

A Murder in Delphi: Some Remarks on Aesop as Φαρμακός and his Heroization

Abstract: The first part of this study questions the appropriateness of comparison with the rite of the φαρμακός to explain the episode of Aesop's death in Delphi. Despite the presence of common details, this episode presents a sequence of events that is quite different from that ritual pattern: rather than a scapegoat, Aesop recalls many heroes first killed or wronged and then worshipped by their enemies, after the intervention of an oracle. For this reason, I reconsider the evidence about the heroic cult that is paid to the fabulist. I show that there are two different traditions regarding the punishment of Delphians. The heroic cult is only mentioned by sources that emphasize the need to appease the wrath of the dead Aesop, a fact that leads me to suggest a new interpretation of some pieces of evidence, in particular a fragment of Plato Comicus, that seem to allude to a return to life of Aesop as a "revenant".

Keywords: Aesop's Life, Delphi, φαρμακός, hero cult, revenant

1 Aesop as φαρμακός

The episode of Aesop's death in Delphi is the earliest attested of his biography and it is told or alluded to by a wide range of sources, among them such authors as Herodotus, Aristophanes, Callimachus, and Plutarch, but also anonymous biographies and notes scattered in the scholia and erudite Byzantine works. The involvement of the sacrificial practices of the sanctuary and the attribution of a heroic cult to Aesop in some accounts have led scholars to investigate the episode from a historical-religious point of view. Since Wiechers's influential study,¹ Aesop's death is usually compared to the ritual expulsion of the φαρμακός.

With the word φαρμακός² scholars refer, strictly speaking, to the human scapegoat expelled in a specific Greek rite, attested especially in Ionia and Athens,³ performed to purify the city.⁴ The rite of the φαρμακός is known from scattered evidence from different sources over a vast span of time from Hipponax of Ephesus to Byzantine scholars.⁵ From these testimonies it can be inferred that the rite was carried out either periodically, notably during the Thargelia, an Ionian festival associated with a seasonal renewal,⁶ or in times of crisis, such as plague, famine, or drought.⁷ One or more

¹ WIECHERS (1961).

² Φαρμακός is not the only word used by the ancient sources to indicate the scapegoat involved in the rite; κάθαρμα ("offscouring") was also used by the *Suda* (kappa, 36); Call. fr. 90 (Pfeiffer); Tz. H. 5.728. See ECK (2011), p. 21.

³ Rites considered as further examples of the φαρμακός pattern were also attested in Abdera, in Thrace, Marseille, and on Leukas, even if in all these cases the ancient sources do not use the word φαρμακός.

⁴ On the significance and symbolism of this rite, see BURKERT (1979), 1979, pp. 59–77; W. BURKERT (1985), pp. 82–84; BREMMER (2008) pp. 169–214; PARKER (1983), pp. 257–280; HUGHES (1991), pp. 139–165.

⁵ On Colophon see, for example, Hipp. fr. 5–10 (West); on Abdera, Callim. fr. 90 (Pfeiffer); Ov. *Ibis* 467 ff.; on Athens, Schol. Ar. *Eq.* 1136; *Suda* κάθαρμα (kappa, 36); Harpoc. s.v. φαρμακός; Helladius *apud* Photius *Bibl.* 534a; Hesych. s.v. φαρμακός; on Massilia, Petronius fr. 1; Lact. Pl. in Stat. *Theb.* 10.793; Schol. Luc. 10.334; on Leukas, Strabo 10.2.9; Ampelius 8. For similar rites often identified with the φαρμακός, see Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 693e–694b on the βούλιμος expelled in Chaeronea; *Suda* περίφημα (pi, 1355). The most important collection of sources on φαρμακός remains GEBHARD *Die Pharmakoi in Ionien und die Sybakchoi in Athen*, München, 1926.

⁶ See BREMMER (2008), pp. 194–197. The Thargelia was a propitiatory and purificatory feast associated with Apollo Pythios; see PARKER (2005), pp. 203–204, 481–483.

⁷ See, for example, Schol. Ar. *Eq.* 1136; Schol. Ar. *Ra.* 733 *Suda*. κάθαρμα (kappa, 36). There is a close connection between λιμός and λοιμός: see ROBERT (1948), p. 128.

people, chosen among the poorest⁸ or the ugliest,⁹ criminals,¹⁰ slaves,¹¹ or simply young men,¹² were led out of the territory of a city, probably in a procession,¹³ or perhaps, according to debatable evidence, sacrificed.¹⁴ Even if most of the sources do not explain the way in which the *φαρμακός* was expelled, we know that he could be chased by pelting him with stones, as in Abdera,¹⁵ while other traditions tell that he was hurled off a cliff.¹⁶ This last punishment would imply a human sacrifice, which appears to be corroborated by Tzetzes, who also alludes to the death of the *φαρμακός*.¹⁷ However, most scholars agree to reject the historicity of such a sacrifice.¹⁸ In some cases, before being expelled, the scapegoat was fed and treated well by the community.¹⁹ It has been proposed that the concept of the *φαρμακός* be extended to other contexts, as for instance Athenian ostracism,²⁰ but this identification is not supported by ancient evidence.²¹ The same pattern and themes implied by the *φαρμακός* rite have been observed, not only in the aetiological stories adduced by the sources to explain the origin of the ritual, but also in many myths in which the death of one or more persons, very often kings or young girls and, to a lesser extent, young men of the royal house, sacrifice themselves in order to save the community.²² In these stories, the sacrifice is always voluntary, and the crisis is usually caused by a war. This broad use of the word *φαρμακός* to describe certain mythical and historical characters in other contexts than the rites explicitly labelled in this way by our sources has recently been criticized.²³ Such a critical attitude is also necessary in the case of Aesop, for whom, as we will see, the more generic category of scapegoat does not seem entirely appropriate.

The episode of Aesop's death in Delphi was already known in the fifth century BC, even if the most extensive accounts come only centuries later. The differences among our sources are many, but some elements of the story are relatively stable throughout the chronological span of our evidence. Already in Herodotus the death of the fabulist was blamed on the Delphians, who must pay reparations for this action, according to the oracle (2.134–135),²⁴ and already in Aristophanes the cause of Aesop's death was the accusation that he had stolen a cup from the sanctuary of Apollo (*V.*

⁸ A pauper was expelled from Abdera (Callim. fr. 90 Pfeiffer; Ov. *Ibis* 467 ff.) and Massilia (Petronius fr. 1; Schol. Luc. 10,334).

⁹ Hipponax in Tz. *H.* 5.731. In Athens, the ugliest people were selected and sacrificed, according to Schol. Ar. *Eq.* 1136; *Suda* kappa 36 κάθαρμα.

¹⁰ A criminal was thrown into the sea at Leucas: see Strabo 10.2.9.

¹¹ A slave was expelled from Chaeronea: Plut. *Mor.* 693f.

¹² *Suda* περίφημα (pi, 1355).

¹³ See KERAMOPOULOS (1923), pp. 116–119; BREMMER (2008), pp. 189–191.

¹⁴ See *infra*.

¹⁵ Callim. fr. 90 (Pfeiffer).

¹⁶ In Leukas: Strabo 10.2.9. See also Phot. s.v. περίφημα.

¹⁷ Tz. *H.* 5. 735 states that the corpse of the *φαρμακός* was burnt and his ashes scattered at sea. The information cannot be attributed to Hipponax and the source of Tzetzes remains uncertain; see HUGHES (1991), pp. 142–149. The death of the *φαρμακός* is implied also by Sch. Ar. *Eq.* 1136.

¹⁸ The generally accepted position is that of BREMMER (2008), pp. 192–194, who distinguishes between the historical reality in which the *φαρμακός* was only expelled and the mythical accounts in which it is killed. A detailed rejection of the idea of a human sacrifice is given by HUGHES (1991), pp. 139–165; *contra* ECK (2011), p. 24.

¹⁹ In Abdera: Callim. fr. 90 (Pfeiffer); in Massilia: Petronius fr. 1; Schol. Luc. 10.334.

²⁰ The idea was suggested by VERNANT (1972), p. 12 and has been widely accepted.

²¹ See SACCO (2018), pp. 107–110. ECK (2011), p. 19 n. 5 points out that the exile of ostracism is only temporary, while the *φαρμακός* is expelled forever.

²² BREMMER (2008), pp. 177–179. The equivalence between the rite and the accounts about the sacrifice of kings is accepted also by BURKERT (1979), pp. 65–66.

²³ This is the case of Oedipus, considered a *φαρμακός* by VERNANT (1972), pp. 117–131, an interpretation partially rejected by ECK (2011), p. 18, who sees Oedipus as a scapegoat but not a *φαρμακός*. ECK (2011), p. 27 also argues that unlike the characters in the mythical tales, the *φαρμακός* was never meant to be a volunteer who chose to sacrifice himself. For a very perceptive critique to the idea of considering Cleisthenes of Sikyon a *φαρμακός*, see HOLLMANN (2012), pp. 11–16.

²⁴ For a thorough examination of Herodotus' account, see *infra*.

1446–148), an accusation the comedian probably considered unjust,²⁵ as many later sources did.²⁶ The origin of the enmity is normally attributed by Hellenistic and later sources to Aesop's criticism and scorn for the Delphians.²⁷ In a biography preserved on an Oxyrhynchus papyrus, *P. Oxy.* XV 1800, the hostility began with a disagreement over the division of the meat in the Delphian sacrifice, an argument that has been associated with the death of Neoptolemos.²⁸ In most versions of the story, Aesop is killed by being thrown from a cliff;²⁹ more rarely, he is stoned.³⁰ These two capital punishments are both present in *P. Oxy.* XV 1800, while in version G of the *Life of Aesop*, once led to the cliff, Aesop gets ahead of his executioners and throws himself off (142).

Aesop's unjust death provokes a divine punishment in the form of a pestilence and/or a famine,³¹ to which the *Life of Aesop* (142) adds a punitive expedition of Greeks, Babylonians, and Lydians.³² An oracle, given by Apollo Pythian,³³ invites the Delphians to pay a penalty (simply a fee in Herodotus) or to appease the wrath of Aesop, which, according to the Hellenistic and later sources, leads to the erection of an altar or even a temple, and thus to a true heroic cult.³⁴

Wiechers was the first to note a striking similarity with the φαρμακός in the tales about Aesop's death, and noted six mythical motifs specific to this rite in the episode:³⁵

- 1) Aesop, as an ex-slave, represented as extremely ugly and deformed in the *Life of Aesop* (1), and very probably already on a fifth-century BC vase,³⁶ fits the kind of person chosen as φαρμακοί, according to our sources. In the *Life*, he is called a κάθαρμα (*W* 14; 31), a word also used for the φαρμακοί.³⁷

²⁵ Philocleon in this passage alludes to the fable of the κανθαρός that Aesop is said to have narrated once he was arrested, as indeed we find in the *Life of Aesop* (135–139). The theme of this fable undoubtedly indicates that Aesop considered his conviction an unjust act that would lead to revenge.

²⁶ *Life of Aesop* 127, Schol. Ar. *V.* 1446; Zen. 1.47; Schol. Luc. *Phal.* 1.6.

²⁷ This scorn is normally expressed by a series of taunts and insults explicitly addressed by Aesop to the Delphians. In the *Life of Aesop*, the first three discourses are considered by the Delphians a κακόλογον (G 127; W 127 κακολογήσει) and a friend of the fabulist considers that he is insulting them (ὕβριζεν G and W 130). Other sources agree, talking of insults (ἀποσκῶσαι Schol. Ar. *V.* 1446; ἐπέσκωπεν *P. Oxy.* XV 1800 fr. 2, col. 2.19). It is probable that Callimachus already alluded to this version when he said that the Delphians did not welcome Aesop's speech (*P. Oxy.* 7 1011, 171–173 = Iambus 2.15–17); see KERKHECKER (1999), pp. 53–54. The reason for the anger in Plutarch seems to be different. In this case Aesop, after a dispute, sends back to Croesus the money that the king has ordered him to distribute to the Delphians (*Mor.* 556f).

