

Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond

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The Literary Life of a Fictional Life: Aesop in Antiquity and Byzantium

Grammatiki A. Karla

Aesop, both a fictional and historical figure, is held to be the inventor of well-known tales of animals. He is said to have lived in the 7th c. BC, and there exists a number of literary testimonies from antiquity that refer to him (Herodotus, Aristophanes, etc.).¹ These agree on three main points: Aesop is linked to tales about animals; he had been a slave; and he met a tragic end at Delphi. These points become the narrative threads in a lengthy imaginary biography known as the *Life of Aesop* (henceforward *Life*).

The author of the *Life* is anonymous and there is no consensus over the date and place of composition of the work. The dating of a papyrus fragment from Berlin (P. Berol. 11628) to the 2nd or 3rd century AD stands as *terminus ante quem* for the *Life*, and scholars seem to agree on the dating of the archetype to the period of the 1st century BC – 2nd century AD.² The question of where the work was composed is, however, still open. Perry's suggestion that it was written in Egypt is not convincing, because the arguments he employs – the role of Isis as leader of the Muses (Μουσωναγωγός), the hostility towards Apollo and the mentioning of Nectanebo –³ do not definitively prove that the *Life* originated there. More appealing is the view that the anonymous author of the *Life* is likely to have been a bilingual scholar from somewhere in the East, who was familiar with both Greek and Eastern literature.⁴

¹ The “Testimonia de Aesopo Fabulisque Aesopiis” are to be found in Perry, *Aesopica*, pp. 211–41.

² On the different suggestions regarding the date of the archetype, see Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, pp. 8–9; Konstantakos, *Αἰχάρος* III, pp. 62–64.

³ Perry, *Studies*, pp. 24–26; Perry, *Aesopica*, p. 5.

⁴ Konstantakos, *Αἰχάρος* III, pp. 347–51, 554.

The language is popular *koine* with many elements from the vernacular and from oral language.⁵ The vocabulary also includes rare words and phrases, some of which are not found in other literary texts.⁶

Textual Tradition

The textual tradition of the *Life* is particularly rich. There are five papyrus fragments ranging from the 2nd/3rd century AD to the 6th/7th century.⁷ Furthermore, the manuscript tradition of the text is divided into the following three versions:

1. Version G or Perriana (named after its first editor, Ben Edwin Perry),⁸ is transmitted in a single manuscript, codex 397 of Pierpont Morgan Library New York (G) from the early 11th century.⁹ This is the most ancient manuscript of the *Life*, and in all likelihood the text transmitted therein is the one closest to the archetype.¹⁰
2. Version W or Westermanniana (named after its first editor, Anton Westermann)¹¹ consists of two recensions, MORN and BPTHSA.¹² The text transmitted in this version is briefer than that in the Perriana (G), but in some cases it has material from the archetype that does not exist in G,

5 For the language of *Life* see Papademetriou, Αἰσώπεια, pp. 15–18; Karla, “Fictional Biography”; see also the specialized studies by Hostetter, *A Linguistic Study*, and Stamoulakis, Το λεξιλόγιο της Μυθιστορίας.

6 Ruiz Montero, “Niveles de lengua”, p. 607, singles out no less than 45 *hapax legomena*. For rare and late words and new or late meanings and uses, see Hostetter, *A Linguistic Study*, pp. 108–14.

7 Perry, *Studies*, pp. 39–70; Haslam, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 48, pp. 53–56; id., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 53, pp. 149–72; Ferrari, “POxy 3331 e Vita Aesopi 18”, p. 296.

8 Perry, *Aesopica*, pp. 35–77.

9 According to Husselman, “A Lost Manuscript”, p. 104, and Perry, “Text Tradition”, p. 198, the ms. dates back to the 10/11th century. This manuscript also preserves a fragment of an earlier translation in Greek of the work *Kalila and Dimna* (fol. 1–7). On this issue see the chapter by B. Krönung in the present volume pp. 427–62.

10 Karla, “Die älteste Version”.

11 Westermann, *Vita Aesopi*.

12 Both recensions are named after the initials of the mss.: M (Monacensis gr. 525; 14th century); O (Baroccianus 194, 15th century); R (Vaticanus gr. 1192, 14th century); N (Parisinus gr. 2894, 13th century); B (Londinensis Add. gr. 17015, 15th century); P (Vaticanus Palatinus gr. 269); Th (Thessalonicensis Bibliothecae Universitatis 86, 11th century); S (Mosquensis G.I.M. 436, 13th century); A (Atheniensis, Benaki Museum 53 (TA 72), 13th /14th century).

and it survives in many more manuscripts, which implies that it had a wider transmission. It was probably from this version (W), and more specifically from *recensio* MORN, that the Latin translation of the *Life*, the so-called Lolliniana, originated. This is named after the Lolliniana library of Belluno/Italy, where the 14th century codex 26, transmitting chapters 1–88a, is held. Another Latin translation of the *Life* and Fables of Aesop was produced by Rinuccio da Castiglione of Arezzo in 1448, who apparently used a Greek manuscript belonging to the *recensio* BPTHSA (perhaps an immediate ancestor of the manuscript P).¹³

3. The Byzantine version of the *Life*, the Accursiana (named after the first editor, Bonus Accursius, 1479/80) or Planoudean version, probably also derives from the Westermanniana, and, more precisely, from a manuscript of the *recensio* BPTHSA.¹⁴ This reduction is a transposition of the *Life* in a more erudite linguistic register by the monk Maximos Planoudes (14th century). It is transmitted in at least 30 manuscripts, although there is only one edition, produced by Eberhardt in 1872.
4. There are also four *metaphrases* (translations), in a low register, dating to the early Modern Greek period (16th–17th century).¹⁵

Plot

The *Life* begins by defining Aesop's 'professional profile' (βιωφελέστατος "great benefactor", λογοποιός "story teller"),¹⁶ his social status (δοῦλος "slave"), his origin (Φρύξ ἐξ Ἀμορίου τῆς Φρυγίας "in Amorium of Phrygia"), as well as his appearance, through a catalogue of his ugly physical characteristics. Special mention is also made of his difficulty in enunciating correctly. After this introduction (ch. 1) and an episode that takes place in the house of Aesop's master (chs. 2–3), the narrative then centers on a miraculous event (the intervention of the Goddess Isis), during which Aesop acquires "excellent speech" (τὸν ἄριστον λόγον) and the ability "to knit and compose Greek fables" (μύθων Ἑλληνικῶν πλοκὴν καὶ ποιήσεις) (ch. 7). Subsequently, he is sold to the philosopher Xanthos in Samos, and several amusing encounters between the erudite

¹³ Perry, "Rinuccio's Aesop".

