LEXIS

Poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica

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SOMMARIO

RECENSIONI

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Aesop and Riddles

1. Riddles and problems in the *Vita Aesopi*

The so-called *Vita Aesopi* is an extensive Greek fictional narrative about the life and adventures of Aesop, composed between the late 1st century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. The central hero, Aesop, presented at first as a slave, is sold to the philosopher Xanthos on the island of Samos and undergoes various adventures in Xanthos' service. He plays various tricks on his master but also solves problems for his sake and helps him out in difficult circumstances. Eventually, Aesop offers the Samians valuable advice in their conflict with King Kroisos of Lydia, thus gaining his freedom. He then travels to Kroisos' court and impresses the Lydian monarch with his intelligence. Afterwards, the hero pursues his travels and arrives at Babylon, where he enters the service of the Babylonian king Lykoros. He is unjustly accused and persecuted by the king, but in the end he is reinstated, proves his innocence and helps Lykoros in a difficult riddle-contest against the Pharaoh of Egypt. Finally, Aesop visits Delphi, where he quarrels with the inhabitants, scorning them for their meanness. For this reason the Delphians insidiously frame Aesop with false accusations of sacrilege and execute him by throwing him down a precipice.

The *Vita* survives in two main Greek versions: the G, preserved by a single manuscript of the late 10th century, and the Westermanniana or W, which comprises in turn two different recensions, each one transmitted by a series of Byzantine codices (MORN and BPThSA). Neither of these versions can be considered as identical to the original form of the *Vita*, which is lost to us, although both are ultimately descended from it. The G is more extensive, seems to be older and is generally regarded as the version closest to the original form of the work, while the archetype of the Westermanniana must have been composed in the early Byzantine period. There are also a number of papyrus fragments of the *Vita*, dating from the 2nd/3rd to the 6th/7th century A.D.[1]

A recurrent motif in the narrative of the *Vita* is the propounding and solving of riddles and similar intellectual problems which the ancient Greeks would classify under the comprehensive heading of γρῖφοι[2]. Aesop repeatedly solves tricky questions of this kind, propounded either directly to him or to one of his masters (the phi-

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[1]   On the textual tradition of the *Vita* see the basic studies of Perry 1933, 198-244 and Perry 1936, 1-70; see also the useful surveys of Perry 1952, 1-4, 10-32; Ferrari 1997, 41-5; Karla 2001, 10-5; Jouanno 2006, 14-7, 199-200. Throughout this article I follow the editions of Ferrari 1997 for the text of G, Papathomopoulos 1999 for the recension MORN and Karla 2001 for the recension BPThSA of the W.

[2]   In ancient Greek γρῖφος is a broad term, including both enigmas in the narrow and proper sense (αἰνίγματα in Greek) and a great variety of other intellectual games (rebuses, kennings, tricky sophisms, quizzes on mythological and other topics, games based on word-play, mnemonic and arithmetical problems etc.). See Ohlert 1912, 3-21, 71-9; Schultz 1914, 88-90, 106-16; Konstantakos 2004, 120-33; Konstantakos 2008, I 39-52. The English word 'riddle', like the German 'Rätsel', is often employed in this broader sense (see Kelso 1918, 766 f.; Taylor 1948, 1; Fischer 2003, 268, 272). This is also the sense intended in the present essay.

losopher Xanthos or the king of Babylon)[3]. The following sections offer an over-view of the relevant episodes. It has been attempted to group together problems of similar nature for reasons of convenience and more orderly presentation. But there is no intention of reducing the great variety of material to a few preconceived categories.

1.1. *Aesop solves riddles in Samos*

(1) While Aesop stands for sale in the slave-market, Xanthos approaches and en-gages in an amusing dialogue with him (§§ 25 f.). Aesop urges Xanthos not to judge him from his ugly external appearance but rather examine his soul, thus provoking Xanthos' question: «What is outward appearance?» (τί ἐστιν τὸ εἶδος, § 26 in the G)[4]. Such a general question about a universal concept recalls perhaps the Socratic enquiries for the definition of abstract notions. In ancient Greek tradition, however, questions of this type might also be used as riddles, in order to test the addressee's wit and capacity for a quick response rather than serve as the basis of extensive phi-losophical investigation. The Seven Sages in particular were often shown answering questions of this type together with other common riddle-like problems[5]. Aesop's reply is also of interest. He answers Xanthos' question with a simile («It is just as, when entering a wine-shop, we see ugly vases which however contain tasty wine»), thus essentially turning the problem into a 'simile-riddle' – a kind of riddle in which the addressee is required to find the most appropriate comparison for a given object. In other words, Aesop answers as though Xanthos had asked him to find an apt sim-ile for the notion of outward appearance[6].

A comparable general question underlies the lengthy sequence of episodes in §§ 56-64: Xanthos asks Aesop to find a 'non-meddlesome' person (ἀπερίεργος), and Aesop finally succeeds, in spite of an initial unfortunate choice. This task essentially corresponds to an 'abstract concept' question, such as «what kind of person is an ἀπερίεργος» or «what is non-meddlesomeness». But the solution is here transferred from the level of words to that of action: the addressee is required not simply to give

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[3] Generally on riddles and related problems in the *Vita* see Zeitz 1936, 234-40; La Penna 1962, 290-4; Adrados 1979, 95-101; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 96, 109 f., 131-5, 184-7, 189-91; Holzberg 1992, 41 f., 51 f., 54-8, 61-3, 65-9; Holzberg 1993, 7-11; Merkle 1996, 215, 220, 222, 224 f.; Fer-rari 1997, 23, 27-31, 35; Adrados 1999, 660-4.

[4] In the W this question has been omitted, due to abridgement of the dialogue.

[5] See e.g. D.L. 1.36 (τί τὸ θεῖον, cf. Gnomol. Vat. 321); id. 1.86 (τί ποτέ ἐστιν εὐσέβεια, cf. Gno-mol. Vat. 149); Gnomol. Vat. 450 and Stob. 3.24.12 (I p. 604 Hense: τί ἐστιν ἐλευθερία); Gno-mol. Vat. 507 (τί ἐστι νόμος). In most of these passages the questions on abstract concepts are closely preceded or followed by problems of different types that were traditionally classified by the ancients as γρῖφοι in the broader sense, such as riddles of the superlative or tricky sophisms (ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα). Clearly, all these kinds of problem are regarded as belonging together. They all function in the same way as intellectual games testing the sage's cleverness. Generally on this kind of riddle see Konstantakos 2005, 22 f. On the similarity with Socratic questions cf. Ferrari 1997, 27.

[6] G § 26: ὅ τι; πολλάκις εἰς οἰνοπωλεῖον παραγενάμενοι ὠνήσασθαι οἶνον θεωροῦμεν κεράμια ἀειδῆ, τῷ δὲ γεύματι χρηστά. On simile-riddles see Konstantakos 2004, 128-30 and Konstanta-kos 2008, I 40 f. with examples.

a verbal definition of non-meddlesomeness but to actually find a man embodying this quality. Thus, the solution of the riddle is developed into a long section with many amusing scenes – a practice we will also encounter elsewhere in the *Vita*.

(2) In §§ 35-7 a question of natural history is posed to Xanthos by a gardener: why do weeds grow faster than the plants cultivated by the gardener himself? Xanthos cannot think of an answer but is saved by Aesop, who promptly forwards a witty response. The hero turns this problem as well into a simile-riddle, replying with a metaphor based on analogy: the earth is like a natural mother to the weeds and like a stepmother to cultivated plants[7]. Aesop also solves similar naturalist questions, posed by Xanthos or his disciples, in §§ 48 («why a sheep keeps quiet when led to the slaughter, while a piglet by contrast squeals loudly») and 67 («why people often look at their faeces while defecating»). In both cases his answer takes the form of an aetiological fable[8].

As shown by Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*, naturalist problems of this kind could be posed as quizzes for entertainment in symposia[9]. Plutarch himself implicitly compares his own collection of sympotic problems with the riddles used by common people for entertainment after dinner (673A-B): the latter are the pastimes of plain and uneducated men while Plutarch's questions suit the conversation of erudite companions (cf. 612D-E, 629C-D, 686C-D). Plutarch also parallels his sympotic questions with the riddles propounded by women during the banquet at the festival of the Agrionia (717A), arguing that both kinds of problem have the same effect, viz. restraining the 'frenzy' of drunkenness by means of intellectual activity. Naturalist problems are therefore regarded as the learned counterpart of common people's riddles. The Peripatetic Klearchos (4th/3rd century B.C.) also testifies that such questions were used as γρῖφοι in fashionable symposia of his own age[10]. His examples are specifically taken from the piquant fields of sexual activity and culinary pleasure: «which sexual posture brings the highest pleasure», «what kind of fish is most tasty or in its prime at a particular season», and «what fish must be preferred after the rising of Arcturus, the Pleiades or the Dog-star». However, it is conceivable that Klearchos insists on these particular topics for moralistic purposes, in good Peripatetic tradition. His aim is to contrast the hedonistic pursuits of his corrupt con-

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[7] Cf. Ferrari 1997, 127.

[8] On these episodes cf. Zeitz 1936, 235 f.; Ferrari 1997, 143; Jouanno 2006, 228.

[9] See e.g. Plu. *Quaest. conv.* 1.9 (626E-627F: why fresh water is used to wash clothes rather than sea water); 2.2 (635A-D: why men become hungrier in autumn); 2.9 (642B-E: why sheep bitten by wolves have sweeter flesh but their wool breeds lice); 3.4 (650E-651E: whether women are colder or hotter in temperament than men); 3.10 (657E-659D: why meat decays more quickly in moonlight than in sunlight); 4.2 (664A-666D: why truffles are thought to be produced by thunder, and why it is believed that sleeping people are not struck by thunder); 6.3 (689A-690B: why hunger is appeased by drinking while thirst is increased by eating). Generally on the diffusion of this kind of naturalist problems in antiquity see Flashar 1962, 298-316, 359-70.

[10] See Klearchos fr. 63.I Wehrli (= Ath. 10.457C-D): τῶν γρίφων ἡ ζήτησις οὐκ ἀλλοτρία φιλοσοφίας ἐστί, καὶ οἱ παλαιοὶ τὴν τῆς παιδείας ἀπόδειξιν ἐν τούτοις ἐποιοῦντο. προέβαλλον γὰρ παρὰ τοὺς πότους οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ νῦν ἐρωτῶντες ἀλλήλους, τίς τῶν ἀφροδισιαστικῶν συνδυασμῶν ἢ τίς ἢ ποῖος ἰχθὺς ἥδιστος ἢ τίς ἀκμαιότατος, ἔτι δὲ τίς μετ' Ἀρκτοῦρον ἢ μετὰ Πλειάδα ἢ τίς μετὰ Κύνα μάλιστα βρωτός.

temporaries with the wisdom and temperance of older times[11]. Possibly the naturalist problems actually posed in 4th and 3rd-century B.C. symposia covered a broader scope of subjects, like those later found in Plutarch[12].

(3) Another type of problem comprises the so-called 'riddles of the superlative', i.e. questions asking what thing or person possesses a certain quality to the highest degree. This kind of riddle, exceedingly popular among many peoples, was especially associated with the Seven Sages in Greek tradition[13]. In §§ 51-5 Xanthos orders Aesop to buy for dinner first whatever is best and most useful in life (§§ 51-3) and then the worst thing that exists (§§ 54 f.). In both cases Aesop buys and serves tongues of pigs. This episode develops a well-known Greek tale, which appears to have been current in several versions: a wise man (Bias, Pittakos or an anonymous figure, depending on the version) is asked a superlative riddle – to choose the part of a sacrificial animal that is simultaneously the best and the worst – and successfully picks out the animal's tongue[14]. In the *Vita* the posing and solution of this riddle serve as a narrative framework for an extensive sequence of amusing scenes (cf. above, no. 1).

