



Summary :

Almost a mythical person, a former slave, writer of a fables collection, which have influenced children's education since the antiquity until contemporary times due to their inspirational content.

Date and Place of Birth

Before 620 BC.

Date and Place of Death

564 BC, Delphi

Main Role

Fabulist

1. The man and the myth

Aesop is the first known fabulist, namely a writer of fables, which are folk stories with allegorical meaning and inspirational character. Despite being the best-known writer of the antiquity, Aesop is mostly a man of myth. Even since the classical era, information on his birth, descent and life has been controversial. It has actually been stated that Aesop, just like [Homer](#) and Hesiod, is rather an emblematic creation than an actual writer,¹ a representative of an archaic kind of literature, the fable. Referring to aesopian fables, grammarian Theon underlines that they were named after Aesop for he was the one that used them more frequently and most artfully, and not after their inventor, who was preceded by Homer (on pseudo-Margites), Hesiod and Archilochus. And indeed, several fables attributed to Aesop are already found in the work of poets, such as Hesiod, Archilochus and Simonides from Ceos, while some of the anecdotes proving his wit have, in other occasions, as protagonists, other men renowned for their wisdom, such as [Bias from Priene](#), [Thales from Miletus](#), Pittakos from Lesbos or Solon the Athenian.²

2. Aesop's Life

Works concerning his actions must have already appeared since the 6th century BC. Our most important source though is the "Life of Aesop", a work dated by most scholars in the late 1st century BC or the early 1st century AD and probably written in Alexandria; it contains a significant amount of mythical and imaginary material though, according to the models of mythical lives of great men produced at that time. Some of Aesop's fables have actually been integrated into narration.³ Aristotle and his students had showed a considerable interest in Aesop and actually concluded that he was Thracian and not Phrygian.

Just like Homer, several cities of Asia Minor and the Aegean claimed Aesop: [Sardis](#) (the capital of Lydia), Samos, Mesembria (a Greek colony in Thrace) and [Amorion](#) or Cotiaem in Phrygia. In most sources, he is referred to as Phrygian or Lydian.

Some of the information on his life is found in most versions of his biography: he had been born before 620 BC. Aesop was renowned for his ugliness: he had a big head in comparison with the rest of his body, an oblate nose, swollen lips, a humped back and a distended belly, attributes that gave him the name Aesop (Esop), namely Ethiop. Probably, he was also lame. According to speechmaker Himerius, it was not only his fables that made people laugh, but also his appearance, his voice and his way of talking, which made him even uglier and more ridiculous than Homer's Thersites. One can recognize in Aesop the archetypal court fool with the uncompromising attitude, a sharp tongue and an outspokenness that reached both the limits of self-ridicule and the concealed mockery of his masters. His fables are not a didactic literature product; they had been invented in order to suggest a way of acting under certain circumstances related mostly with political and rhetorical matters.⁴

Aesop was not a slave by birth, but rather became one after being captured. Bius and most sources refer to Xanthus the Samian as



Aesop's master, though Herodotus, our oldest source, refers to Iadmon the Samian, a version that also Plato agreed with in his lost now *Samion Politeia*. Later texts speak of Timarchus the Athenian.⁵

Aesop's life is divided into three chapters: his slavery in Samos, his "service" as an adviser in Babylon, and the visit in Delphi and his death.

Several jokes are known concerning his wit and the way he made a fool out of his masters and fellow-slaves. The advice he gave to the Samians on how to maintain their freedom from mighty Lydian king Croesus earned him his own freedom. The king used him as an adviser, but Aesop is also said to have wandered Asia and Egypt as an adviser of Lycurgus, imaginary king of Babylon.

He is said to have visited the most significant Greek cities, including Athens and Corinth, and even Sybaris in Magna Grecia. Traditions also speak of the discussion he and Solon had on the way a wise man should advise tyrants. Athenian comic poet Alexis presented a comic version of this discussion in his now lost play *Aesop*. Plutarch, finally, places him amongst the Seven Sages at the celebrated symposium, a folk tale that has to be dated in the 4th century BC.

