



Sappho and Aesop, distinctions between diachronic and historical perspectives

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Sappho and Aesop, distinctions between diachronic and historical perspectives

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2017.03.23 | By Gregory Nagy

A paper presented on March 11, 2017, at the Stoá tou Vivlíou in Athens as part of a conference hosted by the Society for the Promotion of Education and Learning.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)

Introduction

§0. This short paper is derived from a lengthy article of mine, the first version of which was published online in 2011.^[1] An abbreviated second version was published in a book edited by José M. González in 2015.^[2] The title of both versions of that article was "Diachrony and the Case of Aesop." Since even the shorter printed version was over 50 pages long, I can now understand, looking back on it all, that the topics of diachrony and Aesop could easily get lost in the minds of readers who, seeing the title of the article in whichever version, were perhaps expecting to engage with only those two topics, diachrony and Aesop. In the short electronic "paper" I present here, which would take up less than 10 printed pages, I will try to concentrate more on the essence of those two topics, diachrony and Aesop. To get to the essentials, however, I need to add two more topics, as indicated in the title of my paper here: besides Aesop, I add the name of Sappho, and, besides diachronic, I add the term historical. In my compressed paper here, originally presented "live" on the eleventh of March 2017 at a conference hosted by the Society for the Promotion of Education and Learning (SPEL) in Athens, I will make the same distinctions between the terms diachronic and historical that I had originally made in the overlong article of 2011, but my focus now will be different. In the briefest possible way, I will compare historically as well as diachronically the media of Sappho and Aesop, who are described respectively by Herodotus as *μουσοποιός*/*mousopoios* (2.135.1) and *λογονοιός*/*logopoios* (2.134.3). These two words are often translated as 'maker of song' and 'maker of prose' respectively—but I intend to modify the second of these translations in what follows. For those who may wish to compare the essentials as reviewed here in my refocused short paper with the wider-ranging argumentation of my older articles from 2011 and 2016, I offer two makeshift systems of cross-reference. One, I indicate next to the paragraph-numbers of this short "electronic" version the paragraph-numbers, where relevant, from the overlong electronic version of 2011 (preceded by "<"). Two, I indicate the page-breaks from the printed version of 2016: for example, "{236|237}" marks where page 236 stopped and page 237 started.

Distinguishing between diachronic and historical perspectives

§1<§10. I will now explain what I mean by diachronic perspectives and why I am making a distinction here between diachronic and historical perspectives. And, in the course of developing this explanation, I will argue for the necessity of making two kinds of correlation:

1. diachronic perspectives need to be correlated with synchronic perspectives
2. these two perspectives need to be correlated in turn with historical perspectives.

§2<§11. In using the terms synchronic and diachronic, I rely on working definitions recorded in a book stemming from the lectures of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). Here I paraphrase these definitions from the original French wording:

A synchronic perspective has to do with the static aspect of linguistic analysis, whereas a diachronic perspective deals with various kinds of evolution. So synchrony and diachrony refer respectively to an existing state of a language and to phases of evolution in the language.^[3] {235|236}

I note especially the equation here of the words diachronic and evolutionary.

§3<§12. And now I need to add that a diachronic or evolutionary perspective is not the same thing as a historical perspective.

§4<§13. The remark that I just added here about diachrony and history is based on the following formulation:^[4]

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It is a mistake to equate diachronic with historical, as is often done. Diachrony refers to the potential for evolution in a structure, whereas history is not restricted to phenomena that are structurally predictable.

§5<§15. In the same general context, with reference to synchronic as well as diachronic approaches to the study of cultural evidence,[5] I quote a relevant formulation by the anthropologist Pierre-Yves Jacopin: "Both synchrony and diachrony are abstractions extrapolated from a model of reality." [6]

§6<§16. A key word in the formulation by Jacopin is model. Both synchronic and diachronic perspectives are a matter of model building. We can build synchronic models to describe and explain the workings of a structure as we see it attested in a given historical context. We can likewise build diachronic models to describe and explain how that given structure may have evolved from one of its phases into other phases. What we have built, however, is a set of models to be tested on historical realities. The models are not the same thing as the realities themselves. And the realities of history as a process are not dependent on such models. History may either confirm or upset any or all aspects of our models, since the contingencies of history do not need to follow the rules of existing structures. {236|237}

§7<§17. The aim, then, in applying synchronic and diachronic perspectives is to build synchronic and diachronic models for the description of structures and for visualizing the evolution of these structures. And the building of such models may be applied not only to linguistic structures but also to the cultural structures of traditions in general.[7] A case in point is the project that I am undertaking here in comparing the media of Sappho and Aesop, who as we saw are described respectively by Herodotus as *mousopoios* (2.135.1) and *logopoios* (2.134.3).