Akin to riddles of the superlative are questions enquiring in general about a certain quality. Although not formulated in the superlative degree, in essence such questions also concern the object most strongly distinguished by the stated quality[15]. For instance, in § 47 a disciple of Xanthos asks in the course of a symposium «how there will be great consternation among men». This may be reformulated as «what is the greatest consternation for men», a right and proper riddle of the superlative[16]. In § 44 Xanthos, dining as a guest at a friend's house, instructs Aesop to deliver some portions of the food τῇ εὐνοούσῃ, viz. «to her that loves» Xanthos. The philosopher has of course in mind his own wife. Aesop, however, offers the food to Xanthos' bitch and afterwards comically proves that the bitch loves Xanthos more than his wife does (§§ 44-6, 49 f.). The question underlying this episode, «who is the εὐνοοῦσα», essentially corresponds to «who is the one that most loves a man». Aesop deliberately takes Xanthos' order for a riddle and gives the solution he himself regards as the correct one. Once again in this case the solution is expanded into ex-

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[11] Cf. Wehrli 1969, 68 f.

[12] Note that Plutarch's collection also contains sporadic questions on sexual or culinary matters, akin to those of Klearchos: see *Quaest. conv.* 3.6 (653B-655D: what time is suitable for copulation); 3.7 (655D-656B: why sweet new wine is least intoxicating); 4.1 (660D-664A: whether a variety of foods is more easily digested than one kind alone); 4.4 (667B-669E: whether the sea or the land is richer in delicacies); 7.3 (701D-702C: why the best part of wine is in the middle, of olive-oil in the top and of honey in the bottom). But these are mingled with a variety of other topics (see above n. 9).

[13] On riddles of the superlative see Konstantakos 2004, 126-8 and Konstantakos 2005, 20-2 with examples and bibliography.

[14] See Plu. *De aud.* 38B, *Conv. sept. sap.* 146F, *De garr.* 506C, fr. 89 Sandbach (= Sch. Hes. *Op.* 719-21, p. 220 Pertusi); Sch. Hom. *Od.* 3.332 (I p. 153 Dindorf); Eust. *in Od.* I p. 130.43-6. Generally on this story and its adaptation in the *Vita* see Konstantakos 2004, 97-104.

[15] On this type of problem see Konstantakos 2005, 22 f.; Konstantakos 2008, I 96-8.

[16] G § 47: εἷς δὲ τῶν σχολαστικῶν εἶπεν· "πῶς ἔσται (μέλλει γάρ) μεγάλη ταραχὴ ἐν ἀνθρώποις;".

tensive comic action. The episode recalls a folktale widespread in several peoples[17]: a man is asked to bring his best friend and his worst enemy; he brings his dog and his wife respectively and then amusingly demonstrates why the former is his friend and the latter his enemy. In this folktale the problem is posed to the hero in the proper form of a superlative riddle. Possibly a similar tale was already current in the ancient world and the *Vita*-Author exploited it.

(4) In §§ 69-73, again in the course of a banquet, a disciple proposes to Xanthos an impossible feat: to drink up the entire sea. This is the type of problem known as *adynaton*, a physical impossibility propounded as a task to be fulfilled. Aesop comes to the rescue of his master and cleverly solves the *adynaton* with a counter-impossibility (*anti-adynaton*, an equally impossible counter-task): the challenger must first block the mouths of all the rivers for as long as Xanthos will be drinking the sea. This episode adapts a story that was formerly told about the Pharaoh Amasis and his riddle-contest with the king of Ethiopia (Plu. *Conv. sept. sap.* 151A-E). In that story the *adynaton* was proposed by the Ethiopian king and solved by the wise Bias of Priene who acted as Amasis' helper, just as Aesop does for Xanthos[18]. Aesop solves more *adynata* of this kind later, in the section of the *Vita* based on the *Tale of Ahiqar* (see below nos. 8-9).

(5) In §§ 78-80 Aesop and Xanthos find a grave with a sequence of letters inscribed on it: A B Δ O E Θ X. Aesop interprets these symbols as the initial letters of a phrase's words and thus deciphers the message: ἀποβὰς βήματα τέσσαρα ὄρυξον, εὑρήσεις θησαυρὸν χρυσίου, «move four paces away, dig, and you will find a treasure of gold». Following the instructions, the hero discovers indeed a treasure. The inscription is an acrostic, a popular intellectual game in antiquity. The acrostic can also function as a kind of riddle if someone propounds it as a problem to an addressee, asking him to guess the phrase hidden behind the letters[19]. Subsequently, Aesop proposes two alternative solutions of the same acrostic, correlating it with different phrases: ἀπόδος βασιλεῖ Διονυσίῳ ὃν εὗρες ἐνθάδε θησαυρὸν χρυσίου («give back to King Dionysios the treasure of gold you found here») and ἀνέλεσθε βαδίσατε διέλεσθε ὃν εὕρατε ἐνθάδε θησαυρὸν χρυσίου («pick up, walk away, and divide between you the treasure of gold you found here»). With this latter solution Aesop is actually asking a share of the treasure for himself. For this reason he places greater emphasis on this solution and champions it as the most successful of the three[20].

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[17] See ATU type 921B (*Best Friend, Worst Enemy*); Hansen 2002, 49-54.

[18] On this story see Konstantakos 2004, 86-96, 120-6 with more bibliography.

[19] Cf. a similar case in the *Alexander Romance* 1.32.9, for which see Stoneman 1995, 166 f. For such acrostics in medieval texts see Speyer 1970, 94. In other cases the acrostic is not the riddle but the solution to it. The addressee is given a sequence of words or phrases and must take their initial letters (or syllables) and combine them in order to produce the word required: see e.g. D.L. 5.92 f.; Priap. 67; Auson. *epigr.* 85; Ohlert 1912, 225-39; Schultz 1914, 113, 118. For the inscription on a grave functioning as a riddle for the beholders cf. Ath. 10.454F (= *FGE* Anon. Epigr. CXXIV Page, Thrasym. 85 A 8 D-K); AP 7.64, 344, 421-9; D.L. 6.78.

[20] For the structure of this scene cf. Leonidas of Tarentum in AP 7.422: on a gravestone an *astragalos* (knucklebone used for dicing) has been pictured in such a position as to show the side whose value was one, i.e. the worst throw, called Χῖος, 'Chian'. This is a kind of picture-riddle meant to convey a message about the dead man, and the poet wonders what may be the meaning. Perhaps

(6) In §§ 81-91 the citizens of Samos have gathered in the assembly to elect magistrates, when a strange omen is observed: an eagle grasps the public seal, which had been brought out together with the book of laws, and drops it in the lap of a slave. The Samians ask Xanthos to interpret this sign, and Aesop once again rescues his master, explaining the omen before the assembly: since the eagle is the king of the birds, the transportation of the civic seal from the book of laws to a slave's lap forecasts that a king will attempt to enslave Samos and suppress its laws. Aesop is soon proved right, as King Kroisos sends a message demanding the submission of Samos. The interpretation of omens, like that of oracles, is closely akin to the solution of riddles. The oracle, regularly cast in obscure and enigmatic language and using common techniques of riddles (metaphors, paradoxes, ambiguous phrasing) so as to hide its true meaning, functions as a kind of enigma set by the divinity to the mortals. The omen, by analogy, is similar to the picture-riddle (*Bilderrätsel*), which uses visual signs and symbols instead of verbal metaphors in order to convey its message[21]. The omen scene of the *Vita*, therefore, can be considered together with the other episodes of riddle-answering. In essence, Aesop solves a picture-riddle posed to the Samians by a supernatural power and displays the same intellectual virtues that also enabled him to deal with the other riddle-like problems.

1.2. *Aesop solves riddles in Egypt*

The densest concentration of riddles occurs in the so-called 'Babylonian section' of the *Vita* (§§ 101-23), which is based on the well-known Near-Eastern *Tale of Ahiqar*. This narrative work, originally composed in the late 7th or early 6th century B.C. and today known in a multitude of versions in various languages, includes a riddle-contest between the king of Assyria and the Pharaoh of Egypt. Ahiqar, the wise vizier of the Assyrian king, is initially disgraced because of false accusations and unjustly condemned to death. He goes into hiding and is presumed dead, until the Pharaoh of Egypt, learning of Ahiqar's death, decides to challenge the Assyrian king with difficult riddles, assuming that no-one capable of dealing with them is left in Assyria. At this point Ahiqar reappears, is reinstated by the Assyrian king and helps him in the contest. He travels to Egypt and solves there a long series of riddles propounded by the Pharaoh. The *Vita*-Author transferred Ahiqar's adventures to his own hero, Aesop, who becomes the grand vizier of the king of Babylon, confronts Pharaoh Nektanebo in the riddle-contest and successfully tackles five riddles, all of them copied from *Ahiqar*, within the space of a few chapters (§§ 111-22)[22]:

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the dead man was from Chios? Or was he unlucky in dicing? No, it rather means that the man died from too much Chian wine. Here the poet, like Aesop in the *Vita*, gives three consecutive solutions to the riddle, all of them suitable, but highlights the final one as the soundest of the three. Cf. similarly Meleagros in AP 7.421, 428.

[21] On the close relationship between oracles, omens and riddles see Konstantakos 2004, 130-2 with further bibliography; cf. Konstantakos 2008, I 194-6, 202.

[22] For detailed analysis of the riddles of *Ahiqar* see Konstantakos 2008, I 39-53; generally on the relationship between the *Vita* and *Ahiqar* see Perry 1952, 4-10; Jouanno 2006, 22-7, 239-43; and most recently Konstantakos 2009 with more bibliography.

(7) The Pharaoh and his courtiers make a series of appearances before Aesop, each time dressed in different apparel and colours, and Aesop is required each time to find a suitable simile for the spectacle they present (§§ 112-5). This is recognizably the type of problem designated above (no. 1) as 'simile-riddle'.

(8) The main problem posed by the Pharaoh to the Babylonian king from the beginning (see § 105) is an *adynaton*: to build a castle in mid-air. Aesop solves it with a combination of an equally impossible counter-task and the use of technical resources (§§ 111, 116)[23].

(9) Another *adynaton*, but of a different type, is propounded in §§ 117 f. The Pharaoh claims that his mares in Egypt can hear the stallions of Babylon neighing, thousands of miles away, and miscarry as a result. This is not a physical impossibility set as a task (like the *adynata* of drinking up the sea and constructing a castle in the air) but rather an impossible statement that aims at perplexing the addressee and bringing him to an intellectual impasse. Aesop appropriately rebuts it with a counter-statement of the same kind (concerning a cat that travelled all the way from Egypt to Babylon and back again within one night), thus demonstrating the absurdity of the Pharaoh's initial claim.

(10) In §§ 119 f. Aesop solves an enigma in the narrow and proper sense of the term: «There is a temple with a single column, and on the column there are twelve cities, and each one of them is covered by thirty beams, and around each beam two women run». Aesop easily guesses that this symbolic description refers to the year, its twelve months, the thirty days of each month, and the periods of day and night constantly following each other[24].

(11) Finally, in §§ 121 f. the Pharaoh and his courtiers pose a kind of 'unanswerable question': «What is the thing that we have neither seen nor heard?» This is a trap for Aesop: whatever he replies, the Egyptians will claim that they have already heard about it, whether this is true or not. The correctness of the solution cannot be independently ascertained but is subject to the questioner's will. Aesop bypasses the trap by inventing a story about a huge amount of money supposedly lent to Egypt by the Babylonian king. The Pharaoh is obliged to admit that he has never heard of this loan, otherwise he would be required to repay it to Babylon, thus losing more than he expects to win in the riddle-contest[25].