²⁸ Schol. Ar. *V.* 1446 similarly refers to the fact that the Delphians live from exploiting the sacrifices for Apollo without working the land. The version given by the papyrus accentuates the similarity with Neoptolemos, who was killed precisely because of a disagreement over a distribution of sacrifice (*P. N.* 7.40–42). On the similarity between Aesop's death and that of Neoptolemos, see WIECHERS (1961), pp. 43–49; NAGY (1979), pp. 125–127. On Kurke's interpretation, see *infra*.

²⁹ Schol. Ar. *V.* 1446; Plut. *Mor.* 557a; *Suda* (alphaiota, 335); Schol. Luc. *Ph.* 1.6; *Life of Aesop W.* 142. An allusion to this tradition has been acutely recognized in the mime *Moicheutria* (I-II A.D) by ANDREASSI (2001), pp. 220–222.

³⁰ Schol. Call. In *PSI* IX 1094, 12–13. Both types of execution can easily be interpreted as a collective revenge to Aesop's insults. On the relation between revenge and shameful execution, see GERNET (1968), pp. 288–301.

³¹ Famine: Lib. 24.31. Pestilence: *P. Oxy.* XV 1800; *Life of Aesop* 142. Famine and Pestilence: Plut. *Mor.* 556f–557a.

³² In the W version they are only the Greeks and the other disciples of Aesop.

³³ The Pythia is explicitly named by Zen. 1.47, but the oracle of the god that Herodotus (2.134), *P. Oxy.* XV 1800, and the W version of the *Life of Aesop* (142) mention can only be the Delphic one. The fact that the oracle is given by Zeus in *Life G* is certainly an innovation (279). In this sense, FERRARI (1997), pp. 13–20 is probably right in pointing out that in certain cases, G has modified the tradition to accentuate the hostility between Aesop and Apollo, even if some of the divergences between the two main versions of the *Life of Aesop* also depend on the opposite will of the W version to eliminate any element of ambiguity towards the divine on the part of the fable-maker.

³⁴ See *infra*.

³⁵ WIECHERS (1961), pp. 31–42.

³⁶ An Attic vase from the fifth century BC in the Gregorian Etruscan Museum in Vatican City (inv. no. 16552) shows a man with a deformed appearance, most probably Aesop, talking to a fox; see LISSARAGUE (2000).

³⁷ See n. 2.

2) Aesop is led out of the city to be executed, as the *φαρμακοί* are driven out of the territory of the community. Wiechers also identifies the presence of a procession in the story of Aesop, but the sources do not support this speculation.³⁸

3) Aesop is executed, either by being thrown from a cliff or by stoning – according to some sources, the *φαρμακός* was chased off by pelting him with stones or was hurled off a cliff.³⁹

4) The decision to kill Aesop and to plot to find him guilty is taken by the representatives of the Delphians (*ἄρχοντες*, *Life of Aesop* 127), just as the *φαρμακός* was expelled, and perhaps put to death, by collective decision.

5) The crime ascribed to Aesop is the same committed by a *φαρμακός* in the aetiological myth recorded by Istros (*FGrH* 334 F 50 = Harp. s.v. *φαρμακός*) to explain the origin of the role played by *φαρμακοί* in the Thargelia festival: the *φαρμακός* was stoned to death by the companions of Achilles for stealing a cup of Apollo.

6) Apollo plays an important role in the killing of Aesop⁴⁰ and Apollo Pythios was the god honoured in the Thargelia.

For these reasons, Wiechers considered the tale of Aesop's death to be an aetiological explanation of the Delphian ritual of the *φαρμακός*.⁴¹ The existence of such a ritual in Delphi has had very little acceptance among scholars.⁴² Still, the idea that Aesop was conceived of as a *φαρμακός* is largely shared,⁴³ and features in the most important studies on the Greek scapegoat rite.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, some of the arguments adduced by Wiechers are vague⁴⁵ or too generic to link Aesop specifically to the *φαρμακός*,⁴⁶ and the arguments deserving closer attention do not have a decisive value.⁴⁷

There is no doubt that Aesop is described in a way that resembles the *φαρμακοί*: he is extremely ugly, deformed, and of very humble extraction. This makes him appear impure, but this does not mean that he would necessarily have been considered a potential *φαρμακός* by the Delphians.⁴⁸ Nothing indicates that the Delphians killed him because they considered him a source of pollution, because of his appearance or lowly origins. Regarding his status, by the time he travelled to Delphi, he occupied

³⁸ This argument is very weak and it is already implicit in the following motif mentioned by Wiechers, that is, the kind of execution imposed on Aesop. The choice of throwing Aesop off a rock necessarily implies the transfer of the offender from his cell to the place where the sentence will be carried out. No source mentions a procession. A key moment in the procession of the scapegoat was to lead the individual around the city, whereas the Delphians seem determined to lead Aesop to his execution without any deviation. In the *Life of Aesop*, they immediately take him to the cliff and, even when he takes refuge in the temple of the Muses, drag him by force to the place of sentence (134).

³⁹ See nn. 15, 16.

⁴⁰ According to the version G of the *Life*, the Delphians plotted against Aesop also because Apollo was angry with him for dedicating a statue of himself along among those of the Muses (127). In a papyrus of the seventh century AD (P. Ross-Georg. 1.18, 21–23), Apollo actively collaborates in the development of the plan against Aesop.

⁴¹ WIECHERS (1961), p. 42.

⁴² This idea was accepted by ADRADOS (1979), pp. 105–107, 110; WEST (1983), p. 117. But, as stated by KURKE (2011), p. 75, a similar rite in Delphi is entirely unattested in the historical period.

⁴³ See, for example, JEDRKIEWICZ (1989), pp. 99–107; ANDREASSI (2015), pp. 162–163; KONSTANTAKOS (2020), p. 52. On NAGY (1979) and COMPTON (2006), see *infra*.

⁴⁴ See, for example BREMMER (2008), p. 184; PARKER (1983), p. 260.

⁴⁵ On the idea of a procession, see n. 38; on the resurrection of Aesop, see *Infra*.

⁴⁶ For example, the fact that the decision to plot against Aesop is taken by the Delphic magistrates can be linked to a large number of convictions as well as rituals performed by official representatives of a *πόλις*.

⁴⁷ Regarding the arguments adduced by Compton based on the similarity with the myth of Androgeos, see *infra*.

⁴⁸ As stated by HOLLMANN (2012), p. 14: “every *φαρμακός* is polluted, but not every polluted person is a *φαρμακός*”.

a remarkable position in many sources. In Plutarch he is an envoy of King Croesus (*Mor.* 556e–f), while in the *Life of Aesop* he is an itinerant sophist respected by the greatest kings.⁴⁹

At the same time, far from being attributed only to a *φαρμακός* and Aesop, the theft of a sacred cup of Apollo is a relatively frequent motif in traditions connected to Delphi.⁵⁰ It is possible that the crime was first ascribed to Aesop, already in the fifth century BC, and only later was added to the aetiological myth.⁵¹ In any case, the situation of Aesop is not exactly the same as that of *φαρμακός*, since the latter is considered justly killed as impure, while the fabulist is unjustly accused of a crime he didn't commit. In this sense, there is a greater resemblance to the killing of the two sons of a certain Phalaris who, according to Plutarch (825b–c), were also falsely accused of stealing a cup from the god. Whether Aesop really committed the crime or it was unjustly ascribed to him is not a mere detail, but has consequences regarding the purification. Stoning or throwing a temple thief off a cliff are ways to remove the contamination caused by the culprit or their guilt, which was perceived as responsible for pollution in various situations, beyond the case of the *φαρμακός*.⁵² Killing an innocent in this shameful way, on the contrary, brought pollution upon the executioners.⁵³

The other mythical themes that were later added by Compton,⁵⁴ following Nagy,⁵⁵ to the six topics identified by Wiechers, such as the institution of a heroic cult and resurrection,⁵⁶ do not allow an identification of Aesop as *φαρμακός* either. These themes are ascribed to the *φαρμακός* only on the basis of an inaccurate equivalence drawn between this ritual figure and the myth of Androgeos, the son of Minos.⁵⁷ According to Helladios, the death of this hero is the *aition* of the *φαρμακός* in Athens, but the grammarian does not state that he was killed as a *φαρμακός*. On the contrary, he says that the Athenians got into the habit of purifying the city with *φαρμακοῖς* in the wake of the plague caused by Androgeos' killing (*apud* Phot. *Bibl.* 279, 534a3–4). There can be no doubt that for Helladios the primeval *φαρμακοί*, not Androgeos, are the scapegoats used by the Athenians to avert the plague.⁵⁸

The case of Androgeos illustrates the dangers of such approaches, which rely on the accumulated examination of individual elements, but extrapolate them from the pattern in which they are present. The same problem is also present in the case of Aesop: despite the lists drawn up by Wiechers and Compton, the tales of his death lack the *φαρμακός* motif, that is, an individual killed, expelled, or sacrificed in order to save or purify the community as a whole. The order of the elements

⁴⁹ Just before he spontaneously leaves Babylon, King Lykourgos dedicates a golden statue to Aesop, in the company of the Muses, and offers him a great feast (123). Aesop, wishing to reach Delphi, travels around the various cities displaying his wisdom (124), in a manner reminiscent of the rhetorician-philosophers of the Second Sophistic; see HOLZBER (2002), p. 77; MICHELACCI (2017), p. 145.

⁵⁰ JEDRKIEWICZ (1989), pp. 83 n. 3, 85 n.7.

⁵¹ JEDRKIEWICZ (1989), p. 101 n. 59.

⁵² STEINER (1997), p. 205; HOLLMANN (2012), pp. 5–6.

⁵³ See VISSER (1982), p. 405; GRAS (1984), p. 89; HOLLMANN (2012), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁴ COMPTON (2006), pp. 34–36.

⁵⁵ NAGY (1979), p. 280.

⁵⁶ For the heroic cult and the resurrection of Aesop, see *infra*.

⁵⁷ Already WIECHERS (1961), p. 42 in a brief passage stressed some similarities between Aesop and Androgeos. On the heroic cult and the resurrection of Androgeos, see respectively Paus. 1.1.4 and Prop. 2.1.61–62.

⁵⁸ In the most widespread version of the myth the Athenians, following the indication of an oracle, were forced to send young men and women to the Minotaur to end the plague, which was caused by Androgeos' death (Isoc. 10.27; D.S. 4.61,1–2; Plut. *Th.* 15). In a more complicated version, the theme of the sacrifice is duplicated, since the Athenians try, before turning to the oracle, to end the crisis by sacrificing Hyacinth's daughters, according to an ancient prophecy (Apollod. 3.212 with further reference in SCARPI (1996), p. 295). We cannot know whether the *φαρμακοί* alluded to by Helladios are really the young men sent to the Minotaur, or whether they belong to a separate tradition.

is completely different from the ritual pattern of the scapegoat: Aesop is not killed to purify or save the city from a famine, disease, or war. On the contrary, it is his death that causes the plagues.⁵⁹

This absence must have been noticed by both Compton and Kurke, who attempted to restore the traditional pattern of the *φαρμακός*. Compton considers the sense of danger felt by the Delphians, adduced by the *Life of Aesop* (127) as the reason for their plot they conceived, to be equivalent to the fear provoked by a plague or a war, and thus representing a situation that would normally require a *φαρμακός*.⁶⁰ In this way, the first crisis precedes the elimination of Aesop, in accordance with the scapegoat pattern. No doubt the risk that Aesop might mock the Delphians in other towns he later visited would be a serious problem for a city that lived on the offerings of pilgrims, but the expression “plague of shame” used by Compton is simply an unconvincing expedient.⁶¹ As we have seen, situations of crisis that require a purification or a sacrifice comparable to the *φαρμακός* are always plagues, famine, and drought or, alternatively, a war (which in myth often serves the same function as a plague). Unlike these crises, which imply supernatural intervention, the decision taken by the Delphians, even if supported by Apollo according to Vita G, is a response to purely human reasons. Neither the idea of purification, which underlies the *φαρμακός* in the ritual, nor that of sacrifice which is associated with it in the myths can be attributed to the Delphians’ choice.