Aesop met his end while on another of his diplomatic missions in the service of [Croesus](#), in 564 BC.⁶ The Lydian king trusted Aesop with a large amount of gold, which he would distribute to the citizens of Delphi, as a sacrifice in the king's name. Appalled by their greed, he refused to distribute the gold and sent it back to his king. Filled with rage, Delphians accused him of thievery and sacrilege, put a holy utensil in his luggage ignoring his sacredness as an ambassador, and executed him in public as a common criminal throwing him off the Fedriades Stones cliff. Being a sage, Aesop was considered sacred and dedicated to Apollo, for this was the reason the oracle was silenced and famine struck the city of Delphi for this fabrication and his unjust execution, while according to another version, the Samians avenged Aesop's murder. According to some sources of anecdotes, Aesop did not die; he was reincarnated, and actually fought with the Spartans at Thermopylae. In his play *Wasps*, in 422 BC, Aristophanes made an allusive reference to Aesop's death in Delphi, which actually tells us that the audience of Athens was quite familiar with the story.

Researchers have not accepted the story as a historical fact: much of the information provided is borrowed from the ritual of pharmakos, and the narrative is thus considered to be based on this particular ritual model, or in any case constructed so that even its historic core could not be retrieved.⁷

3. Depictions of Aesop in art

Aesop's oldest image is found on a red-figure Attic cylix dated approximately in 450 BC reflecting marvelously his ugliness: the fable-writer is depicted as a caricature with an enormous head and holding a stick, seated on a rock, talking with a fox.⁸

Some unreliable sources inform us of a statue of Aesop in Athens, while it is said that famous sculptors Lysippus and Aristodemus had also done statues of the writer. Some researchers believe that all three sources refer to the same statue.

Some statues of deformed men from the Hellenistic Period have been identified as portraits of the writer, though there is not a shred of evidence about those men's real identity.⁹

Finally, it is worth mentioning the most probably fictitious depiction of Aesop in Neapolis of Campania described by Philostratus. The fox, a much loved leading figure of aesopian fables, holds a dominant position as a coryphaeus in a Greek tragedy chorus, a reminiscent of Aesop's 6 centuries older depiction on an Attic cylix in Vatican.¹⁰

4. Aesop's work

According to Phaedo, fable is a false narrative of plausible stories. This kind flourished mostly in the East, amongst Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, [Assyrians](#) and Chettians, and Aesop is thought without dispute to have drawn a great part of his material



from eastern collections.¹¹ Aesopian fable was only one of the kinds of allegorical tales that were spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Libyan fables, attributed to someone named Kybisis or Kybises, are also known, as well as Sybaritic fables of Thouris, Cilician fables of Connis and more from Assyria, Egypt and Phrygia. The existing collections of the aesopian corpus possibly contain elements from the categories mentioned.

Aesop is said to have written the fables collection that was known in antiquity and bore his name during his stay in Sardis and dedicated it to king Croesus. The conclusion drawn from literary sources is that his fables already circulated in written during the 5th century BC.¹² Early versions of aesopian fables are found in Plato's work (in the disputed dialogue *Alcibiades*) and mostly in Aristotle's, who actually delivers a fable Aesop used in court defending a Samian politician, which is not included in the aesopian corpus. While in prison waiting to be executed, Socrates employed his time in turning aesopian fables into elegiac verses.

Aristotle's school dealt greatly with fables, as indicated by Theophrastus' translation of Akicharus' book (Akichar in Assyrian), which in reality is the main source of the events of Aesop's stay in the Babylonian court.¹³ Another student of the Lycium, grammarian Chamelaeon, studied these kinds and arranged them geographically, also identifying their writers. Demetrius Phalereus conducted the main assembly of aesopian fables in Alexandria approximately in 300 B.C., under the title *Assemblies of Aesop Tales*. This unpreserved work has only partially been delivered through the metrical adaptations of some of its excerpts that Babrias (or Babrius) made in Greek and also Phaedrus and Avianus in Latin, during the 1st century AD. Some Medieval adaptations in prose are still extant or have been integrated into epics of that time.