Woodcut illustration from an incunable German translation by Heinrich Steinhöwel of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (1474).
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§8<§18. I start from a historical perspective in considering these terms *mousopoios* and *logopoios*. In the case of Sappho, it is a historical fact that her verbal art was understood to be the medium of poetry or, more accurately, of song. Accordingly, *mousopoios* in Herodotus (2.135.1) may be translated as 'maker of song'. In the case of Aesop, on the other hand, it is a historical fact that his verbal art was understood to be the medium of prose—at least, from the standpoint of the classical period in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. For example, Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* (61a–b) makes a point of saying that he decided to turn the prose of Aesop into poetry. And there are situations where *logopoios* clearly refers to an author of prose: for example, Herodotus uses this noun in referring to the historian Hecataeus of Miletus (2.143.1, 5.36.2, 5.125), and there is a comparable use of the verb *logopoieîn*, without reference to any specific author, in Thucydides (6.38.1). In brief, there is external historical evidence for translating *logopoios* in Herodotus (2.134.3) as 'maker of prose'—an interpretation that I will nevertheless question in what follows.

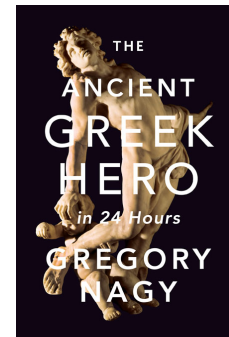
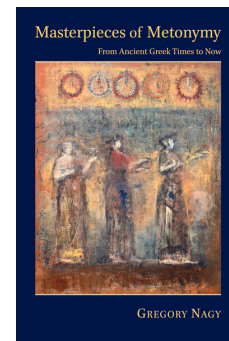
§9. From a historical perspective, in any case, we are left with the impression that Aesop was an exponent of prose while Sappho was an exponent of poetry—or, more accurately, of song. From a diachronic perspective, however, as I will argue, Aesop was an exponent of poetry as well as prose.

§10. Before I can go any further, however, I need to delimit further my use of the terms synchronic and diachronic, as well as my use of the term historical.

Delimiting the terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' in the analysis of structures

§11<§20. I offer here two different ways of further delimiting the terms synchronic and diachronic, thus bringing them into sharper focus:

1. The terms synchronic and diachronic need to be applied consistently from the objective standpoint of an outsider who is thinking about a given structure, not from the subjective standpoint of an insider who is thinking within that structure.[8] Such an objective standpoint enhances the synchronic as well as the diachronic perspectives that are needed



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for describing structures and for explaining how these structures evolve. This way of looking at a given structure helps avoid the pitfall of assuming that one's own synchronic or diachronic perspectives are identical with the perspectives of those who were part of the culture in which that structure was historically anchored. Such an assumption runs the risk of misreading the historical context in which the structure is attested.

2. Whereas synchronic and diachronic perspectives are needed to describe a given structure as it exists at a given time and as it evolves through time, historical perspectives are needed to describe what actually happened to that structure. As I noted already, what happened in history can be unpredictable, since we cannot predict the contingencies of history. So, when it comes to reconstructing what happened to a given structure, it is not enough to use a purely {237|238} diachronic perspective. As I have also already noted, a purely diachronic perspective is restricted to phenomena that are structurally predictable.

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Delimiting the term 'historical' in the analysis of structures

§12<§21. Here I come to the third of the three delimitations I am now proposing: in analyzing a given structure, synchronic and diachronic perspectives need to be applied before historical judgments or prejudgments can be made.

§13<§22. The delimitation I have just outlined is especially important in situations where we find little or no historical evidence for earlier attestations of a given structure. I am addressing here one of the biggest problems that historians face when they try to view structures over time. If they apply only a historical perspective as they reconstruct a given structure backward in time, back to the era when that structure is actually documented, they find themselves limited to the realities they find in that era. And the only way they can reconstruct further back in time is to find further documentation stemming from earlier eras.

Reconstructing structures forward as well as backward in time

§14<§23. By contrast, a diachronic perspective provides also for the reconstruction of realities that that are historically undocumented. And reconstruction from a diachronic perspective is not restricted to the hindsight of history. A diachronic perspective not only makes it possible to reconstruct backward in time by tracing the evolution of a given structure back to undocumented phases of that structure. It also makes it possible to reconstruct forward in time.