Equally unconvincing is the hypothesis put forward, albeit cautiously, by Kurke, who identifies the scapegoat element in the military expedition that closes the *Life of Aesop*. According to her, in the *Life* we witness a competitive *φαρμακός*: the Delphians seek to treat Aesop as a scapegoat by condemning him as a temple robber, but Aesop reverses the accusation, telling a series of fables in which the Delphians are compared to the perpetrators of the most impious crimes.⁶² In the end, Aesop prevails over his executioners who, according to Kurke, ultimately themselves become *φαρμακοί*: the punishment inflicted by the Greeks, Babylonians, and Lydians involves the scapegoating of the entire community.⁶³ However, as rightly stated by Hollmann in a different context,⁶⁴ to speak of the whole community being made *φαρμακοί* makes little sense, since the core of the scapegoat rites consists of the idea of one person or a small number of individuals taking the place of the whole community, ensuring its salvation.

In conclusion, despite the partial similarities acknowledged by scholars, it is not possible to identify the central element that characterizes the *φαρμακός* in the story of Aesop’s death: the idea of a scapegoat appointed to save or purify the community. For these reasons, I do not consider it correct to call Aesop a *φαρμακός*.

2 Aesop and Hero Cult

2.1 A Heroic Pattern

The *φαρμακός* is not the only pattern to which the events preceding and following Aesop’s death have been compared. A remarkable similarity to the deaths of certain heroes is often emphasized by studies that also adopt the idea of Aesop as a scapegoat. In this sense, the *φαρμακός* and hero worship

⁵⁹ Unlike Androgeos, Aesop cannot be identified as a *φαρμακός*; but nor does the story as a whole show any elements that suggest a connection with this rite. The way to put an end to the plague suggested by the oracle consists of a tribute to the fabulist, and none of the sources implies the expulsion or the sacrifice of a member of the community.

⁶⁰ COMPTON (2006), p. 34.

⁶¹ COMPTON (2006), pp. 34, 359.

⁶² KURKE (2011), pp. 85–94.

⁶³ KURKE (2011), p. 92.

⁶⁴ HOLLMANN (2012), p. 11.

have been seen as related phenomena, as two sides of the same coin.⁶⁵ In other studies however, the two aspects were kept separate and the importance of the heroic paradigm was heeded.

Already Niklas Holzberg compared Aesop in Delphi with the heroes of Attic tragedy, and especially Oedipus, in a study which focuses on the *Life of Aesop* as a literary work structured and planned according to specific patterns.⁶⁶ In Holzberg's reading, Aesop himself is responsible for his misfortune and, blinded by his success, like the tragic hero, only recovers his piety when his fate is inevitable. In this sense, the vengeance imposed by the gods comes too late and his death is tragic.⁶⁷

This idea has been developed by Jedrkiewicz, who also takes into account the role played by previous traditions and the superhuman dimension achieved by Aesop at the end of the episode.⁶⁸ He argues that the heroic pattern⁶⁹ integrates the Delphic episode into the ascending biographical trajectory which characterizes the *Life of Aesop*. The tragic death is necessary for Aesop to ascend to a heroic status and to obtain a definitive divine sanction.⁷⁰

Even if Jedrkiewicz recognizes the φαρμακός and the sacrificial pattern in the mythemes of the Aesopian and Delphian traditions,⁷¹ he identifies the underlying pattern of the narrative with a different model: the biographies of poets, soothsayers, and wise men forced to die after they face a riddle they cannot solve.⁷² And, actually, Aesop was included among the heroized poets,⁷³ although, as noted by Kurke, he had been considered a maker of prose fables since Herodotus' time.⁷⁴

However, in attempting to prove this parallelism, Jedrkiewicz is forced to overestimate the importance of a single phrase pronounced by Aesop, in order to find the epistemological error that would cause his death.⁷⁵ In fact, we cannot find in any of the extant sources an epistemological challenge comparable to that present in the biographical tradition about Homer or in the myth of the seer Calchas.⁷⁶ Moreover, Aesop does not accept his fate when he fails in a trial, like the other sages named by Jedrkiewicz; he tries to persuade the Delphians with many discourses. Aesop's conduct, described by the *Life* as a sudden loss of wisdom (ἀπόλεσα γὰρ καὶ ὄν πρῶτον εἶχον νοῦν εἰς Δελφοῦς εἰσελθὼν G 131), rather recalls the foolishness that strikes many heroes before their death.⁷⁷

Hesiod could provide us with a paradigm more appropriate than that of the sages referred to by Jedrkiewicz. Although we find here a failure to interpret an oracular riddle absent from the Aesopic tradition (*Certamen* 14), Hesiod's death, like Aesop's, according to what is probably the earliest version of the story, is partially caused by the poet himself: he is said to have provoked the wrath of his murderers by having illicit intercourse with the sister of his hosts.⁷⁸ Moreover, his death is not

⁶⁵ See especially NAGY (1979), pp. 306–308; see also *infra*.

⁶⁶ HOLZBERG (2002), pp. 83–84.

⁶⁷ HOLZBERG (1992), pp. 73–75.

⁶⁸ JEDRKIEWICZ (2009a), pp. 190–197; JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b).

⁶⁹ According to JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), pp. 141–143, this is only one of the three different scenarios combined by the author of the *Life of Aesop* to construct his original account. The three scenarios are those of “Lost Wisdom”, “Counterproductive Wisdom”, and “Heroic Wisdom”.

⁷⁰ JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), p. 154. In this sense, the attempt to find asylum in the temple of the Muses, violated by the Delphians, the pronouncement of the Dung Beetle Fable, the direct appeal to Apollo, and the heroic death chosen without waiting for his executioners to push him from the rock, prepare and justify the subsequent intervention of the gods and the tribute paid to Aesop (pp. 152–153).

⁷¹ JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), pp. 149–151.

⁷² JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), pp. 150–151.

⁷³ CLAY (2004), pp. 127–128.

⁷⁴ KURKE (2011), p. 76.

⁷⁵ When the Delphians claim that Aesop has stolen a cup from the temple, the fabulist defends himself by saying that ἀπολέσθαι θέλω, εἴαν τι τοιοῦτον εὖρεθῆ εἰς ἐμέ (G 127). According to JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), p. 150, this statement shows how the prophetic ability of the sage would prove ineffective.

⁷⁶ Homer and Calchas are the two paradigms mentioned by JEDRKIEWICZ (2009b), p. 150 n. 50.

⁷⁷ See BRELICH (1958), pp. 264–265.

⁷⁸ In the account known to Aristotle, Hesiod actually seduces the girl (Arist. fr. 565 R.). In the first version given by the *Certamen*, his hosts' suspicion of the poet's relationship with their sister is presented as an objective fact too (14). The

accepted peacefully. On the contrary, it arouses divine vengeance, as does that of Aesop.⁷⁹ In any case, the account of Aesop's death can be easily compared to a pattern typical of heroic myth in a broad sense, rather only the traditions concerning poets, wise men, philosophers, and soothsayers.

A violent and often unjust and shameful death resulting in a plague or in some other negative consequence for the community and an appeal to an oracle (almost always the Delphian oracle), which calls for fair compensation and often worship of the slain victim, formed a pattern that scholars have detected in many tales about the origins of heroic cults for athletes⁸⁰ or for former enemies of the πόλις⁸¹ and, more generally, for people killed violently.⁸² The general outline of this pattern can also be seen in traditions about Aesop that do not depend on the *Life*, such as the biography preserved in *P. Oxy.* XV 1800,⁸³ and for this reason it cannot simply be ascribed to the anonymous author of the novel.

However, when examining these recurring patterns, it must be kept in mind that they are always abstractions, and differences cannot be ignored. There is no a "typical heroic pattern" from which the historically attested stories developed as variants.⁸⁴ At this point, the question arises as to whether this heroic pattern, and specifically the hero cult, is something that has been part of the traditions about Aesop since their earliest attestations or if perhaps it is something that developed over time.

2.2 The Hero Cult of Aesop: A Reassessment

Many scholars have accepted the historicity of a cult paid to Aesop and have given it an early date.⁸⁵ According to the very influential study by Nagy, the tale of the fabulist's is the *aition* of this cult.⁸⁶ Nagy traces this *aition* relatively far back, since he holds that it preserves the memory and at the same time justifies the whole complex of religious institutions resulting from the First Sacred War.⁸⁷ Nagy's analysis indicates that we should imagine a cult already present at Delphi in the archaic age, set in an Apollonian context,⁸⁸ having a purifying function and mirrored in a mythical *aition* transmitted to us especially by the G version of the *Life of Aesop*.⁸⁹

manner in which Hesiod dies seems "sordid"; see BASSINO (2019), p. 172 with further bibliography. The other version that considers the accusation unfair is probably a secondary construction; see BRELICH (1958), p. 322.

⁷⁹ On the sources about Hesiod's death, see KIVILO (2010), pp. 25–28.

⁸⁰ FONTENROSE (1968), nn. 76–78.

⁸¹ VISSER (1982), pp. 416–418.

⁸² EKROTH (2007), p. 106.

⁸³ See *infra*.

⁸⁴ The structuralist idea of a basic and original pattern later developed into different forms is at the base of FONTENROSE (1968).

⁸⁵ See, for example, LUZZATTO (1988), p. 430. She tries to reconstruct the historical figure of Aesop and argues that there is no reasonable doubt about the existence of a heroic cult that she presumably considers to have immediately followed his death (p. 430). CLAY (2004), p. 127–128 includes in his list of cults devoted to poets both the cult dedicated to Aesop at Delphi and the Δισώπειον, which, according to the *Life of Aesop*, the Samians dedicated to him (100).

⁸⁶ In his opinion, the Lives of the Poets have the scope to motivate, not their poetry, but their cult; see NAGY (1979), p. 306.

⁸⁷ NAGY (1979), pp. 284–286.

⁸⁸ The ambiguous attitude shown by Apollo towards Aesop is, according to Nagy, a clear example of the typical relationship between patron god and hero: antagonism in myth and symbiosis in cult. According to this pattern, Aesop is the recessive element in a Delphic cult with Apollo as the dominant part; NAGY (1979), pp. 302–308.

⁸⁹ In the tradition about Aesop, and especially in the version given by Vita G, NAGY (1979), p. 398 identified an ancient ritual pattern: the death of the blaming poet would thus lead to a permanent purification via his propitiation with a heroic cult. Nagy based this reconstruction on the interpretation of Aesop's death according to the φαρμακός pattern reconstructed by WIECHERS (1961).

However, many elements of this reconstruction are speculative and, in particular, the arguments pointing to an early date are rather weak. Leaving aside the age-old question of the historical reality of the First Sacred War,⁹⁰ the alleged references to this event in the *Life* are all but certain. Wiechers believed that Aesop was referring to an event of the First Sacred War when, in his abuses against the Delphians, he alludes to the practice of sending a tenth share of the spoils to Apollo whenever the Greeks take a city (126).⁹¹ According to our sources, this practice followed in the taking of the city of Crysa. However, references to this custom are not strictly limited to this episode: the threat of the Apolline tithing was present in the debate of the fifth and fourth centuries⁹² and, according to Kurke, it was used in the *Life* as a display of erudition to criticize the slavish behaviour of the Delphians, rather than being a specific reference to a historical event.⁹³ In any case, even if we consider this reference to the tithing as an element of the Aesopic tradition originating in a period when this practice was still the object of debate, and not simply a later erudite reference, we can date only the blaming conduct of Aesop to the Classical period, not the heroic cult.

