



# A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 3: A dog's craving for meat as a signal foretelling the death of Aesop

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## A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 3: A dog's craving for meat as a signal foretelling the death of Aesop

June 11, 2019 | By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)

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2019.06.11 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. It is a commonplace in storytelling to picture the stealing of meat by a hungry dog, as we see in the illustration for this posting. After all, dogs have a natural craving for meat—also for other rich sources of protein, such as cheese. In Part 3 here, I pick up from where I left off in Part 2, where I was analyzing the fable “Aesop and the Bitch,” printed as Aesop Fable 423 in the edition of Perry (1952)—the story of which is attested only in the *Wasps* of Aristophanes, lines 1401–1405. In the internal logic of the story, the dog is barking furiously at Aesop because it craves to devour a portion of meat that Aesop is presumably carrying. I say presumably because Aesop has just left an evening feast, and so he must be carrying away with him a “doggie bag.” What I just expressed in colloquial American English does seem apt for describing the presumption—at least, in the inner logic of the story. But Aesop has no meat to give to the hungry dog, and the barking won't stop. So, what will happen now, if neighbors are roused out of their evening's repose amidst all this continued barking? Won't they presume that the dog is barking at a thief in the night? Well, if the setting for this story happens to be Delphi, as I think it is, then Aesop will now be accused of stealing. Then an improvised jury of some kind will swiftly find him guilty. And then, the next thing you know, he will be put to death.



From Michel Brunet, ed., *Les fables d'Esop Phrygien: traduites en françois, et accompagnées de maximes morales & politique, pour la conduite de la vie* (Paris: 1645), 284.

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§1. In the Life of Aesop traditions, there is in fact such a story. It can be pieced together by reading the ancient sources collected as Testimonia 20–32 in the edition of Perry (1952:220–223). I offer here a brief paraphrase based on all these sources. The story tells how Aesop the traveler, when he visited Delphi, was falsely accused and convicted of stealing. The penalty was death, and he was swiftly executed as a lowly thief. What Aesop was falsely accused of stealing, however, was not meat, and I will get to that part of the story in a minute. But first I have to identify the false accusers, since it was they, not Aesop, who were the real thieves in the story. And the irony is, it was these false accusers, not the lowly Aesop, who were really stealing meat. They were the high-and-mighty priests of Delphi, who were greedily enriching themselves day after day by habitually taking for themselves far more than their fair share of the cooked meat that they processed and divided in the course of sacrificing the vast numbers of sheep that visitors coming to Delphi from all over the Greek world would offer, day after day, to be sacrificed for feasting in honor of the god Apollo. The priests were angry at Aesop because his tellings of fables ridiculed their greedy habits, and so they had their revenge by “framing” him, stealthily planting into his travel-bag a golden bowl that had been dedicated as an offering to Apollo in his temple. Thus the high-born stealers of meat could falsely and slanderously accuse the low-born Aesop as a stealer of gold.

§2. The first time I analyzed this story as derived from the Life of Aesop traditions was in the book *The Best of the Achaeans* (Nagy 1979|1999), where I quoted and translated (at 16§7 = pp. 284–285) the following relevant text (Oxyrhynchus Papyri 1800 fr. 2 ii 32–63 = Aesop Testimonia 25 ed. Perry):

[ἔστ]ιν δ' αἰτία τοια[ύτη] εἰρ[η]μένῃ· ἐπὰν [εἰσέ]λθῃ τ[ις] τῷ θεῷ θυσιάσ[ων οἱ] Δελφ[οι] περ[ι]εστήκασιν τὸν βωμ[ὸ]ν ὑπ' ἑαυτοῖς μαχαιράς κ[ο]μίζοντες, σφαγιασμένου δὲ τοῦ ἱερέως καὶ δειραντος τὸ ἱερεῖον καὶ τὰ σπλάγχνα περιεξελομένου, οἱ περιστώτες ἕκαστος ἦν ἂν ἰσχύσει μοῖραν ἀποτεμνόμενος ἄπεισιν, ὡς πολλάκις τὸν θυσιάσαντα αὐτὸν ἄμοιρο[ν] ἀπι[έ]ναι. τοῦτο οὖν Αἰ[σ]ωπ[ο]ς Δελφοῦς ὀνιδ[ί]ζων ἐπέσκηψε, ἐφ' οἷς διορισθέντες οἱ πολλοὶ λίθοις αὐτὸν βάλλοντες κατὰ κρημνοῦ ἔωσαν. μετ' οὐ πολλὴ δὲ λοιμικὸν πάθος ἐπέσκηψε τῇ πόλει, χρηστηριαζόμενοι δ' αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς ἀνεῖλεν οὐ πρότερον [λήξ]ειν τήν νόσον μέ[χ]ρις [ἄν Α]ἰσωπὸν ἐξ[ι]λάσκωντ[αι]. οἱ δὲ περιτε[χί]σαντες τὸν τόπον [ἐν ᾧ κ]ατέπεσεν βωμό[θ]ν ἰ[δ]ε[ρ]υσά[μ]ενοι λυτήρ[ι]ο[ν] τῆς νόσου, ὡς ἦρψ θ[υ]σίας προ[σ]ήνεγκαν.

