

## Seers and Cultural Exchange in Archaic Greece

Recent studies (López-Ruiz, 2010) have demonstrated the transmission of ideas from the Near East to Archaic Greece as reflected in the Greek cosmogonies dating to this era. The mechanism by which these ideas were transmitted in Archaic Greece is difficult to document. Considering their religious functions, seers may have served as vehicles for the diffusion of religious and ethical concepts from the Near East (Burkert, 1992). The biographies of Archaic sages provide a possible means to document this process. The ancient biographies of Pherekydes of Syros, Aesop, and Epimenides of Crete present a number of similarities, all of which conform to a common template, the figure of the seer. The development of the biographical traditions surrounding these sages undoubtedly reflected a widely held view that seers were repositories of traditional wisdom and lore.

Ancient authors composed biographies of Aesop, Pherekydes, and Epimenides by the close of the Classical period. A version of the later *Life of Aesop* was circulating by either the late fifth century or fourth century BC (Kurke, 2011). The historian Theopompos (fourth century BC) treated the lives of both Pherekydes (*BNJ* 115 F 70 -71) and Epimenides (*BNJ* 115 F 69). In these biographies these sages issued prophecies and interpreted signs (*Life of Aesop, Vita G* 87-91, *BNJ* 115 F 69, 71). Such activities were essential to the profession of the *mantis* or seer (Dillery, 2005).

All three sages also are associated with purification rituals. Modern scholars have linked the legend of Aesop's death at Delphi with the *pharmakos* purification ritual (Kurke). In one account of Pherekydes' death, the sage at his own request, is dragged by the legs by an Ephesian into the territory of Magnesia where he is left to die, an act which subsequently enabled Ephesos to defeat the Magnesians in battle (Diogenes Laertius 1.117). Pherekydes' death is reminiscent of

the *pharmakos* ritual in which the victim as a scapegoat (the *pharmakos*) was expelled or killed by a community to purify itself and escape divine wrath. In this story, Pherekydes' expulsion clears the way for Ephesos to avoid defeat at the hands of a rival city. This interpretation of this account is paralleled in another account of Pherekydes' death in which the sage flung himself from a mountain at Delphi (Diogenes Laertius 1.118), the very same mountain from which Aesop as a *pharmakos* leaped to his death (*Life of Aesop Vita G*, 142). In the *pharmakos* ritual the chosen victim was always a marginalized member of the community (Kurke). The assimilation of Pherekydes and Aesop into the figure of the seer made them into candidates for scapegoats, as the seer strikes a liminal specter in both myth and history. Seers could experience respect from their contemporaries, but also faced contempt as outsiders like other non-elite specialists such as craftsmen and merchants (Dillery; Flower, 2008)). Epimenides, unlike Pherekydes and Aesop, was not the victim in a purification rite, but his most famous feat as a seer involved purifying Athens after the Kylon affair (Diogenes Laertius 1.110-111; Plutarch, *Solon*, 12-14).

The seer was also a wanderer, migrating from place to place (Dillery). Likewise Aesop lived in Samos, but travelled afar to Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt (*Life of Aesop Vita G*. 98, 101,108). Pherekydes reportedly visited Delos, Samos, Messene, and Sparta (Diogenes Laertius 1.116-118) while Epimenides travelled from Crete to both Athens and Sparta (Diogenes Laertius 1.111-115).

By the sixth century BC oracular writings were attributed to legendary seers such as the Sibyl and Bakis (Suárez de la Torre, 2009). In this same period Aesop, Pherekydes, and Epimenides were also reportedly the authors of written works. The similarities in the biographical traditions of these three authors stem from the efforts of later ancient writers to

reconstruct their life and work by modeling their biographies on the myth and tradition surrounding seers. Behind the legendary personas of these sages perhaps stands real seers in the Archaic period who, while practicing their craft and travelling afar, were instrumental in the transmission of culture.

### Bibliography

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