§15<§24. In my own work on linguistics,^[9] I applied the concept of reconstructing backward and forward in time with reference to the term Common Greek, which refers to a diachronic model developed by linguists. I offer here a summary:

I am speaking here about the historical evidence for a chronological demarcation between pre-documented and documented eras of the Greek language. Experts used to place this demarcation somewhere around the eighth century BCE, which is the era when alphabetic writing was first being introduced into the Greek-speaking world. The Greek language as it existed in what was understood to be the pre-documented era on the farther side of this demarcation could only be reconstructed diachronically, {238|239} all the way back to a hypothetical proto-language known to linguists as Common Greek. This proto-language, Common Greek, is not a historical reality but a construct, a diachronic model. But then a major shift in demarcation took place, signaled by the decipherment of Linear B, which was a system of syllabic writing that dates back to the second millennium BCE. Once the decipherment revealed that the language written in this script was an earlier form of Greek, the documented era of the Greek language needed to be pushed back into the second millennium BCE, and this newly demarcated older era could now reveal new historical facts about the language. These new facts in some ways confirmed but in other ways contradicted the reconstructions achieved by way of diachronic perspectives that had already been developed before the decipherment of Linear B.^[10] Those previous reconstructions, which were dominated by the hindsight of later history, needed to be modified in the light of earlier history. So now a new diachronic model of Common Greek needed to be built by way of reconstructing backward in time, even farther back than before. And, now that an earlier historical phase of Greek had been discovered, this discovery required re-adjustments in how we reconstruct forward in time from that earlier phase to later phases.

§16<§25. From this example, we can see that the diachronic process of reconstructing forward as well as backward in time depends on the data provided by historical evidence. But the actual reconstruction of structures depends primarily on diachronic and synchronic perspectives and only secondarily on a historical perspective. I say this because the historical perspective works only by hindsight, whereas the diachronic perspective allows for foresight as well, so to speak, by way of the procedure I describe here as reconstructing forward in time.

§17<§26. For a prime example, I highlight here a set of findings achieved by applying another diachronic model. This model is another construct built by linguists, and this one is even bigger than the model of Common Greek. The diachronic model I have in mind here is what German-speaking linguists call Indo-Germanic and other linguists call Indo-European or Common Indo-European or proto-Indo-European. I focus here on an example of what kinds of things we can find when we reconstruct forward as well as backward in Indo-European linguistics:

The example centers on the etymology of the Greek word *pontos* (πόντος) 'sea', which is cognate with the following words in other Indo-European languages: Latin *pōns* 'bridge', Armenian *hun* 'ford', Old Church Slavonic *poti* and Old Prussian *pintis* 'path', Sanskrit *pānthāh*, and Avestan *pantā* 'path'. When we reconstruct all these words backward in time, back to an undocumented common proto-language known to linguists as Common Indo-European or proto-Indo-European, such reconstruction backward in time does not help us fully comprehend the semantic relationship of the meaning 'sea' in Greek with such divergent meanings as 'bridge', 'ford', and 'path' in the other Indo-European languages. It is only after we reconstruct forward in time, taking into account all the {239|240} comparative evidence we derive from the cognate languages that we factored into our reconstruction backward in time, that we can comprehend more fully the convergent meaning that unifies diachronically the divergent meanings of these words. This convergent meaning has to do with a crossing, over a dangerous body of water or over some other dangerous zone, that sacralizes the one who succeeds in achieving such a dangerous crossing (Nagy 1972|2008:48–49, following Benveniste 1954|1966:296–298). Only then, only after we have reconstructed forward in time, can we understand the contexts of the word *pontos* (πόντος) 'sea' in the earliest attested phases of Greek poetry, where we see expressions of dread about dangerous sea crossings and references to the sacralizing effect of such crossings. Further evidence comes from the derivative form *Hellēs-pontos* (Ἑλλήσ-ποντος), which is the name of a famous strait that we know as the Hellespont and which means etymologically 'the crossing of Helle', referring to a myth about a dangerous crossing of this strait by a girl named Helle and by her brother, who are being carried across the dangerous waters by a ram with a golden fleece: the girl falls off the ram and drowns in the Hellespont while her brother succeeds in crossing the strait and is thus sacralized (Nagy 1979|1999:339–340).