The idea that the military invasion that punishes the Delphians at the end of the *Life* (142) could allude to the First Sacred War, and that, therefore, the episode of Aesop's death could be an *aition* of this historical event, as suggested by Wiechers and accepted by Nagy,⁹⁴ is not sure either. The expedition force comprises not only Greeks, but also by Lydians and Samians, who have no connection to this war.⁹⁵

More recently, the historicity of this heroic cult has been totally rejected by Leslie Kurke, who considers the account of Aesop's death to be a pastiche, or rather a parody, of the Neoptolemos myth. The latter is a product of the official Delphian culture, the former a popular criticism of this culture. The differences of genre, level, and style are reflected in a ritual difference: if we consider the *φαρμακός* and hero cult as two ends of a spectrum available to the Greeks for representing the possible outcome of a conflict involving a problematic figure, Neoptolemos could be said to represent the first, while Aesop represents the second. The idea of a cult to the fabulist would thus simply be a parodic appropriation of the honours paid to the son of Achilles.⁹⁶

However, as we have seen, Kurke's interpretation of Aesop's death as that of a competitive *φαρμακός* cannot be accepted, and the idea that this episode was simply a parodic critique of Delphian practices from the beginning is far from convincing.⁹⁷ In any case, if the biographies collected in *P.*

⁹⁰ The historicity of this war was first rejected by ROBERTSON (1978), since our sources are completely silent about this event down to the third quarter of the fourth century, that is, at the time of the Third Sacred War. This position has often been rejected as extreme (see, for example, HORNBLLOWER (1992), p. 177; MORGAN (2003), p. 124). However, Robertson's scepticism has been revived with more solid arguments by LONDEY (2015).

⁹¹ WIECHERS (1961), pp. 7–30. By recalling that this tenth included men and women too, Aesop alludes to the fact that the ancestors of the Delphians were also slaves sent as gifts to the god. In conclusion, according to Aesop, the Delphians are the slaves of all the Greeks.

⁹² PARKE (1948).

⁹³ KURKE (2011), p. 71. The reference to the ancient custom is strictly linked to the polysemic value of the word *ἀνελεύθεροι*, used by Aesop to criticize the Delphians. They are illiberal, since they offer Aesop no financial recompense, but they are also servile in the literal sense, and the Apolline tithing could justify this second meaning.

⁹⁴ WIECHERS (1961), pp. 22–25; NAGY (1979), pp. 283–284.

⁹⁵ Moreover, the military expedition contrasts with the logic implied by the function of the *aition* of the heroic cult ascribed to the tale by NAGY (1979), p. 308. According to this logic, the tribute paid to the hero by the Delphians must be the last consequence of Aesop's death, as a perennial purification that continues into the present. The invasion by foreign forces, however, reveals the inadequacy of the expiations imposed by the oracle.

⁹⁶ KURKE (2011), pp. 75–94; quote p. 76.

⁹⁷ KURKE, adopting the concept of the “hidden transcript” elaborated by SCOTT (1990), considers Aesop a tool available for every critique from below which generated resistance and attempts to domesticate in the philosophical, rhetorical, and educational structures (see KURKE (2011), pp. 11–12). Already in the Classical age, Aesop would express the tension between the civic and egalitarian values of the elitist practices and privileges of the Delphian institutions (especially pp. 58–60). However, we cannot ignore the arguments of LUZZATTO (1988), pp. 437–438, who shows how the parodic

Oxy. XV 1800 must be ascribed to an educational context, as its most recent last editors maintain,⁹⁸ it would mean that the most complete reference to the heroic cult dedicated to Aesop is offered by a text that has no interest in perpetuating the most critical and parodic elements of the traditions about the fabulist.⁹⁹

However, I agree with some of Kurke's arguments; in particular, she notes that, in contrast to Neoptolemos, the idea of a place of worship dedicated to Aesop is not found outside the biographical traditions relating to Aesop.¹⁰⁰ Even if the absence of historical evidence for a cult does not necessarily mean it did not exist,¹⁰¹ it invites us not to take for granted the early origins of an element found only in sources from the Imperial age. Only a new examination of the ancient sources can provide us with new arguments to try to establish the probability of a cult of Aesop and its antiquity.¹⁰²

2.3 *The Hero Cult of Aesop: The Ancient Sources*

The heroic cult in Delphi is explicitly attested only by two sources: the biography preserved in *P. Oxy.* XV 1800 and *Life W*. In the former, the description of the Delphians' actions is extensive and ends with an explicit reference to heroic sacrifices dedicated to Aesop,¹⁰³ while in the latter the cult is inferred from the fact that a temple is erected in his honour (ναοποιήσαντες οὖν ἔστησαν αὐτῷ στήλην *W* 142).¹⁰⁴ These two texts belong to different biographical traditions¹⁰⁵ and show important differences. For example, in the papyrus the Delphians' reproach of Aesop is linked to their proverbial avidity in the sacrifices, while in *Life W*, as in the other versions of the novel, it is their intention not to pay him for his performances. However, when the texts describe the institution of the heroic cult, they present an important lexical point of contact: the papyrus states that the god told the Delphians that the pestilence would not cease before they τὸ[ν Αἰσώπου ἐξι[λεώσῳ]νται,¹⁰⁶ while *Life W* (but also *G*) states that the Delphians received an oracle prescribing that they ἐξιλεώσασθαι τὸν Αἰσώπου μόρον. Among the other ancient sources, only the *Vulgata* tradition of Zenobius uses a similar expression.¹⁰⁷

elements in the *Life of Aesop* are completely absent from the accounts of Herodotus and Plutarch, who probably had access to official Delphic traditions. See also LUZZATTO (1996).

⁹⁸ See DE KREIJ and MACCARIELLO (2018) *FGrHist* 1139, *introduction* and DE KREIJ (2018), p. 42 with further bibliography.

⁹⁹ KURKE (2011) does not seem to grasp the difference between this biography and the *Life of Aesop*, to the point of stating that we have no evidence of the existence of a heroic cult of Aesop independent of the *Life* (p. 93). The survival of parodic and critical elements within the novel is justified, according to KURKE (2011), pp. 12, 38, on the basis of the particular origin of the work: the author of the *G* version of the *Life* would have been someone within the elite educational structure, but who felt himself oppressed in the official hierarchy and wanted to critique this institution. This context would have ensured that the long diachrony of traditions about Aesop, placed on the fringes of official culture, would eventually have been incorporated into a literary work. However, these arguments do not apply to *P. Oxy.* XV 1800, which was probably a text compiled for educational purposes.

¹⁰⁰ Even if *P. Oxy.* XV 1800 does not belong to the tradition of the *Life of Aesop*; KURKE (2011), p. 93. See *supra* n. 98.

¹⁰¹ We must take account of the lack of evidence as a probable explanation of the fact that so many heroes who come down to us in literary and other media have no attested cult; EKROTH (2007), p. 103.

¹⁰² For the text of the sources examined in the next paragraph see Appendix I.

¹⁰³ The papyrus uses the verb θύειν with the expression ὡς ἦρω; on this expression, see EKROTH (2002), pp. 197–199.

¹⁰⁴ In the papyrus we encounter a three-item progression (enclosure of the place, construction of the altar, and offering of sacrifices); see DE KREIJ and MACCARIELLO (2018), *FGrHist* 1139 F. 2 C. In the *Life W*, the last element is omitted and instead of a βωμός, they erected a στήλη.

¹⁰⁵ DE KREIJ and MACCARIELLO (2018), *FGrHist* 1139 F. 2 C l. 32. "*P. Oxy.* XV 1800 is the only papyrus fragment preserving a *bios* of Aesop that does not belong to the Romance tradition".

¹⁰⁶ This is the reading chosen by the last editors of the papyrus, who convincingly explain their preference over the option of reconstructing ἐξι[λάσ][κωντ]αι.

¹⁰⁷ Zen. 1.47: καὶ διὰ τὴν Πυθίαν φασὶν ἀνηρηκέναι αὐτοῖς ἰλάσκεσθαι τὸ ἐπὶ Αἰσώπου μύσος.

The use of the verb ἐξιλέομαι emphasizes the need to expiate guilt by appeasing a supernatural entity which, in the case of the biography preserved in *P. Oxy. XV 1800*, is Aesop himself (τὸ[ν Αἴσωπον ἐξι[λεώω]νται), conceived, therefore, as an active vengeful force.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, it is not a mere coincidence if this biography also provides us with the most detailed and articulate reference to the heroic cult paid to Aesop. The idea of a heroic cult instituted by a community to appease the anger of a man killed or wronged, as do the Delphians, is common to many tales,¹⁰⁹ and the verb ἰλάσκεσθαι is often used to indicate propitiatory sacrifices to heroes in similar situations.¹¹⁰ Even if the *Life W*, the other source that mentions the heroic cult, used the verb ἐξιλέομαι with an accusative of fault and not directly with Aesop (ἐξιλεώσασθαι τὸν Αἰσώπου μόνον), the use of the same verb seems to confirm that the authors knew the same or similar accounts in which Aesop acts as a typical vengeful force transformed into a hero and worshipped by his murders.

Scholars have not yet paid enough attention to how, from a lexical point of view, the extant sources can be divided into two branches. On the one hand, as we have seen, those that mention the cult employ the verb ἐξιλέομαι, whereas the others, with the exception of Herodotus, use the expression δίκην δίδοναι.¹¹¹ In this second branch the heroic cult is never mentioned and, as we will see, the logic of the account does not lead to such a cult as the conclusion of the story.

The expression δίκην δίδοναι, often used in legal contexts to mean the verdict of a court,¹¹² has a religious value too, especially in the account given by Plutarch in *De sera numinis vindicta* (556f–557b). This is a fictional dialogue about the nature of divine Providence set in Delphi whose second half discusses the transmission of divine punishment to the criminal's descendants. The punishment for Aesop's death opens the list of six examples cited by Timon as evidence of the iniquity of the concept of "ancestral fault".¹¹³ In this account, the Delphians killed Aesop because, following a dispute, he refused to give them money that Croesus had entrusted to him as a gift to the citizens of Delphi. Consequently, the god became furious (μῆνισαν) and struck them with all kinds of plagues.¹¹⁴ For this reason, they sent heralds to all the festivals of Greece, asking who would like to receive compensation for Aesop (ὕπερ Αἰσώπου δίκην λαβεῖν). Only in the third generation did Iadmon, a descendant of Aesop's master, present himself, and the Delphians were freed of their troubles after paying him the fee (δίκας δόντες). In this context, the expression δίκην δίδοναι probably indicates a financial compensation for the homicide, as emerges even more clearly in Herodotus.¹¹⁵ The Ionian historian mentions this episode in order to provide a chronological reference for Rhodopis and, especially, to demonstrate that Aesop, like her, had been a slave of Iadmon (2.134–135). When the Delphians, following the oracle's answer, sent heralds several times to find out who wanted compensation for Aesop's death (ποινήν τῆς Αἰσώπου ψυχῆς ἀνελέσθαι), only a certain Iadmon,

¹⁰⁸ If ἐξιλέω is followed by an accusative of person, this person is usually a god, a hero, a king, or a similar personality of relevance; in any case, it is always someone considered capable of acting, who must be propitiated or appeased; see s.v. DGE.

¹⁰⁹ See *infra*. In addition to the cases collected by VISSER (1982) and FONTENROSE (1968), we can note Orpheus (Cono 45), Actaeon (Paus. 9.38.5), and Cimon (Plu. *Cim.* 19.5). The encyclopaedic entries of DENEKEN (1886–1890), col. 2479 and EITREM (1912), coll. 116–118 are still indispensable for the amount of material they provide.

¹¹⁰ EKROTH (2002), pp. 197–198

¹¹¹ Plu. *Mor.* 556f–557a; Lib. 24.31; Him. 13,5–6.

¹¹² HARRISON (1971), p. 74. On the religious and symbolic values *infra*.

¹¹³ GAGNÉ (2013), pp. 40–41.

¹¹⁴ Timon wants to show the injustice of the divine action. Therefore, it is not strange that his account highlights the role of the god in punishing the Delphians.

¹¹⁵ In any case, the logic of the tale is not entirely clear, as we are led to believe that the recipient of the compensation should be Croesus, who sent Aesop as his representative (there is actually a similar case, in which the killers of some heralds try to repair their fault by sending an equal compensation to the ruler who had sent them). This fact could perhaps be explained by assuming that Croesus was already unable to receive the compensation, or that he did not accept it. However, it could also be an incongruity that reveals that the connection between the Delphic events and Aesop's service to Croesus is a secondary addition and therefore is not confirmed in Herodotus, the oldest source.

nephew of Aesop's master of the same name, responded. Herodotus does not mention the reasons why Aesop was killed by the Delphians.

