

# ANCIENT GREEK FOLKLORE

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**Overview** Much of the folklore of ancient Greece has made its way into the body of fables we attribute to Aesop, though any thorough research into ancient Greek folktales will need to start from the six-volume Arne-Thompson Folklore Index, *The Motif Index of Folk Literature*, (1955-1958) or from the many subsequent research studies into world folklore. It will be apparent from the start that the imaginative power of Greek mythological thinking, to which we owe much of the finest artistic sensibility of the Greeks, differed sharply from the by and large moralistic thinking embedded in ancient Greek folktales, which like folktales world wide are fundamentally conservative, reinforcing age old truths—or at most questioning the interpretation of them—while the mythological imagination proposes theories, suggests ways of reviewing the world, and not infrequently flies in the face of moral expectations. Or, as better put by Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher we place in the first century C.E., Aesop was

*like those who dine well off the plainest dishes...made use of humble incidents to teach great truths, and after serving up a story he adds to it the advice to do a thing or not to do it.*

Apollonius goes on to say that while the poets played with truths through myth, in order to make them probable, Aesop 'announced' a story which everybody knew was not true, but thereby told the truth.

**Aesop** Aesop was rumored to have been a slave who lived in ancient Greece during the fifth century B.C.E. Generic though that description is, we have remarks, in both Aristophanes and Plato, suggesting that Aesop was a real figure of current attention in the later fifth century, and yet from early on in 'his' identity-formation 'Aesop' seems to have developed toward a generic moniker for the tale-creator: 'any fable tended to be ascribed to the name of Aesop, if there was no known alternative literary source.' Around this loose biographical construction, of Aesop himself, developed the generic idea of the fable itself, or what we might call the set form of the folktale, the template to which the ancient Greek folktale adheres: fables were short and fictitious, 'useful to life and true to nature,' typically following animals and plants in their interreactions, while sharply limiting interactions among the human players. From this formula—a few examples below—developed an ancient literary form, and within it many international echoes between Indian and Greek literatures, whose influence through later 'fabulists' like Lafontaine (in the 17th century) has kept the Aesopian tradition fully alive.

***The Ant and the Grasshopper***(originally 'the cicada.')

One can see at once that the moral dominates here, but that like all rich moralities this one generates unexpected behavioral conclusions. The ant (or ants) labor all year to prepare food for winter. When that season comes, of course, the cicada—who has been singing all summer—finds himself without food, and goes to the ant to beg for emergency rations. The ant turns him down, pointing out the obvious moral, that one must prepare in advance; the wisdom of the insurance man. It is this expected turn--down that lives on in the tradition of the present folktale, but it is worth noting—and remembering as a testimony to the unpredictability of imagination—that a great imagination, that of Lafontaine, might waver in his attitude toward the ant—a stolid citizen, but not of the most open-minded. Pursuing this line, we may want to return to a theme in the ancient Athenian fable repertoire (Perry, # 166). The argument shaper, in this instance, maintains that there was once a farmer who worked all the time, by night even plundering his neighbors' farms, and was ultimately turned into an ant by the enraged king of the gods. The tale teller has in this case firmly grasped that deficiency in industriousness, which turns a seeming virtue into mean stinginess.

***The Ass and the Pig*** The earliest version of this tale Introduces a pig who has been fattened on barley so that he will make a juicy sacrifice. A fellow barnyard ass, offered the remaining barley, after the sacrifice has been carried out, refuses that perk on the grounds that it might lead to his own sacrifice. The moral of the tale, as told there, is that one should learn to distinguish between immediate good—the left over grain-- and ultimate good., precaution against deceptive bargains. The same kind of investigation, of motives and consequences, appears in another version of this folktale, in which a bullock is comparing his own happy go lucky existence with that of a yoked ox, who is being made to labor In the fields. At that

point the owner of the animals approaches the bullock, tying him up for sacrifice, and unyokes the ox. The ox informs the bullock that for this reason he was being allowed to live a life of freedom. We are left to reflect, as we did in the case of the ass and the pig, on the ambiguities of the free life and gifts from left field, both of which can be gateways to unexpected danger.

**What kind of folktales are these?** Aesop's fables, which we see comprehend a large number of 'tales,' from different periods and apparently different cultures—ranging from Sumerian to the Indian tales found in the *Panchatantra* (300 B.C.E.)—are a diverse package of ancient cultural reflections, on moral issues, and on practical philosophy, from ethics to prudence.

### Reading

Holzberg, Niklas, *The Ancient Fable: An Introduction*, trans. Christine Jackson-Holzberg, Bloomington, 2002.

Kurke, Leslie, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Traditions, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*, Princeton, 2010.

### Discussion questions

What seems to you the main difference between myths and folktales? Which type of thinking seems to you closer to 'philosophy'?

Do the kinds of folktale we sampled here resemble Asian thought forms, like the *Analects* of Confucius, or the *Bhagavad Gita* (from the *Mahabharata*)?

What kinds of authors must we assume for the pretty sophisticated tales that make up Aesop's fables? Philosophers, academics? Or just smart observers of life?