¹⁴ Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, pp. 58–61.

¹⁵ Editions of these Early Modern Greek translations are in Papathomopoulos, Πέντε δημῶδεις μεταφράσεις and Eideneier, *Äsop*.

¹⁶ All references to the text of the *Life* are taken mainly from version G, primarily from the edition of Ferrari, *Romanzo di Esopo*, and the translation of Wills, *The Quest*, pp. 177–225.

master and his witty slave are recorded. In these episodes the ugly and uneducated slave proves himself superior to the philosopher of repute (chs. 20–91). After he successfully interprets a riddle for the Samians, and offers them, as a result, wise political advice regarding the threat posed by Croesus, Aesop wins his freedom and travels to the court of the Persian king, where, by means of his clever tales, he earns the admiration of the king and, along with it, the promise of peace for his fellow Samians. He returns to the island in triumph, and is awarded special honours by the population (chs. 92–100). The narrative now leaps forward in time and reports Aesop's decision to travel around the world. And so he does gaining recognition and honours everywhere. In Babylon, at the court of King Lycoros, Aesop is offered a high administrative position, when he helps the king win a series of riddle contests against his enemies – such a riddle contests having taken the place of wars – and as a result he brings prosperity to Babylon (chs. 101–23). Aesop, however, decides to continue his journey around the world, until he arrives at Delphi. There, contrary to his expectations, he is not welcomed by the residents of the city. He then tells them an insulting tale, whereupon the people of Delphi make false accusations against him and sentence him to death. Aesop tries to save his life by narrating various tales, but in vain. Without any hesitation the people of Delphi drive him to the edge of a cliff and push him over. Shortly afterwards the city is afflicted by a disease. However, “when the Greeks, Babylonians, and Samians heard of Aesop's execution they avenged his death” (chs. 124–42).

Structure

An article published by Holzberg in 1992 has been very influential in spreading the view that the *Life* is a literary work, complete in itself. In contrast to those critics who suggested that the *Life* is merely a conglomeration of elements drawn at random from various sources, he proposed a literary reappraisal of the work and through structural analysis demonstrated the unity and cohesion of the *Life*. In his article, Holzberg divides the *Life* into five units, in accordance with the structure of a New Comedy play:

1. Introduction / Pre-history (1–19)
2. Aesop and Xanthos (20–91)
 - 2.1. Aesop comes as slave to the house of Xanthos (20–33)
 - 2.2. Aesop plays tricks on his master (34–64)
 - 2.3. Aesop helps his master ([65–67] 68–91)
3. Aesop helps the Samians (92–100)

4. Aesop helps the king of Babylon Lycoros (101–123)
5. Aesop in Delphi: he cannot help himself (124–142).¹⁷

Recently, Ruiz-Montero also divided the *Life* into five units, and uses Propp's morphology of the folk tale¹⁸ to study the composition of the text.¹⁹ However, the five units can be reduced to three large units,²⁰ which in turn may be divided into smaller sections as follows:

A. Chs. 1–100 Aesop as slave

- Ch. 1 prooemium (origin, social status, and description of Aesop)
- Chs. 2–9 (miracle of Isis, restitution of Justice) “Birth” of the *logopoios*.
- Chs. 10–20 (10–11 Aesop is handed over to Zenas – a kind of first sale for Aesop; 12–20 Aesop is sold to the slave trader Ophelion – Aesop is sold for a second time)
- Chs. 21–100 Aesop in Samos
 - Chs. 21–27: Aesop is sold to Xanthos (third sale for Aesop)
 - Chs. 28–80: various humorous episodes involving Aesop and Xanthos
 - Chs. 81–98: Aesop and the Samians. Aesop wins his freedom
 - Chs. 99–100: Aesop and Croesus. Aesop returns to Samos (conclusion of the first part – deification of Aesop)

B. Chs. 101–23: Aesop in the service of the Babylonian king Lycoros.

- 101–11: Aesop at the court of Lycoros, in Babylon.
- 112–23: Aesop at the court of Nectanebo in Memphis. His return to Babylon (conclusion of the second part – deification of Aesop)

C. Chs. 124–42: Aesop at Delphi and his death

- The cause (the insult and the reaction of the people of Delphi)
- Aesop is imprisoned and condemned to death.
- Aesop's various attempts to save himself (narration of fables, refuge to the sanctuary of the Muses)
- Aesop's death and deification.

¹⁷ Holzberg, “Strukturanalytische Interpretation”, p. 41. The model of the five-section division of the *Life* has been accepted by several critics who proposed in turn a number of minor changes; cf. for instance Merkle, “Fable”, pp. 212–13, 217–19; Jouanno, *Vie d'Ésope*, p. 28; Hägg, *The Art of Biography*, p. 112; Ruiz-Montero, “The Life of Aesop”, p. 259.

¹⁸ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

¹⁹ Ruiz-Montero, “The Life of Aesop”.

²⁰ This tripartite structure of the *Life* is also proposed in Papadementriou, *Αἰσώπεια καὶ Αἰσωπικά*, pp. 21–22.

As regards the first part in particular (chapters 1–100), it is probable that it may have originally been an independent narrative, and that the author of the *Life* incorporated it into his own story, having made the necessary changes. Such a thesis rests on external (title, closure) and internal elements (transformation of the figure of the protagonist, setting, fables, register of language /style).²¹ In particular:

- The title of the oldest manuscript (G), which may preserve the version closest to the archetype (G, Perriana), is “The Book of Xanthos the Philosopher and Aesop his Slave. On Aesop’s Way/Reversal of Life”.²² This title captures perfectly the content of part one.
- Chapter 100 records the surrendering of the Aesopean fables to the library of King Croesus and the foundation of the Aesopeion in Samos, the deification, that is, of the hero. The dedication of a book (usually of the tale itself) in a temple is a method of closure employed in two ancient novels (*Ephesiaca*, *Apollonii Historia*) and in aretalogies.²³
- The following chapters 101–23 (which build the so called Babylonian section of the *Life*) are themselves simply a rewriting of the very old *Story of Ahiqar*, a folktale of oriental (may-be Babylonian or Persian) origin, which circulated in Aramaic as earlier as 500 BC (as a papyrus fragment from Elephantine witnesses), and was probably available in Greek since the early Hellenistic period. The fact that this part of the *Life* organically incorporates an independent text strengthens the hypothesis that the Samos-section

21 On this topic, see Holzberg, “Strukturanalytische Interpretation”, pp. 64–65 with particular emphasis to the chapters 92–100; Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, pp. 12–14. According to Hägg, “A Professor and his Slave”, p. 183, “the introductory part is a mixture of old (*pharmakos* rite) and new (Isis); the Xanthos part, which takes up half the text, is probably Hellenistic in substance; the Samos-Lydia part may be mostly a new invention; the Babylon-Memphis part has an old oriental model; the Delphi part is again a mixture of old and new”.