In adapting the *Tale of Ahiqar*, so as to integrate it into his own work, the *Vita*-Author has placed the greatest emphasis on the part of the narrative dedicated to the riddle-contest – from the Pharaoh's challenge, marking the beginning of the competition, to the wise hero's conclusive victory and triumphant return from Egypt. In the *Vita* this part occupies the greatest portion of the Babylonian section: 17 chapters in all (§§ 105-8 and 111-23), almost 5 large-sized pages in Perry's edition of the G, 10

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[23] Aesop trains four eagles to carry small boys on their backs. When the time of building comes, the birds rise up in the air with the boys riding on them, and the boys shout down, asking for mortar, bricks, wood and other materials for building. The Pharaoh's men are unable to carry the materials so high up, and so Aesop claims that it is not his fault if the castle cannot be built.

[24] Such 'riddles of the year' are known from many traditions and seem to have been especially popular in the ancient Near East. See Konstantakos 2005, 15.

[25] On this 'unanswerable question' see Konstantakos 2006b with parallels.

small pages in Ferrari's text[26]. All the episodes of the contest are developed in great detail, like the corresponding scenes in the various versions of *Ahiqar*. On the contrary, the episodes preceding the riddle-contest have been much reduced in the Babylonian section of the *Vita*, so as to occupy minimal space in the narrative[27]. In this respect the *Vita* is very different from *Ahiqar*, where the incidents before the contest make up a large portion of the plot: in the fullest versions they include Ahiqar's adoption and raising of his nephew, the nephew's ungratefulness and machinations against Ahiqar, the hero's condemnation by the king and the preparations for his execution, Ahiqar's salvation by the friendly executioner, his concealment in a subterranean chamber and the slaying of a substitute victim in his place. In most versions of *Ahiqar* the total expanse of these episodes is approximately equal to that of the riddle-contest. For instance, in the Syriac text (one of the main and earliest recensions) the episodes before the contest extend to about 7 pages in the edition of Conybeare, Harris and Lewis, while the riddle-contest occupies 8 pages[28]. By contrast, in the *Vita* all these initial episodes have been condensed into a brief summary comprising only two chapters (§§ 103 f.), just half a page in Perry's edition of the G, slightly more than one page in that of Ferrari[29]. The events amply narrated in most versions of *Ahiqar* are succinctly described in one or two phrases in the Greek text, while all graphic or circumstantial details, dramatic scenes and dialogues are omitted.

Since the tradition of *Ahiqar* is virtually unanimous in awarding more or less equal space to the riddle-contest and to the episodes preceding it, the stark abridgement of the latter must be the work of the *Vita*-Author himself. Evidently, the riddle-contest was the ingredient of *Ahiqar* that chiefly attracted the Greek author. This was the element that he wished to highlight above all others, possibly even the main reason for which he decided to include Ahiqar's story in his own work. The cause of this preference is not difficult to guess. As shown above, riddles are a recurrent theme running through the greatest part of the *Vita* and abounding in the large and central 'Samian section' of the narrative (§§ 20-101). The contest of *Ahiqar*, in which the wise hero solved a long series of riddle-like problems, accorded very well with this basic theme of the Greek work. Presumably for this reason the *Vita*-Author took care to emphasize the riddle-contest of Ahiqar's story, so as to forge a thematic

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[26] See Perry 1952, 67 f., 70-3; Ferrari 1997, 218, 220, 222, 226, 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 238, 240.

[27] Cf. the remarks of Hausrath 1918, 7 f. and Jedrkiewicz 1989, 127 f.

[28] See Conybeare-Harris-Lewis 1913, 101-3, 109-14 (before the contest) versus 114-22 (contest). Similar ratios are found in the other versions: 5½ pages of preceding episodes versus 5 pages of riddle-contest in the Old Slavonic version, and respectively 9 versus 8 in the first Armenian, 6 versus 5 in the second Armenian, 8 versus 12 in the Arabic, 2½ versus approximately 3 in the Ethiopic (Schneider 1978) and the same ratio in the Romanian text (Gaster 1900). In the earliest version of *Ahiqar*, preserved on a fragmentary Aramaic papyrus of the 5th century B.C., the entire extant narrative part (5 papyrus columns) is dedicated to the episodes preceding the contest, while the rest of the action has been lost in a large lacuna. The riddle-contest, if contained in that early version, must have been considerably briefer (less than 4 papyrus columns). See Konstantakos 2008, I 23-6, 143-57 for full discussion and bibliography.

[29] See Perry 1952, 67; Ferrari 1997, 216, 218.

connection between the Babylonian section and the preceding Samian episodes and thus ensure the coherence and integration of his entire narrative[30].

Indeed, there are particular analogies between the riddles of the Babylonian section and those of the Samian one with regard to their types, the methods and circumstances of their solution. For instance, Aesop solves *adynata* by means of a counter-impossibility both in Samos (§§ 69-73) and in the Babylonian section (§§ 116-8)[31]. The riddles answered by means of a simile or analogical metaphor in §§ 26 (G) and 35-7 (nos. 1 and 2 above) correspond to the simile-riddles of the Babylonian section (§§ 112-5, no. 7 above). In all these cases the mechanics of the solution are essentially the same. Aesop interprets the object proposed (the concept of outward appearance in § 26, weeds and cultivated plants in §§ 35-7, the spectacle of Nektanebo and his entourage in §§ 112-5) by comparing it to an entity which is taken from a different field of human experience but presents qualities comparable to those of the proposed object[32]. Finally, in the Babylonian section Aesop solves the riddles for the sake of his royal master, King Lykoros, who is unable to deal with them on his own and thus runs the risk of being humiliated and paying a heavy price to his opponent. An analogous situation recurs in the Samian section, where Aesop repeatedly solves problems originally posed to his master Xanthos. The latter is unable to solve these problems and hence runs the risk of being put to shame (before the gardener in §§ 35-7, before the citizens of Samos in §§ 81-6) or paying a great deal of money (§§ 69-73, where Xanthos has bet his entire fortune on the *adynaton* of drinking up the sea)[33]. By means of these analogies, the ties between the Babylonian and the Samian section are further solidified.

1.3. *Aesop propounds riddles*

In the episodes discussed up to now, Aesop appears as a solver of riddles. There are also a few scenes in which the hero plays the opposite role, propounding himself riddles to other personages. This activity is not as frequently illustrated in the *Vita* as that of riddle-solving, but the two roles are obviously connected to each other. They form two complementary aspects of the same essential capacity of Aesop for intellectual problems and are therefore as inseparable as the two sides of the same coin[34].

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[30] Cf. La Penna 1962, 290 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 110, 131-3; Merkle 1996, 220; Ferrari 1997, 30 f. As shown in the pioneering study of Holzberg 1992, 35 f., 64-70, the *Vita*-Author has striven to integrate the Babylonian section into his overall narrative and firmly bind it with the other parts of his work (the foregoing Samian section and the following Delphic one) through the repetition of common motifs and narrative patterns. Riddle-solving is one of the most important binding motifs employed for this purpose. Cf. also below, section 1.3.

[31] On this analogy cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989, 185.

[32] A similar method is employed also in §§ 48 and 67 of the Samian section, where naturalist questions are solved by means of a fable (see above, section 1.1, no. 2). Once again the solution is based on the principle of analogy (between the problem proposed and the aetiological fable explaining it), just as in the case of a simile and the object it refers to.

[33] On this analogy cf. Holzberg 1992, 41; Merkle 1996, 220.

[34] Ferrari 1997, 27-30 similarly treats riddle-solving and riddle-propounding as aspects of the same type of Aesopic linguistic activity, examining together specimens of both. Both aspects also coexist in the earlier traditions about Aesop: see below, section 3.

For this reason an overview of the riddles propounded by Aesop in the *Vita* is included here. Significantly, while Aesop is always successful in solving the problems posed to him, the other characters cannot find an answer to Aesop's own riddles, and so the wise hero wins again.

(12) In § 24, while standing for sale, Aesop calls one of Xanthos' disciples θαλάσσιον πρόβατον. As I have argued elsewhere, this phrase recalls the zoological paradoxes of many ancient enigmas and is a kenning, i.e. a kind of cryptic circumlocution, meaning 'fish'. Aesop allegorically employs the image of the fish to mock the disciple for his stupidity, but the latter does not understand the sarcastic allusion[35].

(13) In §§ 75 f. Xanthos' libidinous wife conceives a sudden lust for Aesop and asks him to copulate with her for ten consecutive times. Aesop well manages nine times but has no strength left for the tenth one and ejaculates on the woman's thigh. Later, when Xanthos returns home, Aesop describes the incident to him in the form of an allegorical tale: the mistress saw a well-laden plum-tree and asked Aesop to knock down for her ten plums with one throw; Aesop took good aim and brought down ten plums, but one of them fell into manure. The tenfold adulterous copulation is thus hidden under metaphors and turned into a kind of riddle, which Aesop poses to the cuckolded husband. Xanthos, however, takes the allegory literally and does not manage to solve the riddle[36].

(14) In § 77b Xanthos instructs Aesop to stand at the door of the house and let in only the wise men invited by the philosopher. Aesop poses the same question to every guest arriving before the door as a test of wisdom: τί σείει ὁ κύων («What does the dog wag?»). This is a riddle based on homophony: the phrase sounds almost identical with τίς εἶ, ὦ κύων («Who are you, you dog?»). Most of the guests mistake Aesop's words for this latter insulting question and angrily walk away, losing the game. Only one guest understands Aesop's riddle correctly, replying «his tail» (τὴν κέρκον), and is duly allowed in the house as a truly wise man[37]. This is the only case in the *Vita* in which someone actually finds the answer to a riddle of Aesop, and even so it is significant that the successful solution is offered after a long series of other people have failed in the attempt. However, § 77b is contained only in the W (codd. M, B, P, S and A), and Perry has argued that it did not form part of the original *Vita* but was interpolated by a later redactor[38].

(15) Finally, in § 102, at the beginning of the Babylonian section, Aesop, having become the chief administrator of the Babylonian kingdom, helps King Lykoros in his contests of wits against other monarchs. Lykoros and his rivals are sending difficult problems to each other, under the condition that whoever proves unable to solve

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[35] For a study of this kenning and its meaning see Konstantakos 2003. This episode has been lost from the G due to a lacuna and survives intact only in the W.

[36] This episode is preserved only in the W (recension MORN) but must have originally been contained in the G as well. For analysis of the riddle and its mechanics see Konstantakos 2006a.

[37] On the play of sounds in this scene see Ohlert 1912, 12; Holzberg 1992, 59; Papathomopoulos 1999, 98; Jouanno 2006, 247. For such riddles of homophony cf. D.L. 2.118, 6.3, 6.52, 7.62; Theon *Prog.* pp. 81.30-82.7 Spengel; Quint. *inst.* 7.9.4; Ohlert 1912, 7-10; Kelso 1918, 766.

[38] See Perry 1933, 222 f., 230 f.; Perry 1936, 30, 35-8; Perry 1952, 17, 22; cf. also Holzberg 1992, 39 f., 57-62.

the problems will pay tribute to the sender. Aesop of course answers all the questions posed by the rival kings. He also invents problems of his own and propounds them through Lykoros to the other rulers, who cannot solve them and thus pay tribute to Babylon. Here Aesop's riddling activity is only generally noted and no examples of his riddles are given. In the following contest between Lykoros and the Pharaoh Aesop limits himself to solving the Pharaoh's riddles (like Ahiqar in the oriental model) without producing any problems of his own.

