

# Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions in Archaic Greek Culture

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**Abstract** This contribution aims to: 1. present a quick overview of proverbs and their use in archaic Greek culture; 2. define and review the main Greek wisdom traditions; 3. show, through the analysis of some examples, how proverbs are among the main forms of expression of the sapiential traditions.

**Keywords** Ancient Greek. Proverbs. Wisdom traditions. Epic poetry. Hesiod.

**Summary** 1 The Proverb: General Remarks. – 2 Proverbs in Greek Culture. – 2.1 Terminology: Modern and Ancient. – 2.2 Dissemination in Greek ‘Literary Genres’. – 3 Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions. – 3.1 Wisdom Traditions in Greece: A Brief (and Partial) Survey. – 3.2 Hesiod. – 4 Conclusions.

## 1 The Proverb: General Remarks

Proverbs and sayings are human universals:<sup>1</sup> all societies without exception have developed a proverbial tradition. This prompts the

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I would like to thank the participants in the discussion of this paper in its oral version, presented in Turin on 27 October 2022, at the conference of which this publication is the fruit. I would also like to thank Livio Sbardella for criticising and improving this contribution with his usual acumen and intelligence. Translations from Hesiod are by H.G. Evelyn-White; other translations from the Greek, unless otherwise indicated, are by the Author.

**1** The theory of human universals dates back to Brown 1991; the category of human universals includes “those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no known exception”. Among the universals identified are: poetic lines characterized by repetition and variation; proverbs, sayings - in mutually contradictory forms; rhythm. With particular reference to proverbs see also Mieder 2008, 2: proverbs are “linguistic and cultural ‘monumenta humana’”.

assumption that proverbs represent an information unit of fundamental importance for the transmission of relevant segments of the 'cultural message', i.e. that set of information useful for the survival of the human group and not inscribed in the genetic code. From this point of view, proverbs can indeed be considered an adaptive tool in Darwinian terms.

Proverbs are characterized by a very high degree of 'cognitive economy':<sup>2</sup> a proverb is able to compress and provide "enough information (free of noise) to generate the appropriate 'diagnosis' of a situation and 'remedy' for it".<sup>3</sup> Otherwise said: proverbs express a maximum of information through a minimum of linguistic signs;<sup>4</sup> each proverb represents a single linguistic unit and therefore works very well as a *meme*, a memory unit that reproduces itself and automatically disseminates.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these structural elements explain why the proverb is entrusted with fundamental notions of social/collective relevance and usefulness: rules of behaviour, indications of method, relevant data (in the most diverse fields: work activities, calendar, animals, plants etc.).<sup>6</sup>

The effectiveness of the proverb, both in terms of communicative impact and in terms of dissemination/diffusion capacity, also depends on the level of its formal elaboration. In the traditions I am aware of,<sup>7</sup> proverbs always have a particular structure, significantly different from that of plain language. I present below a quick list of 'proverbial' traits without claiming to be exhaustive, only *exempli gratia*:<sup>8</sup>

- Nominal clause
- *Cola* structure (bi- and tri-members)<sup>9</sup>
- Symmetries and parallelisms<sup>10</sup>

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**2** Although formulated in other contexts, namely within Stinchcombe's 2001 'theory of formality', it describes the effectiveness of the proverb excellently.

**3** Concise definition by Colyvas 2012, 177, tab. 1.

**4** This explains well, in my opinion, why they have found and still find wide diffusion and dissemination.

**5** Because this is precisely its function: Dawkins 1976.

**6** The hypothesis that the proverb, in addition to being a source of knowledge, would also have heuristic and epistemological value is worthy of consideration: Shapin 2001.

**7** The Italian, Latin and Greek ones: some forays in others, such as German and English traditions, confirm the general lines.

**8** On the structure of proverbs in general, Dundes 1975 is still very useful (see also Cirese 1972). Updated discussion of proverbial features in Mac Coinnigh 2014, with an extensive bibliography.

**9** Cf. Sum. and Akk. traditions: see Buccellati in this volume. In what follows, given the theme of the conference whose proceedings are collected here, I will tend to favor comparisons with Near Eastern cultures, and more particularly with Sumerian and Akkadian texts.

**10** This is a universal formal/structural characteristic: whether there are exclusive 'specific' forms of it, such that direct relationships can be established between texts

- Meter and rhythm<sup>11</sup>
- ‘Sound’ organisation of the text (parechesis, homoteleuton, assonances, alliterations etc.)
- Formulaic diction (esp. incipit-formulas)

Precisely because of all these formal and structural characteristics ‘proverbs speak louder than words’.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Proverbs in Greek Culture

### 2.1 Terminology: Modern and Ancient

In order to provide an overview of the proverb in Greek culture, it is useful to first clarify as much as possible the notion of ‘proverb’.