22 Βίβλος Ξάνθου τοῦ φιλοσόφου καὶ Αἰσώπου δούλου αὐτοῦ. Περὶ τῆς ἀναστροφῆς Αἰσώπου. See the comment on the title in Hägg “A Professor and his Slave”, pp. 183–84; Ludwig, *Sonderformen*, p. 17.

23 Aretalogy is a statement about the miraculous act (often healing) of a god. On aretalogy see especially Reitzenstein, *Wundererzählungen*, pp. 8–12; M. Haase, “Aretalogien”, as well as Jördens, “Aretalogies”. – Such reports are very often deposited in the libraries of temples: for example, the aretalogy Διὸς Ἥλιου μεγάλου Σαράπιδος ἀρετὴ ἢ περὶ Συρίωνα τὸν κυβερνήτην (“The Great Deed of Zeus-Helios-Sarapis Concerning the Helmsman Syriion”, POxy. 11, no 1382) is registered in the libraries of Mercurius. Further examples are to be found in Merkelbach “Novel and Aretalogy”, pp. 283–85. See also Merkelbach, *Isis-regina*, p. 220.

may also have originally been an independent narrative. The adaptation of the *Story of Ahikar* shows the mind of the author of the *Life* at work in how he employs his compositional technique.²⁴ With similar ease, he could have incorporated another part (the Samos-narrative) into his work as well. This second part, too, closes with the deification of the anti-hero Aesop.

- In the first part, particular emphasis is placed on the motif of Aesop's ugliness, which becomes a literary tool. This is later used in a series of antithetical pairings, notably 'external appearance/internal merit', 'ugliness/cleverness', 'servant/master', 'slave/free', or as a cause for laughter, or in order to bring about suspense and surprise alike in both the internal (intradiegetic) audience and the external receptors of the work (listening or reading audiences). The ugliness motif appears just once in the second part (ch. 121 *σαπρόμορφον καὶ κατάρατον* "unsightly and accursed fellow"),²⁵ and nowhere, not even implicitly, in the third part.
- There are notable differences in the representation of Aesop between the first and the other two parts of the *Life*. While in the second part he embodies the wise counsellor and in the third he resembles a sophist, who "traveled by way of many other cities, demonstrating his wisdom and learning" (ch. 124), in the first part, Aesop is presented as a trickster, a "picaro".
- The setting changes constantly (the market, the house of Xanthos, at a symposium, the public baths, the gardens, and the cemetery) in the first part. By contrast, in the other two parts, the setting changes less frequently.
- The use of fables, which is notably more frequent in the third section, is limited in the first part. Only three fables are included, all near the end of the section, when Aesop addresses the Samian *demos* and Croesus.
- In the first part there are many comic, even satiric elements, and the various exchanges between Aesop and Xanthos generate humor easily and promptly. Likewise, the scatological and sexual vocabulary and in general the language of obscenity (see chs. 75–76), are confined to the first part. There is also the occasional combination of prose and verse text,²⁶ and the use of lines from Euripides "to make a sententious point".²⁷

24 Konstantakos, *Αἰχίαρος* III, investigates the incorporation of the Aramaic Story of Ahikar into the *Life* and illustrates the compositional technique of the anonymous author.

25 The motif of Aesop's ugliness appears once again in ch. 112 only in Westermanniana. More on the motif of ugliness in the second part is in Konstantakos, *Αἰχίαρος* III, pp. 377–84.

26 Papathomopoulos, *Aesopus revisitatus*, pp. 19–20, suggests that the conclusion of chapter 3 consists of two iambic trimeters in G and in Westermanniana. See also Hunter, "Rhythmic Language", pp. 240–43.

27 Henderson, "The *Satyrice* and the Greek Novel", p. 489, uses this phrase to refer to the fragments of the *Iolaus*-novel (on which see the chapter by M. Fusillo in this volume, p. 33) and thus highlights its close parallels with the *Satyrice*.

- More generally, in terms of style, the difference between the first part and the other two is clear. In the first part, the narrative is structured principally in the form of internal monologues and dialogues, and as a result the narrative has suspense and speed. In the first part, the language is plain everyday speech, the sentences short and the dialogue vivid. One may also observe the switching between high and low language register, a good example of this change in style being the passages in which Xanthos addresses his students (see for example ch. 23). Here the vocabulary changes and the sentences become more complex. In the other two parts, the style is consistent. It remains plain, but the sentence structure becomes more complex.

Genre

The *Life* belongs to the literary genre of biography, because it records the life story of a character, of the protagonist (an anti-hero in this case) up to his death. It is obvious, however, that the author is not interested in recording the biography of the real Aesop. More probably, the anonymous author of the *Life* is drawing on some narrative about the life of the main hero that contains some historical truth, but he does not hesitate to enrich this narrative with a wide variety of elements. Chapters 101–23 have been inserted into Aesop's biography, as already hinted at, from a version of the *Story of Ahikar* circulating in Aramaic as early as the 5th century BC, in demotic Egyptian since at least the Ptolemaic period, and in Greek perhaps since the 4th century BC.²⁸ Anecdotes and stories pertaining to other figures, such as Hesiod, the Seven Wise Men, Socrates and Diogenes of Sinope, and oral material are also used in order to create an appealing popular work.

Notably, the medieval manuscripts that transmit the *Life*, give as a title either Βίος (“Life”) Αἰσώπου τοῦ φιλοσόφου (mss. S, A, M), or Διήγησις (“Narration”) (τοῦ) Αἰσώπου (mss. B, P). A single manuscript (V) records the title Βίος καὶ Διήγησις τοῦ βιοφιλοῦς (*sic*) Αἰσώπου (“Life and Narration of Aesop, the Useful for Life”). The oldest manuscript (G), as already pointed out, bears the title “Βίβλος Ἐάνθου Φιλοσόφου καὶ Αἰσώπου δούλου αὐτοῦ. Περὶ τῆς ἀναστροφῆς Αἰσώπου”.²⁹ Both διήγημα (tale) and βίβλος (book, writing) were used to

28 On this issue see Konstantakos, *Αχίχαρος* I, pp. 23–36, 158–66, II pp. 17–81, 225–70; also Kussl, “Achikar”; Marinčič, “The Grand Vizier”, and for additional bibliography in Beschoner/Holzberg, “Bibliography”, pp. 177–78.