It is noteworthy that § 102 has no equivalent in the *Tale of Ahiqar*. No extant version of *Ahiqar* mentions such an ongoing competition between monarchs, in which the wise vizier would continuously help his master amass victories. The only contest in the oriental work is the one provoked by the Pharaoh after Ahiqar's disgrace. At that point it is clear that the Pharaoh's challenge does not form part of any broader competition: the Pharaoh thinks of it on the spur of the moment, when he hears of Ahiqar's supposed death and assumes that the Assyrian king, deprived of his wise counsellor, will now be totally helpless. The entire § 102 is therefore an invention of the *Vita*-Author[39]. The latter presumably generalized the single riddle-contest of *Ahiqar*, transforming it from a specific incident into a continuous phenomenon[40].

The author's main purpose in adding § 102 was doubtless to provide adequate motivation for the events that follow – especially for the strong favour shown to Aesop by the Babylonian king. Unlike Ahiqar in the Near-Eastern narrative, Aesop was not from the start a great lord of the kingdom and a high officer in the court. He was an outsider coming to Babylon from abroad and equipped with nothing but his intelligence. The *Vita*-Author needed to justify why King Lykoros entrusted Aesop with the highest offices and honours, and § 102 explains precisely this: the wise Aesop helped the king win his contests and gain tribute from his opponents. There was also

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[39] Cf. Marc 1902, 397 f.; Holzberg 1992, 66. In several versions of *Ahiqar*, when the Pharaoh sends the *adynaton* of the castle, the Assyrian courtiers remind their king that the wise Ahiqar was able to cope with such problems in the past; see Conybeare-Harris-Lewis 1913, 17 (Slavonic), 44, 78 (Armenian), 115 (Syriac), 145 (Arabic). However, no information is provided about the provenance of those past problems and the circumstances in which Ahiqar solved them. It is not stated that the problems were propounded in the context of an intellectual competition between the Assyrian king and a rival monarch, as in the present occasion, nor is there any indication about the ongoing character of the competition, as in *Vita* § 102. In addition, the courtiers' remark is only a brief mention made in passing by secondary characters during the contest, not an emphatic statement programmatically placed at the beginning of the story. The *Vita*-Author may have been inspired by a similar remark in his model version of *Ahiqar*, but he developed it into something much more prominent and powerful.

[40] This is indicated by the connective motif of the letter. In § 102 the competing monarchs are said to send their problems to each other «by letters» (δι' ἐπιστολῶν G, διὰ γραμμάτων W), just as in the riddle-contest of *Ahiqar* the Pharaoh sends a letter to the Assyrian king and challenges him with the riddle of the castle (see Conybeare-Harris-Lewis 1913, 16, 43 f., 77 f., 114 f., 144, and cf. *Vita* § 105). The *Vita*-Author may also have been influenced by other tales of the same type that seem to have been current in the Greek tradition, e.g. the riddle-contest of Amasis with the king of Ethiopia or of King Solomon with Hiram of Tyre. In these latter tales the contesting kings are presented as holding a long-running competition with each other, which comprises successive exchanges of riddles and answers. See Plu. *Conv. sept. sap.* 151B (Amasis and the Ethiopian king); Menander of Ephesos, *FGrHist* 783 F 1 = Jos. *AJ* 8.146, *Ap.* 1.120 (Solomon and Hiram). On the influence of these stories on § 102 of the *Vita* cf. Marc 1902, 398; Holzberg 1992, 68 f.

another reason for the addition of § 102, related to Aesop's involvement with riddles in the narrative of the *Vita*. In the course of his Samian adventures Aesop was shown not only solving but also occasionally propounding riddles, while in *Ahiqar* the hero appeared only in the solver's role. So the *Vita*-Author added § 102 in order to preserve Aesop's double-sided function (as solver and propounder) in the Babylonian section as well and create an additional analogy between this latter section and the Samian episodes. His aim was again to forge ties between the section based on *Ahiqar* and the foregoing narrative through the repetition of common motifs and patterns in both these parts of his work.

2. Riddles and the narrative structure of the *Vita*

As shown in the previous section, the solving and propounding of riddles accompany Aesop throughout his fictional career, from his humble beginnings to his greatest triumph. In this way, riddle-episodes become an important narrative constituent of the *Vita* and contribute to the development and shaping of its plot. The riddle-motif appears in the narrative as soon as Aesop meets with his prospective master Xanthos in the slave-market. In the course of the sale-scene Aesop both propounds a riddle to Xanthos' company (§ 24) and answers one posed to him by Xanthos (G § 26), thus forecasting his double role in the rest of the narrative. After this initial occurrence, riddles keep showing up throughout the time of Aesop's servitude and in his subsequent life as a free man and an official in Babylon.

Within this broad narrative the riddles are designedly placed in such a way as to create an escalation, culminating in an impressive and triumphant climax. This can be observed both in form and in content. Formally, the riddle-motif is rather timidly introduced at the beginning of the Samian section (§§ 24 and 26), with very brief conversations comprising only a few lines of text (a minimal portion of the respective chapters) and consisting of a single exchange of question and answer. Then the treatment of riddles broadens in the middle part of the Samian section with a series of episodes comprising one or a few chapters each (§§ 35-7, 47, 48, 67, 76, cf. 77b). These episodes are simple in structure, each one limited to a single scene and made up of plain conversation between characters. On the other hand, the middle part of the Samian section also contains more expanded and complex riddle-episodes that cover several chapters, consist of several scenes and combine dialogue with vigorous comic action (§§ 44-6 and 49 f., 51-5, 56-64, 69-73). At the end of the Samian section comes the lengthy story of the omen (§§ 81-91), the most extensive episode of problem-solving up to that point. And then follows the Babylonian section with its marathon riddle-contest – the final and longest riddle-episode of the *Vita* (§§ 102, 105-8 and 111-23) and the only one in which Aesop tackles an entire series of riddles in succession, rather than a single, isolated problem. Riddle-episodes, therefore, become perceptibly longer and more complex as the narrative moves forward and culminate with a grand-scale tour de force.

With regard to content and action, riddles accompany and punctuate Aesop's advancement in life and his gradual rising from the depths of slavery to high offices and fame. It is by solving a riddle in § 26 (the question on outward appearance) that Aesop definitively persuades Xanthos to buy him and is thus settled in Samos. In the

following chapters, thanks to his success with several such problems, Aesop gains the admiration of Xanthos' disciples (§§ 47, 48, 51-3) and surpasses Xanthos himself in cleverness (§§ 35-7, 44-6 and 49 f., 51-5, 69-73, 76, 78-80). By the same means the hero also becomes Xanthos' benefactor, providing the philosopher with the right answers and rescuing him from embarrassment (§§ 35-7, 81-6) or financial ruin (§§ 69-73). By interpreting the omen (§§ 81-91) Aesop rises even higher and becomes the benefactor of an entire state. He also gains his freedom (§§ 89 f.) and acquires the esteem and gratitude of all the citizens of Samos (§ 93, cf. § 100). Aesop's riddling activity has moved from a small private world (benefiting a single individual, gaining the admiration of a few students of philosophy) to a much larger public sphere (saving a whole state, being respected and honoured by its entire population). The zenith of this rising course is reached with the competition in Egypt, in which Aesop overcomes not merely a private philosopher (as in the case of Xanthos) but a great king and all his priests and courtiers (who also have a hand in devising and propounding the riddles, see §§ 119-22). At the same time, he saves not just a small city-state, like Samos, but another great king and his empire (Lykoros and Babylon). As a reward for this feat, Aesop receives the greatest honours (a golden statue of himself in the company of the Muses and lavish celebrations, § 123) and attains the peak of his glory[41].

This is the highest point that the hero reaches in the narrative. Immediately afterwards follows the ill-fated trip to Delphi, with Aesop's downfall and ignominious death (§§ 124-42). It is only in this final, Delphic section of the work that riddles cease to play a role. Up to that point they formed a regular concomitant of Aesop's rising career, one of the basic means by which the hero displayed his brilliance and procured his own advancement. But once Aesop's upward progress is over, riddles disappear as well. The hero is now heading to the opposite direction, falling down to infamy and death, and his intellectual abilities prove insufficient to save him from destruction. He unwittingly falls into the trap of his enemies and is unable to think of any way to escape[42]. It is thus appropriate that riddles, an emblematic manifestation of Aesop's cleverness, are absent from this final part. Their disappearance symbolically announces the failure of the hero's intellectual powers and forecasts his unavoidable end.

Riddles, therefore, have an important structural function in the *Vita*. In this respect, the latter can be especially compared with two other narrative works dating from approximately the same or a slightly later period:

a) The *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* dates in its present form from the 2nd century A.D., although most of its material seems to have been taken over from Alkidamas' *Mouseion* (4th c. B.C.)[43]. The core of this work is a long contest of wits

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[41] On this pattern of progress cf. the brief remarks of Holzberg 1992, 41. Ferrari 1997, 21-30 traces more generally an analogous progress with regard to the various types of manifestation of Aesop's wisdom and linguistic mastery in the course of the *Vita*.

[42] On Aesop's helplessness and intellectual impasse in the Delphic section see especially Holzberg 1992, 69-73.

[43] On the dating of the *Contest* and its relation to Alkidamas see most conveniently Avezzù 1982, 84-7; O'Sullivan 1992, 63-6, 79-105; West 2003, 298-300; and Rosen 2004, 297-300, who survey earlier scholarship. Alkidamas' *Mouseion*, apart from the poets' contest, also included the story of

between the two celebrated poets (§§ 6-12 West = vv. 62-204 Allen), mainly consisting of riddles or riddle-like puzzles (γρῖφοι in the broader sense, according to ancient terminology): riddles of the superlative[44], questions on general concepts[45], nonsensical verses for completion[46], an *adynaton*[47] and a mythological quiz[48]. For most of the contest Hesiod poses these riddles and Homer solves them with great sagacity. The audience twice applauds and praises Homer, and the narrative stresses several times his success and skill in these games[49]. As a final test, King Panedes, who acts as arbiter of the competition, asks each one of the poets to recite the best passage from his own works. This is another riddle of the superlative, here posed to two contestants whose answers are to be compared and evaluated against each other. The spectators once again fill with admiration for Homer and acclaim him as the winner, but the king ignores their opinion and awards the victory to Hesiod, preferring the latter's poetry of peace and agriculture over Homer's songs of war (§ 13 West = vv. 205-10 Allen). Despite this notorious decision, it is clear that Homer is the true champion of the contest, since he has successfully solved all of Hesiod's riddles and has been repeatedly acclaimed by the audience. Even though he has not been awarded the prize, he has gained the people's admiration and great glory among the Greeks[50]. At this point the *Contest* presents the same narrative pattern as the *Vita Aesopi*: the hero's rise to success and glory is associated with the solution of

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Homer's death because of his inability to solve the fishermen's riddle. So the riddle-motif must have played a comparable structural role in Alkidamas' narrative as well.

[44] See § 7 West = vv. 75 f., 81 f. Allen; § 11 West = vv. 151-4, 161, 164, 166 Allen.

[45] See § 11 West = vv. 168 (ἡ δὲ δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἀνδρείη δύναται τί;), 170, 172, 174 Allen. On this kind of problem see above, section 1.1, no. 1.

