



History 101

Aesop

Aesop (c. 620 – 564 BC) was an Ancient Greek fabulist or story teller credited with a number of fables now collectively known as *Aesop's Fables*. Although his existence remains uncertain and no writings by him survive, numerous tales credited to him were gathered across the centuries and in many languages in a storytelling tradition that continues to this day. Many of the tales are characterized by animals and inanimate objects that speak, solve problems, and generally have human characteristics.

Scattered details of Aesop's life can be found in ancient sources, including Aristotle, Herodotus, and Plutarch. An ancient literary work called *The Aesop Romance* tells an episodic, probably highly fictional version of his life, including the traditional description of him as a strikingly ugly slave who by his cleverness acquires freedom and becomes an adviser to kings and city-states. Older spellings of his name have included Esop(e) and Isope. Depictions of Aesop in popular culture over the last 2500 years have included several works of art and his appearance as a character in numerous books, films, plays, and television programs.

The earliest Greek sources, including Aristotle, indicate that Aesop was born around 620 BC in Thrace at a site on the Black Sea coast which would later become the city Mesembria. A number of later writers from the Roman imperial period (including Phaedrus, who adapted the fables into Latin) say that he was born in Phrygia.

From Aristotle and Herodotus we learn that Aesop was a slave in Samos and that his masters were first a man named Xanthus and then a man named Iadmon; that he must eventually have been freed, because he argued as an advocate for a wealthy Samian; and that he met his end in the city of Delphi. Plutarch tells us that Aesop had come to Delphi on a diplomatic mission from King Croesus of Lydia, that he insulted the Delphians, was sentenced to death on a trumped-up charge of temple theft, and was thrown from a cliff (after which the Delphians suffered pestilence and famine); before this fatal episode, Aesop met with Periander of Corinth, where Plutarch has him dining with the Seven Sages of Greece, sitting beside his friend Solon, whom he had met in Sardis.

Problems reconciling dating the death of Aesop and the reign of Croesus led to the questioning of his existence, but subsequent research has established that a possible diplomatic mission for Croesus and a visit to Periander "are consistent with the year of Aesop's death." [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesop>]

