

Zeitschrift: Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique
Herausgeber: Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique
Band: 30 (1984)

Artikel: The ascription of fables to Aesop in archaic and classical Greece
Autor: West, M.L.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-660827>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

IV

M. L. WEST

THE ASCRIPTION OF FABLES TO AESOP IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

The name of Aesop is as widely known as any that has come down from Graeco-Roman antiquity. There must be many people who have heard of the *Fables* of Aesop but never of Homer or Virgil, Sophocles or Plato. For Europeans, at least, his name is all but synonymous with the ancient animal fable. And yet we scholars have to confess that it is far from certain whether a historical Aesop ever existed. If he did, his life is shrouded in legend, and of his achievements in the realm of fable we can hardly say anything except that he did not invent it. The ancients themselves, at least the rhetoricians and grammarians, were aware of that. Aelius Theon explains that Aesopic fables are so called not because Aesop was the inventor of the type, for Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus, and others who lived earlier than Aesop were evidently acquainted with it, but because he used it extensively and felicitously; just as certain metres are called Aristophanean, Sapphic, and so on, not because those poets were the first or the only ones to use them but because they made the most conspicuous

use of them.¹ When Peisetairos in Aristophanes' *Birds* (651-3) alludes to the fable of the fox and the eagle as occurring in the tales of Aesop, the scholiast comments: "Note that they clearly attributed these tales to Aesop—even this one that is told in Archilochus, despite his being the older."

We know today that the history of fable does not begin with Hesiod and Archilochus but well over a thousand years earlier, in Sumer. My subject is the position of Aesop in that history. Was there really such a person, a storyteller as resourceful and witty as he was ugly and misshapen, who in Greece in the sixth century B.C. exploited the possibilities of the fable so effectively as to give it a new importance for all subsequent generations? It is a question which will lead us to consider such problems as the relationship between the single fable and the collection; the ways in which fables were transmitted in archaic Greece; and the origins of the biographical tradition.

As Theon remarks, the early poets—Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus—apply the term αἶνος to the fables or parables that they tell; he explains that this is because they contain παραίνεσιν τινα, a measure of advice.² We may quibble at his explanation, but he is right to this extent, that the stories in question, at least in those texts which are not too fragmentary for us to judge, are not told merely by way of entertainment (though they are entertaining, and this is their

¹ *Progymn.* 3, in *Rhet.Gr.*, ed. L. SPENGLER, II p. 73. Cf. Hermogenes, *Progymn.* 1, pp. 1-2 Rabe; Aphthonius, *Progymn.* 1, p. 1 Rabe; Quint. V 11, 19; Philostratus, *Imagines* I 3, 1. There are no animal fables in Homer, but Theon's subject is μῦθος, defined as λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν (p. 72, 28). He notes that the early poets generally use the term αἶνος (p. 73, 25), so he is very likely thinking of Odysseus' αἶνος in *Od.* XIV 462 ff., which is indeed a λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν.

² *Progymn.* 3, p. 73, 31 ff. αἶνος δὲ ὅτι καὶ παραίνεσιν τινα περιέχει· ἀναφέρεται γὰρ ὅλον τὸ πρᾶγμα εἰς χρησίμην ὑποθήκην. νῦν μέντοι καὶ τὰ αἰνίγματα αἶνους τινὲς καλοῦσι. See further my note on Hes. *Op.* 202 (*Hesiod. Works and Days* [Oxford 1978], p. 205).

strengthening): they are told with the intention of influencing the conduct of a particular person or persons in a particular situation. Hesiod tells the fable of the hawk and the nightingale to the unjust 'kings' as an αἶνος which will not be lost on them (φρονέουσιν καὶ αὐτοῖς). Archilochus tells his fable of the fox and the eagle to Lycambes, who has broken faith with him, as a warning that such behaviour does not go unpunished.³ In another epode he told the fable of the fox and the monkey to someone addressed (satirically, perhaps) as Kerykides, and to his fellows. We know nothing of the circumstances, but here too the αἶνος presumably contained a point specially aimed at these people.⁴ The αἶνος which Odysseus uses as a hint to Eumaios that he should give him a blanket is of a different sort, and we may wish to exclude it from consideration, but it is certainly relevant to the meaning of the word αἶνος. It confirms that the idea of a pointed lesson is essential to it.

Karl Meuli, in an important and influential contribution to the subject in 1954, argued that this was the natural and original format of the fable.⁵ "Die ursprüngliche lebendige Fabel" did not exist to convey a universal truth of general application but was rather "der diplomatische Vermittler einer ganz speziellen, sozusagen akuten Wahrheit, die einen bestimmten Hörer in einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt unmittelbar treffen, im einzelnen konkreten Fall unmittelbar wirken soll".⁶ It was a technique of criticism and per-

³ Fr. 172-181 (+224?) West. See my *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin 1974), 132-4, and *ZPE* 45 (1982), 30 f.

⁴ Fr. 185-7 (+225?).

⁵ «Herkunft und Wesen der Fabel», in *Schweiz. Archiv für Volkskunde* 50 (1954), 65-88 (also issued separately), = *Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel 1975), II 731-756. See further Triantaphyllia KARADAGLI, *Fabel und Ainos. Studien zur griechischen Fabel*, Beitr. zur Klass. Phil. 135 (Königstein/Ts. 1981), Kap. 1, a work written with all the clarity, charm, and *Erzählfreude* of her teacher Reinhold Merkelbach.

⁶ *Art. cit.*, 77 = 743.

suasion which by its indirectness might avoid giving offence, while at the same time making a powerful impression by its artistry. It was especially valuable to the weak as a weapon against the powerful; but the powerful might also use it as a rebuke or 'put-down' to the weak, as Cyrus is said to have answered the Ionians' overtures following the fall of Sardis with the fable of the piper and the fishes who would not dance for him until they were landed in the net.⁷ Meuli believed that Cyrus actually did use this fable, and that the symbolism was suggested to his mind by the Persian practice of going over a conquered territory with a human dragnet to capture every single one of the enemy, as if trawling for fish.⁸ For not only fable itself, but its admonitory function was native to the orient. Meuli referred to Aḥiqar and to two αἵβοι of the Homeric type in the Second Book of *Samuel* (12,1 ff.; 14,4 ff.), as well as to the later *Pañcatantra*.

In Meuli's view, then, a fable is created *ad hoc* for a concrete situation, or (since not everyone possesses the requisite powers of invention) a pre-existing fable created for a particular situation in the past is re-used whenever a similar situation arises again. At a second stage a quantity of fables come to be attached to a figure such as Aḥiqar or Aesop and are worked into a biographical narrative. Meuli accepts the view of Crusius and others that a *Life of Aesop* existed as a *Volksbuch* as early as the sixth century. The third stage is for fables to be detached from their contexts and gathered in collections as self-sufficient stories with a lesson for everyone.

This is certainly the observed sequence so far as Greek fable is concerned. The individual αἵβοις is present in Hesiod

⁷ Hdt. I 141; repeated without context in Babr. 9, *Augustana* H. 11 (= P. 11), and in a debased form in Aphthonius, *Fab.* 33.