[46] For the 'nonsensical verses' (ἀμφίβολοι γνῶμαι in Greek) see § 9 West = vv. 102-37 Allen. Hesiod begins each time by delivering a hexameter line that sounds absurd or nonsensical because it entails a logical contradiction, combines incompatible concepts or refers to something impossible. Homer has then to improvise a second hexameter which completes and restores good sense to Hesiod's illogical statement, usually by adducing new elements which alter the syntactic relations between the contradictory terms of Hesiod's line and make them refer to different entities. See e.g. vv. 113 f. Allen: (Hes.) οὗτος ἀνὴρ ἀνδρός τ' ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀνάλκιδός ἐστι / (Hom.) μητρός, ἐπεὶ πόλεμος χαλεπὸς πάσῃσι γυναιξίν. This game is akin to the *adynaton*, especially the second type of *adynaton* discussed above (section 1.2, no. 9, *Vita* §§ 117 f.): each one of the verses propounded is an impossible statement that aims at perplexing the addressee.

[47] See § 8 West = vv. 97 f. Allen. Hesiod propounds to Homer an *adynaton* of the 'impossible task' type: to sing of something that neither is nor will be nor ever was. Compare many folktales in which the hero is required to go somewhere «neither on foot nor on horseback, neither dressed nor naked, neither alone nor in the company of others» etc. (see Konstantakos 2004, 122 f. and Konstantakos 2008, I 51 f. with examples and bibliography). But in the *Contest* the impossible task is specifically drawn from the sphere of song and poetic creation, i.e. the main occupation of the contestants.

[48] See § 10 West = vv. 140 f. Allen (πόσσοι ἅμ' Ἀτρείδῃσιν ἐς Ἴλιον ἦλθον Ἀχαιοί;). Homer answers with another type of riddle, an arithmetical problem (vv. 143-5 Allen). Generally on the affinity between the problems of the *Contest* and riddles see Rohde 1901, 103 f.; Busse 1909, 113-8; Ohlert 1912, 35-47; Hess 1960, 3-7, 10-26; West 1967, 439-43; Heldmann 1982, 55-8, 76-84; Erbse 1996, 311 f.; Cavalli 1999, 92-9.

[49] See vv. 90-4, 102, 138, 148 f., 176 f. Allen (§§ 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 West).

[50] On Homer's obvious superiority in the *Contest* see Vogt 1959, 197-9, 205, 215 f.; Heldmann 1982, 21-7; O'Sullivan 1992, 80 f., 85 f., 96-9; Rosen 2004, 302-10.

a series of riddles. The only difference is that in the *Contest* all the riddles are gathered in one lengthy episode of competition, while in the *Vita* they are spread in numerous scenes throughout the course of a more extensive plot.

In the concluding part of the *Contest* (§ 18 West = vv. 323-35 Allen) the riddle-motif appears again, but this time with the opposite function. After many wanderings, Homer arrives at the island of Ios, where he encounters some boys returning from fishing and asks them if they have caught anything. They reply by propounding to him a proper enigma: «What we caught we left behind, what we did not catch we bring along». Homer cannot understand its meaning and the boys explain that they were not referring to fishes but to lice: they deloused themselves, leaving behind the lice they caught, but still carry on them those they failed to catch. Homer remembers an oracle he has received, according to which he is destined to die in Ios and should beware of the young boys' riddle, and understands that his end is approaching. Shortly afterwards he is injured in a fall and dies. The great sage that had been applauded by a large public body for his clever answers to difficult riddles proves in the end unable to tackle an enigma propounded by lousy fisher-boys[51]. The ability to solve riddles elevated Homer to glory, his inability to understand one was responsible for his downfall and death.

This provides another analogy with the *Vita Aesopi*. When the moment of his death approaches, Homer is abandoned by the riddle-solving powers that had accompanied his rise to fame, just as Aesop suddenly stops solving riddles in the final and fatal part of his adventures. Both heroes lose, actually or symbolically, their capacity of coping with riddles when entering the last episode of their lives and heading towards their death. In the *Contest* this is concretely shown through Homer's failure to guess the boys' riddle. In the *Vita* it is indicated implicitly and *ex silentio*, through the absence of riddles from the concluding section.

b) Another comparable narrative is the Latin *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*, whose extant recensions go back to a redaction of the 5th or 6th century A.D., but its original appears to have been composed in the early 3rd century A.D.[52] This romance also uses riddles as a recurrent motif, placed at key points of the narrative and playing an important role in plot structure[53]. However, the *Historia* represents an inversion of the pattern traced above in the *Contest* and the *Vita*.

The hero, Apollonius, a rich young prince from Tyre, arrives at Antioch as a suitor of the local king's daughter. The king, Antiochus, is actually having an incestuous relationship with his daughter and has devised a stratagem in order to get rid of her suitors. He propounds to them a difficult riddle and puts to death those who fail to find the answer. Apollonius successfully guesses the solution: the riddle is describing in obscure language Antiochus' incest with his own offspring. Antiochus of course denies that this is the correct answer but allows Apollonius thirty days to

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[51] On this ironic contrast cf. Vogt 1959, 201, 204; Hess 1960, 33; Avezzù 1982, 89.

[52] On the dating and recensions of the *Historia Apollonii* see the recent discussions of Schmeling 2003, 528-37 and Kortekaas 2004, 13-96. Although they disagree as to the language of the original form (Latin or Greek), they both date it to the early or mid-3rd century A.D.

[53] On the role of riddles in the *Historia* see mainly Chiarini 1983, 287 f.; Müller 1991, 267-77; Holcroft 1991, 45-54; Archibald 1991, 12 f., 23-6; Schmeling 1998, 3288-91; Wolff 1999, 279-88; Laird 2005, 226-31.

reconsider and try again. Apollonius returns to Tyre, checks his books and confirms that his solution was correct. He then rightly fears that Antiochus will send people to murder him, because he has discovered the king's terrible secret, and escapes from his city on a ship. Antiochus learns of his flight, puts a price on his head, and thus a long series of travels, adventures and sufferings begins for Apollonius. The hero is eventually shipwrecked near Cyrene and marries the local king's daughter, who gives birth to a girl. However, new mishaps separate Apollonius both from his wife (who is presumed dead) and from his daughter Tarsia, who ends up being sold as a slave in Mytilene, while Apollonius travels as a merchant for fourteen years. By solving King Antiochus' riddle, Apollonius sets in motion a process that leads him to long-lasting hardship and tribulations. The contrast with the *Contest* and the *Vita* is striking. In those narratives the hero's successful solution of riddles is beneficial and rewards him with prosperity and fame; only the failure to solve a riddle proves destructive. On the contrary, in the early part of the *Historia* Apollonius' solution of the riddle marks the beginning of his misfortunes. It is not failure but success in riddle-solving that drives the hero to sufferings and near-destruction.

Towards the end of the *Historia*, however, the function of riddles is redeemed. Apollonius, falsely believing his daughter Tarsia to be dead and overpowered by grief, arrives at Mytilene, where Tarsia is now working as a musician and performer. A gentleman of the city sends Tarsia to entertain Apollonius, and she propounds to the hero a series of riddles, which Apollonius solves with acumen one after the other (§§ 42 f.). Although this game seems to entertain him, Apollonius refuses to leave his ship and seeks to dismiss the girl, offering her money. Tarsia then grabs him and attempts to drag him out but he pushes her away. The girl falls down, is hurt and starts crying and pitifully relating the story of her life among her tears. In this way Apollonius recognizes his daughter and is reunited with her, beginning a new life. He subsequently rediscovers his lost wife and lives happily as a king until ripe old age. In this way riddles regain their beneficial power: the solution of Tarsia's enigmas initiates the sequence of events that lead to Apollonius' recognition of his daughter and the other fortunate occurrences[54]. Successful riddle-solving is thus intertwined with the hero's restoration to happiness[55].

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[54] On the role of Tarsia's riddles in the recognition cf. Holcroft 1991, 51-4; Schmeling 1998, 3291; Laird 2005, 230 f. In the extant recensions of the *Historia* Tarsia's riddles are taken from the collection of Symphosius, which is usually dated to the late 4th or early 5th century A.D. The original, early 3rd-century romance will presumably have used different riddles at this point, but a later redactor replaced them with those from Symphosius; see Müller 1991, 273; Archibald 1991, 8, 33; Wolff 1999, 282; Kortekaas 2007, 704, 708 f.

[55] Apart from these two principal riddle-episodes, the *Historia* also contains several other scenes in which characters use ambiguous or abstruse phrases sounding like riddles. For instance, when the daughter of the king of Cyrene falls in love with Apollonius, she uses an ambiguous, riddle-like circumlocution to indicate that she wants him for her husband (§ 20; on the affinity with riddles see Chiarini 1983, 287; Müller 1991, 267, 273; Holcroft 1991, 46, 50 f.; Schmeling 1998, 3290; Wolff 1999, 281-3). Apollonius understands the meaning of this 'riddle' and explains it to the king, thus winning the princess' hand (§§ 21 f.). Here riddle-solving proves beneficial for Apollonius, who is rewarded with a happy marriage and a place in the royal family – although this prosperity is only temporary. This episode, placed slightly before the middle of the narrative, is a prelude to the positive role that riddles will play in the hero's restoration at the end. The fragile

The *Historia* presents, therefore, a mirror image of the structure of the *Contest* and the *Vita*. In these latter texts the hero is first shown rising to great fame and fortune thanks to the solution of riddles; and then, at the end of the narrative, he is destroyed because of his inability to solve another riddle (*Contest*), or at least his suffering and death occur at the moment when he is dissociated from his earlier riddling activity (*Vita*). In the *Historia*, by contrast, a riddle first causes sufferings to the hero, nearly leading him to his death; but in the end the solution of riddles becomes instrumental in the hero's rehabilitation and felicity[56]. In the *Contest* and the *Vita* riddles mark the movement of the action from prosperity to disaster, in the *Historia* vice versa from disaster to prosperity.

According to D. Konstan, works like the *Vita*, the *Historia Apollonii* and the fictional biographies of Homer belong to a special kind of narrative text which seems to have flourished in the first two or three centuries A.D. Such texts focus on the exhibition of the hero's canny wit through a series of sundry anecdotal incidents, loosely bound together in an episodic narrative. The protagonist is repeatedly shown overcoming his adversaries by means of his clever retorts and masterful control of language[57]. The riddles and kindred problems here examined constitute one of the particular forms by which the hero's verbal wit may be manifested. As the foregoing discussion has indicated, episodes displaying the same form of wit may be placed in such a way within the broader narrative as to produce a distinctive structural pattern. This pattern, in turn, helps to organize the seemingly fortuitous and loose agglomeration of scenes of wit-play into an intelligible plot scheme. Although the overall construction of the narrative remains episodic and open to variations, the underlying design created by the combinations of related episodes or themes provides the story with a sense of progression and drives it towards a meaningful denouement[58].

As Konstan has remarked, the audience that read these narratives doubtless enjoyed the demonstrations of the heroes' wiliness, and this may account for the enormous popularity of these works both at their time and for many subsequent centu-

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and transient happiness procured by the solution of the princess' riddle forecasts the permanent and consummate bliss that the hero will finally achieve after answering Tarsia's riddles. Coming mid-way between Antiochus' initial enigma and Tarsia's concluding ones, the princess' episode provides a bridge for the transition from the former to the latter: Apollonius' riddle-solving leads him first to disaster, then to temporary good fortune, and finally to lasting felicity. For other riddling statements in the *Historia* see the lists provided by Müller 1991, 273 and Wolff 1999, 281 f.; cf. also Schmeling 1998, 3288-90; Laird 2005, 226 f., 230, 232. This is not the place to analyze their function in plot-structure; some preliminary remarks are offered by Wolff 1999, 282 f., 287 f.