29 “The Book of Xanthos the Philosopher and of Aesop his Slave. On Aesop's Way/Reversal of Life”. This title has caused much discussion. See Hägg, “A Professor and his Slave”, p. 178 and note 34.

describe some ancient Greek novels³⁰ and indeed the *Life* is extremely close to a novel in terms of the similar expectations that both generated for their readers in antiquity. This naturally, and perhaps rightly, has caused some scholars to use the term “novelistic biography” or “fictional biography” in order to describe the literary genre to which the *Life* belongs.³¹

Is there, then, any relationship between the *Life* and the comic-picaresque narrative represented in Latin literature by the *Satyricon* of Petronius and the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius? According to Adrados “... in the *Life* of Aesop and in others ... more or less parallel texts, a new genre, full of possibilities, the comic-realistic novel, was created”.³² Certain critics see in the *Life* the ancestor of “Schelmenroman”,³³ or the Spanish “picaresque novel” of the Renaissance, a genre to which *Don Quixote* belongs.³⁴

My principal objection to this view is that this characterization does not apply to the *Life*'s narrative as a whole. The first part (chapters 1–100), indeed, contains all the features one might expect to find in a comic-picaresque narrative, but this is not the case for the second part (in which the *Story of Ahikar* is incorporated), nor for the third part (the undeserved death of Aesop at Delphi). Accordingly, if we wish to regard the *Life* of Aesop as one of the earliest samples of the comic-realistic genre, then we must restrict our study to the first part.

Thus, if we accept that the first part of the *Life* (chs. 1–100) was originally a separate text, there can be no doubt that this work is a very early Greek literary example of the comic-picaresque narrative, if not the earliest. Henderson, who has recently studied this type of narrative, which, as we noted earlier, is the literary ancestor of Petronius' *Satyricon* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, has found in the papyrus fragments of the *Iolaus* and in the 41 fragments of the so-called *Protagoras* several of the above listed features that characterize the *Life*. According to Henderson, a narrative of this type should be distinctly “novelistic, prosimetric and obscene; [one] that featured ... picaresque adventures among the lower orders; that mixed high and low registers; and that included

30 The colophon to a 2nd-3rd-centuries AD papyrus fragment from Book 2 gives the title τὰ περὶ Καλλιρόην διηγήματα; see details in Whitmarsh, “Titles and Genre”, p. 590.

31 See Wills, *The Quest*, p. 23; Holzberg, “The Genre”, pp. 22–23. On the hybrid character of the *Life* as a literary genre see also Ruiz-Montero, “The Life of Aesop”, pp. 257–58.

32 Adrados, “The Life of Aesop”, p. 97.

33 Holzberg, “Ein vergessener griechischer Schelmenroman”.

34 Adrados, “The Life of Aesop”, p. 93.

parody of romantic motifs if not of romantic novels themselves”.³⁵ All these characteristics are to be found in the first part of Aesop’s *Life*.

Interaction with Other Literary Genres – Sources

Furthermore, the author of the *Life* extensively used rhetorical exercises from school texts (*progymnasmata*), such as *chreia* (anecdote), *diegema* (narrative), *enkomion* (praise), *psogos* (invective), and *mythos* (fable).³⁶ Fables make up a considerable part of the *Life*. Their presence in the text is even more significant, in that the protagonist appears both as the inventor and narrator of the stories, which aim, at the same time, to instruct, counsel, protest, or warn. Still, additional literary tropes, beyond the rhetorical techniques noted above, seem to have influenced the composition of the *Life*. A careful reader can discern several intertextual references: the text displays an intensive dialogue with other literary genres, notably novel, comedy, aretalogy, mime, and even with works of Christian literature, such as the Gospels, the lives of saints and the Apocrypha.

A number of literary motifs in the *Life* are also to be found in the Hellenistic erotic novel.³⁷ Such are the decisive role of: divine intervention, dreams and divinations, travel, attempted but just thwarted suicides, the exchange of letters, unruly crowds, the corruption of a servant or a friend (in the *Life* the corruption of Aesop’s adopted son), the buying and selling of slaves, and, finally, *Scheintod*, or more precisely, the entombment of persons still alive. The main difference between the *Life* and erotic novels is the fact that in the latter all is centered on the erotic element, while in the *Life* this very element is relegated to the margins, only occurring in episodes of secondary importance (e.g. chapters 75–76, 103). Moreover, the erotic theme in the *Life* is light-hearted and comical, modelled on brief and widely circulating love stories containing vivid sexual descriptions, such as the *Milesiaka* of Aristides, (2nd century BC)

35 Henderson, “The *Satyrিকা* and the Greek Novel”, p. 489. The date he proposes for the emergence of this particular genre category (“Such works begin to appear in the second sophistic era, not long after the appearance of the first romantic novels, with both varieties reaching their hey-day in the 2nd century AD”), does not seem to differ substantially from the date of the *Life*, although the first part (the Xanthos section) may date back to the Hellenistic era, see above, note 21.

36 Shiner, “Episodic Narratives”, pp. 159–61; Ruiz-Montero, “The Life of Aesop”, p. 267.

37 I have discussed in detail the relationship between the *Life* and the erotic novel, in Karla, “Fictional Biography”.

or other tales of adultery.³⁸ Lastly, novels typically have a happy end, whereas the *Life* ends dramatically, with the hero's death.

Likewise, the influence of Old and New Comedy is evident in the *Life*. The vocabulary and the satirical language used to describe specific human characters, such as Xanthos, his wife and the maids, are closely related to the vocabulary and language of Aristophanic comedy.³⁹ Critics have detected several similarities between the *Life* and New Comedy in terms of structure and overall presentational techniques, as well as in the motifs employed in both genres.⁴⁰ Jouanno correctly calls the *Life* a "biographie comique", thus emphasizing the common features between the *Life* and comedy in general: Old and New, Greek and Roman. These common features include an emphasis on the ugliness of Aesop, frequently conveyed through similes that liken him to some animal, as well as on scatology, eroticism and misogyny, and lastly through the description of a world where everything is topsy-turvy and hierarchy and authority are subsequently mocked.⁴¹ Of course, critics have already remarked on the influence Aesop's character and fables exercised upon Aristophanes and in doing so have demonstrated a two-way interaction, the interrelation of traditions and genres, always evident when popular characters like Aesop are involved.⁴²