Ben Edwin Parry from the U.S.A., Aesop's 20th century most important student, claims that some fables of Demetrius Phalereus' original collection can actually be set apart. Fables that define themselves as "speeches" are dated with a relevant certainty in the period before that of Alexander the Great, the period that the word *fable* was used with the modern meaning. Herodotus calls Aesop a "speechmaker". Of all early fables, the ones that seem to be undisputed works of the original aesopian collection are those containing fragments of mythology. In some cases, actually, it is the later version that takes away every ounce of myth; for instance, the myth of Charybde, a monster that swallowed the sea as described in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, was converted into the myth of Gaia swallowing the sea in the contemporary Aesopian collection.

Nowadays we know Aesop's fables through four collections saved in several copies and manuscripts. The most significant edition is that of a manuscript from Munich, the "Augusteian", containing 231 fables, while Babrius and the rest of the collections add 147 more. Dozens of other fables have been delivered to us in the works of ancient rhetoricians and writers, on scrolls of unknown writers and in works of Byzantine scholars. Every contemporary edition integrates a different number of fables into the aesopian corpus, with 358, the Emile Chambry French edition number, being the dominant one. Many of them are definitely pseudo. According to Parry, not less than 250 fables included in Chambry's edition are irrelevant with Demetrius Phalereus' collection, which probably contained 100 fables, some of which were not even integrated in later collections. The fables evident of an acquaintance with the most exotic of Asia and Africa's animals (lions, camels, cobras) or the ones reminiscent of foreign customs, probably, originate from Assyrian, Libyan, and Egyptian or Cyclician collections.

In antiquity, Aesop was not only known for his fables, but also for his sayings and proverbs, as the renowned phrases "fire, woman and sea" –supposedly the three most dangerous things in the world– and "habit is a second nature".

5. Assessment of Aesop's work

The effect of his fables in the ancient world was tremendous: they were banqueters' favorite stories at banquets, while they played a significant part in the education of children and young people. Through Apollonius' mouth, Philostratus lauds the wisdom of Aesop, who dedicated his work to the edification of his fellow-beings, comparing him thus to the platonic Socrates. The 5th century dominant view surely does not reflect the aspect above.

6. Fables of Aesop and the Life of Aesop in Byzantine and contemporary times



Both the collection of fables in Aesop's name and his mythical life were widely spread in later and modern times. The original and later version of Aesop's Life were followed up by a third version (circa 1300), attributed to renowned Byzantine scholar [Maximos Planoudes](#) and by a 14th century Latin translation. Later researchers have claimed that the spread of Aesop's Life through its first Latin editions in Western Europe during the 15th century led to the formation of a new kind of novel (picaresque novel), at first in Renaissance Spain; the main character is a marginal illiterate but a pretty slick and wise hero too (picaro). Professor Papademetriou actually saw into the character of Aesop the archetypal hero that inspired Karagiozis,¹⁴ the folk shadow theater of modern Greece.

Scholar Accursius published some of the fables for the first time in 1479 in Western Europe, and many more editions followed thereafter. Fable, as a kind of literature, owes its great flourish both to paraphrases of Aesop's speeches and, mainly, to Fontaine's work: his fables, built according to the aesopian model, had a tremendous effect. Even now, apologues are an educational instrument. [Adamantius Korais](#) was the first to collect fables of Aesop and publish them in Greek in 1787 in Paris.