[56]   On the symmetry and correspondence between the initial and the final riddle-episode cf. Chiarini 1983, 287; Müller 1991, 272 f.; Schmeling 1998, 3282, 3291; Wolff 1999, 282 f.

[57]   See Konstan 1998, especially 123, 129-32, 137 f.

[58]   Cf. the remarks of Konstan 1998, 132-6 on the interplay of themes in the *Alexander Romance*. Riddles and similar problems play a part in this latter work: see e.g. 1.32.9, 1.36.1-3, 1.38.7, 3.6; cf. Stoneman 1995; Konstan 1998, 131, 134 f. They also prominently feature in other narratives of early imperial times, such as the *Life of Secundus* and the *Altercatio Hadriani et Epicteti*. These texts have not been included in the present investigation because the riddles contained in them do not form a narrative pattern comparable to that of the *Vita*, the *Contest* or the *Historia Apollonii*. They testify, however, to the appeal and popularity of riddle-like problems with the reading public of the time.

ries. Readers may have identified with the cunning heroes, especially when the latter were shown turning the tables on figures of authority[59]. The prominent place of γρῖφοι in these works also indicates the appeal of this kind of intellectual game to their reading public. Riddles and similar games seem indeed to have enjoyed a vogue in early imperial Greek culture, as testified not only by such popular fictions but also by learned authors like Plutarch (see e.g. *Convivium septem sapientium*) and Athenaeus (see his long section on riddle-games in 10.448B-459C)[60].

3. Aesop and riddles in the overall ancient tradition

The riddle-episodes of the *Vita Aesopi* were not invented out of nothing. As indicated in section 1, the *Vita*-Author has often used as raw material earlier and originally independent tales about other legendary or historical figures. He transferred these tales to his own hero, adjusted them to the context of Aesop's adventures and occasionally developed them at greater length with lively scenes of comic action. For instance, the episode with the pigs' tongues (§§ 51-5) is based on a famous anecdote told about members of the Seven Sages. The *adynaton* of drinking up the sea and its solution (§§ 69-73) are borrowed from the tale of Amasis and the king of Ethiopia. The episode of the εὐνοοῦσα (§§ 44-6, 49 f.) is probably a reworking of an ancient popular tale which can be amply exemplified from later folk tradition (ATU type 921B). The riddle of the θαλάσσιον πρόβατον (§ 24) is ultimately derived from Chrysippos, who appears to have used it in a satirical anecdote, possibly in his work *On Proverbs*[61]. The riddles of the Babylonian section (§§ 111-22) are taken over from the *Tale of Ahiqar*. It seems likely that other riddle-episodes of the *Vita* were also modelled on pre-existent narratives, although neither their specific models nor any related material has survived, presumably due to accidents of transmission. For example, the episode of the ἀπερίεργος (§ 56-64) and the homophony riddle of τί σείει ὁ κύων (§ 77b), given their prominent Cynic overtones, could be based on Cynic anecdotes featuring Diogenes or another emblematic figure of the Cynic movement[62]. The naturalist questions (§§ 35-7, 48) may have been borrowed from collections of such puzzles (similar to Plutarch's *Sympotic Questions* or Pseudo-Aristotle's *Problems*) or from a work of popular philosophy. The episode of the acrostic (§§ 78-80), which refers to a certain King Dionysios of Byzantium as the proprietor of the treasure, appears to be based on a historical anecdote or legend about an otherwise unknown monarch.

It is not only for particular episodes or problems that the *Vita*-Author is indebted to earlier stories. The same holds true for the basic concept itself, the association of Aesop with riddles and similar games. There was an earlier and broader tradition

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[59] See Konstan 1998, 130, 137 f.

[60] Cf. Ferrari 1997, 35; on Plutarch see also below, section 3. Compare the popularity of riddles in 4th-century Athens, both in symposia and on the theatrical stage, as indicated by Middle Comedy and Klearchos' Περὶ γρίφων. On this phenomenon see Konstantakos 2000, 146-57.

[61] See Konstantakos 2003, 97 f., 108 f.

[62] The *Vita*-Author's tendency to transfer Cynic material to Aesop has been well documented. See e.g. Zeitz 1936, 230-4; La Penna 1962, 306-9; Gallo 1980, 288-91; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 116-27; Adrados 1999, 659-61, 665, 677-81; Konstantakos 2003, 109-11.

showing Aesop as a solver or creator of riddles[63]. This tradition must have provided the *Vita*-Author with the idea of making riddles a capital area of Aesop's intellectual activity in his own narrative. Once the author had conceived this idea, he proceeded to expand the extant repertoire of Aesopic riddle-episodes with new formations of his own, based on the exploitation of originally independent material. As in the *Vita*, so also in the overall tradition the complementary roles of riddle-solving and riddle-propounding coexist in Aesop's figure and will be surveyed together here.

The oldest fully-fledged specimen of the tradition is a story transmitted in ancient lexica and paroemiographers as an explanation of the proverb μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ (Zen. 5.16, Suda μ 116, Phot. *Lex.* μ 78 etc.)[64]. Kroisos assembled the wise men (Zen.) or more specifically the Seven Sages (Suda, Phot.) and asked them who is the happiest (εὐδαιμονέστατος) of all creatures. After various answers, Aesop, who was also present at that meeting, remarked that Kroisos overcomes all other men in happiness as much as the sea surpasses the rivers. The Lydian king praised Aesop for this reply (μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ, «The Phrygian replied better»). This story offers a variation of the well-known legend about the Seven Sages' gathering in Kroisos' court, recounted by the 4th-century historian Ephoros (see immediately below). So it probably goes back to a Hellenistic grammarian who was enquiring for the meaning of the aforementioned proverb and exploited Ephoros' narrative to create an explanation of his own[65]. Kroisos' question is obviously a riddle of the superlative. Aesop also solves such riddles in several other anecdotes, preserved in gnomologia or other late sources[66]. He appears to have been habitually connected with this type of riddle, just like the Seven Sages.

Stories of this kind were perhaps circulating about Aesop already from earlier times. Diodoros' account about the meeting of the Seven Sages in Kroisos' court (9.26 f.) is generally held to be derived from Ephoros[67]. After a series of superlative

[63] On this tradition cf. in general Zeitz 1936, 234 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 58-60, 184-6; Merkle 1996, 215; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 123.

[64] For a fuller list of sources see Perry 1952, 224; Bühler 1982, 74.

[65] See Snell 1952, 85, 90 f.; Kindstrand 1981, 43; Bühler 1982, 74-7.

[66] See Gnomol. Vat. 126 (*Sent.* 12 Perry: τί τῶν ζῴων ἐστὶ σοφώτατον); Nicol. *Prog.* p. 461.11-3 Spengel (*Sent.* 11: τί ἰσχυρότατον τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις); *P. Mich.* inv. 25.6 f. (Gallo 1980, 434 f., 443 f.: [ἐρ]ωτηθεὶς [ποῖος θάνατος χαλεπώτατ]ός ἐστιν, εἶπ[ε]ν εὐτυχοῦ[ντα] ἀπ[οθανεῖν], cf. the same idea attributed to Aesop as a general maxim in Plu. *Pel.* 34.5). For further sources see Perry 1952, 250; Sternbach 1963, 56, 88; and in general cf. Hausrath 1936, 83 f.; La Penna 1962, 304.

[67] Ephoros is said to have presented the Seven Sages gathering in Kroisos' court with the exception of Thales (*FGrHist* 70 F 181 = D.L. 1.40). Indeed, in Diodoros' account Thales does not appear, although elsewhere he is a standard member of the Seven Sages and a permanent character in relevant stories. On the other hand, Diodoros includes Anacharsis among the sages, and Ephoros also counted Anacharsis as a member of the group (*FGrHist* 70 F 182 = D.L. 1.41). For these reasons most scholars accept that the account comes from Ephoros: see F. Jacoby in *FGrHist* II C pp. 54, 87; Schwartz 1905, 678 f.; Snell 1952, 85-91; Bühler 1982, 76 f.; Santoni 1983, 134, 136-8; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 138 f.; Konstantakos 2005, 20 f. Ephoros in turn may have drawn on Cynic sources, since the ideas expressed by the Seven Sages (praise for wild animals, emphasis on wisdom and internal 'wealth' by contrast to material possessions) have distinctly Cynic colouring, and the Cynics were keenly interested in Anacharsis and Aesop; see Santoni 1983, 137 f.; Kindstrand 1981, 79 f.

questions posed by Kroisos and answered with great outspokenness by the sages, Diodoros' narrative concludes with a brief reference to Aesop (9.28): the latter was a contemporary of the sages and remarked that they did not know how to behave towards a ruler; for one should associate with rulers either as little as possible or in such a way as to please them as much as possible (ὡς ἥκιστα … ἢ ὡς ἥδιστα). It is plausible to suppose that this section belongs together with the foregoing narrative, in which the sages were indeed shown boldly speaking to a ruler, and comes as Aesop's response to the sages' outspokenness. In that case, Aesop's words must also be drawn from Ephoros. The storyline is again based on a riddle of the superlative: Aesop's statement might be the answer to a question like «what is the best way to associate with a ruler»[68]. Although such a question is not expressly put to Aesop in Diodoros' account, the story appears to presuppose the circulation of anecdotes in which Aesop solved superlative riddles. Such anecdotes must therefore have been already current in Ephoros' time. In addition, Aristophanes (*Av.* 471-5) attributes to Aesop an aetiological fable arguing that the lark was born first of all the birds. This passage implies the same kind of dialogue, with a question like «which is the oldest bird» answered by Aesop's fable[69]. In that case, Aesop's association with superlative riddles would go back to the 5th century.

In other anecdotes Aesop answers questions about general qualities or concepts (a type of problem akin to riddles of the superlative, see section 1.1 above): e.g. «what does Zeus (or the gods) do», «how should a man approach politics», «when will things become bad for people», and «what is peculiar to humankind»[70]. Significantly, Aesop's answer to the first of these questions («Zeus lowers those that are high and upraises those that are low», τὰ μὲν ὑψηλὰ ταπεινῶν, τὰ δὲ ταπεινὰ ὑψῶν or similar phrases) is itself a kind of riddle relying on paradox: the combination of contradictory qualities is a distinctive technique of enigmas in the narrow and proper sense[71]. Elsewhere in the gnomological and fable tradition Aesop is asked difficult questions on topics of moral or social nature: e.g. «why rich people do not go to wise men but vice versa», «what profit liars extract from their lies», or «why women offer dowry to their husbands and not vice versa»[72]. The last question comes from the collection of fables included in Pseudo-Dositheos' *Hermeneumata* and Ae-

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[68] Cf. Jedrkiewicz 1997, 87. The same statement is attributed to Aesop in Plu. *Sol.* 28.1.

[69] Cf. La Penna 1962, 304.

[70] See D.L. 1.69; Gnomol. Vat. 553; Stob. 4.41.61, III p. 945 Hense (*Sent.* 9 Perry: ὁ Ζεὺς τί εἴη ποιῶν or τί πράττουσιν οἱ θεοί); Perry 1952, 252 (*Sent.* 18: πῶς ἂν προσέλθοι πολιτείᾳ); Gnomol. Vat. 127 (*Sent.* 10: πότε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἔσται κακῶς); *P. Mich.* inv. 25.8-10 (Gallo 1980, 438, 444 f.: ἐρωτηθεὶς [τί ἴδιόν ἐστιν ἀνθρ]ώπου εἶπεν· λύπη). All these questions can be reformulated as superlative riddles: «what is it that Zeus or the gods do *par excellence*», «what is the best way of approaching politics», «when will things become worse than ever», and «what is the quality most distinctive of humankind».

