνομα συμμένει διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν τοῦ Ὑβλαίου μέλιτος", as a matter of fact "Cities do not exist anymore, but the name of Hybla survives thanks to the goodness of the hyblaeon honey". SANTAGATI 2019, pp. 21-32.

156 Area where there was worship of the Sican goddess Hybla, linked to bees and honey. Refer to SANTAGATI 2019, p. 24.

157 Virgil, *Eclogae* 1, 53-54; 7, 37; Ovid, *Tristia* 5, 7, 13; Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, 4, 5; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 14, 23-26, see SANTAGATI 2019, p. 26.

158 Statius, *Silvae*, 3, 2,117-118.

159 KOURKOUTA *et alii* 2013, pp. 456-461.

160 Refer again to Herodotus, 1, 198, to Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 5, 3, 19 and Diodorus, 15, 93, 6, Lucretius, 3, 888-893.

161 Refer to RAIMONDI 2020, pp. 250-251.

162 Statius, *Silvae*, 3, 2,117-118: "Lead him to see the remains of the hero of Emazia, where the belligerent founder of the city is still intact, embalmed with Hyblaeon nectar." Refer to CARUSO 1994, p. 35; BORTOLIN 2008, SANTAGATI 2019, p. 26.

163 See also Curtius, *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, 10, 10 and GIUMAN 2014, p. 83.

164 Refer to SANTAGATI 2019, pp. 26-27 for the main socio-economic reasons regarding exported Hyblaeon honey.

165 DI STEFANO 2001, p. 31.

sources' analysis, followed by some philological and archeological attestations, is just a short *incipit* to a study which presents several elements in a diachronic scale and it has to be studied in detail. Such contexts can be found in a geographical macroscale, in fact the latter can be so wide that it can only be preliminary discussed. As a matter of fact, this argument provides the start to an increasingly urgent necessity to investigate this nourishment, not only from a gastronomical point of view, but also from a medical-therapeutical perspective. This is due to its social and, consequently, economic importance that honey had in the ancient period. This scope is essential from the ancient economic analysis of the population who used and commercialized it. In this regard, there are different epigraphic and archeological artifacts which prove its importance in this way. It is also clear the scientific need that emerged from this dispute, due to a series of dialogues with different researchers. Hopefully, even if this analysis may be short, it could move the research to a comparative and multidisciplinary study related to what is linked (and links) to a nourishment like the honey to the medical area, considering the philological and archeological aspects as a whole, indissoluble.

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**RIASSUNTO** - Il miele è conosciuto da millenni come il principale nutrimento dolce per l'uomo e sin dall'antichità sono noti i molteplici campi in cui esso veniva utilizzato. Questa sostanza, per via della sua purezza, è stata associata dagli autori antichi alle ninfe delle acque. Queste a loro volta si trovano spesso in relazione alle api, le produttrici del miele. Oltre alla sfera letteraria, di indiscussa rilevanza in ambito culinario e in ambito economico, la sua importanza è stata riconosciuta dalla letteratura antica che ne ha descritto anche l'utilità in campo medico.

Questa connessione alla sfera medico-salvifica pone in essere anche problematiche legate alla sfera culturale attraverso un'analisi diacronica riguardante l'ape e l'alimento da essa prodotto.

Partendo da tali basi, il miele è attestato anche come elemento primario in alcune pratiche sacre e nella preparazione di cibi rituali di cui conosciamo attestazioni archeologiche. Attraverso una breve disamina di fonti filologiche e di attestazioni archeologiche si vedrà come esso venisse utilizzato e quanto fosse importante per gli antichi popoli che lo producevano e che ne facevano uso.

**SUMMARY** - Honey has been known for millennia as the main sweet nutrient for humans, and since ancient times the many fields in which it was used have been known. This substance, due to its purity, was associated by ancient authors with water nymphs. The latter in turn are often found in relation to bees, the producers of honey. In addition to the literary sphere, which represents an undisputed relevance in the culinary and economic sphere, honey's importance was recognized in the ancient literature, which also described its usefulness in the medical field.

This connection to the medical-salvific sphere also raises some issues related to the culinary sphere through a diachronic analysis of the bee and the food it produced.

On this basis, honey is also attested as a primary element in certain sacred practices and in the preparation of ritual foods of which we have archaeological evidence. Through a brief examination of philological sources and archaeological evidence, we will see how honey was used and how important it was to the ancient peoples who produced and used it.

*Parole chiave:* miele, cibo, medicina, ninfe, culto.

*Keywords:* honey, food, medicine, nymphs, cult.