It has been said that Herodotus' account reflects a long legal and financial process that had recently ended.¹¹⁶ However, a more complex story of divine wrath and punishment has been assumed on the basis of the parallel of one of the two further passages in which Herodotus uses the word *ποινή*.¹¹⁷ It refers to the wrath of Talthybios for the killing of the Persian ambassadors by the Spartans. The situation is similar: the text deals with a divine punishment that endures over a long period, and has an epilogue that affects the descendants of the guilty party (137.1–2), a fact that explains why ancestral fault is also spoken of here.¹¹⁸ The Spartans fail to obtain favourable answers from their sacrifices, as punishment, a situation that lasts for some time, until they too make a proclamation. This time, however, the aim is to find people willing to sacrifice themselves as compensation to be paid (*ποινήν τίσειν*) to the Persians. The nobles who offer themselves are sent to Xerxes, but he refuses to kill them and thus the Spartans are not freed from their guilt (*ἀπολύσειν Λακεδαιμονίους τῆς αἰτίας*).¹¹⁹

This parallel may lead us to believe that Herodotus already knew of the divine punishment, as suggested also by Plutarch's account and by the intervention of the oracle, but this does not mean that the tradition known by the historian coincides with that of the *Life* and much less that the *φαρμακός* pattern can be found in his text, as stated by Kurke. If, in the case of the rage of Talthybios, the term *ποινή* indicates a compensation that takes the form of reciprocal damage, in the case of Aesop it is sure that Herodotus means "blood-money".¹²⁰ This is a rather important difference. In the first case, the idea of a bloody ransom fits very well with the wrath of the victim. Violent punishment is normally what the dead demand, either directly or through other supernatural agents, gods included.¹²¹ In contrast, the offering of goods or money to Iadmon answers to a different logic that sees in the group of the victim, rather than in the deceased himself or in his divine representative, the subject to whom reparations are to be paid. A notable element of both Herodotus and Plutarch is the duration of the divine punishment, which is prolonged until the Delphians find someone who can be considered a representative of their victim's group. This is not easy, since Aesop was a foreigner and moreover a former slave. For this reason, in this version of the story there seems to be no space for the institution of a hero cult. The bilateral character recognized by Gernet¹²² at the origins of the expression *δίκην δίδοναι* itself seems to confirm that in this different tradition it is necessary to find a part that still represents the dead and not to reward the dead itself directly.

We might be tempted to ascribe these differences among our sources to two different chronological stages in the tradition about Aesop: in the earlier version the punishment imposed by the god, offended by the crime, is resolved without a direct appeal to the victim, while a heroic cult for Aesop is conceived only later. And, indeed, there are hints that the tradition presented by the Oxyrhynchus papyrus originated later than Herodotus: at the Hyampeian Rock, the place where

¹¹⁶ This is the expression used by LUZZATTO (1988), p. 429, who accepts the historicity of the event.

¹¹⁷ KURKE (2011), pp. 91–92

¹¹⁸ GAGNÉ (2013), pp. 296–306.

¹¹⁹ A similar significance of *ποινή* is also found in a fragment of Pindar (fr. 133), where the idea of Persephone accepting the *ποινήν παλαιοῦ πένθεος* has been considered a reference to an atonement for the primordial murder of her son Dionysos. In this case the ancestral fault is common to the whole of humanity, according to a concept shared by some Orphic gold leaves; see GAGNÉ (2013), pp. 459–460.

¹²⁰ "Blood-money" is the translation suggested by POWELL (1960), p. 311. Already in Homer the word *ποινή* can imply a reciprocal damage or can be paid in the form of prestige goods; in this case it must be paid to the victim himself or, more usually, to his φίλοι. See WILSON (1999), p. 139.

¹²¹ According to JOHNSTON (1999), pp. 140–141, the idea that the dead man takes his revenge not directly but through other supernatural agents is the oldest, and the only one known to Homer. In the Classical age, the two ideas coexisted; see JOHNSTON (1999), p. 143.

¹²² GERNET (1917), pp. 459–462; GERNET (2000), pp. 60–61.

according to the papyrus the altar for Aesop was built, Herodotus places the temenos of Autoonoo, a Delphic hero (8.39).¹²³ In this sense, it is possible that this altar was attributed to Aesop only later, once the legend about his heroic cult had developed.

In any case, we must be careful about determining a stratification of tradition when there is so little information prior to the Hellenistic period. If even the heroic cult as it appears in the papyrus may seem to be a post-Herodotean innovation, it must have arisen not long after the historian. A careful analysis of the ancient sources alluding to Aesop's return from the dead will allow us to see that, in fact, it is possible that at the end of the Classical age a tale was already circulating in which Aesop acted like other vengeful heroes. Thus, the presence of two parallel and coexisting traditions cannot be excluded.

3 Aesop *redivivus*

Many scholars have collected scattered references that, from the Classical to the Imperial age, allude to a kind of second life enjoyed by Aesop after his death at Delphi. In many cases, they have neglected the important differences among these pieces of evidence, which has led them to argue that they all point to a general concept of resurrection,¹²⁴ sometimes assumed to be an element of the *φαρμακός* pattern¹²⁵ or a true apotheosis.¹²⁶ In this sense, the extant evidence has not been evaluated with due attention. Specifically, the question of whether the references to this second life agree with hero worship, as has often been taken for granted, is instead an issue that deserves reflection. As we will see, the differences between our sources are very important and emerge clearly if one considers that the earliest versions speak explicitly of the fate of the soul separated from the body, while the later ones seem to imply a real return to corporeal life, presenting Aesop in a way comparable with other mythological accounts of resurrection.

The most important piece of evidence is given by a fragment of a comic dialogue. According to a scholium on Aristophanes (*Av.* 471) and the *Suda* (alphaiota, 335), Plato Comicus said that Aesop came back to life (*ἀναβιῶναι*) and quoted a passage supporting this statement, although in fact its interpretation is rather problematic. The division of the speech between two characters is not given by the scholiast, but the reconstruction proposed by Cobet is followed in the most recent editions:

Character A

καὶ μὴν ὄμοσόν μοι μὴ τεθνάναι.

Character B

¹²³ See DE KREIJ and MACCARIELLO (2018), *FGrHist* 1139 F. 2 C. l. 29–34.

¹²⁴ See, for example, LA PENNA (1962), pp. 296–297.

¹²⁵ COMPTON (2006), pp. 9, 16, 18 assumed resurrection to be an element of the *φαρμακός* since it was ascribed to Androgeos by Propertius. According to the Roman poet, Minos' son was restored to life by Asklepios on Crete with Cressian herbs (2.1.62–63). However, I have shown that Androgeos cannot be considered a *φαρμακός*. WIECHERS (1961), pp. 40–41 compares Aesop's resurrection with the bull sacrificed and later "restored" in the Bouphonia. In this sense, Aesop's account would be an aetiology of the Thargelia. However, the connection with the Bouphonia and the Thargelia is not generally accepted. Resurrection was considered by ADRADOS (1979), p. 110 as a coincident theme already present in the *aition* of the Delphic *φαρμακός* and in the *Life of Ahikar*. In any case, Ahikar's apparent death has its exact parallel in Babylonian part of the *Life* more than in the Delphian tale. Although near-eastern parallels have also been found for the Delphic section of Aesop's biography (see GROTTANELLI (1987), pp. 18–26), this part has no clear counterpart in the eastern model of the *Life of Ahikar*. It is worth noting that ADRADOS juxtaposes Aesop's death with Near Eastern tales of deities whose death is followed by a period of famine and drought until their resurrection the following year. However, this annual pattern is not reflected in Aesop's case.

¹²⁶ JEDRKIEWICZ (1989), p. 99.

τὸ σῶμ' ἐγώ,
ψυχὴν δ' ἐπανάκειν ὥσπερ Αἰσώπου ποτέ.¹²⁷

According to this reconstruction, the first character, probably surprised to see someone he thought dead, asks this person to swear him that he is not dead, so that the second character answers that, actually, his body is dead but his soul has come back, as once did the soul of Aesop. Scholars have interpreted the passage as talking about the resurrection of a man from the underworld and in this context Plato's work has been compared to Aristophanes' *Frogs*.¹²⁸ However, if we accept Cobet's division of the dialogue, it is clear that Plato is playing with the idea of a distinction between body and soul. The possible meaning of this distinction has been construed as a parody of the doctrine of the resurrection of the soul.¹²⁹ As we will see, this interpretation is not a perfect fit for the context of the dialogue, but for the moment it is enough to say that the situation described in the dialogue, which must have resembled one attributed to Aesop by some tradition unknown to us, is not a physical resurrection. The dialogue does not state that the body was dead before the soul came back to life. On the contrary, the use of the perfect *τεθνάναι* clearly indicates that the body is believed to remain dead at the moment in which the dialogue is taking place, and that therefore the soul has returned separately from it. The apparition of a soul without a body is something very different from the way in which resurrection is normally represented in ancient sources: as shown by Johnston, the ancient Greeks did not problematize the way in which a dead person could come back to life in myth: they assumed that he or she simply regained unchanged his or her physical situation prior to death.¹³⁰ Therefore, this fragment does not legitimize the simple hypothesis of a return to life after Aesop's death; it seems to allude to something different. Before investigating its meaning, however, it is necessary to examine carefully the value of the testimony of later sources that do seem to speak about real, physical resurrection, and that have often biased the interpretation of the fragment of Plato Comicus.

Both the sources transmitting the fragment of Plato Comicus and the others collected by scholars as evidence of Aesop living a second life use the verb *ἀναβιῶναι*. And it is perhaps this verb, rather than the actual content of the comic passage, that led many scholars to believe that there was a tradition about Aesop's resurrection. However, this interpretation underestimates the diversity of uses of this verb, which could allude not only to physical resurrection but, as we will see, also to revenants or apparitions.¹³¹ It is, therefore, necessary to carefully examine these sources, all of which are relatively late, to see whether they actually refer to a tradition in which Aesop came fully back to life after death.

The first piece of evidence is provided by Photius' summary of Ptolemy Chennos (*apud Phot. Bibl.* 152 b11).¹³² According to Photius, Aesop, killed by the Delphians, came back to life and fought alongside the Greeks at Thermopylae. This anecdote has a clear heroic tone and can be compared to many stories about supernatural apparitions on historical battlefields.¹³³ Even if the verb used is *ἀναβιῶναι*, as in later sources, the idea of resurrection is extraneous to the traditions about supernatural aid on the battlefield. In these cases, the heroes or the gods simply appear, often as *φάσματα*, and disappear after the battle, even if their presence is sufficiently physical that they are

¹²⁷ See PIRROTTA (2009), pp. 169–170 with further references.

¹²⁸ PIRROTTA (2009), pp. 162–163, 168.

¹²⁹ This thesis is defended by PIRROTTA (2009), p. 170 *contra* BURKERT (1972), pp. 152, 176.

¹³⁰ JOHNSTON (2017). According to JOHNSTON, the problematic nature and fear of the resurrection of a corpse is alien to this culture, originating with Christianity.

¹³¹ STRAMAGLIA (1999), p. 59; see *infra*.

¹³² Ὡς Αἰσώπος ἀναίρεθεις ὑπὸ Δελφῶν ἀνεβίωσε, καὶ συνεμάχησε τοῖς Ἑλλήσι περὶ Θερμοπύλας.

¹³³ On the apparitions of heroes on battlefields, see PRITCHETT (1974), pp. 11–48 and STRAMAGLIA (1999), p. 345 n. 22 for further bibliography. On the heroization of the fallen in battle see BREMMER (2006), 21–26.

able to hurt or kill their enemies.¹³⁴ It is therefore quite likely that, in Ptolemy's account, Aesop comes back to life, not in the same human condition he had before his death, but as an apparition that intervenes before the battle and probably disappears immediately afterwards. Regardless of the meaning we might want to attribute to his return to life, the episode is probably an invention of Ptolemy, and therefore it cannot be simply considered an authentic piece of evidence about the Aesopic tradition.¹³⁵ Ptolemy, active under the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, was a notorious forger and transmitter of bogus quotations.¹³⁶ In recent years, our understanding of this author has made progress, and scholars have appreciated the ironic erudite tone of his work,¹³⁷ a characteristic that probably also defines this odd text about Aesop.