[71] See D.L. 1.69; Gnomol. Vat. 553. Cf. Zeitz 1936, 234 f., and on paradox as a constituent of enigmas Konstantakos 2003, 100 f. and Konstantakos 2004, 128, with more references and bibliography. For this kind of pattern (the addressee answers a riddle posed to him with another riddle of the same or a different type) see *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* § 10 West = vv. 140-5 Allen (above, note 48); D.S. 9.27.4; D.L. 1.77; Verg. *ecl.* 3.104-7; LXX *Jd.* 14.12-8; Konstantakos 2010, 338 f.

[72] See Perry 1952, 252 f. (*Sent.* 19 and 24) with a list of sources; Ps.-Dosith. *Fab.* 15 Hausrath.

sop responds to it with a fable. Compare the naturalist problems solved by means of a parable or fable in the *Vita* (§§ 35-7, 48, 67, see above, section 1.1, no. 2).

Aesop appears as the protagonist of riddle-episodes in some versified fables of Phaedrus (first half of 1st century A.D.), who must have been active at about the same time as the *Vita*-Author or slightly earlier. In one of these tales (Phaedr. 3.3) Aesop gives a rationalistic explanation to a portent. The ewes of a certain man give birth to human-headed lambs and the diviners interpret this prodigy as an omen of evil. Aesop, however, advises the man to provide wives for the shepherds of his flocks. The same story is related by Plutarch (*Conv. sept. sap.* 149C-E) but with Thales in the role of the wise explicator. The version with Thales (traditionally a connoisseur and expounder of mysterious natural phenomena) must have been the original one, and subsequently someone, perhaps Phaedrus himself, transferred the story to Aesop[73]. As noted above (section 1.1, no. 6), omens and portents are closely related to riddles. Aesop's manner of explanation itself presents conspicuous analogies to the solution of an enigma. Aesop explains a paradoxical being that combines incongruous elements (lamb's body and human head) in a rationalistic way, as a result of a 'natural' process which could lead to the conjunction of those elements[74]. Similarly, the solver of an enigma sorts out a paradoxical description, usually made up of contradictory or incompatible elements, in a logical manner by proposing an existing object that can correspond to all those elements in one way or another, whether literally or metaphorically.

In Phaedrus 4.5 Aesop sagaciously explains a dead man's will that has been enigmatically phrased. A father stipulated that his fortune should be divided among his three daughters in such a way that the three girls «neither possess nor enjoy what has been given to them» (4.5.10: *ni data possideant aut fruantur*). This self-contradictory formulation, practically reducible to an *adynaton* (the daughters must in fact «not possess what they will possess»), renders the will equivalent to an enigma[75]. Aesop disentangles the verbal paradox by suggesting that each daughter be given the portion of the fortune that least suits her own character and desires. The city house, its furniture and wine-cellar must be given to the hard-working daughter living in the country; the farmhouse, fields and flocks to the licentious beauty living in the city; and the fine clothes and jewels to the ugly girl prone to drinking.

In another tale of Phaedrus (3.14) Aesop appears in the opposite role, posing himself the riddle. An Athenian laughs at Aesop for playing in the company of children. Aesop then places an unstrung bow in the middle of the road and challenges the Athenian to interpret this act. The man meditates for long but cannot find any meaning in Aesop's gesture, so Aesop finally gives away the solution: «If you keep a bow continuously stretched tight, you will soon break it, but if you keep it relaxed, it will always be ready for use when you need it» – a metaphor well illustrating the

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[73] See Konstantakos 2005, 23 f. for discussion; also Hausrath 1936, 86 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 59, 140 f.; Hershbell 1986, 182; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 71; Oberg 2000, 122-5. Compare how other stories about members of the Seven Sages (Bias or Pittakos) have been transferred to Aesop in the *Vita* (§§ 51-5, 69-73, see above, section 1.1, nos. 3 and 4).

[74] Aesop's explanation is of course impossible in biological terms, but this has no importance for the mechanics of the solution that are under discussion here.

[75] Cf. Schönberger 1975, 185 f.; De Maria 1987, 110; Oberg 2000, 169-72.

necessity of play and recreation in life. What Aesop propounds to the Athenian is in fact a 'picture-riddle', an image with a hidden symbolic meaning, functioning as a visual enigma: the stretched bow and the unstrung one are visual metaphors for serious work and relaxing play respectively[76]. This anecdote is obviously based on an earlier tale related by Herodotus about the Pharaoh Amasis. At least from the 4th century B.C. there was also a version featuring Anacharsis in the central role[77]. It was most probably Phaedrus himself that transferred this tale to Aesop[78]. However, in the earlier narratives the wise hero employed the bow only as a verbal example or simile, without posing any question about it. Phaedrus, on the other hand, has transformed the plain simile of earlier stories into a proper riddle: he presents Aesop setting down a real bow and proposing it as a puzzle to his interlocutor. This new form of the story betrays the influence of the tradition associating Aesop with riddles.

The same tradition is reflected in Plutarch's *Convivium septem sapientium*, in which Aesop appears as a character, participating along with the Seven Sages in a banquet organized by Periandros of Corinth. In the course of a conversation on *auloi*, Aesop mentions to the company a relevant enigma of Kleobouline (150E-F: «A dead donkey struck me on the ear with its horn-bearing shin», meaning the Phrygian *aulos* which was manufactured from a donkey's shin-bone). Later in the narrative (154B-C), when the physician Kleodoros speaks contemptuously of Kleobouline's riddles, Aesop propounds to him one of those («I saw a man sticking bronze on another one with fire», referring to a copper cupping-glass), but Kleodoros cannot guess the solution[79]. These are enigmas in the proper sense, based on the techniques of metaphor and paradox.

Three main factors must have contributed to the association of Aesop with riddles. One of them was Aesop's close connection with the Seven Sages, established already from the 4th century B.C. or the early Hellenistic age and reflected in several narratives[80]. The Seven Sages, in their turn, were regularly shown propounding or

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[76] On the 'picture-riddle' (*Bilderrätsel*) see Konstantakos 2008, I 195 f. with examples and bibliography.

[77] Hdt. 2.173: when Amasis was criticized for entertaining himself at symposia, he replied that a bow would break, if one kept it constantly stretched, and similarly a man will become crazy or suffer a stroke if he ceaselessly works without recreation. Gnomol. Vat. 17 and other collections (for lists of sources see Sternbach 1963, 11; Kindstrand 1981, 109, 129 f.): when reproved for playing with knucklebones, Anacharsis answered that, just as bows break if continuously stretched, so a man's mind is sickened if it always stays attached to the same things. According to Kindstrand 1981, 129 f., the version with Anacharsis was already current in the 5th century, simultaneously with the Herodotean version about Amasis. However, allusions to the Anacharsis version are not found before Aristotle (*EN* 1176b 33-5, cf. Praechter 1912, 472 f.). In later authors the simile of the bow is used as a proverbial expression; see Praechter 1912, 472-6; Aly 1969, 60 f.; Müller 1989, 234-6 with many examples.

[78] See Thiele 1906, 584 f.; Hausrath 1936, 87; Müller 1989, 234.

[79] See respectively Kleobouline 3 (κνήμη νεκρὸς ὄνος με κερασφόρῳ οὖας ἔκρουσεν) and 1.1 West (ἄνδρ᾽ εἶδον πυρὶ χαλκὸν ἐπ᾽ ἀνέρι κολλήσαντα). On the legendary Kleobouline, daughter of Kleoboulos of Lindos, and her famous riddles see Konstantakos 2005, 15-7 with references and bibliography.

[80] See Ephoros' account about the Seven Sages and Aesop at Kroisos' court (D.S. 9.26-8) and the Hellenistic story of μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ (both discussed above); also Alexis fr. 9, where Aesop appears conversing with Solon. If the statue of Aesop in front of the Seven Sages attributed to

solving riddles in many stories from the 5th or 4th century onwards[81]. The riddling activity could thus easily be transferred from the sages to Aesop, their frequent and close companion. The transfer can actually be documented with concrete examples. Some of the tales about Aesop as a riddler are demonstrably adaptations of stories originally concerning a member of the Seven Sages: see Phaedrus 3.3 (based on a story about Thales) and 3.14 (if inspired by the version with Anacharsis). In the *Vita Aesopi* the *adynaton* of drinking up the sea (§§ 69-73) and the episode of the pigs' tongues (§§ 51-5) apply to Aesop tales formerly circulating about Bias or Pittakos. It may thus be conjectured that 'riddle-stories' about the Seven Sages were being transferred to Aesop from a relatively early age, and this triggered off the development of an entire tradition of similar narratives about the fabulist. Other stories, like the one explaining the proverb μᾶλλον ὁ Φρύξ, characteristically show Aesop solving riddles in the company of the Seven Sages or in competition with them. Similarly, in D.L. 1.69 the enigmatic question («what does Zeus do») is put to Aesop by one of the sages, Chilon, while in the alternative version of the story in Gnomol. Vat. and other sources the roles are reversed. Aesop's involvement with superlative riddles in particular reminds us that in antiquity this kind of riddle was preeminently associated with the Seven Sages.

The second factor has to do with the generic affinity between the enigma and the fable of 'Aesopic' type. The ancient Greeks' keen awareness of this affinity can be primarily detected in terminology: the same or etymologically kindred words were applied to both enigmas and fables. The oldest Greek term for fable is αἶνος, a word derived from the same root as αἴνιγμα[82], and occasionally the enigma itself might be designated as αἶνος. For instance, the well-known 'riddle of Panarkes' – a typical specimen of enigma in the narrow and proper sense, made up of a sequence of para-doxes – is regularly termed αἶνος in ancient sources[83]. The use of αἶνος for enigmas is also recorded by various grammarians, rhetoricians and scholiasts[84]. Conversely,

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Lysippos (APl. 332) was genuine, it must have been created at about the same period. Generally on this association see Zeitz 1936, 232 f., 242-5, 256; Defradas 1954, 23-6; La Penna 1962, 281 f., 294-8; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 66, 135-43, 161; Puppini 1991, 194-6; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 124-6; Adrados 1999, 273, 652 f.; Jouanno 2006, 11 f., 196 f.

[81] See Konstantakos 2005, 14-24 for detailed discussion.

[82] For αἶνος = fable see Hes. *Op.* 202; Archil. fr. 174.1, 185.1 West; later Call. *Iamb.* 4, fr. 194.6 Pfeiffer; Theoc. 14.43; D.S. 33.7.5; Konon, *FGrHist* 26 F 1.42 (= Phot. *Bibl.* 186, 139b 8) etc.

[83] «A man who was not a man, seeing and not seeing a bird that was not a bird sitting on wood that was not wood, hit it and did not hit it with a stone that was not a stone» – meaning a one-eyed eunuch who threw a pumice stone at a bat sitting on a reed but missed it. See Panarkes, *IE*[2] II pp. 93 f. West (αἶνός τίς ἐστιν ὡς ἀνήρ τε κοὐκ ἀνήρ etc.); Klearchos fr. 95a-b Wehrli (= Sch. Pl. *R.* 479c, p. 235 Greene, Eust. *in Il.* II pp. 580.10-581.1 van der Valk); Suda αι 230, ν 578. Cf. van Dijk 1997, 81 f.; Adrados 1999, 7 f.