⁸ Hdt. III 149; VI 31; K. MEULI, «Ein altpersischer Kriegsbrauch» (1954), in *Ges. Schriften* II 699 ff. (the fable: 728 f.).

and Archilochus; a biographical legend about Aesop, in which a number of fables were incorporated, was known by the fifth century B.C.; the first collection of fables as independent entities was made by Demetrius of Phaleron, unless we count the few that Socrates is said to have versified during his last days in prison.⁹ However, it is difficult to believe that every one of all the hundreds of fables that we know from Babrius, the Augustana and other collections had its origins in an αἶνος devised for some specific occasion. And since Meuli wrote, the picture has been transformed by the progress of Assyriological research. It now appears that the evolution was more complex than he supposed.

One of the very earliest examples of a fable occurs in a Sumerian wisdom poem, the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, which in its oldest form goes back to about 2500 B.C. The antediluvian sage Šuruppak tells his son Ziusudra

After a man had taken a great ox by the neck,
He found he could not cross the river.
After you have consorted with the great men of the city,
My son, you should be quick to disengage yourself.¹⁰

Here is a short fable or parable used not in a specific situation but to reinforce a general precept, and attributed to a mythical sage. This example, however, is as far as I know (Mr Falkowitz may correct me) isolated in the Mesopotamian material known hitherto. The typical habitat of the Mesopotamian fable is the proverb collections, or *Rhetoric collections* as Mr Falkowitz calls them—‘commonplace

⁹ Plat. *Phd.* 60 c – 61 b; *Iambi et Elegi Graeci*, ed. M. L. WEST (Oxford 1971-1972), II pp. 118 f. I see no reason to doubt the story; why should Plato have invented such a surprising thing, which has no relevance to his argument? He also mentions a *Prooimion to Apollo*; Socrates may have intended this to be the prooimion to his *Aesopica*.

¹⁰ B. ALSTER (ed.), *The Instructions of Šuruppak* (Copenhagen 1974), lines 194-197. I have modified the translation to make it more idiomatic.

books' would perhaps not be an inappropriate description, for they are miscellanies which include maxims and adages, truisms and paradoxes, taunts and compliments, wishes and greetings, prayers and anecdotes. Edmund Gordon, who pioneered the study of these texts, was able to write in 1958 (four years after Meuli's paper):

It is now clear that both the scribes of Sumer in the second millennium B.C. (and perhaps earlier) and their successors in Assyria in the 8th century B.C. included the fable within the category of "proverbs",

and in 1960:

The fables and parables (at least as far as can be judged from the material studied so far) seem to be found always in the milieu of the proverb collections.¹¹

Of course, these scholastic compilations are at some remove from real life, the life of popular discourse. The items contained in them presumably had a function outside the collections. A modern dictionary of proverbs would not be the ideal evidence on which to judge the role of the proverb in our culture. And so it is with the Mesopotamian fable. The *Instructions of Šuruppak* give us one indication of its application. After a very long gap in time the story of Aḫiqar provides more evidence of the same sort. There are also occasional examples of proverbs and short fables being quoted for rhetorical purposes, for instance in the Tell el-Amarna letters.¹²

It follows from all this that if we wish to maintain Meuli's view that the first form of the fable is the αἶνος tailor-made for the specific addressee in a specific situation, we must go back at least to the third millennium to find this 'original' stage, and our evidence runs out before we reach it. His second and third stages seem to be established

¹¹ *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958), 1; *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 17 (1960), 130.

¹² W. G. LAMBERT, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford 1960), 280-2.

from the beginnings of the literate period. Perhaps the development in Greece from Hesiod to Demetrius repeated a sequence that had been played through in Sumer two thousand years earlier. However that may be, the essential point is that we cannot any longer treat the archaic Greek poets, where they draw on oriental traditions, as if they lived at the beginning of the world.

I do not think anyone now disputes that the fable came to Greece from the orient, in the eighth century B.C. if not earlier. We must now address ourselves to the question in what form it came, bearing in mind what we know of the forms in which it was current in the east. Hesiod offers us one fable, and he offers it in a wisdom poem, preceded by two extended myths and followed by a series of admonitions. This wisdom poem, the *Works and Days*, stands in a clear relation to the Near Eastern traditions of wisdom literature, as I have shown in the Prolegomena of my edition following the lead of Dornseiff, Walcot, and others. Šuruppak and Aḥiqar provide evidence for the use of fable in these traditions. It is natural to suppose, therefore, that this was one medium by which fable came to Greece: in the context of wisdom literature.

In this type of tradition fables might have come to be associated with a particular mythical personage. Hesiod's poem is composed in his own persona; but there is evidence for some other early Greek wisdom poetry put in the mouths of legendary instructors such as Chiron and Pittheus,¹³ and Near Eastern wisdom is commonly pseud-epigraphic. If there happened to be a liberal use of fable in a particular composition, it is possible to imagine fable becoming associated with the person in whose mouth the wisdom was put. Aḥiqar is the nearest approach to this in the extant material. Thus archaic Greek wisdom poetry

¹³ See my *Hesiod. Works and Days*, 23-25.

might have provided conditions in which a proto-Aesop could have emerged. But this does not seem to have happened.

Another genre in which the fable made itself at home was the Ionian iambos. Archilochus, as we know, used fables in at least two of his *Epodes*; there may have been others, though I regard the attempts to identify others as excessively speculative. Semonides of Amorgos included in a trimeter iambos a fable in which a heron robbed a buzzard of a Maeander eel that it was eating; we do not know the rest of the story, or anything of the context.¹⁴ I may say in passing that I do not believe fr. 13 of the same poet,

τὸ δ' ἡμιν ἔρπετὸν παρέπτατο
τὸ ζῳίων κάκιστον ἔκτεται βίον,

to come from the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle, as has often been supposed (and indeed asserted as an established fact). It is much more likely to be a detail from a scatological first-person narrative of a type characteristic of the iambos, especially in view of the parallel of Hipponax fr. 92, 10 f.,

κάνθαροι δὲ ροιζεῶντες
ἦλθον κατ' ὁδὸν πλεῶνες ἢ πεντήκοντα.¹⁵

But when all doubtful instances have been excluded we are still left with three definite examples of fable in the iambographers. It would be surprising if we were so fortunate as to have the only three they ever used, or if they used all the ones they had ever heard. We must suppose that they knew a fair number.

¹⁴ Semon. fr. 9 West = P. 443.

¹⁵ Cf. *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus*, 28. Semon. fr. 8 and 17 West might have stood in the same context.

From whom did they hear them, and in what circumstances? Archilochus gives the only clue when he introduces one of his fables with the words

αἶνός τις ἀνθρώπων ὅδε.