The tale is inserted among some mythological stories not attested elsewhere, which comprised the rapid summary of Ptolemy's sixth book given by Photius. In this section, Ptolemy constructs an otherwise unattested version of the myth by playing with the identities and the names of the characters in a well-known story, as is revealed especially by the account that precedes the reference to Aesop.¹³⁸ he changes some important details about the story of the golden wine given by Zeus to the royal Trojan family, with the paradoxical result that the place of Ganymede, the eternal ephebe beloved of Zeus, is taken by Priam, known from ancient epic as an aged patriarch, father of an extraordinary number of children, and that Eurypylos accepts the gift that causes his death.¹³⁹

A similar transformation of the tradition can also explain the anecdote of Aesop's resurrection. From Pausanias (1.4.4, 10.23.3) we know about four heroes fighting to defend Delphi during the invasion of the Gauls: Phylakos, who had already saved the oracle during the Persian War, Hyperochos, Laodokos, and Pyrrhos/Neoptolemos. The latter, as we have seen, has many points of contact with Aesop, since he too was killed by the Delphians.¹⁴⁰ In playing with these parallels, I believe Ptolemy humorously evokes the sudden apparitions of heroes summoned from their abode to help the Greeks defend their most important sanctuaries, by ascribing a similar role to a character traditionally depicted as deformed.¹⁴¹

Given the likely comic nature of this testimony, we can state that scholars have accepted this isolated and odd information too literally. However, it is not without interest. If the interpretation I propose here of how Ptolemy constructed this unusual tale is correct, it means that the points of contact between Aesop and Pyrrhos were already marked and, therefore, he probably knew a version

¹³⁴ See, for example, Cono 18 (Ajax, as φάσμα, inflicts a wound on Autoleon); Hdt. 8.38–39 (Phylakos and Autoonos are seen pursuing and killing the Persians in their attack against Delphi).

¹³⁵ A further reason for suspicion is the fact that this is the only extant reference to a supernatural intervention in a battle fought at Thermopylae. We cannot ascertain to which battle Ptolemy refers. He may have in mind the Gallic invasion of 279 BC, rather than the Persian Wars, since, as we will see, sources mention more heroes who fought to defend the oracle from the barbarians on this occasion.

¹³⁶ CAMERON (2004), pp. 134–159 with further bibliography.

¹³⁷ See HOSE (2008) and HARTLEY (2014), pp. 86–87; *passim*.

¹³⁸ Irony is also evident in the fourth tale: according to Ptolemy, the story of the dispute over the golden apple is a fable originating from a “real” myth in which Athena and Aphrodite compete for the beautiful son of Scamander, called Apple (Μήλοϛ). The goddesses wanted to have him as their priest and Paris chose to assign him to Aphrodite. It is more difficult to reconstruct Ptolemy's work on Philoctetes' myth in the third account. Ptolemy introduces a certain Pylios, son of Hephaistos, who heals Philoctetes and teaches him to use the bow. In the first case, he takes the role normally ascribed to Makaon and Podaleirius, sons of Asklepios, while in the second he plays a role comparable to Herakles, from whom Philoctetes receives his bow according to a well-known myth. In this sense, it may not be a mere coincidence that Pylios is also the name of the Eleusine said to have initiated Herakles himself into the mysteries (Plu. *Thes.* 33; Schol. Hom. *Il.* 8.368).

¹³⁹ In the *Nekuia*, Odysseus tells Achilles that Eurypylos, and many Ceteans, perished because of “womanly gifts” (*Od.* 11.519–521). The scholium to this passage ascribes to Akousilaos an account that explains this obscure reference, according to which it is not Eurypylos, but his mother, who treacherously accepts the gift of the golden wine, in exchange for her son's participation in the war.

¹⁴⁰ See n. 28.

¹⁴¹ See n. 36.

of Aesop's death similar to that preserved in *P. Oxy.* XV 1800, which closely resembles the fate of Achilles' son Neoptolemos.

The other reference to a physical resurrection of Aesop is given by a note transmitted by the *Suda* (alpha, 1806)¹⁴² and the *Vulgata* tradition¹⁴³ of Zenobius (1.47).¹⁴⁴ According to this piece of evidence, some people said that Aesop was so beloved by the gods (θεοφιλή γενέσθαι *Suda*; θεοφιλῆς ἐγένετο Zen.) to come back to life (ἀναβιῶναι), just as Tyndareos and Herakles and Glaukos were.¹⁴⁵ The editors of Aelian's fragments ascribed this text preserved by the *Suda* to the Roman rhetor (fr. 204a Domingo-Forasté), but no argument is provided to legitimize this hypothesis and, furthermore, Aelian is never explicitly quoted in the entries of the lexicon related to Aesop.¹⁴⁶ The examples cited by the *Suda* probably indicate that the verb ἀναβιῶναι is used with a rather broad meaning: Glaukos and Tyndareos are well-known examples of physical resurrection,¹⁴⁷ but it is difficult to say the same of Herakles. Actually, the so-called Tyrian Herakles, a specific epiclesis of the hero-god with which the Greeks identified the Phoenician Melqart,¹⁴⁸ was credited by Eudoxus with a physical resurrection, but it is very unlikely that the *Suda* could be alluding to the same myth as Eudoxus:¹⁴⁹ the traditions about the original Greek hero do not imply a resurrection in a literal sense, but rather point to an apotheosis.¹⁵⁰

Anyway, in the case of Aesop the verb ἀναβιῶναι is directly associated with the fragment of Plato by the entries of the *Suda* (alpha, 1806; alphaiota, 335) and the scholium to Aristophanes (*Av.* 471)¹⁵¹ and, in this sense, this unique piece of evidence seems to be the origin of all these later notes. If they are actually alluding to a physical resurrection of Aesop, which is not necessarily implied by the use of the verb ἀναβιῶναι,¹⁵² one would have to assume a misinterpretation of Plato Comicus'

¹⁴² Ἀναβιῶναι: ἀναζῆσαι. ἤδη δὲ τινὲς φασιν, ὡς τοσοῦτον ἄρα τὸν Αἰσωπὸν θεοφιλῆ γενέσθαι, ὡς καὶ ἀναβιῶναι αὐτὸν, καθάπερ οὖν τὸν Τυνδάρεων καὶ τὸν Ἡρακλέα καὶ τὸν Γλαῦκον. καὶ Πλάτων φησὶν ὁ κωμικός: καὶ νῦν ὁμοσόν μοι μὴ τεθνάναι τὸ σῶμ' ἐγώ, ψυχὴν δ' ἐπανήκειν ὡσπερ Αἰσώπου ποτέ.

¹⁴³ The reference to Aesop's rebirth is absent from the *Recensio Athoa*, which is closer to the original, and it was probably a detail added to the original explanation of the proverb given by Zenobius at a later stage. The reference to the resurrection is added at the end of the note in a way (οὕτω γάρ) that seems to betray a different origin from the rest of the material; see KURKE (2011), p. 190.

¹⁴⁴ Οὕτω γάρ θεοφιλῆς ἐγένετο ὁ Αἰσωπος, ὡς μυθεῖται αὐτὸν ἀναβιῶναι ὡς Τυνδάρεων καὶ Ἡρακλῆν καὶ Γλαῦκον.

¹⁴⁵ The *Suda* repeats the same words at the end of the brief biography of Aesop (alphaiota, 335), where the lexicographer also quotes the passage of Plato Comicus. It expresses the same concept under the headword Ζῆσαι: Ζῆσαι δις λέγουσι καὶ ἀναβιῶναι τὸν Ἡρακλέα, τὸν Τυνδάρεων καὶ τὸν Γλαῦκον, τινὲς δὲ καὶ τὸν Αἰσωπὸν (zeta, 87).

¹⁴⁶ Aelian is surely an important source for the *Suda*; however, DOMINGO-FORASTÉ (1994) has been criticized for following HERCHER (1866) too far in ascribing to Aelian many anonymous entries; see NESSELRATH (1995).

¹⁴⁷ The two heroes are recorded among the mortals restored to life by Asklepios (Sch. P. P. 3.96), even if Glaukos is normally said to have been resurrected by Polyidos (Apollod. 3.3.1 [18]).

¹⁴⁸ According to a story ascribed to Eudoxus (fr. 284), Iolaos restored Herakles to life thanks to the delicious odour of quail meat, a meal very much appreciated by the hero. This story is generally considered a myth that reflects Phoenician myths and rites concerning Melqart, a typical dying god; see COOK (2018), pp. 124–132.

¹⁴⁹ The account of Eudoxus, mentioned by the entry of the *Vulgata* version of Zenobius (5.56), explicitly distinguishes the hero resurrected by Iolaos from the Greek Herakles. Athenaeus (9.392DE) and Eustathius (ad. *Od.* 11.600), who record Eudoxus' account too, identify this Herakles as the son of Zeus and Asteria, not the son of Alcmena. In contrast, the entry about Aesop's resurrection simply mentions Herakles without any epiclesis and, therefore, probably refers to the son of Alcmena and his apotheosis. Already Arrianus distinguished three different Herakles: the son of Alcmena, the Tyrian, and the Egyptian (*An.* 2.16).

¹⁵⁰ See BURGESS (2009), pp. 102–103.

¹⁵¹ οὐδ' Αἰσωπὸν πεπάτηκας: Ὅτι τὸν λογοποιὸν Αἰσωπὸν διὰ σπουδῆς εἶχον. ἦν δὲ ὁ Αἰσωπος Θράξ. ἠλευθερώθη δὲ ὑπὸ Ἴδμονος τοῦ κωφοῦ. ἐγένετο δὲ πρῶτον Ξάνθου δοῦλος. ὁ δὲ κωμικός Πλάτων καὶ ἀναβιῶσαι φησὶν αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς Λάκωσιν οὕτως καὶ νῦν ὁμοσόν μοι μὴ τεθνάναι τὸ σῶμ' ἐγώ, ψυχὴν δ' ἐπανήκειν ὡσπερ Αἰσώπου ποτέ.

¹⁵² ἀναβιῶναι could mean a real resurrection, but could also indicate a revenant; see STRAMAGLIA (1999), pp. 59–60 and *infra*.

dialogue, as said above.¹⁵³ Therefore, the interpretation of this comic fragment is fundamental to understanding how Aesop's return from the dead should be originally conceived.¹⁵⁴

3.1 Aesop the Thracian?

As we have seen, the situation alluded to in the aforementioned comic dialogue implies a clear distinction between Aesop's soul, which has returned to life, and his body, which remains dead. This distinction has generally been interpreted as a comic allusion to the religious ideas associated with Pythagoras, also mocked in other passages of ancient comedy, and in particular to the belief in metempsychosis.¹⁵⁵ Aesop is actually associated with metempsychosis in a passage of the Plutarchian *Life of Solon*. Plutarch mentions not only his direct source of an anecdote about the encounter between Solon and Thales, the biographer Hermippos,¹⁵⁶ but also the latter's own informant, a certain Pataikos, otherwise unknown. According to Hermippos, this Pataikos claimed to have Aesop's soul in him (ἔφρασκε τὴν Αἰσώπου ψυχὴν ἔχειν).¹⁵⁷ Even if the value of this text has been questioned, there is no serious reason to dismiss it.¹⁵⁸ The unusual statement was probably intended to boost the credibility of the anecdote, since Aesop was closely associated with Solon and the seven sages, but we cannot know how seriously Hermippos and Plutarch took such a statement, even if the latter accepted the Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis.¹⁵⁹ In any case, the fact that an author chronologically close to Plato Comicus¹⁶⁰ could boast of possessing Aesop's soul provides confirmation of how the latter could be associated with such religious beliefs.