[84] See Theon *Prog.* p. 74.1 f. Spengel; Sch. Hom. *Od.* 14.508 (II p. 600 Dindorf); Eust. *in Od.* II pp. 84.8-12, 219.44 f. Some of these passages may be specifically inspired by the use of αἶνος for Panarkes' riddle. Nonetheless, they collectively indicate that this application of the term was a more widespread habit.

the term αἴνιγμα could occasionally be employed for an Aesopic fable, at least in the imperial age[85].

The kinship between enigmas and fables relies on the fact that both genres are based on ambiguity. They both employ the techniques of metaphor and analogy in order to operate on a double level of meaning, hiding a deeper symbolic sense under their literal surface. The Aesopic fable (*ainos*) is an allegorical story alluding to another specific situation: every element (personage, incident etc.) of the fable's scenario functions as a symbol or metaphor for a corresponding element of the actual situation alluded to. The person to whom the fable is told is required to discover the hidden meaning of the story by correlating the symbolic elements with the actual ones. Similarly, the enigma is a cryptic description consisting of a sequence of metaphors that allude to the various constituents of an existing object. The solver must decode these metaphors, finding the actual element represented in each case, so as to finally reconstruct the object of the enigma[86]. Indeed, there are Greek enigmas, some of them apparently very old, which take precisely the form of a brief allegorical tale, looking like small cryptic fables[87]. By virtue of this affinity of genres, Aesop, the emblematic creator of fables/αἶνοι, could also be connected with the related form of the enigma proper and by extension with other kinds of riddle.

Plutarch indicates his own awareness of this generic affinity in his *Convivium septem sapientium*, casting it in the form of fiction. Aesop, the fabulist *par excellence*, and Kleobouline, the famous creator of enigmas, have a close familiarity and relationship with one another in the narrative, and each one of them appropriates the other's peculiar genre. Aesop defends Kleobouline and her riddles in face of Kleodoros' contemptuous comments (154B-C) and actually recites enigmas of hers on two occasions in the course of the sympotic conversation (150E, 154B-C). On the other hand, Kleobouline relates a brief story (157A-B) which very much resembles Aesopic fables: the Moon (Selene) asked her mother to weave for her a garment such as to fit her; but her mother replied in wonder: «How could I make it fit you, since at one time you are full and round, at another time you are crescent-shaped, and at still another gibbous?»[88]. The archetypal teller of fables and the emblematic representative of the enigma exchange their literary genres and virtually occupy each other's place. In this way Plutarch fictionalizes the generic affinity of fables and rid-

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[85]   See S.E. *Math.* 8.103 (κατὰ τὸ Αἰσώπειον αἴνιγμα, referring to fable 35 Hausrath); Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 32.2 (τῷ Φρυγίῳ τούτῳ αἰνίγματι for a variant of fable 22 Hausrath).

[86]   On the affinity between fable/αἶνος and enigma see most notably Hausrath 1909, 1704 f.; Ohlert 1912, 3, 124-6; Josifović 1974, 17-20; Nagy 1979, 237-41; West 1984, 106 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 184-9, 292 f.; Puppini 1991, 196-8; Payen 1994, 50-9; van Dijk 1997, 79-82, 97, 113; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 49 f., 95; Adrados 1999, 5-9, 40, 204 f. That Aesop's presentation as a riddle-solver reflects this generic affinity is also noted by Adrados 1999, 7 f., 204; cf. van Dijk 1997, 104, 113.

[87]   Examples of this type of enigma are Panarkes' riddle (current among children in Plato's time, see Pl. *R.* 479b-c); the enigmas attributed to the legendary Kleobouline (1-3 West), which must have been circulating from the 5th century B.C. (see Konstantakos 2005, 16); the riddle ascribed to Simonides in Ath. 10.456C-E (= Chamaileon fr. 34 Wehrli), which draws on old folk material (see Reitzenstein 1893, 116-9; Wehrli 1957, 83); the riddle in the Hesiodic *Wedding of Keyx* (fr. 266a, 266c M-W); the popular riddle (τὸ περιφερόμενον) in Ath. 10.457B-C; and further AP 14.19, 14.53, App. Anth. 7.28, 7.35. See in general Konstantakos 2000, 184-6.

[88]   This tale has actually been collected by Perry as Aesopic fable no. 468.

dles, turning it into a narrative association between the legendary figures embodying these genres. Another such instance of fictionalization involves Kleoboulos of Lindos, Kleobouline's father, who was himself traditionally regarded as a composer of riddles. Although Kleoboulos does not propound any of his riddles in the *Convivium*, Plutarch eruditely alludes to his well-known expertise in this field by having Bias consult with Kleoboulos in order to solve the riddle of the Ethiopian king (151C)[89]. On the other hand, Kleoboulos also narrates an Aesopic animal fable in the course of the symposium (157B)[90].

A final factor contributing to Aesop's association with riddles was the hero's own nature and characteristics. Aesop embodies a paradox because he is distinguished by contradictory qualities. He is extremely ugly in his outward appearance but has great intelligence and wisdom; in other words, he is both ugly (in body) and beautiful (in mind). Furthermore, he comes from the lowest strata of society, being a barbarian and slave, yet he surpasses in intelligence his social superiors, Greeks and free men, outwitting them or teaching them lessons. This paradox is most clearly brought out in the *Vita*, where Aesop is emphatically portrayed as a paragon of ugliness but consistently proves cleverer than his superiors (Xanthos, his disciples, the citizens of Samos, and even kings like Kroisos, Lykoros and Nektanebo). The same characteristics, however, were already present in earlier traditions about Aesop, going back to the 5th or 4th century B.C.[91] Aesop is a living paradox, and by virtue of this he may also be regarded as a living enigma, since paradox is a standard and distinctive technique of the enigmatic genre[92]. A further analogy is also to be noted. The enigma hides its true meaning under a dissimilar, illusory formulation. It states one thing but in fact means something different which lies concealed under metaphors and obscure allusions. Similarly, Aesop hides his true nature under an entirely unfitting and illusory outward appearance (his ugly physique, which regularly misleads people into assuming that he must be of no worth). In all these aspects, Aesop embodies the mechanics and poetics of riddles. It is as though the basic constituents of the enigma

[89]   On Kleoboulos' association with riddles and his role in Plutarch's narrative see Konstantakos 2005, 15-7 with further bibliography.

[90]   On the relationship between Aesop and Kleobouline/Kleoboulos in the *Convivium* cf. Defradas 1954, 26; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 78; Puppini 1991, 196-8; García Gual 1994, 608 f., 612; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 83 f., 86, 89 f., 94 f.; Lo Cascio 1997, 31, 48 f. In the Near East the kinship between riddles and fables found a similarly fictionalized expression. The Queen of Sheba, another archetypal riddler, famous for her riddle-contest with Solomon, is considered in some Arabic stories to be a descendant of Luqman, the emblematic creator of fables in Islamic tradition; see Chastel 1939, 34.

[91]   Aesop's slavery is already mentioned by Hdt. 2.134 and his barbarian origins by the 5th-century historian Euagon (*FGrHist* 535 F 4 = Suda αι 334) and then by Aristotle (fr. 573 Rose = Sch. Ar. *Av.* 471b, Heraclid. Lemb. Περὶ πολιτειῶν 33, p. 24 Dilts). His ugliness must also have formed part of the earlier tradition: see the famous 5th-century cylix (*ARV*² 916 no. 183) which portrays a misshapen and big-headed man conversing with a fox and is commonly considered as a depiction of Aesop; cf. Schefold 1997, 40, 86 f., 487 f.; Konstantakos 2008, II 163 f. with more bibliography. As for Aesop's intelligence, this is inherent in his talent for composing wise fables, his cardinal feature in the entire Greek tradition. In addition, Aristotle relates stories that show Aesop demonstrating his intelligence before the Samian citizens or teaching them by means of his fables (*Rh.* 1393b 22-1394a 1, fr. 573 Rose).

[92]   On Aesop as a living paradox cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989, 73-82; Adrados 1999, 677 f.

have taken concrete shape and animate existence in Aesop's paradoxical and truth-concealing figure.

In this respect Aesop may be compared with another archetypal riddler of the Greek tradition: Oedipus, the famous solver of the Sphinx's enigma. Oedipus is also a living riddle. His incestuous marriage to his mother has entangled him into an intricate web of ambiguous and paradoxical family relationships: he is at the same time his own mother's son and husband, father and brother of his own children, son and erotic rival of his own father[93]. Each one of these relationships is a combination of contradictory and normally incompatible elements, and all of them together form a sequence of paradoxes like those regularly found in enigmas. Thus, Oedipus, the animate enigma, was naturally turned into the riddler *par excellence* of Greek myths, the hero whose entire course of life (his elevation to kingship and glory, but also his final fall into ignominy) was fatally sealed by a riddle. As in Aesop's case, the personage embodying the distinctive qualities of a riddle is also associated with riddles in the narrative tradition.

Epilogue

It is time to sum up the main points of the preceding discussion. Riddles and kindred problems are a central theme in the *Vita Aesopi* and play an important role in the structure of its narrative. They punctuate the action, following the hero in his gradual rise from slavery and lowliness to freedom, victories and glory, and abandoning him only at the moment of his fatal doom. This narrative use of riddles, which can be paralleled from other near-contemporary Greek and Latin fictions, was adopted and developed by the *Vita*-Author in order to enhance the structural cohesion and integration of his work. However, Aesop's association with riddles was not an invention of the *Vita*-Author. There was an earlier tradition of stories presenting Aesop as a solver or creator of riddles, traceable back to the 4th or even the 5th century B.C. This tradition seems to have particularly flourished in the 1st century A.D., around the time of composition of the original *Vita*. It was consciously cultivated by Plutarch and Phaedrus, two writers who were roughly contemporary with the *Vita*-Author but do not appear to have known the *Vita Aesopi* and are not dependent on it. It may thus be supposed that in the early imperial age Aesop's appearance in stories about riddles became something of a vogue or fashion. It is this fashion that all three aforementioned authors follow and reflect in their writings. Working independently and presumably unaware of each other's output, Plutarch, Phaedrus and the *Vita*-Author must have drawn on a common repository of stories, and each one of them expanded and enriched this repository with his own contributions.

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[93] See especially the riddling descriptions of Oedipus in Soph. *OT* 457-60 (παισὶ τοῖς αὑτοῦ ξυνὼν / ἀδελφὸς αὐτὸς καὶ πατήρ, κἀξ ἧς ἔφυ / γυναικὸς υἱὸς καὶ πόσις, καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς / ὁμόσπορός τε καὶ φονεύς, cf. ibid. 1406 f.) and Sen. *Phoen.* 134-7 (*avi gener patrisque rivalis sui, / frater suorum liberum et fratrum parens; / uno avia partu liberos peperit viro / sibi et nepotes*). Cf. Chiarini 1983, 272.

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Abstract. Riddles and related intellectual problems are a recurrent theme in the *Vita Aesopi* and play a significant part in the structure of its narrative. The solution and propounding of such problems accompany the central hero in his gradual rise from slavery and lowliness to power and glory, abandoning him only at the moment of his final doom. In this respect, the *Vita* is comparable to other near-contemporary narrative works, such as the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* and the *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*, where riddles have a similar structural function. Aesop's association with riddles was not invented by *Vita*-Author but has roots in earlier legendary tradition. It is a fictionalized expression of the generic affinity between the riddle and the Aesopic fable, an affinity the Greeks were keenly aware of. Other influential factors were Aesop's connection with the Seven Sages, traditionally regarded as master riddlers, and his paradoxical combination of contradictory qualities (physical ugliness and inner beauty), which made Aesop a living enigma. Other writers contemporary with the *Vita*-Author, such as Plutarch and Phaedrus, also exploited Aesop's association with riddles in their works.

Keywords. Aesop, riddle, fable.