A fable that men tell—not a particular wise man, not the men of a particular nation or region, simply men. The story is current among the people, and not thought of as coming from a particular source, or at any rate not from a source that it is of any moment to specify. The effect is similar when Hesiod introduces the Myth of Ages (which immediately precedes his animal fable) as a λόγος, that is, a story which is not necessarily literally true but which is told and deserves attention. Strictly speaking, an αἶνος ἀνθρώπων should mean a story that men tell for the sake of its rhetorical point. But it is possible that Archilochus means no more than a story that men tell and that he himself intends to use as an αἶνος. Such a story clearly could be told for its entertainment value, without pressing its moral implications, just as one of the classic myths might be told with greater or less emphasis on its moral implications. The fable of the crab and the snake (H. 211 = P. 196) appears as a self-contained item in the old collection of Attic *skolia* preserved by Athenaeus, *Poetae melici Graeci* fr. 892 Page:

ὁ καρκίνος ὧδ' ἔφα
χαλαῖ τὸν ὄφιν λαβών·
“εὐθὺν χρὴ τὸν ἐταῖρον ἔμ-
μεν καὶ μὴ σκολιὰ φρονεῖν”.

It is theoretically possible that this, like at least one other item in the collection, was an excerpt from a longer poem.¹⁶ But the fact remains that at the Attic symposium, probably

¹⁶ See, however, R. REITZENSTEIN, *Epigramm und Skolion* (Giessen 1893), 19.

sometime in the fifth century, it was sung by itself as one of the guests' contributions to the εὐφροσύνη, and not as a pointed αἶνος. One could no doubt read a political reference into it by assuming an appropriate historical date, but that would be gratuitous. Eustathius interprets it as a moralizing piece inculcating straightforwardness in friendship; but the circumstances in which the crab pronounces this moral make it ironic and deprive it of serious force. It is simply an amusing epigram, approaching the pregnant brevity of Sumerian or Assyrian 'one-liners' such as

A mouse, out of the way of a mongoose, entered a snake's hole.
He said, "A snake-charmer sent me. Greetings!"¹⁷

It is of so little consequence that it does not require even such an introduction as "It is said . . .".

The earliest example in Greek of a fable for which a source is specified is the one related in a fragment of Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* (fr. 231 Mette), the tale of what the eagle said on being shot with an arrow flighted with eagle's feathers. The source is not 'Aesop' (and of course it would be impossible for Aesop to be mentioned in a drama set at the time of the Trojan War) but 'the Libyan stories', μῦθοι οἱ Λιβυστικοί. These "Libyan stories" are mentioned together with οἱ Αἰσώπειοι λόγοι by Aristotle, Quintilian, and others.¹⁸ One or two late sources attempt to define the difference between the two categories, but their statements are contradicted by the material at our disposal. It seems there is no distinction to be drawn as regards content; Aesop and Libya are simply alternative labels. The "Libyan story" seems originally to have been a fable or apophthegm

¹⁷ W. G. LAMBERT, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 217; the lines "illustrate presence of mind" (*ibid.*, 338).

¹⁸ B. E. PERRY (ed.), *Aesopica* (Urbana, Ill. 1952), test. 64, 87-92, 101; A. HAUSRATH, in *RE* VI 2, s.v. «Fabel», 1719 f.

put in the mouth of an unspecified Libyan. One such is quoted in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica* (I 6,3, 1345 a 4-5): "The Libyan, being asked what was the best kind of manure, said 'the master's footsteps' " (meaning that the best way to promote good crops is for the master to exercise personal supervision). The dictum might just as well have been attributed to Aesop. Theon states that the only distinguishing feature of Λιβυστικοὶ λόγοι is that they are introduced by Λίβυς ἀνὴρ εἶπεν.¹⁹ At a certain stage, however, the Greek taste for named sources and for identifying the πρῶτος εὐρετής led to the nomination of a particular individual, one Kybissos or Kybisses, as the author of the Libyan stories. The Peripatetic Chamaeleon appears to have been the first to mention him.²⁰

Aeschylus, then, knew a category of "Libyan stories" and found it natural to include an animal fable among them; we cannot tell whether or not he had heard of Aesop. It was not only Libyans who were a source of amusing and instructive anecdotes: Timocreon of Rhodes is recorded as having used in his poems both a Καρικὸς αἶνος, an anecdote about a Carian fisherman's dictum, fr. 8 Page (*PMG* fr. 734; cf. Simon. fr. 9 Page = *PMG* fr. 514), and a Κύπριος αἶνος, a story of some pigeons in Cyprus who were destined to be burned alive in honour of Adonis, but escaped, only to fall into another fire—Timocreon made pointed use of this in a poem about the banishment of Themistocles, fr. 4 Page (*PMG* fr. 730). Another of his songs began

A smart Sicilian
said to his mother. . .

¹⁹ *Progymn.* 3, II p. 73, 1-7 Spengel.

²⁰ *Ap.* Hesych., s.v. Λιβυκοὶ λόγοι (κίβυντόν cod.: Κυβισσὸν τὸν Λίβυν Fabricius). The fragment is missing in the collections of F. Wehrli and D. Giordano, though noted by Alberta LORENZONI, in *Museum Criticum* 13/14 (1978/79), 321 f. See also B. E. PERRY, test. 63, 65, 89.

(fr. 6 Page, *PMG* fr. 732). In Aristophanes' *Wasps* Bdelycleon refers to entertaining stories heard at the symposium, Αἰσωπικὸν γελοῖον ἢ Συβαριτικόν (1259). A little later (1427, 1435) Philocleon produces a couple of 'Sybaritic' tales, about what a man or a woman at Sybaris once said in a certain situation. Such stories are said to have already appeared in Epicharmus (fr. 215 Kaibel). Theon is able to name a particular Sybarite, Thouros, as the author of Sybaritic tales; this is exactly parallel to the development we have seen in the case of the Libyan tales, and it is possible that the same Chamaileon was responsible.²¹ Another literary romancer, whose theory is preserved in Hesychius, claimed that Aesop travelled to Italy and that the Συβαριτικοὶ λόγοι were a local development from the Aesopic.

Theon also mentions Phrygian, Cilician, and Egyptian tales—for the Cilician ones he is again able to identify an author, Konnis—but they seem to be no more than further variations on the convention that a far-fetched anecdote or an apocryphal witticism is ascribed to an inhabitant of a distant country. No doubt particular countries had particular associations, as in England a joke about a Scotsman will always be an example of ludicrous meanness, and a joke about an Irishman will always hinge on some marvellous collapse of logic; but we are not in a position to determine them.

It is in the second half of the fifth century that we begin to hear of Aesop. He appears from the beginning not only as an inventor of fables but as a man who had an eventful life and a violent death. Certain fables are associated with occasions in his life when he used them, or tried to use them, for his own ends. Herodotus (II 134 f.) mentions him

²¹ Theon, *Progymn.* 3, II p. 73, 18 Spengel. For Sybaritic tales see further A. HAUSRATH, in *RE* VI 2, 1720 f.

in connexion with the famous courtesan Rhodopis, whom he identifies with the Doricha freed by Sappho's brother. Rhodopis, he says, was of Thracian origin. Both she and Aesop the λογοποιός were slaves to one Iadmon in Samos. It was another Samian, Xanthes, who took Rhodopis to Egypt. To prove that Aesop was Iadmon's slave, Herodotus adduces the fact that when the Delphians made proclamation that they wished to pay compensation for having (unjustly) taken Aesop's life, no one came forward to claim it except Iadmon's grandson, whose name was also Iadmon.