Perhaps one element that can justify this association is the origins that some sources attribute to Aesop. The most widespread version is that Aesop was of Phrygian origin; another is attested that considers him a Thracian. This geographical origin appears in the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Samians*, as preserved in the excerpts of the Aristotelian Constitutions written by Herakleides Lembos (F611.33 Rose).¹⁶¹ In addition, according to the *Suda*, Εὐγγείτων mentioned him as coming from the Thracian city of Mesembria (alphaiota, 335). The name of this otherwise unknown author has been

¹⁵³ Already BOLLANSÉE (1999) (BNJ 1026 F 17) recognized that the idea of a physical resurrection is a later interpretation of previous tradition. See also COOK (2018), p. 172. It is possible that this misunderstanding dates back to imperial age, if we accept the interpretation given by ANDREASSI (2001), 224-225 of the last sentence of the mime *Moicheutria*. Spinther, a slave, states that Aesop and Apollonia, previously said to be dead, are alive. Spinther states that Aesop and Apollonia, previously said to be dead, are alive. The context is, however, quite different. The story of the mime is inspired by Aesop's character and his biography, but it is also completely original. The fable-maker here is killed by Apollonia herself for refusing her advances, and we do not know whether this sentence is an actual allusion to an existing tradition of Aesop's resurrection or whether it is another innovation to give the story a happy ending.

¹⁵⁴ Apart from the references already examined, other allusions to a second life of Aesop have been identified in a passage from Plutarch's the *Life of Theseus*, which we will examine later, and, in the the *Suda* which mentions two books written by Aesop on the things that happened to him at Delphi (alpha-iota, 334). CHAMBRY (1927), pp. xvii-xviii, followed by BOLLANSÉE (1999): *FGrHis* 1026, F. 17, states that this odd information can be understood only if we accept that Aesop lived twice, and indeed could write about his first death. However, a similar work is not attested elsewhere, and the author of the *Suda* is not free from error in reporting the titles of literary works. In

¹⁵⁵ See n. 129.

¹⁵⁶ Hermippos is the author of many biographies, some of which have been distributed into different groups. The editor considers this fragment to be derived from the *Περὶ τῶν ἐπτὰ σοφῶν*; see BOLLANSÉE (1999): *FGrHist* 1026, F. 17.

¹⁵⁷ ταῦτα μὲν οὖν Ἑρμιππος ἱστορεῖν φησι Πάταικον, ὃς ἔφρασκε τὴν Αἰσώπου ψυχὴν ἔχειν.

¹⁵⁸ Pataikos has been considered a fictitious author, invented by Hermippos as an allusion to the deformed nature of Aesop: the Pataikoi were Phoenician images, well known to the Greeks, depicting deformed figures of dwarfish shape. However, Pataikos is attested as a normal anthroponym at least since the third century BC. Furthermore, a Callimachean scholar such as Hermippos can hardly be suspected of being a creator of bogus references; see BOLLANSÉE (1999), BNJ 1026 F 17.

¹⁵⁹ See AGUILAR FERNÁNDEZ (2011).

¹⁶⁰ Pataikos must be an author dated at least to the fourth or third century BC, since Hermippos was active in the third century.

¹⁶¹ LA PENNA (1962), pp. 273-274.

considered a corruption of Εὐάγων of Samos, a historian who lived before the Peloponnesian War and was probably one of the sources used by Aristotle for his work about the Samians.¹⁶² According to this reconstruction, the idea of Aesop's Thracian origins was already attested when Plato Comicus composed his comedy.¹⁶³

We know of another famous Thracian who was said to have been a slave on Samos: according to Herodotus (7.3.11), the Greeks of the Hellespont and of the Black Sea told that Zalmoxis had been a slave of Pythagoras of Samos before returning to his homeland.¹⁶⁴ It is not my intention to establish a parallel between this figure and Aesop; rather the reference to Zalmoxis serves as an indication of the kinds of religious representations that could be attributed to the Thracian world. The reduction of Zalmoxis to a human being, educated by Pythagoras, is presented by Herodotus as a result of the *interpretatio Graeca*,¹⁶⁵ while the Getae of Thrace considered him a god.¹⁶⁶ This *interpretatio* is interesting for us as it shows how, to the Greeks, this figure must have recalled the religious perspectives attributed to Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans.¹⁶⁷ One element that must have played a major role in associating Zalmoxis and Pythagoras is the belief in the immortality of the soul.¹⁶⁸ This is often seen as a belief shared by the Thracians, as already acknowledged by Herodotus (4.94). There is no consensus among the sources on how this immortality was conceived, though many of them speak of a journey to another blissful place, in the company of the gods,¹⁶⁹ and there is no decisive evidence that the Thracians believed in metempsychosis.¹⁷⁰ In any case, the similarity between their religious beliefs and the Pythagorean ones could explain the ascription of metempsychosis to a sage of Thracian origin and, in this sense, it can offer an additional argument for understanding the claim made by Pataikos.

Pythagorean and Thracian beliefs do not, however, present a good fit for the fragment of Plato Comicus. The situation described in the dialogue is not a case of metempsychosis. In the comic scene, as reconstructed by Cobet, someone sees a person he thought was dead and does not believe his eyes, thinking that he is being deceived by a vacuous image.¹⁷¹ However, if the first speaker believes that he is seeing a dead man, it is because he can identify certain features of his physical appearance, which would be impossible if the soul was reincarnated in another body, as in metempsychosis. On the contrary, there is an idea already present in Homer that continues at least until Plutarch, that the ψυχὰι of the dead are considered to retain sufficient traits of their previous appearance to allow their

¹⁶² The author named by the *Suda* is identified with Euagon of Samos without any doubt by his last editor: BERTELLI (2007): *BNJ* 535, F. 3.

¹⁶³ The Thracian origins have sometimes been considered an erroneous inference from Herodotus, who considered Rhodopis to be Thracian; see ZEITZ (1936), p. 299 n. 2, but there are no decisive reasons to dismiss this detail.

¹⁶⁴ Strabo considered him Pythagoras' slave too (7.3.5), while other sources made him a disciple of the philosopher; see Clem. Al. *Strom.* 4.8.58; Iambl. *VP* 104. For a comprehensive survey of ancient sources on Zalmoxis, see TAUFER (2008).

¹⁶⁵ See TAUFER (2008), pp. 140–141.

¹⁶⁶ It is not my intention to investigate the extent to which Greek traditions can help us to understand the religious practices of the Thracian peoples. Some scholars still refer to the interpretation of Zalmoxis tales and of the Thracian religion under the category of shamanism (DODDS (1951), pp. 146–147), despite Bremmer's decisive criticism (BREMNER (1983), pp. 27–40). Eliade's reading from an initiatory and mystery angle (ELIADE (1970), pp. 31–80) has also been the subject of a pointed critique, from DANA (2007), pp. 100–104.

¹⁶⁷ The reciprocal influence between the legends of Zalmoxis and Pythagoras has been observed in the accounts of disappearance and reappearance attributed to both of them. For the idea that the story of Zalmoxis could have been built upon a previous tradition about Pythagoras' katabasis, see BURKERT (1972), pp. 158–161 and SANTAMARÍA ÁLVAREZ (2016), p. 37; *contra* ZHMUD (2016), pp. 450–451.

¹⁶⁸ On the idea that he learned of the immortality of the soul from Pythagoras, see Hdt. 4.95; Iambl. *VP* 30.173; Phot. *Lexicon* s.v. Zalmoxis; see ZHMUD (2016), p. 451.

¹⁶⁹ Hdt. 4.94.

¹⁷⁰ See MARTÍN HERNÁNDEZ and ÁLVAREZ PEDROSA (2011). According to Pomponius Mela (2.18), some of the Getae *redituras putant animas obeuntium*. This could be seen as a reference to metempsychosis, but it cannot be ruled out that perhaps these souls simply had to return to their previous bodies.

¹⁷¹ COBET (1840), p. 95. His reconstruction was accepted by the last editors; see PIRROTTA (2009), pp. 169–170.

recognition.¹⁷² The situation described by Plato Comicus must therefore be that of the apparition of a soul without a body, and not of a soul in a new body.

This leaves us with two options: either to suppose that the comedian deliberately distorted ideas about the immortality of the soul and its separation from the body to create a paradoxical situation in which a man comes back to life while his body remains dead. In this case, Aesop would only be cited as an example, not because there was a tradition in which he actually came back to life in this unusual way, but because he too was associated with theories such as metempsychosis. His Thracian origins could be a clue: they could be the cause or, on the contrary, the consequence of such an association. Aesop might have been considered a Thracian, rather than a Phrygian, by some sources because it fit better certain traditions that recalled an extraordinary post-mortem experience. Or perhaps, as a Thracian sage, he would have assumed the characteristics of the *interpretatio Graeca* of that kind of wisdom.

This explanation is not fully convincing, and does not help us to understand what is actually going on in the comic scene. What entity has the first speaker encountered? Taking literally what is stated in the dialogue and trying to understand the significance of a returning soul whose the body remains dead, is the best choice left to us.

3.2 *The Ghost of Aesop*

As has been shown above, the situation represented in the comedy does not correspond to a physical resurrection, or to metempsychosis. In my opinion, the distinction between the state of death, in which the body remains, and that of the soul, which is alive, can only indicate the apparition of a ghost. Indeed, a remarkable parallel has been pointed out between this comic fragment and one of the ghost stories transmitted by Phlegon of Tralles (2):¹⁷³ nine months after his death, Polykritos appeared in the middle of an assembly of the Aetolians, who were deciding the fate of his monstrous androgynous son, born to his Locrian bride. To reassure the crowd, Polykritos claims to remain dead in body (τῷ σώματι τέθνηκα 2.6; observe the use of perfect), but to be alive because of the benevolence he feels towards the Aetolians. The same distinction between the death of the body and the life of the soul is taken up again later in the story, in the prophecy uttered by the head of the devoured child.¹⁷⁴ Polykritos himself explains what kind of “presence” he is: he has not been resurrected, at least not in the sense in which we understand resurrection, but he has the permission of the underworld gods to be present at the assembly, even if only for a limited time. It is a presence endowed with that “incorporeal corporeity” often characteristic of “revenants”,¹⁷⁵ whereby, on the one hand, it devours the flesh of its son, but on the other is immune to the stones thrown by those present and suddenly vanishes. For all these reasons, there is no doubt that Polykritos is an example of how the ancients conceived of ghosts. However, it is remarkable that Proclus should use the verb ἀναβιῶναι (*in R*, 2.115) to describe the appearance of Polykritos in the assembly, exactly like the sources reporting the fragment of Plato Comicus.

What little information we can glean from this comic fragment does not contradict the idea of the apparition of a ghost. Firstly, the term ψυχή was commonly used to indicate the apparition of a ghost, at least until the fourth century.¹⁷⁶ As noted above, such entities normally bear a remarkable

¹⁷² See JOHNSTON (2017), p. 29; the persistence of this idea has been highlighted by AGUILAR FERNÁNDEZ (2011), pp. 312–313.

¹⁷³ STRAMAGLIA (1999), p. 379.

¹⁷⁴ See BRISSON (1978), p. 120.

¹⁷⁵ STRAMAGLIA (1999), p. 377; also pp. 42–43.

¹⁷⁶ See STRAMAGLIA (1999), p. 29; VERMEULE (1979), p. 212 n. 12 with further bibliography.

resemblance to their former living appearance and, therefore, can be recognized.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, although they are sometimes considered to be mute or to emit an inarticulate screech, in many cases they are able to converse with the living, although their voice is often particularly faint or, on the contrary, deep.¹⁷⁸ The appearance of a ghost, true or false,¹⁷⁹ is also a fairly common theme in classical comedy¹⁸⁰ and, for all these reasons, it is quite likely that the dialogue preserved in the Plato Comicus fragment involves an encounter between a character and the ghost of a deceased person known to him. The fact that the latter compares himself to Aesop seems to indicate the existence of a tradition that attributed such an apparition to the fabulist too.