Merkelbach, in turn, discerns traces of an aretalogy of Isis in chapters 4–8.⁴³ These chapters record the miracle performed by Isis, whereby Aesop acquires a voice and special oratorical skills. Indeed, the entire first part (chapters 1–100) contains several elements typical of an aretalogy. The narrative emphasizes the miracle performed by the goddess, during which Aesop is cured and acquires what she desires for him, that is, a voice and excellent rhetorical faculties (φωνήν και ἄριστον λόγον). The episodes recorded after the miracle, and especially those that reportedly take place in Samos, can be regarded as constituting the completion of the miracle that had been set in motion earlier, since they feature an Aesop who not only has a voice, which is the gift of Isis, but is also now notable for his λόγων εὔρεμα και μύθων Ἑλληνικῶν πλοκήν και ποιήσεις

38 See Konstantakos, "Aesop Adulterer and Trickster", pp. 565–80; Weinreich, *Der Trug des Nektanebos*. Konstantakos suggests that this Aesopic story may also involve a gross parody of the stock motifs of idealistic love found in New Comedy or the erotic novel.

39 Goins, "The Influence of Old Comedy".

40 Holzberg, "Strukturanalytische Interpretation", pp. 43, 45–50, 71–74.

41 Jouanno, "Une biographie comique".

42 The motifs Aristophanic comedy shares with the *Life* have been identified and interpreted variously; see Cataudella, "Aristofane"; Luzzatto, "Esopo"; Schirru, *La Favola in Aristofane*, pp. 39–55.

43 Merkelbach, *Isis-regina*, pp. 222–23.

(the gifts of the Muses, “who bestowed upon him the power to compose and elaborate Greek tales” ch. 7). At the end, in place of an epilogue, two significant acts take place: “He (Aesop) then wrote down for the king all the sayings and fables that are even now still recounted, and deposited them in the library”;⁴⁴ his deification comes immediately afterwards, for the Samians offer him special honours and name the spot “The Place of Aesop” (Αἰσώπειον).⁴⁵

The genre of the mime, too, must have influenced the *Life*. Ludwig and Andreassi studied the relationship between the *Life* and mime, and identify common stylistic elements and motifs.⁴⁶ The episode with the figs (chs 2–3),⁴⁷ the miracle of Isis (ch. 8), the scenes from the sale of Aesop (ch. 24), and the episode concerning the missing pig’s leg (ch. 42) all share stylistic elements with mime.⁴⁸ A comparison between the *Life* and the mime handed down in POxy. 413, known as Μοιχεύτρια (*Adulteress*), yields notable verbal similarities between the two texts, evident, for example, in the use of the some particular words like σκάπτειν (“dig”), βινητιᾶν (“inire, coïre cupio”), and κέρκος (“tail”). Various common motifs, such as Aesop the slave, the mute Aesop, the ugly Aesop, the illicit affair with the wife of his master, the sexual adventures of the two lovers, the Apollonian element and death are also to be found.⁴⁹ Admittedly, we cannot exclude the possibility of the existence of a common source and of a tradition centered around the legendary Aesop, literary or otherwise, or in the form of oral and written legends and tales, on which both anonymous authors may have independently drawn.⁵⁰ Be that as it may,

44 Αἰσώπος οὖν αὐτῷ συγγραψάμενος τοὺς ἰδίους λόγους καὶ μύθους, τοὺς ἄχρι καὶ νῦν ὀνομαζομένους, κατέλιπεν εἰς τὴν βιβλιοθήκην (ch. 100).

45 The role of the crowd in an aretalogy is very important; see Merkelbach “Novel and Aretalogy”, pp. 284–86. The reference to the construction of a temple for the Muses, where nonetheless no place is reserved for Apollo, which offends the god, while presaging the end of Aesop, may possibly be the author’s own addition, intended to join the first (chs 1–100) and the last (chs 124–142) part.

46 Ludwig, *Sonderformen*, pp. 351–62; Andreassi, “Esopo sulla scena”. Yet, since the boundaries separating comedy from the mime are not always clear, the many similar stylistic features and motifs make one sceptical regarding the accuracy of Ludwig’s conclusions, especially those concerning the motifs.

47 Two of Aesop’s fellow slaves ate the figs that had been preserved for their master, and then accused Aesop of the deed. They expected him to be unable to defend himself because of his dumbness. Aesop, however, by drinking warm water and vomiting, proved his innocence in contrast to his accusers, who in doing the same reveled themselves as the real thieves.

48 Ludwig, *Sonderformen*, pp. 352–56.

49 Andreassi, “Esopo sulla scena”, pp. 207–22.

50 Andreassi, “Esopo sulla scena”, pp. 224–25.

perhaps we have the remarkable case of a popular figure inspiring the production of literature in which he also plays a leading role. Thus, it is possible to claim that in general mime as a genre influenced the *Life*, and the *Life* in turn influenced the composition of a specific mime with Aesop in the leading role (the *Μοιχεύτρια*).

Scholars have noticed striking similarities between the *Life* and the Gospels, especially the Gospels of Mark and John, mostly in relation to structure and narrative technique (episodic narratives),⁵¹ but also individual motifs (for instance the fearless speech of the protagonist, his rebellion against his social and religious superiors, the typical character of the poisoner).⁵² It is remarkable that both the *Life* and the two Gospels begin with some event of decisive importance for the course of the hero's life, and conclude with his unjust death, which later becomes the cause for the foundation of a cult (the "hero-cult pattern").⁵³ In any case, the language and style exhibit similarities, for in both a considerable part of the story consists of dialogue and interior monologue. A further common denominator lies in the fact that both texts are products of literature written to entertain and instruct, a goal accomplished by, among other means, the use of parables and fables.⁵⁴ Finally, similarities of style, narrative technique and, to a lesser extent, motifs, do exist between the *Life* and the *Lives of Saints*, the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Apocrypha*.⁵⁵

Crossing genres, allusion and transgression of register deliberately triggered by the use of low-register language are in harmony with another feature of the *Life*: "incorporating elements of earlier traditions about Aesop as well as adapting anecdotal material about similar figures".⁵⁶ The sources for it must therefore have been both written and oral.⁵⁷ Very briefly put, the *Life of Aesop* is made up of:⁵⁸ (a) legends about Aesop's life as a slave, several of which must have been in circulation at least since the 5th or 4th century BC; (b) countless tales and anecdotes regarding other individuals, which circulated orally or in written form, in historical works, biographies, treatises, anthologies, etc.; many

51 Shiner, "Episodic Narratives".

52 Wills, *The Quest*, pp. 29–31.

53 Wills, *The Quest*, p. 49.

54 On reading the *Life* as if it were a 'gospel', see Pervo, "A Nihilist Fabula", pp. 97–120.

55 More research is needed in this area. Ludwig, *Sonderformen*, p. 387, compared the *Life* with the *Lives of the Saints* (including the *Lives of Philaretos*, Symeon the Holy Fool and Andrew the Holy Fool), to reach the conclusion that there is no direct association between Byzantine biographies and the *Life*, nor is it possible to show such a link.