This is our earliest evidence about Aesop; and it is clear that we are already in the realm of legend. The linking of three notable persons, Aesop, Rhodopis, and Sappho, is suspicious in itself. If there was any justification for identifying the Doricha named by Sappho with Rhodopis, we do not know what it was. The whole story of how the Delphians arraigned Aesop on a false charge and put him to death is, as Anton Wiechers showed, an aetiological myth connected with the pharmakos rite, or at any rate a story so strongly influenced by the pharmakos rite that no kernel of historical fact can be discerned in it; it also appears to be presented as a cause of the First Sacred War.²² As for Aesop's servitude in Samos, it seems that this rested, at best, on the unsupported assertion of a Samian two generations later, that is, about the end of the sixth century. No one else at that time was able to say anything about the matter. I say 'at best', because there is no guarantee that even the second Iadmon, the grandson, and the Delphic proclamation are historical.

A variant version appears in the epitome of Heraclides Lembus' digest of Aristotle's Σαμίων πολιτεία; there is some reason to think that it derives from the fifth-century

²² *Aesop in Delphi*, Beitr. zur Klass. Phil. 2 (1960).

Samian historian Euagon or Eugeon, though it may have been garbled in the process.²³ According to this, Aesop was a Thracian (as Herodotus says Rhodopis was). His first master was Xanthes or Xanthos (the man who Herodotus says took Rhodopis to Egypt), and he was set free by Idmon the Deaf—the name obviously corresponds to Herodotus' Iadmon. I suspect that the deafness of Idmon is to be connected with the dumbness of Aesop in the later so-called *Vita Aesopi* (1-5). The story there is that Aesop, in addition to all his other physical disadvantages, was originally dumb, until, while still in the service of his first master (who is not named), he was miraculously cured by Isis. The reason for his dumbness is obvious. It is the essential precondition for the episode in which, falsely accused by two of his fellow-slaves of stealing figs which they have in fact eaten themselves, he succeeds in convicting the culprits without the use of words. He makes himself vomit, and indicates that the others are to be compelled to do likewise, whereupon it is seen where the figs have gone. After this Aesop gets his voice back, because the rest of the narrative depends on his skill with words. Now, to provide the conditions for the story, a deaf master will do as well as a dumb slave. Aesop might use a wordless demonstration not because he could not speak but because his master could not hear. So this was perhaps the function of Idmon in the Samian version, Aesop's verbal repartee with his master being all placed during his service to Xanthes/Xanthos. In the *Vita* Aesop's stay with Xanthos and the battle of wits between them form a major component of the work, which actually bears in the older recension the title "The Book of Xanthos the Philosopher and Aesop his Slave".

²³ Heraclides Lembus, *Exc. Polit.* 33 Dilts; cf. Arist. fr. 573 and *Rh.* II 20, 1393 b 23 ff.; *schol. ad. Aristoph. Av.* 471; Euagon, *FGrHist* 535; test. 5-6 Perry.

The earliest discernible sources for the story of Aesop, then, seem to be a Samian historian (who was also able to name the parents of Homer),²⁴ and Herodotus, who had a special connexion with Samos; and they locate Aesop in Samos. Aristotle knows—perhaps from Euagon—of a fable which Aesop used in addressing the Samians in defence of a condemned revolutionary.²⁵ On the other hand, there is the legend of Aesop's death at Delphi. Herodotus presupposes it, and Aristophanes in the *Wasps* (1446 ff.) alludes to the story that Aesop was accused by the Delphians of stealing a cup, and told them the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle.²⁶ The Samian and the Delphian episodes are complementary parts of one narrative. Their connexion is implicit in Herodotus: the Delphians, punished by the god for their injustice to Aesop, take steps to pay compensation to whoever may have the right to it, and a Samian comes forward to claim it. One further detail attested in the earlier period, by Plato the comic poet in his *Lakones*, is that Aesop's soul returned to earth.²⁷

So: in the latter part of the fifth century something like a coherent Aesop legend appears, and Samos seems to be its home. It incorporated certain fables, at least one addressed to the Samians and one to the Delphians. There were probably others. Aristophanes introduces the Archilochian fable of the fox and the eagle with the words "among the tales of Aesop there is one told of how...",

ἐν Αἰσώπου λόγοις
ἔστιν λεγόμενον δὴ τι, τὴν ἀλώπεχ' ὥς
φλαύρως ἐκοινώνησεν αἰετῶι ποτε

²⁴ *FGrHist* 535 F*2; for the mother's name see *CQ* 17 (1967), 445.

²⁵ *Rh.* II 20, 1393 b 23 ff. (= P. 427), cf. fr. 573.

²⁶ Cf. *Vita* 127-128; 135-139; A. WIECHERS, *op. cit.*, 7 ff.

²⁷ Fr. 68 Kock = test. 45 Perry, cf. test. 46-47.

(*Av.* 651-3). In itself, ἐν Αἰσώπου λόγοις might well be used of a simple collection of fables with no narrative framework. But in the *Peace* (129) Aristophanes uses the same phrase, ἐν τοῖσιν Αἰσώπου λόγοις, of the fable of the dung-beetle, which he himself in the previous year had mentioned as the fable that Aesop told to the Delphians after being accused of stealing the cup. In this case, at least, Aristophanes' Αἰσώπου λόγοι are a series of tales told by Aesop on different occasions in his life. There is no reason to think that in the other case they are something different, a repertory of fables without context.

This does not necessarily mean that whenever someone refers to an Aesopic fable in fifth-century Athens he is quoting from an established account of Aesop's life. The phrase Αἰσώπου λόγοι suggests a plurality of tales with only a loose unity, each one being an αἶνος which Aesop used on such and such an occasion. In the background there was a biographical legend, but this was a flexible frame within which new fables could easily be accommodated. The fables were told singly, probably, more often than in a continuous sequence. The Aristophanic passages I have cited are examples of this. And when we read ἐν Αἰσώπου λόγοις/ἔστιν λεγόμενον δὴ τι, this certainly sounds like oral material, not a book.

There is other evidence, still from Aristophanes, that may imply a more general attribution of fables to Aesop without reference to any particular occasion in his life. I have mentioned the passage of the *Wasps* where Bdelycleon speaks of entertaining stories heard at the symposium, Αἰσωπικὸν γελοῖον ἢ Συβαριτικόν (1259). (Note again that they circulate orally, they are not learned from a book.) Bdelycleon recommends using them to restore good humour in the event of a quarrel arising from drunken behaviour. In the same context (1226, 1238) there are allusions to *skolia* known to us from the collection pre-

served by Athenaeus, and there is a temptation to take ὁ καρκίνος ὃδ' ἔφα, which occurs in the same collection, as an example of the kind of Αἰσωπικὸν γελοῖον that Bdelycleon means. However, he need not be referring to songs. He may mean anecdotes in prose, and these may or may not have referred to an occasion in Aesop's life. The same applies to the humorous fables (Αἰσώπου τι γελοῖον) that Philocleon in 566 says some defendants use in the courts. They were presumably used as αἶνοι, and Aesop's prior use of them might have been mentioned.