In fact, Aesop fulfils many of the prerequisites for becoming a revenant: the way he is killed by the Delphians places him within both the group of the βαιοθάνατοι¹⁸¹ and that of the ἄταφοι,¹⁸² two of the conditions that make it possible for a dead person to visit the living.¹⁸³ Thus, if we want to look for a context in which Aesop could appear as a ghost, the events following his death are perfect. His ghost could return to punish his murderers, rather than simply to ask for a burial. Normally, the power of ghosts is rather limited; they only act upon people, causing terror or madness.¹⁸⁴ But the same does not apply to heroes, who after death possess a power greater than the ordinary dead. Cases of heroes as revenants have been collected by scholars¹⁸⁵ and their mode of action can vary greatly. Some have comparable effects to those caused by Aesop's death, provoking famine and diseases.¹⁸⁶ Consider in particular the case of Actaeon who, as a ghost (εἶδωλον), damaged the land (λυμαίνεσθαι τὴν γῆν) of the Orcomenes by carrying a rock. Here, the intervention of the oracle is necessary and the story ends with a heroic cult (Paus. 9.38.5).

It can therefore be assumed that in the case of Aesop, too, the spirit of the dead was imagined as an active agent working, together with divine wrath, to punish the Delphians. This explains why some sources insist on the need to appease his wrath. If we accept this interpretation, the references to Aesop's return to life must be explained in a very different way from previous scholars. It is not a matter of the privilege of a real second life, a fact often related to a supposed recurrent structure of the φαρμακός model. In my opinion, Aesop's death should instead be traced back to a rather widespread type of tale, in which the action of a vengeful hero, who in some cases can take the form of a revenant, inflicts disastrous phenomena, such as epidemics and diseases, on those who have done him wrong; requires the intervention of an oracle; and ends with the establishment of a heroic cult.¹⁸⁷ In this sense, it is probable that this heroic cult was already known in the late Classical age.

¹⁷⁷ See n. 172.

¹⁷⁸ STRAMAGLIA (1995).

¹⁷⁹ For the purposes of my analysis, it is unimportant whether the apparition is genuinely supernatural or, on the contrary, someone is pretending to be a ghost.

¹⁸⁰ See FELTON (1999), pp. xiii–xiv.

¹⁸¹ Even in the law of the classical age there are clear traces of the idea of the victim as a source of revenge; see GERNET (1968), pp. 207–227; TADDEI (2017).

¹⁸² In the *Life of Aesop* (G 132), the Delphians explicitly state that his condemnation to death by means of being thrown off a cliff is intended precisely to deprive Aesop of burial.

¹⁸³ The division of the “revenants” into the three categories of ἄταφοι, ἄωροι, and βαιοθάνατοι is constantly repeated in the various discussions dealing with the issue. See, for example, JOHNSTON (1999), pp. 127–128; FELTON (1999), p. 25 and STRAMAGLIA (1999), pp. 8–12, especially 9 n. 4 with further bibliography.

¹⁸⁴ JOHNSTON (1999), pp. 144–148.

¹⁸⁵ EITREM (1912), coll. 116–118; BRELICH (1958), pp. 226–232; VISENTIN (1992), pp. 75–107. See also NILSSON (1967), pp. 182–184.

¹⁸⁶ Heroes sending plagues or famine: Orpheus (Cono 45); Minos (Hdt. 5.17.3); Acteon (Paus. 9.38.5); Cimon (Plut. *Cim.* 19.5). The intervention of Delphi: Orpheus (Cono 45); Oibotas (Paus. 7.17.3); Heros of Temesa (Paus. 6.6.7–10); Cimon (Plut. *Cim.* 19.5). Other examples in VISSER (1982) and FONTENROSE (1968).

¹⁸⁷ See FONTENROSE (1968), pp. 76–78; VISSER (1982), pp. 416–418; VISENTIN (1992), p. 82.

Conclusions

At the end of this long analysis, we can try to draw some conclusions. The first part of my investigation showed that Aesop can hardly be considered a *φαρμακός*. The events that took place at Delphi certainly have points in common with this ritual, but it cannot be ignored that the pattern implied by the latter diverges considerably from the narrative of Aesop's death. Indeed, the longer narratives provided by the *Life of Aesop* and the biography in *P. Oxy.* XV 1800 resemble other narratives of heroes who take revenge for unjust violence and are eventually worshipped with a cult. Therefore, we can speak of a heroic pattern rather than a *φαρμακός* model. In any case, I have highlighted the differences between these accounts, in which the need to appease Aesop's anger is explicitly alluded to, and another branch of the tradition attested by the oldest extant source, namely Herodotus. In the latter, there seems to be no room for the establishment of a heroic cult, and this tradition could have been interpreted by Plutarch as an example of divine punishment for an ancestral fault.

However, this does not mean that the heroic cult was a Hellenistic or later invention, or even a fantasy of the popular culture. My examination of the sources that seem to allude to a return to life by Aesop and, in particular, my examination of the fragment of Plato Comicus, has shown that already at the end of the Classical age the fabulist could have been considered a powerful revenant who caused serious problems and had to be appeased by a heroic cult.

In conclusion, with this analysis I have tried to clarify certain points arising from a reading of the various sources alluding to Aesop's death, but I do not claim to have exhausted the questions they raise. For example, the solution of the story found in Herodotus and Plutarch, the payment of compensation to a descendant of Aesop's master, is still difficult to interpret. Other themes have been left to one side, such as the relationship between Aesop and Apollo in the *Life of Aesop*, or the possible contaminations by the Delphic myth of Pyrrhos. I hope, however, that I have offered some new answers to old questions and some insights that may be useful for future research.

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Appendix I

Hdt. 2.13-135

ἔτεσι γὰρ κάρτα πολλοῖσι ὕστερον τούτων τῶν βασιλέων τῶν τὰς πυραμίδας ταύτας λιπομένων ἐγένετο Ῥοδῶπις, γενεὴν μὲν ἀπὸ Θρηίκης, δούλη δὲ ἦν Ἰάδμονος τοῦ Ἡφαιστοπόλιος ἀνδρὸς Σαμίου, σύνδουλος δὲ Αἰσώπου τοῦ λογοποιοῦ. καὶ γὰρ οὗτος Ἰάδμονος ἐγένετο, ὡς διέδεξε τῆδε οὐκ ἤκιστα. ἐπεῖτε γὰρ πολλάκις κηρυσσόντων Δελφῶν ἐκ θεοπροπίου ὃς βούλοιο ποινήν τῆς Αἰσώπου ψυχῆς ἀνελέσθαι, ἄλλος μὲν οὐδεὶς ἐφάνη, Ἰάδμονος δὲ παιδὸς παῖς ἄλλος Ἰάδμων ἀνείλετο, οὕτω καὶ Αἴσωπος Ἰάδμονος ἐγένετο.

Plut. ser. num. vind. 556f–557b.

οἷον ἐνταῦθα δῆπουθεν λέγεται ἐλθεῖν Αἴσωπον, ἔχοντα παρὰ Κροίσου χρυσίον ὅπως τε τῷ θεῷ θύση μεγαλο- πρεπῶς καὶ Δελφῶν ἐκάστῳ διανεῖμη μνάς τέσσαρας· ὀργῆς δὲ τινοσ, ὡς ἔοικεν, αὐτῷ καὶ διαφορᾶς γενομένης πρὸς τοὺς αὐτόθι τὴν μὲν θυσίαν ἐποιήσατο, τὰ δὲ χρήματ' ἀνέπεμψεν εἰς Σάρδεις, | ὡς οὐκ ἀξίων ὄντων ὠφελήθηται τῶν ἀνθρώπων· οἱ δὲ συνθέντες αἰτίαν ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἱεροσυλίας ἀπέκτειναν, ὥσαντες ἀπὸ τῆς πέτρας ἐκείνης ἦν Ὑάμπειαν καλοῦσιν. ἐκ δὲ τούτου λέγεται μνηῖσαν τὸ θεῖον αὐτοῖς ἀφορίαν τε γῆς ἐπαγαγεῖν καὶ νόσων ἀτόπων ιδέαν πᾶσαν, ὥστε περιόντας ἐν ταῖς Ἑλληνικαῖς πανηγύρεσι κηρύσσειν καὶ καλεῖν ἀεὶ τὸν βουλόμενον ὑπὲρ Αἰσώπου δίκην λαβεῖν παρ' αὐτῶν. τρίτη δὲ γενεᾶ Σάμιος Ἰδμων ἀφίκετο, γένει μὲν οὐδὲν Αἰσώπῳ προσήκων ἀπόγονος δὲ τῶν πριαμένων αὐτὸν ἐν Σάμῳ γεγρονός· καὶ τούτῳ τινὰς δίκας δόντες οἱ Δελφοὶ τῶν κακῶν ἀπηλλάγησαν. ἐξ ἐκείνου δὲ φασι καὶ τὴν τιμωρίαν τῶν ἱεροσύλων ἐπὶ τὴν Αὐλίαν ἀπὸ τῆς Ὑαμπείας μετατεθῆναι.

P. Oxy. 1800 fr. 1 col. II (ed. de Kreij – Meccariello)

c. 5] τῶν Δελ[φῶν c. 3]

c. 5] εὐωνυμ [c. 5]

ἔς[τιν δ' αἰτία τοια[ύτη]68 εἰ-

ρ[η]μένη69· ἐπὸν ε[ι]κέ]λθη

5 τ[ι] τῷ θεῷ θυσιάς[ων ο]ἱ Δελ-

φ[ο]ἱ περ[ι]εστήκασι τὸν βω-

μ[ὸ]ν ὑφ' ἑαυτοῖς μαχαίρας

κομίζοντες. σφαγιασα-

μένου δὲ τοῦ ἱερέως καὶ

10 δείραντος τὸ ἱερεῖον καὶ

τὰ σπλάγχνα περιεξελο-

μένου οἱ περιεστώτες ἔ-

κατος ἦν ἄν ισχύσει
μοῖραν ἀποτεμνόμενος
15 ἄπεισιν, ὡς πολλάκις τὸν
θυσιάσαντα αὐτὸν ἄμοι-
ρον ἀπι<έ>ναι. τοῦτο οὖν Αἴ-
c]ωπ[ο]c Δελφοὺς ὄνειδ[ί]ζων
ἐπέσκωψεν, ἐφ' οἷς διοργι-
20 θέντες οἱ πολλοὶ λίθοις
αὐτὸν βάλλοντες κατὰ
κρημνοῦ ἔωσαν. μετ' οὐ
πολὸν δὲ λοιμικὸν πάθος
ἐπέσκηψε τῇ πόλει. χρη-
25 στηριαζόμενοι δ' αὐτοῖς
ὁ θεὸς ἀνεῖπεν οὐ πρότε- >
ρον λή[ξ]ειν τὴν νόc[ον μέ-
χρ[ις τὸ]ν Αἴσωπον ἐξι[λεώ-
cω]νται· οἱ δὲ περιτεῖ- [>
30 χίc]αντες τὸν τόπον [ἐν
ῶι κ]ατέπεσεν βωμό[ν θ' ἰ-
δ[ρυcά]μενοι λυτήρ[ι]ο[ν
τῆς νόcου, ὡς ἦρωι θ[υcίας
προσῆνεγκαν.

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οἱ δὲ ὠθήσαντες ἔρριψαν αὐτὸν κατὰ τοῦ κρημνοῦ, καὶ οὕτως ἀπέθανε. λοιμῶ οὖν καὶ συνοχῇ ισχυρᾷ κατασχεθέντες οἱ Δελφοὶ χρησμὸν ἔλαβον ἐξιλεώσασθαι τὸν τοῦ Αἰσώπου μόνον. ἐτύπτοντο γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς συνειδήσεως δολοφονήσαντες τὸν Αἴσωπον. ναοποιήσαντες οὖν ἔστησαν αὐτῷ στήλην. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἀκούσαντες οἱ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἔξαρχοι καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ διδάσκαλοι τὸ εἰς τὸν Αἴσωπον πραχθέν, παραγενόμενοι ἐν Δελφοῖς καὶ συζήτησιν ποιησάμενοι ἐξεδίκησαν τὸν τοῦ Αἰσώπου μόνον.