56 Hägg, *The Art of Biography*, p. 113.

57 See Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, pp. 6–7.

58 Karla, "Fictional Biography", pp. 24–25.

anecdotes about Hesiod, Diogenes, Socrates, the Seven Sages and other philosophers, for instance, were attributed to Aesop by the author of the *Life*;⁵⁹ (c) a version of the widely-known Eastern *Story of Ahiqar*; (d) the legend of the death of Aesop at Delphi, which was already circulating widely in the 5th century BC;⁶⁰ (e) popular oral tales, such as the story of the widow of Ephesus. Variations of this novella⁶¹ have also been found in the fabulist Phaedrus and Petronius, both of which derive from the *Milesiaka* of Aristides.⁶² Some of the legends about Aesop, such as those concerning his life on Samos, or those about his death at Delphi, might also have been included in the biography of Aesop that prefaced the collection of fables by Demetrios of Phalerum.⁶³

The question of the sources leads us to the issue of whether the *Life* may be seen as an 'open biography'.⁶⁴ Indeed it displays many of the basic features of "open texts", such as anonymity, stratification of various sources, episodic character and overall fluidity of the narrative structure as well as the widespread geographic distribution, the abundance of translations and versions, and the chameleonic way in which they were transmitted and have come down to us.⁶⁵ In this, the *Life* exhibits all the characteristics of an 'open biography', for its text was constructed by the welding or interweaving of older, independent materials which received further embellishments by subsequent adapters during the course of its later transmission. Hence the versions of the *Life* differ

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- 59 Holzberg, "A Lesser Known 'Picaresque' Novel", p. 7; Jouanno, "Une biographie comique", pp. 419–423; Hägg, *The Art of Biography*, pp. 112–13. In particular on the influence of the traditions regarding the Seven Sages on the *Aesop Life*, see Konstantakos, "Trial by Riddle" with full bibliography at pp. 102–03.
- 60 Generally on the sources of the *Life*, see Holzberg, "A Lesser Known 'Picaresque' Novel", p. 7; West "The Ascription of Fables"; Perry, "Demetrius of Phalerum" esp. pp. 332–34; Zeitz, "Der Aesoproman und seine Geschichte"; La Penna, "Il romanzo di Esopo"; Adrados, *History*, pp. 659–73.
- 61 It is characterized as a novella or anecdote. See La Penna, "Il romanzo di Esopo", p. 310; Adrados "The Life of Aesop", p. 108; van Dijk, "The Fables", pp. 141–42; Merkle, "Fable", pp. 226–27.
- 62 See Papademetriou, "Romance without *Eros*", and Adrados, *History*, p. 658. For an extensive bibliography on the *Milesian Tales*, see e.g. Harrison, "The Milesian Tales"; Ferrari/Zanetto, *Le storie di Mileto*.
- 63 Demetrios of Phalerum (c. 350–280 BC) was an Athenian Peripatetic philosopher and statesman (A.B. Bosworth, s.v. Demetrius (3), *OCD* 1996³, p. 448). He compiled the first European collection of Aesopic fables, which has not come down to us. Perry, "Demetrius of Phalerum", pp. 332–34. For a different opinion, see Adrados, *History*, pp. 649–54.
- 64 Konstan, "The Cunning of the Open Text"; Thomas, "Stories without Texts" p. 289; Hägg, *The Art of Biography*, pp. 99–101.
- 65 See also Fusillo, "Letteratura di consumo", p. 239; Karla, "Fictional Biography", p. 27.

greatly from each other, both in number and sequence of the episodes and in their language and narrative style (detailed or condensed) to such a degree, that the reconstruction of an archetype seems impossible.

Narrative Technique

The *Life* follows a predictable, straightforward and linear narrative offered by an omniscient narrator. Admittedly, the narration begins with the physical description of Aesop, and also reports events from some period during his early life (to this period possibly belongs the episode with the figs, chs. 2–3). But the actual starting point is the miracle of Isis, by which Aesop acquires the ability to speak and receives divine gifts from the goddess and the Muses. From this point onward the life story develops in a strict chronological sequence up to his death; the episodes are described in order, one after the other, like pearls on a thread.⁶⁶ Occasionally a tale is embedded within the narration of another, for example chs. 44–50: Aesop's revenge on his mistress is embedded in the episode of the dinner by one of Xanthos' students.

The basic narrative tools used by the author of the *Life* are: a model based on a tripartite division, a climactic plot and a set of contrasting/antithetical opposites.⁶⁷ The threefold repetition functions as a leitmotif to be followed through the whole narration. Thus, in addition to the overall tripartite structure of the work (see above), it is to be noted that Aesop is sold as a slave three times, he tries three times to find a human being who is ἀπερίεργον, incurious (chs. 56–64), and, finally, he is thrice deified (see the conclusions of the three separate units). Climactic moments can be observed in several episodes in the course of the narrative. In chapter 42, Xanthos asks for a pretext to whip Aesop; chapter 77, Aesop is actually “beaten diligently” (ἐδάρη ἐπιμελῶς); and chapter 80, Aesop is even imprisoned. The affair between Aesop and the wife of Xanthos is both tripartite and climactic: the first encounter occurs in chs. 29–33, the second in chs. 44–50 – where it is made clear that πρὸς ἔννοιν οἰκέτην οὐδὲν ἰσχύει γυνή (“a woman cannot compete with a household slave for the affections of his master”: ch. 44) –, and lastly, in chs. 75–76, the final encounter takes place, in which the faithless and sexually insatiable wife commits adultery with Aesop.