We seem to be on firmer ground in *Birds* 471-472, where Peisetairos tells the chorus "You are ignorant and incurious, and have never explored Aesop, who used to tell that the lark existed before everything else" etc. It does not matter whether or not this otherwise unrecorded fable (= P. 447) was invented *ad hoc* by Aristophanes. What matters is that he is able to say that Aesop *used to* tell it, ἔφασκε λέγων. In other words a fable told by Aesop did not have to be linked to a single specific occasion. Perhaps this is already implied by Herodotus' description of Aesop as a λογοποιός, a story-maker, which is not a natural way of referring to someone who only used stories when he needed to persuade. It implies at least that the stories had independent value.

"You have never explored Aesop", οὐδ' Αἰσωπον πεπάτηκας. Does this expression imply a book? The author of the relevant entry in Liddell and Scott's *Lexicon s.v.* πατέω evidently thought so. He translates "thou hast not *thumbed* Aesop". The closest parallel is in Plato's *Phaedrus* (273 a), where Socrates notes that Phaedrus has explored carefully what Teisias has to say about rhetoric, τὸν γε Τεισίαν αὐτὸν πεπάτηκας ἀκριβῶς, and immediately afterwards refers to what Teisias has written. This certainly supports the inference that fables of Aesop could be studied in a book of some kind, and it is difficult to see what πατεῖν τὸν Αἰσωπον

might mean otherwise. The verb implies something more active than listening to stories.²⁸ What form might such a book have taken? We need not take Aristophanes so literally as to argue that it contained stories which Aesop *used* to tell, as distinct from stories that he told on particular occasions. That would make the book into a fable collection of the Demetrian type, over a century before Demetrius. More probably the fables it contained were set in a biographical framework, a version of the legend to which Herodotus devoted a few lines and Euagon of Samos perhaps a few pages.

Do we, then, here catch sight of the *Volksbuch* beloved of the older critics? What is meant by a *Volksbuch*? A book, I suppose, whose author has been forgotten, and which continues to circulate because of the interest of its subject matter, and of which the text is subject to progressive change. The Byzantine Alexander Romance would be an example. But I doubt whether any book of this category existed in the classical period. If there was a book about Aesop and his fables, the probability is that it had a named author, even though no record of his identity now survives.

Perry rejected the whole idea of such a book, on the ground that people did not write on such frivolous subjects at so early a date, and did not write biographies:

*Nam semper fere ad res serias exponendas vel referendas, non ad meras facetias propagandas neque temere calamos suos illi sumpserunt qui saeculo quinto et prius operam καταλογάδην scribendo dederunt; neque mos erat eius aevi scriptorum ut libros totos de singulis viris quamvis insignibus conderent, sed de totarum gentium, civitatum, populorum, regnorum historia, vel de rebus philosophicis variisque scientiis.*²⁹

²⁸ Cf. M. NØJGAARD, *La Fable antique* I (København 1964), 474.

²⁹ *Aesopica*, 5.

However, before we can accept such sweeping statements, there is at least one other area of literary tradition that we must consider, one that presents several analogies with the case of Aesop. I refer to the biographical tradition about Homer.

Wilamowitz in *Die Ilias und Homer* has an appendix entitled "Zwei alte Volksbücher", in which he discusses firstly the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* and secondly the pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer*. He does not, of course, suppose either of these documents to be old in its present form. But he shows that many of the stories they contain were current in the classical period, and he argues that both are descended from popular narratives of not later than the fifth century. As regards the *Contest*, more definite information became available a few years later, when a Michigan papyrus confirmed what Nietzsche had deduced, that the main substance of the extant *Certamen* derives from a work by the fourth-century rhetorician and essayist Alcidas. Alcidas certainly incorporated earlier legends about the deaths of Hesiod and Homer, as well as some pre-existing puzzle verses. But he may have invented the contest between the two poets, and I see no necessity to postulate a pre-Alcidamantine *Volksbuch* on the subject.³⁰

The pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer* offers a closer analogy with the *Life of Aesop*. It gives an account of Homer's travels and eventual death, and it includes seventeen occasional poems which he improvised in various situations, the so-called *Homeric Epigrams*, just as the *Life of Aesop* includes fables which Aesop produced in various situations. I have emphasized the Samian connexions of the Aesop legend, and it is interesting to note that pseudo-

³⁰ I discussed the question in *CQ* 17 (1967), 433-450. For more recent studies see G. L. KONIARIS, in *HSCP* 75 (1971), 107-29; N. J. RICHARDSON, in *CQ* 31 (1981), 1-10; K. HELDMANN, *Die Niederlage Homers im Dichterwettstreit mit Hesiod*, *Hypomnemata* 75 (Göttingen 1982).

Herodotus devotes several pages to Homer's stay on Samos. As Wilamowitz observed, this section of the work is especially full and rich in content, with detailed allusion to Samian cults and institutions. Homer composes four poems there, including two of the longest and most interesting in the collection, the *Kaminos* or *Kerameis* and the *Eiresione*, the begging-song which Samian children subsequently sang as they went from house to house collecting gifts at the winter new moon. In other sources we hear of the Samian Creophylus who entertained Homer on Ios and was rewarded with the *Capture of Oichalia*, an epic later attributed to him but really Homer's work. Samos evidently made an important contribution to the Homer legend. I remarked earlier that Euagon wrote on the biography of Homer as well as on that of Aesop.

I will just mention one other point of contact between the Aesopic and the Homeric legends. Pseudo-Herodotus tells how, when Homer was on his way to Cyme, he was prevailed upon by the kinsmen of Midas, the late king of Phrygia, to compose an epitaph for that potentate; it is the famous epitaph that Simonides knew as the work of Cleobulus of Lindos. Unlike the remainder of Homer's occasional compositions, this one also appears in the *Certamen* (12), with some extra details of the episode. There Midas' sons, who commission the verses, are named as Xanthos and Gorgos—we recall the Samian Xanthes or Xanthos whom Aesop served—and they reward Homer with a silver φιάλη, which he dedicates to Apollo at Delphi. Aesop was accused at Delphi of stealing a gold φιάλη that had been dedicated to Apollo. This is an integral part of the pharmakos myth.³¹ Homer's cup, on the other hand, is functionless. It may have been suggested by the Aesopic legend, and the name Xanthos may come from the same source.

³¹ See Istros, *FGrHist* 334 F 50; A. WIECHERS, *op. cit.*, 33, 36.

Wilamowitz assigned the pseudo-Herodotean *Life* in its present form to the late second or early first century B.C., and it can hardly be earlier than that, seeing that it mentions the *Battle of Frogs and Mice* and other burlesque poems of a type first attested in the late Hellenistic period.³² But he claimed its contents to be "alter ionischer Erzählungsstoff". The best reason for thinking that it is based on a much older narrative is the fact that the *Epigrams* appear to be of classical rather than of Hellenistic date, and that most of them could only have been preserved in the context of a narrative, because they make no sense without explanation of the circumstances in which they were uttered. They are not like Aesopic αἶνοι which can be taken out of their context and presented as entertaining or instructive items on their own.