The cause [aitiā] is said to be this: When someone goes in for the purpose of initiating sacrifice to the god, the Delphians stand around the altar carrying concealed daggers [mákhairai]. And after the priest has slaughtered and flayed the sacrificial victim and after he has apportioned the innards, those who have been standing around cut off whatever portion [moira] of meat each of them is able to cut off and then depart, with the result that the one who initiated the sacrifice oftentimes departs without having a portion [moira] himself. Now Aesop reproached [oneidizein] and ridiculed [skōptein] the Delphians for this, which made the people angry. They stoned him and pushed him off a cliff. Not much later, a pestilence fell upon the city, and when they consulted the Oracle, the god revealed that the disease would not cease until they propitiated Aesop. So they built a wall around the place where he fell, set up an altar as an antidote to the disease, and sacrificed to him as a hero.

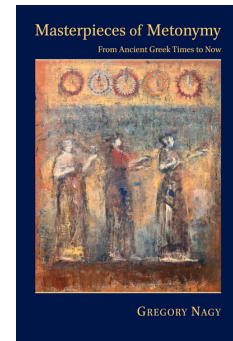
In my book (at notes 1–4 of 16§7 = pp. 284–285), I give information about textual corrections as indicated by way of underlines made at four points in the Greek text above, but this information is not pertinent to my analysis here—except for the first underline, which signals the fact that a lacuna in the papyrus has left us with a missing sentence that precedes the Greek text as I quoted it.

§3. In the missing sentence, there must have been a statement about something that is being explained in the sentences that follow. The explanation is termed an aitiā ‘cause’—a word that is regularly used in Greek with reference to a special kind of a myth. Such a myth, known either as aitiā or as aition, both meaning ‘cause’, functions as an aetiology, that is, as a traditional explanation for an institutional reality—for a traditional custom. In most cases, the traditional custom that is being explained by the aetiological myth is a ritual or, more broadly, a ritualized institution.

§4. In the case of the myth that is being retold in this text, it is an aetiology for the ritualized institution of worshipping Aesop as a cult hero in Delphi, as I argued in *The Best of the Achaeans* (1979|1999 16§§7–9 = pp. 284–286). And then I broadened and deepened the argument further in my essay “Diachrony and the Case of Aesop” (Nagy 2011, especially at §§4–9, 17–19, 28–29, 65–94). For now, however, my focus is not on the hero cult of Aesop as a ritualized institution but rather on the myth that aetiologizes that institution.

§5. The central story of this myth, as we saw at §2 in the text of the papyrus from Oxyrhynchus, was the actual death of Aesop. In the version of the story as I quoted it at §2, he was killed because he made the people of Delphi angry by ridiculing them in a reproachful way. But this telling of the story is incomplete. It does not give details about what it was that Aesop actually said in reproaching and ridiculing the priests of Delphi. Nor does it say how Aesop was framed by the priests. Such missing details in the text at §2 can be found in other texts collected as Testimonia 20–32 in the edition of Perry (1952:220–223), and I have already retold a complete version in a cursory way at §1 above.