66 On episodic composition in the *Life*, see Shiner, “Episodic Narratives”.

67 See Holzberg, “Strukturanalytische Interpretation”, pp. 41, 47, 51; Ruiz-Montero, “The Life of Aesop”, p. 262.

The motif of antithesis (opposition) dominates the work. In the first part, in particular, the narrative emphasizes the contrast between Aesop's physical appearance and his great intelligence.⁶⁸ Aesop makes his first appearance as a member of the group of slaves belonging to Ophelion and who are on sale. Some among them are distinguished by their beauty: "very handsome young men, exceedingly radiant as Dionysos or Apollo" (παῖδας καλλίστους, πάντας καθαρωτάτους ὡς Διονύσους καὶ Ἀπόλλωνα ch. 16) while Aesop himself is ugly (σαπρός / σαπρόμορφος).⁶⁹ When Aesop next joins Xanthos' household, multiple contrasts emerge, Aesop being an ugly and uneducated slave, while Xanthos and his students are free citizens, rich and educated. In due course the latter will be shown to be fools in the face of the Phrygian slave's intelligence and his readiness of speech (see also the antithesis in the meaning of their names, Xanthos=blond / Aesop=Aithiop=black).

In the chronotopic structure of the *Life* space takes precedence over time.⁷⁰ In fact, there is no precise chronological framework underlying the *Life*. Instead, we have only general expressions signaling the passage of time (e.g. "next day", "on that particular day" etc.). The reader has the impression that the narrative action is situated within an a-temporal frame and no effort is made to locate it in the real archaic period, in which the historical hero lived. The author even introduces conspicuous anachronisms, for example, by dating Aesop to the time of Nectanebo, the last native Pharaoh of Egypt, who became a mythical figure in the Roman era,⁷¹ or making references to Euripides and Demosthenes.

On the contrary, narrative space is given a central position in the *Life*, whose spatial coordinates are always concrete. Aesop is first transported from an unnamed place to be sold as a slave in Ephesus. He is then brought to Samos, to be taken into the service of the philosopher Xanthos for a certain period of time. We later see him at the court of Croesus, and again back on Samos where

68 Other dichotomies to be observed include those of justice / injustice, piety / impiety, usefulness for the other / uselessness for one's own self.

69 The ugliness of Aesop and his status as a slave are repeatedly highlighted. This may be a deliberate effort to parody the depiction of the heroes of the erotic novel, who are typically handsome and of noble descent. For the contrast between Aesop's appearance and the dazzling beauty of the heroes of the erotic novels, see Papademetriou, *Aesop as an Archetypal Hero*, pp. 17–18. On the link between the ugliness of the slave Aesop and Greek and Roman Comedy, see Jouanno, "Une biographie comique", pp. 398–400.

70 The term "chronotope" was coined by the Russian critic Michail Bakhtin, to indicate the spatial-temporal frame of a narrative: Bakhtin, *Dialogic imagination*, pp. 84–258. Particularly on the chronotope of the *Life* see Avlamis, "Isis", pp. 88–97.

71 On this issue see Konstantakos, "Nektanebo", in particular p. 116.

he expresses the desire “to travel around the world” (ch. 101); in Babylon he serves at the court of Lycoros. As an envoy of Lycoros he travels to Egypt and meets King Nectanebo and finally, after “travelling around the rest of the cities”, he reaches his final destination, Delphi, where he meets his end.

Ugliness, cunning and wit, eloquence and wisdom are the main themes in Aesop's *Life*. Thus the protagonist becomes the archetype of the anti-hero, the monstrously ugly, yet exceptionally gifted individual, the cunning slave who gains recognition and admiration, the trickster. Right from the very beginning, Aesop is called βιωφελέστατος (a great benefactor)⁷² and his *Life* is an amusing, entertaining and, at the same time, very edifying literary work.

The Reception of the *Life* in Late Byzantine Times

The prolific scholar, teacher and monk of the Palaiologan era, Maximos Planoudes (1255–1305), rewrote the *Life* and fables in atticizing prose⁷³ probably for didactic purposes.

The Planoudean version reveals a lot regarding the transmission of the *Life* in Byzantium. To begin with, Planoudes' work shows how the linguistic register of a popular text written in the vernacular, the language of everyday speech, is transformed into the archaizing language of learned Greek, and in general, what linguistic and structural changes an earlier popular text requires in order to meet the expectations of Byzantine learned readers. The brief, entirely functional prologue to the *Life* is replaced with a more studied proem, written by the reviser himself.⁷⁴ More particularly, Planoudes' prologue is an ethical and philosophical text that repeatedly uses the antithetical pairs ‘rational / irrational’, ‘deed / word’, ‘nature / law’, ‘free / slave’, ‘soul / body’ (λογικός – ἄλογος, ἔργον – λόγος, φύσις – νόμος, ἐλεύθερος – δοῦλος, ψυχή – σῶμα), and features throughout references to classical authors as Homer (Aesop is compared to the Homeric Thersites) and Plato (*Gorgias*). Furthermore, the dialogues and the monologues of the original have become third-person narratives, and the original text has been summarized and condensed throughout.

72 Hägg, *The Art of Biography*, p. 104, translates the expression πάντα βιωφελέστατος as “the most useful in all vicissitudes of life” and points out its meta-textual dimension which allows interpreting *bios* both as ‘life’ and as *Life*.

73 On arguments for the identification of the translator of the *Life* (this Byzantine version has been named Accursiana or Planoudea) with Planoudes, see Karla, “Die Redactio Accursiana”.

74 On Planoudes' habit of writing a prologue for all the works he comments on or paraphrases, see Karla, “Die Redactio Accursiana”, p. 666.

Finally, according to Planoudes' customary style, passages with explicit or implicit sexual content and those involving obscenity are removed from his text.⁷⁵ Planoudes' working method in the *Life* is notably very similar to the way he worked when editing learned literary texts. In the case of the *Life*, he used an ancestor of manuscript B (Londinensis Add. gr. 17015) as the basis of his translation, but he obviously also used one or more manuscripts from other recensions.⁷⁶

When looking at the reception of Planoudes' version, the large number of manuscripts (the oldest of them dating back to the late 14th century) that transmit it is striking. The first editor, Eberhardt, made use of 13 manuscripts as he was preparing his critical edition of 1872. Marc adds another 13,⁷⁷ and I have little doubt that a meticulous search of the updated manuscript catalogues in libraries worldwide would considerably increase this number. Moreover, three of the five modern Greek versions of the *Life* are based on Planoudes' version of the text, and another one at least used it as a secondary source.⁷⁸

I should also remark that Planoudes' version of the *Life* is also transmitted among various manuscripts of other, mainly rhetorical works of his.⁷⁹ One such manuscript is codex Marcianus 11, 2 of the 15th century, which is the "Leithandschrift" of the Eberhard edition. It begins with the *Life* and the fables, and continues with the *corpus planudeum* on rhetoric, that is, Planoudes' commentary on Aphthonius and Hermogenes, thus giving a strong hint to the didactic function of the text.⁸⁰

At about the same time, the scholar Andrew Livadenos (1314–61?) produced a manuscript, held today in the State Library of Bavaria in Munich (Codex Monacensis gr. 525), that contains different texts of considerable thematic variety from many different eras. The composition of this particular selection is of great interest for the study of Byzantine literature.⁸¹ The codex starts with the *Life of Aesop* (under the title of *Life of Aesop, the Philosopher/ Βίος Αἰσώπου τοῦ φιλοσόφου*), and continues with the *Fables*. There then follows Aesop's *proverbiorum sylloge*, the *fables* of Syntipas, a letter by the philosopher Diocles to the king [of Persia] Antigonos, the story of *Stephanites and Ichneutes*, a frag-

75 See Karla "Maximos Planoudes", in particular on *Life*, pp. 221–23.

76 Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, pp. 58–65.