Wilamowitz's greatest successor and only true intellectual heir, Felix Jacoby, agreed that the pseudo-Herodotean *Life* was based with only slight modification upon an older text, which he regarded as certainly pre-Aristotelian, perhaps even fifth-century.³³ But for him this text was no *Volksbuch*, but a product of sophistic learning, similar in status to Alcidamas' contest story, and like it drawing on earlier traditions. I suspect that this may be close to the truth. But it must be admitted that it is a conclusion based on subjective judgment rather than on hard evidence. It is attested that the Homeridai told stories about Homer's life in the first half of the fourth century.³⁴ Some such stories are already alluded to by Pindar and Bacchylides. A number of fifth-century authors wrote about Homer's ancestry. It is

³² For the date of the *Battle of Frogs and Mice* see H. WÖLKE, *Untersuchungen zur Batrachomyomachie*, Beitr. zur Klass. Phil. 100 (Meisenheim 1978), 46-70. There is a fragment of a *Battle of Weasels and Mice* in a Michigan papyrus of the 2nd/1st century B.C. (H. S. SCHIBLI, in *ZPE* 53 (1983), 1-26).

³³ *Hermes* 68 (1933), 10 = *Kleine philologische Schriften* I (Berlin 1961), 11 f.

³⁴ Isocr. *Or.* X (*Hel.*) 65; Plat. *Rep.* 599 e, cf. 600 b.

perfectly plausible that someone before 400 should have constructed an extended account of Homer's career, uniting various scattered traditions and inventions, among which, as we have seen, Samian tradition and invention were prominent.

If so, we should have something of a parallel for the book about the life and death of Aesop whose existence in 415 B.C. is suggested by Aristophanes' phrase οὐδ' Αἴσωπον πεπάτηκας. Another work in the same general category, if it existed so early, would be the *Symposium of the Seven Sages*. In his lives of the Sages Diogenes Laertius, after Lobon of Argos, quotes little gnomic *skolia* which each of them once sang.³⁵ Wilamowitz dated them on stylistic grounds to the fifth century, and noted that they presuppose a narrative about a symposium at which the seven were present—another “altes Volksbuch”, in his view.³⁶ J. F. Kindstrand in his recent work on Anacharsis claims that there is “good reason” to suppose that the Seven Sages figured in literary works of a popular character even in the archaic period, probably in the form of an agon or symposium.³⁷ I cannot share this opinion. The Seven Sages are not mentioned as a group before Plato's *Protagoras* (343 b), and their symposium presupposes the rise of dialogue literature—it may indeed presuppose Plato's *Symposium*. The *skolia* quoted by Lobon are composed in a facile dactylo-epitrite characteristic of the fourth century.³⁸ The *Sympo-*

³⁵ H. LLOYD-JONES and P. J. PARSONS (edd.), *Supplementum Hellenisticum* (Berlin 1983), nos. 521-6. Periander's song is not preserved.

³⁶ *Hermes* 60 (1925), 300 = *Kleine Schriften* IV (Berlin 1962), 388. On traditions of the Sages' symposium cf. O. BARKOWSKI, in *RE* II A 2, s.v. “Sieben Weise”, 2252-4.

³⁷ *Anacharsis. The Legend and the Apophthegmata*, *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* 16 (Uppsala 1981), 77.

³⁸ See my *Greek Metre* (1982), 139 f. Lloyd-Jones and Parsons consider them Hellenistic, and they may well be.

sium of the Sages, then, is a little late for our purposes. But it is part of the same trend as the construction of biographical narratives about Homer and Aesop; here too a fictitious narrative served as a frame for noteworthy utterances by the persons in question. The Sages' wisdom was of a different style from Aesop's: adages and apophthegms were attributed to them, fables to him. But it is not surprising that in time he was brought into association with them. Alexis in his *Aesop* had at least Solon in dialogue with the fabulist, and later authors represent him as pitting his wits against the others too.³⁹

Many individuals other than Aesop are reported to have made rhetorical use of fable on some single occasion: Stesichorus, Cyrus, Demosthenes, Demades, Eumenes, and so on.⁴⁰ Only Aesop, however, used it habitually. So when the story of Aḥiqar came to be translated into Greek in the early Hellenistic period, it was natural for this oriental dealer in fable-wisdom to become assimilated to Aesop. His name became known in Greece to some extent—even Theophrastus is credited with a book entitled *Akicharos* or *Akicharis*⁴¹—but his story survived only as an interpolation into the story of Aesop (*Vita* 101-110), with Aesop taking his place.

It is time to sum up. Fable came to Greece in association with wisdom poetry, but also as an autonomous form which could be employed in various settings, in iambos for example, or at the symposium, or in the law-courts. It was always capable of being used as an αἶνος to reinforce an

³⁹ See test. 33-38 Perry.

⁴⁰ See K. MEULI and T. KARADAGLI, as in n. 5.

⁴¹ Diog. Laert. V 50. A translation of the 'stele of Akikaros' was foisted on Democritus (Clem. Al. *Str.* I 15, 69, 4-6 = *Vorsokr.* II 68 B 299 Diels-Kranz, cf. *CR* 19 [1969], 142). Strab. XVI 2, 39, p. 762 mentions Achaikaros as an influential prophet among the Bosporenes, parallel with Orpheus, Trophonius, the Indian Gymnosophists, the Persian Magoi, and others.

argument or admonition, but it could also be used for pure entertainment. Its transmission was at first purely oral. Fables no doubt spread in swarms—anyone who knew one fable was likely to know several—but there were no formal collections. There was no particular person famous for inventing them. Sometimes, like other witticisms, they were ascribed to some nameless Libyan or to someone from some other distant country.

In the fifth century, probably in Samos, the legend of a repulsively ugly and worthless-looking slave, who was unjustly put to death by the Delphians in circumstances like those of the *pharmakos* rite, was developed into a fully-fledged novella in which the slave was a shrewd and witty fellow, given to impressing points on his superiors by means of apt parables. Once given this starting-point, the Greek instinct to attach anonymous compositions or achievements to any appropriate individual ensured that Aesop would attract fables. Many fables which had hitherto had no fixed context became fables that Aesop had told on some occasion or other. By Aristophanes' time the *Αἰσωπικὸν γελοῖον* is a recognizable category of story, and there is apparently a book in which the inquisitive may read about Aesop's life and death, and his wit and wisdom. But the circulation of fables is still predominantly oral. Socrates, according to Plato, applied himself to the task of versifying the tales of Aesop, which he had in his head, not in a book, taking them in the order in which they occurred to him.⁴² Demetrius' procedure a century later was probably much the same. But by then the number of available fables had grown larger; and Demetrius did not have to drink hemlock before he had finished.

⁴² Plat. *Phd.* 61 b οὗς προχείρους εἶχον μύθους καὶ ἡπιστάμην, τοὺς Αἰσώπου, τούτων ἐποίησα οἷς πρώτοις ἐνέτυχον.

DISCUSSION

M. Lasserre: J'ai suivi avec beaucoup d'intérêt l'exposé de M. West; ses conclusions, prudentes et mesurées, me semblent tout à fait convaincantes. Je pense toutefois qu'on pourrait faire état d'un *terminus ante quem* auquel il paraît n'avoir pas songé: le 'portrait' d'Esope reproduit sur une coupe datée d'environ 450 avant J.-C. Cette coupe tient compte à la fois des caractéristiques biographiques d'Esope, en lui prêtant un physique souffreteux et quelques signes serviles, et de son renom de fabuliste, puisqu'il est représenté écoutant un renard. La présence du renard me fait même penser que l'artiste a surtout en vue les fables, et cela d'autant plus que la *Vie* conservée, d'ailleurs pauvre en fables, ne mentionne pas le renard. Serait-il déraisonnable d'interpréter ce témoignage surtout comme un indice de l'existence du recueil, voire du recueil seulement, sans le cadre biographique?