§18<§27. This example shows that diachronic analysis, by way of reconstructing forward in time, can enhance not only historical analysis but also synchronic analysis, since a purely synchronic analysis of the attested contexts of *pontos* (πόντος) would yield only the meaning 'sea'. The underlying sense of a dangerous crossing that sacralizes would be impossible to recover without applying a diachronic perspective.

Reconstructing through time the medium of Aesop as distinct from the medium of Sappho

§19<§28. The three perspectives that I have examined, synchronic, diachronic, and historical, are all at work in my reconstruction, through time, of the term *logopoios* as used by Herodotus with reference to Aesop (2.134.3) in contrast with the term *mousopoios* with reference to Sappho (2.135.1). By way of developing synchronic and diachronic perspectives in analyzing such a tradition, I built models that were meant to be tested by way of applying historical perspectives. In reconstructing backward in time, I considered not only the classical phases of this tradition, dating back to the fifth and the fourth century BCE, but also their preclassical phases in the sixth century BCE and before. And, in reconstructing forward in time, my point of departure was not the {240|241} classical but the preclassical phases of the Aesop tradition, as I worked my way forward from there into the classical and the postclassical phases.

§20<§29. Just now, I referred to the classical phases of the Aesopic tradition, dating these phases to the fifth and the fourth century BCE. I was speaking from a historical point of view, from the hindsight of history. From a diachronic perspective, however, reconstructing backward and then forward in time, even the term classical becomes relative, in the sense that it can no longer be absolutized.

A diachronic view of Aesopic fables in poetry as well as in prose

§21<§119. I epitomize here from Nagy 2011 §119 ({267|268}), where I summarize my overall argument, presented in §§90–118:

- (1) The prose versions of fables attributed to Aesop are cognate with poetic versions as attested in the medium of Aristophanes in the fifth century.
- (2) These prose versions are also cognate with the fables narrated in the preclassical poetry of figures like Stesichorus ("The Horse and the Deer," PMG 281a) and Archilochus (The Fox and the Eagle," F 174).

From a diachronic point of view, then, fables could be narrated in poetry as well as in prose.



Frontispiece woodcut from *Fabulas de Esopo* (1489).
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§22<§120. As we see in the *Wasps* of Aristophanes (1258, 1394, 1398), the word *logos* ‘speech’ is used with reference to fables in their versified forms. So, the meaning of this word does not confine fables to the medium of prose. And it can be shown in general that poetry uses the word *logos* to refer to verse as well as prose.

§23<§159. A similar point can be made with regard to the word *logopoiios* ‘maker of logo-’, which Herodotus actually applies to Aesop himself (2.134.3), to be contrasted with the word *mousopoiios* ‘maker of song [mouso-]’, which he applies to Sappho (2.135.1). And the point is this: the component *logo-* of the compound *logopoiios* can refer to poetry as well as prose.

§24<§168. In Plato’s *Phaedo* (61b), as we saw, Socrates makes a point of saying that he decided to turn the prose of Aesop into poetry. In this context, the form of the Aesopic fable is described as *logos*, which is ordinarily prose in the era of Socrates—but the content of fable is said to be *muthos*, making it compatible with poetry. As we saw, the *muthos* of Aesopic fable could in fact be poetry in earlier phases of its existence. That is why Plato’s Socrates can playfully take the *muthoi* of Aesop at their word by converting these *muthoi*, as fables, into poetry: if you intend to be poetic in content, he is saying, you should be poetic in form as well. And that is why I can say that Plato’s Socrates, by turning Aesop’s fables into verse, has in effect made the fable revert from its current form as prose to its earlier form as poetry. {285}

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Notes

[1] "Diachrony and the Case of Aesop." *Classics@*. Issue 9: Defense Mechanisms in Interdisciplinary Approaches to Classical Studies and Beyond. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy_Diachrony_and_the_Case_of_Aesop.2011.

[2] González 2015:233–290.

[3] Saussure 1916:117: "Est synchronique tout ce qui rapporte à l'aspect statique de notre science, diachronique tout ce qui a trait aux évolutions. De même synchronie et diachronie désigneront respectivement un état de langue et une phase d'évolution." For background on the original wording and on my paraphrase, including remarks on the special relevance of these terms to Homeric studies, see Nagy 2003:1.

[4] Nagy 1990 1§9 = p. 21n18.

[5] Nagy 1979|1999 §25 = p. xv with n3.

[6] Jacopin 1988:35–36.

[7] As I showed in both Nagy 1979|1999 and 1990.

[8] Nagy 1990 0§11 = p. 4.

[9] Nagy 1972|2008:19.

[10] Nagy 1972|2008:33.

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