77 Marc, "Überlieferung", pp. 389–99.

78 Karla, "Die Redactio Accursiana", p. 669, note 65.

79 Karla, "Die Redactio Accursiana", p. 664.

80 Karla, "Die Redactio Accursiana", p. 664, where more examples are listed.

81 This is studied in detail in Hinterberger, "Ο Ανδρέας Λιβαδηνός".

ment of the *Book of Syntipas* and the third poem of *Ptochoprodromos*.⁸² The manuscript continues with other texts, but I restrict myself to the first group of texts included in this collection, the others being far removed from the focus of the present study.⁸³

This first category of texts (to whom the *Life* belongs) involves similar subjects. All are useful and educational texts, intended to offer instruction and, at the same time, entertainment.⁸⁴ Collections of popular texts, such as this one, in which edification and entertainment are essential goals, also appear in other manuscripts containing the *Life*.⁸⁵ Common features of these texts are the advisory character and a simple narrative style, involving short episodic narratives, as well as a low linguistic register. As already noted, the corpus of texts of Monacensis gr. 525 is probably a representative selection of the sort of Byzantine texts a scholar such as Andrew Livadenos would have read and used. Various testimonies make it clear that texts of this kind, among which the *Life of Aesop* held a leading position, literally and metaphorically, were extremely popular at the imperial and other courts during the Palaiologan period.⁸⁶

The codex 397 of Pierpont Morgan Library is another interesting case-study. It contains some popular instructional texts, like a fragment of *Kalila and Dimna* (= *Stephanites and Ichnelates*), a fragment of *Physiologus*, the *Life* and the *Fables* of Aesop, the *Fables* of Babrius and seven anecdotes of the *Philogelos*.

In codex Baroccianus 194, of the 15th century, the *Life* once again is the first in a corpus of instructional texts, alongside others such as Cato's *Gnomai* and collections of mythological examples. Here the *Fables* do not follow the initial group, and this strengthens the view that the reception of the *Life* should not necessarily be associated with that of the *Fables*. The *Life* does not function as a prologue, as a frame for the fables themselves.⁸⁷ It is instead an independent, stand-alone text, and as such was transmitted through time in isolation, to be eventually received in Byzantium.

82 Hinterberger, "Ο Ανδρέας Λιβαδηνός", p. 27. On both *Syntipas* and *Stephanites* see the chapters by B. Krönung and I. Toth in this volume.

83 According to Hinterberger, the texts transmitted in Monacensis gr. 525 belong to four different categories, while Bühler, *Zenobii Aethi proverbialia*, pp. 170–79, distinguishes five different groups.

84 Hinterberger, "Ο Ανδρέας Λιβαδηνός", pp. 40–41.

85 One such manuscript is Codex Mosquensis gr. 436. For a detailed description of the codex see Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, pp. 26–29. See an additional example in Hinterberger, "Ο Ανδρέας Λιβαδηνός", p. 40.

86 Hinterberger, "Ο Ανδρέας Λιβαδηνός", pp. 39–42.

87 The independence of the *Life* from the *Fables* is discussed in Holzberg, *Fabel*, pp. 80–84.

One further case worth mentioning is the codex Atheniensis, Benaki Museum 54 from the 13th/14th century, which preserves the Aesopic corpus of *Fables*, *Proverbs* and *Life*, among theological texts giving practical advice, written in a higher linguistic register.⁸⁸ For the Byzantines, distinctions made on the basis of language (learned or vernacular) and content (Christian or pagan) were not as strict as they are for modern scholarship. On the contrary, the *Life*, thanks to its simple form and its instructional and entertaining content, was promptly categorized in Byzantium as an instructional text. It thereafter followed its own course until the modern era, to become part of the Modern Greek literary tradition.

Having thus looked at the evidence and the work of Byzantine scholars, and the transmission of the text of the *Life* itself, we can perhaps now sum up our survey. The papyrus fragments date to the 3rd-6th/7th centuries, while the earliest codices date to the end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th centuries (ms. G, codex 397 Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and ms. Th, codex Thessalonicensis, Bibliothecae Universitatis 86⁸⁹). We have no testimony on the text from the 12th century, whereas from the 13th century onwards the number of manuscripts rises.

The character of Aesop, as portrayed in the *Life*, has travelled successfully through the ages as it can easily adapt to many different cultural contexts, yet without the hero himself undergoing any transformation of identity, at least in the Greek speaking world.⁹⁰ What changes is the form of the text and the language. The message, or rather, the multiple messages it communicates, are still relevant, and are always instructive and beneficial. In the middle of the work, in chapter 88, the author of the *Life* inserted a very instructive message: “you should consider my intelligence not my appearance ... many people with the worst appearance are intelligent”.⁹¹ We might ask ourselves whether the message of the *Life* is in fact a meta-literary comment, and, in a way, a parody of learned literature,⁹² of grandiloquent speech and its excessiveness. Form is not what matters the most; rather it is the content, the interior that counts.⁹³

88 A detailed description of this codex is in Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, pp. 20–24.

89 This is a parchment folio kept today in the main library of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. A description is in Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, p. 29.

90 It has already been observed that the figure of Aesop does not convert to Christianity in the various redactions, in contrast to Alexander the Great in the *Alexander Romance*; on this topic see the chapter by U. Moennig in this volume, pp. 159–89.

91 *Life of Aesop*, ed. Ferrari, p. 198: οὐχὶ τὴν ὄψιν δεῖ θεωρεῖν, ἀλλὰ τὴν φρόνησιν σκοπεῖν ... πολλοὶ γὰρ μορφὴν κακίστην ἔχοντες νοῦν ἔχουσι σώφρονα.

92 Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, pp. 214–15.

93 I am most grateful to the editors of this volume, especially to C. Cupane for perceptive comments and to my colleagues S. Papaioannou, Io Manolessou and A. Farrington for

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