Comme, d'autre part, Hérodote est né un peu avant 480, et comme on peut légitimement imaginer qu'il a recueilli à Samos une tradition sur Esope déjà fixée, et non toute nouvelle, il me semble que son témoignage renvoie au plus tard au début du V^e siècle le *terminus ante quem* de la formation de la légende.

M. West: I should have mentioned this vase-painting, though I do not think it adds anything extra to the literary evidence. The dating given can of course only be taken as approximate, say within twenty years or so. It is perhaps contemporary with Herodotus. It attests the connexion of fables with the Ugly Slave, whom we may no doubt identify as Aesop, but it does not necessarily imply the existence of a book.

M. Adrados: L'influence de l'Orient est certes importante, mais la fable a aussi une origine grecque, en relation avec l'iambe et les banquetts.

En Orient, il y a d'une part les collections de fables et de proverbes (l'Aḥiqar, avec ses collections de fables et de proverbes adressés par le protagoniste à son fils, dont la fable d'Hésiode paraît très proche); d'autre part, des fables isolées, comme celle de l'Aigle et du Renard, dont Archiloque s'est inspiré. La thèse de Meuli reste valable.

Toute fable grecque, archaïque ou classique, existe par elle-même, indépendamment de tout recueil; elle conseille ou critique, dans une situation donnée. C'est même le cas de la fable du Serpent et de l'Ecrevisse dans les *Carmina convivalia* ou les *Sybaritika* d'Aristophane.

La thèse développée par M. West au sujet de l'origine de la légende d'Esope est très proche de celle que j'ai exposée dans mon *Historia de la fabula greco-latina* (I pp. 286 sqq.) et dans mon article ("The 'Life of Aesop' and the Origins of Novel in Antiquity", in *Quaderni Urbinati* N.S. 1 (1979), 93-112), article que M. West semble ne pas connaître. Il y a toutefois, entre lui et moi, quelques différences sur lesquelles je souhaiterais connaître son avis:

1) M. West paraît admettre qu'il existait dès la fin du V^e siècle une *Vie d'Esope* sous forme écrite, ce dont je doute.

2) J'ai donné de nouveaux arguments en faveur de la thèse de M. Wiechers, selon laquelle Esope serait à l'origine un *pharmakos* delphique.

3) J'ai suggéré que la légende d'Esope a pu se combiner à Samos avec celle de Aḥiqar, qui présente avec elle de grandes analogies, et qui a aussi pour origine un *pharmakos*.

M. West: Certainly one should not *exaggerate* the oriental influence. One should never exaggerate anything. The Greek fable is much more than a continuation of something that existed in the east. But I am not convinced that it had any native roots.

M. Falkowitz: One might distinguish between the Mesopotamian precept collections, such as *The Instructions of Šuruppak*, and the Sumerian *Rhetoric Collections* (inaccurately called *Proverb Collections*). The former are clearly hortatory in character and have narrative frames. The latter are

unframed and contain diverse genres of discourse. They are the sources of the Old Babylonian Sumerian fables. The precept collections contain numerous animal metaphors and *exempla*, but are not fable sources. As such, they show a less clear relationship to Greek Aesopic fable collections.

In the Aramaic recension of Aḥiqar's so-called *Instructions*, we have a combination of diverse genres of speech, including fables, framed with the story of Aḥiqar. Subsequent recensions in other languages turn the sayings into precepts. While the Aramaic frame calls Aḥiqar an Assyrian court official, the actual attribution of any sayings or fables to Aḥiqar is not known from Mesopotamia. The practice of pseudepigraphic attribution of fables is only tenuously linked to the best attested Near Eastern tradition, Mesopotamia's.

Similarly, the fable, which is not clearly recognized as a distinct genre in Mesopotamia, has only circumstantial links to Greek fables. While there are common motifs and even cases of strikingly similar texts, the actual process of transmission is not documented. The few striking similarities may be exceptions, indicating a rule of independent fable traditions.

M. Nøjgaard: L'hypothèse de M. West est séduisante. Respectant les témoignages, elle les rassemble en une synthèse plausible. J'estime toutefois qu'elle laisse trop de problèmes sans solution pour qu'on puisse l'accepter telle quelle. Si l'on entend mettre la transmission du corps primitif des fables ésopiques en relation avec la constitution d'une biographie (fictive) d'un certain Esope, on se heurte à deux difficultés majeures: en premier lieu le fait que la *Vie d'Esope* renferme très peu de fables. Je précise que je parle maintenant de la version de la *Vie* qui nous est connue: il faut bien partir de là (dans la version la plus ancienne, celle éditée par Perry). Je sais bien que la *Vie* hypothétique du V^e siècle a pu se présenter sous une forme et avec un contenu assez différents, mais les différences éventuelles iraient plutôt dans le sens de mes objections. Ainsi, on peut supposer que la *Vie* hypothétique du V^e siècle était plus courte. Quoi qu'il en soit, il ne me semble pas pensable qu'un récit renfermant au grand maximum vingt fables ait pu servir de 'canal' (au

sens d'un Roman Jakobson) à toute la tradition ésopique. Bien sûr, nous ignorons le nombre de fables 'ésopiques' qui circulaient dans le monde grec à cette époque reculée, mais nous pouvons être certains que la *Vie* ne faisait que puiser quelques rares récits dans un trésor autrement étendu.

La seconde difficulté tient au caractère même du personnage d'Esopé tel qu'il apparaît dans la *Vie* conservée, ainsi que dans les témoignages classiques. On y voit un homme hideux, extrêmement intelligent, sarcastique et respectueux — dans certaines limites — face à son maître, mais surtout hautement moral. Esopé n'a certainement rien du *mozo de muchos amos*, autrement dit du serviteur corrompu du roman picaresque (2^e moitié du XVI^e siècle). Il y a plus. Au contraire de l'anti-héros picaresque, Esopé reste une figure profondément respectueuse des autorités divines. Il est significatif que la *Vie* conservée le présente, au début, comme une âme charitable qui aide une prêtresse d'Isis. Il est bien possible que l'hypothèse de M. West, selon laquelle la surdité du maître aurait été remplacée plus tard par le mutisme de l'esclave, soit exacte, mais le fait reste que tout au long de la *Vie*, tant comme esclave que comme sage, Esopé fait preuve à l'égard de la religion d'un conformisme qui jure étrangement avec la position de la fable ésopique. Ce trait est souligné par la fin de la *Vie*: si la mort d'Esopé accusé de sacrilège est tellement révoltante, c'est précisément parce que personne, sinon lui, ne respecte plus la religion. Notons aussi que si l'on pense que le milieu naturel de la vieille fable est le banquet, on s'étonne de ne voir nulle part Esopé raconter des fables dans un banquet. Cela est d'autant plus remarquable que les scènes de banquet ne manquent pas dans la *Vie d'Esopé*.