1. Nagy, G., *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore – London 1979) p. 259.
2. Fables in the works of poets of the 7th and 6th century BC: Lasserre, F., "Le fable en Grèce dans la poésie archaïque", in Adrados, F.R. (ed.), *Le Fable*, Fondation Hardt. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique 30 (Vandoeuvres – Genève 1983) pp. 61-96.
3. Critical publication of the various manuscripts and versions of "Life of Aesop", as well as all of the sources that are related to Aesop: Perry, B.E., *Aesopica. A Series of Texts relating to Aesop or Ascribed to him or closely connected with the literary tradition that bears his name, volume I : Greek and Latin Texts* (Urbana 1952).
4. This role of the fable is ascertained better in the work of Archilochus and in the fables narrated by Aesop in his "Life". For the procedure of the invention of the fable, see Meuli, K., "Herkunft und Wesen der Fabel", in Meuli, K., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II (Basel 1975) pp. 731-756.
5. For the possible owners of Aesop see Suda, entry Aesop.
6. Regarding the date of the incident: Eusebius' Chronicle (Armenian translation), II, 94. Parian Chronicle, *IG XIV 1297*, column II, 15-18.
7. See Wiechers, A., "Aesop in Delphi", *Beiträge zur Klassischer Philologie* 2 (1960).
8. Attic cylix at the Batican Museum, attributed to the Painter of Bolonia 417: Garland, R., *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca & London 1995) fig. 32.
9. Compare Richter, G.E.M., *The Portraits of the Greeks, I* (London 1965) pp. 72-73, fig. 265.
10. Philostratus., *Im.* 1.3.
11. Fable in the East: Lambert, W.G., *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford 1960). Falkowitz, R.S., "Discrimination and Condensation of Sacred Categories : The Fable in Early Mesopotamian Literature", in Adrados, F.R. (ed.), *Le Fable*, Fondation Hardt. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique 30 (Vandoeuvres – Genève 1983) pp. 1-23.
12. Nøjgaard, M., *La fable antique I* (København 1964) p. 474. A contrary view is expressed by Perry, B.E., *Aesopica. A Series of Texts relating to Aesop or Ascribed to him or closely connected with the literary tradition that bears his name, volume I : Greek and Latin Texts* (Urbana 1952) p. 5.
13. Akicharus' book is known today from Syrian, Arabic, Armenian and Slavonic versions. See generally Dupont-Sommer, A., *Les Araméens* (Paris 1949). Oettinger, N., "Achikars Weisheitssprüche in Micht älterer Fabeldichtung", in Holzberg, N. (ed.), *Der Äsop-Roman. Motivgesichte und Erzählstruktur* (Tübingen 1992) pp. 3-22.



14. Papadimitriou, J.-Th., *Aesop as an Archetypal Hero*, Studies and Research 39 (Hellenic Society for Humanistic Studies, Athens 1997).

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	Adrados F.R. , "Le Fable", <i>Fondation Hardt. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique</i> , 30, 1983
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	Richter G.M.A. , <i>The Portraits of the Greeks, I</i> , London 1965
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http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/	

Quotations

Ο μέρμηκας κι ο τζίτζικας

Θέρους ἦν ἀκμή καὶ οἱ μὲν τέττιγες μουσικὴν ἀνεβάλλοντο σύντονον: τοῖς μύρμηξι δὲ πονεῖν ἐπήει καὶ συλλέγειν καρπούς, ἐξ ὧν ἔμελλον τοῦ χειμῶνος τραφήσεσθαι. χειμῶνος δὲ ἐπιγεγονότος οἱ μύρμηκες μὲν, οἷς ἐπόνουν, ἐτρέφοντο, τοῖς δὲ ἡ τέρψις ἐτελεύτα πρὸς ἔνδειαν.

Οὕτω νεότης πονεῖν οὐκ ἐθέλουσα παρὰ τὸ γῆρας κακοπραγεῖ.

The ant and the dung beetle



During the summer, the ant went around the fields collecting grains of wheat and barley so that he could store up some food for the winter. A dung beetle watched the ant and decided that he must be a wretched creature since he worked all the time, never taking a moment's rest, unlike the other animals. The ant didn't pay attention to the dung beetle and simply went about his business. When winter came and the dung was washed away by the rain, the beetle grew hungry. He went to the ant and begged him to share a little bit of his food. The ant replied, 'O beetle, if you had done some work yourself instead of making fun of me while I was working so hard, then you would not need to be asking me for food.'

Transl.: Laura Gibbs (2002)