§6. Another sign of incompleteness in the Greek text as quoted at §2 is the vagueness of the narrative about the ritual involving the sacrificing of sheep. The story makes it look as if there were only one person performing the actual slaughter—he is the one who is called the hierēus ‘priest’—while the others attending, all brandishing makhairai or sacrificial ‘daggers’, seem to be merely the people of Delphi. What this description elides, however, is that the holders of makhairai at Delphi are already performing a priestly function when they carve the meat of the sheep that have been slaughtered. What causes the vagueness



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here, I argue, is that the ritual being described—the ritual that Aesop reproached and ridiculed—was a practice that notionally took place in the mythologized past of Delphi, at a time before the so-called First Sacred War (traditionally dated to the early sixth century BCE), which was ostensibly caused by the death of Aesop. I apply here an epitome of a relevant argument I made in the article “Diachrony and the Case of Aesop” (Nagy 2011 §68), with reference to myths about deaths of heroes in general:

Myths about the violent death of a hero can include details about rituals of sacrificial slaughter where the sacrifice went wrong, very wrong. Such a disruption of sacrifice in the distant past, which is the world of myth, can motivate the regulation of sacrifice in the immediate present, which is the world of ritual. Such myths, then, are aetiological, in that they explain and even confirm the stability of a ritual or of some other such institution in the present by narrating a primordial event of instability in the mythical past.

§7. Here is an earlier formulation (Nagy 1990 4§§4, 12–20; 5§§9–10; 13§§11, 33–36 = pp. 118, 125–130; 141–142; 386; 395–397): an aetiology focuses on a foundational catastrophe in the mythologized past that explains and thus motivates continuing success in the ritualized present and future.

§8. In terms of this formulation, the ritual of sacrificing sheep at Delphi in the present has been perfected because Aesop died long ago in the past—back in the days when the prototype of that same ritual was still chaotic.

§9. So, back in the days of Aesop, the priests at Delphi were dysfunctional. And, back then, they were angry at Aesop for ridiculing their dysfunctionality, which they displayed most blatantly in their greed. There they were, wrangling over the best cuts of meat at the feast, while a visitor who initiated a sacrifice of a sheep could be left without a cut even by the time he made his departure from the feast.

§10. Comparably, in the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch” at lines 1401–1405 in the *Wasps* of Aristophanes, it was Aesop himself who had left the feast without a portion. And then, as he made his departure, he encountered the bitch. There she was, furiously barking at him, craving meat that he did not have. And, like the greedy priests, this bitch had a nasty tongue—which got Aesop in trouble not by speaking but by barking. Meanwhile, the greedy priests got Aesop in trouble by speaking with nasty tongues that slandered our maker of fables.

§11. There is a comparison to be made here with the comic “dog-trial” at lines 891–1008 in the *Wasps* of Aristophanes. At this canine trial, the defendant is the dog Labes, whose name means ‘grabber’—and who is accused of thievishly grabbing a portion of cheese. On the other side, the prosecutor is the dog Kyon, whose name means simply ‘dog’, matching in metrical shape the name of Kleon (Cleon) himself. This Kyon is a talking dog, making his accusations with his evil tongue, just like the priests of Delphi who caused the death of Aesop. But this dog Kyon is just as thievish, if not more so, than the other dog who has no speaking role, Labes the ‘grabber’.

§12. I bring this essay to an end by recalling what I had said earlier at §15 in Part 2. There I was highlighting an obvious reason, in the retelling of the fable “Aesop and the Bitch” in the *Wasps* of Aristophanes, for mentioning wheat at lines 1404–1405, since the bread-seller would need more wheat for making more bread. But then I added that there was also a reason, a far less obvious reason, for mentioning wheat in the story of this fable. I repeat here what is reported in the scholia for the *Wasps* of Aristophanes (at 1446), drawing on a relevant detail from the *Life of Aesop* tradition: it is said that the people of Delphi had resolved to kill Aesop because he insulted them by ridiculing (ἀνοσκόψαι) the fact that they had no land of their own for growing their own produce. Because they had no land for agriculture, according to the scholia here, the people of Delphi had to depend for their sustenance on the meat they obtained from the sacrifices made by visiting sacrificers. This insult, as I had proposed already in Part 2, is built into the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch,” where the dog who angrily barks to get meat is like the people of Delphi, who would be well advised to use their barking to get wheat instead of meat. And now I would add that such an insult is grounded in the old world of myths about Aesop in Delphi, not in the new world inhabited by characters who come to life in the comedies of Aristophanes.

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