M. West évoque d'ailleurs lui-même l'éventualité d'une transmission double: les livres de sagesse servant de modèle à la *Vie d'Esopé* primitive et une tradition 'populaire'. Pour ma part, je pense que les vieux témoignages sur Esopé s'expliquent si on y voit la rencontre d'une fixation structurale de la fable en une forme 'canonique', qui est celle que nous connaissons sous le nom d'ésopique, et de la création, en langue grecque, d'un livre de sagesse à partir d'un modèle babylonien, présentant un sage qui donne des conseils sous forme de fables.

Enfin, j'aimerais attirer l'attention sur le fait que la *Vie d'Esopé* ne nous renseigne pas sur l'origine d'un autre trait fondamental de ce que seront les collections ésopiques, à savoir le mélange des genres. A quelle date est-on convenu qu'une collection 'ésopique' devait ou pouvait comprendre non seulement des fables animales, mais aussi des anecdotes, des étiologies, des réponses plaisantes?

M. West: My hypothesis does not require that the classical form of the *Life of Aesop* contained a larger number of fables than the extant form. If we were able to compare the two, we should see a clear genetic connexion, I believe, but also important differences. The classical *Life* will have been shorter. It will not have contained anything corresponding to the section which runs parallel to Aḥiqar. The miraculous cure by Isis is naturally not pre-Hellenistic. It seems to me that M. Nøjgaard exaggerates the extent which Aesop is portrayed as a pious man. He is above all witty, mischievous, resourceful. He never uses fables simply to amuse or entertain, always to instruct or persuade.

When was it decided which kinds of material were appropriate to Aesop? Initially it would have been whatever was perceived as similar to the material encapsulated in the biography, but the limits might be re-drawn with each new collection.

M. Adrados: Les différences entre l'Aḥiqar et la légende d'Esopé ne m'échappent pas; mais les similitudes sont frappantes: il s'agit d'un ministre (ou d'un esclave) plus intelligent que son roi (ou son patron), qui résout des énigmes, raconte des fables, sauve son maître, est mis à mort injustement et ressuscite; dans l'un et l'autre cas, les coupables sont châtiés. Ces analogies expliquent qu'on ait interpolé, dans la *Vie* hellénistique d'Esopé, quelques chapitres de l'Aḥiqar.

Or l'Aḥiqar était sans doute connu à Samos dans la seconde moitié du V^e siècle, soit à l'époque où s'est développée la légende delphique du *pharmakos*. La traduction attribuée à Démocrite est probablement apocryphe; mais il a existé une traduction araméenne, qu'on a découverte en Egypte. Or l'araméen était la langue officielle de l'Empire achéménide, auquel appartenait l'Asie Mineure, voisine de Samos; et Samos a été

intégrée à cet Empire après la mort de Polycrate. Il n'est donc pas surprenant que des motifs de l'Aḫiqar aient été incorporés au mythe grec.

M. West: The story of Aḫikar may indeed have been known over a wide area by the fifth century. The proximity of Samos to the Asiatic mainland is not necessarily the most significant thing. If we can go back as far as the time of Polycrates, we find Samos in close connexion with Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean.

M. Lasserre: Plusieurs biographies archaïques, ou datant au plus tard de la période classique, font état de connexions de leurs héros avec Delphes: celles d'Homère, d'Hésiode, d'Archiloque (je pense à ce que l'inscription de Mnésiépès raconte de sa vocation poétique, ainsi qu'aux témoignages sur sa mort et le sort de son meurtrier, épisodes liés à des oracles delphiques), les Sages, Anacharsis, et finalement Esope. Etant donné qu'on fixe l'apogée de l'influence delphique en cette matière (la sagesse) dans la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle, n'y aurait-il pas lieu de situer déjà à cette époque l'élaboration de la *Vie* d'Esope?

M. West: M. Lasserre's observations are pertinent. But I doubt whether any chronological conclusions can safely be drawn on this basis.

M. Adrados: Une observation de détail: M. West qualifie la fable de l'Alouette, chez Aristophane, d'"otherwise unrecorded". C'était aussi mon opinion quand j'ai rédigé mon *Historia de la fabula greco-latina* (I p. 415); mais on m'a fait observer qu'on trouve chez Elien (*NA* XVI 5) une fable très voisine, d'origine indienne.

M. Lasserre pense que des *Vies* du type de celle d'Esope peuvent avoir existé, sous forme écrite, au V^e siècle. Je constate qu'aucune source ne mentionne de telles *Vies* avant le IV^e siècle; en conséquence ceux qui pensent qu'il en a existé une dès le V^e siècle devraient accepter l'*onus probandi*.

M. Knapp: Im Gegensatz zu Mr. West glaube ich nicht an die Monogenese der Gattung 'Fabel'. Zwar kennen wir die ältesten Aufzeichnungen solcher Erzählungen aus Mesopotamien, und von dort mögen auch einzelne Fabelmotive und Fabelapplikationen nach Griechenland und anderswohin gelangt sein, die Denk- oder Erzählform der Fabel jedoch — die Darstellung einer 'Wahrheit' mittels einer fiktiven Geschichte (meist mit Tieren als anthropomorphen Akteuren) — vermag ich nicht nur einer bestimmten Kultur zuzutrauen, von der alle anderen Völker dann die Gattung direkt oder indirekt bezogen hätten, so nicht nur die Griechen und Ägypter, sondern etwa auch die Chinesen der Vorzeit.

M. West: Ich glaube nicht, dass man die Fabel als gemeinmenschliches Phänomen betrachten darf, weil die Ethnographen kein Beispiel von dieser Form bei den sogenannten Naturvölkern gefunden haben. Tiergeschichten gibt es aller Art, Mythen mit redenden und handelnden Tieren, aber das sind noch keine Fabeln, d.h. sie sind nicht erst um einer Pointe willen konstruiert. Deshalb glaube ich nicht, dass die alten Chinesen z.B. Fabeln gehabt haben. Es scheint vielmehr, dass die Fabel tatsächlich einen einzigen Ausgangspunkt gehabt hat, und zwar gerade in Mesopotamien.

M. Lasserre: Vous semblez exprimer des réserves sur l'hypothèse des *Volksbücher* archaïques en général, et je suis prêt à les partager, du moins tant qu'on n'aura pas défini de plus près le terme si commode de *Volksbuch*. Mais, cela dit, jugez-vous impossible l'existence et la circulation de livres en prose sur des sujets moins graves que ceux des philosophes ioniens? Il me semble que la vogue actuelle de la référence à la littérature orale tend à rendre tabou tout système d'explication qui ferait appel à la diffusion écrite. Et pourtant l'intéressante lettre d'affaires trouvée à Berezan (mer Noire) il n'y a pas longtemps atteste qu'au début du Ve siècle l'usage de l'écriture et de la prose était beaucoup plus répandu qu'on ne le suppose trop souvent.

M. West: Prose books existed from the mid sixth century, but apparently always with a known author who impressed his personality on his work: Ἐκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται · τάδε γράφω ὥς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθέα εἶναι, and so on. It is the same with the philosophers, Pherecydes, Anaximander, Heraclitus. The currency of anonymous books, *Volksbücher*, does not seem to fit into this picture.