The proverb is now commonly defined by the *terminus technicus* ‘*paroimia*’ and is the field of study of an autonomous discipline: paremiology.<sup>13</sup>

A *paroimia* is a specially meaningful sentence (with specific formal features) that has entered the collective linguistic memory of a human group. The distinction and isolation of the proverb from other expressions of general application therefore depends mainly:

1. on the ‘linguistic sharing’ of the formulation;
2. on the non-‘authorship’ of the text: if a text has a specific and ‘nominal’ (authorial) origin, it is a *sententia*, until it is lost, anonymous and enticed, in the rhetorical code of the *langue*;<sup>14</sup>
3. on the allological nature of the utterance, evoking by analogy another semantic set (a trait particularly evident in animal proverbs).<sup>15</sup>

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and/or traditions, according to a derivationist model, seems to me highly questionable. For an attempt in this direction see, however, Currie in this volume.

**11** See Buccellati in this volume.

**12** So goes the title of a book by Wolfgang Mieder (2008).

**13** For an excellent introduction to this field of study see Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Varga 2015, with extensive bibliography.

**14** I use and accept F. de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* (de Saussure 1916).

**15** On the definition of proverbs, the linguistic concept of *paroimia* and, more generally, on problems concerning the definition and classification of proverbial utterances I follow Franceschi 2004 (cf. already Franceschi 1999; see also D’Eugenio 2018, 602-4). Still fundamental is the pioneering work of Taylor, despite his aporetic position that “the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking” (Taylor 1931, 3). For the various definitions of ‘proverb’ see the doxography in Mieder 2008, 10-13, and then Norrick 2015. With a possibilistic attitude Villers 2014 and then Villers 2022 (with bibliography). Lelli (2023, 1-4) quickly returns to the various issues.

The definition of a proverb (and the appropriate criteria for identifying it) adopted here illustrates its basic characteristics and allows us to address the question of the ‘proverb in Greek culture’. Of course, there are other descriptive models that produce other taxonomies and define other oppositions between different types of utterances that we might generically define as sententious, including proverbs in the strict sense. I quote, purely as an example, Barley’s 1974 model, in my opinion more effective than others, which develops a classificatory matrix that can be summarized as follows:

	statement	fixed	metaphorical
proverb	+	+	+
riddle	-	-	+/-
maxim	+	+	-
proverbial phrase	-	+	+

In the Greek culture proverbs in the proper sense are indicated by the term *paroimia* παροιμία.<sup>16</sup> The noun *gnome* γνώμη indicates a formulation like the proverb but allegedly of authorial origin. More precisely, on the level of meaning, should we wish to try to distinguish, *paroimia* expresses a kind of general and generally shared truth, *gnome* a personal (albeit authoritative) opinion.<sup>17</sup>

These purely theoretical distinctions, however, are of no consequence, since both *gnome* and *paroimia* are present in wisdom traditions,<sup>18</sup> and we are not always able to make a sensible distinction between them.

That a distinction existed between *paroimia* and *gnome* can be deduced from the existence of two erudite genres related to such utterances: the gnomologists on the one hand and the paremiography

<sup>16</sup> For the etymology see García Romero 1999.

<sup>17</sup> γνώμη indicates a cognitive faculty and hence takes on the generic meaning of ‘thought, judgement’ or ‘judgement, opinion’ (*LSJ* s.v., II, III): something individual, therefore. On the definition of *gnome* and its detailed use see the discussion in Boeke 2007, 12-27 (with further bibliography). An attempt to define the Greek concept of ‘proverb’ in Kindstrand 1978; further discussion in Russo 1983 and Tzifopoulos 1995. For a useful overview see Tosi 2004b. Issues of terminology and definitions also in Hallik 2007 and now in Lelli 2023 (who alongside proverb adopts, perhaps rightly, the more generic definition of *sententia*).

<sup>18</sup> One should also consider the ἀποφθέγματα (*apophthègmata*) ‘terse pointed sayings’ (cf. *LSJ* s.v. “ἀπόφθεγμα”), in fact indistinguishable from *gnomai*, if not for their avowedly oral origin of ‘spoken word’ (sayings, precisely). In reverse perspective (= point of view of the listener, not of the issuer) on the same level are the *akousmata* ἀκούσματα, literally ‘things heard’, but in the context of the Pythagorean school ‘oral instructions’ (cf. e.g. Iambl. *VP* 18.82; cf. *LSJ* s.v. “ἄκουσμα”). For the lexicon of ‘proverb’ in Greek (and Roman) culture see Bieler 1936.

on the other. The proverb was certainly the subject of reflection by Aristotle<sup>19</sup> and by his school: in the list of works of Theophrastus, one of Aristotle's most prominent pupils, reported by Diogenes Laertius 5.42-50, a treatise Περὶ παροιμιῶν is mentioned. Precisely to the interest of ancient scholars we owe collections of both *gnomai* and *paroimiai* that fixed in written form part of the Greek proverbial traditions, thus ensuring its preservation over time.<sup>20</sup> Particularly relevant is the set of ancient proverbial collections published as *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* (CPG), without which any attempt at investigating the Greek paremiological tradition would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

## 2.2 Dissemination in Greek 'Literary Genres'

Archaic Greek culture (as many others) made use of proverbs *plenis manibus* and embedded them in numerous communicative contexts. The use of proverbs appears pervasive (I can't say if massive, but certainly pervasive), as the following brief review demonstrates:<sup>21</sup>

### Epos

Hes. *Op.* 218

παθῶν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων ||

cf. Hom. *Il.* 17.32 = 20.198

ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων ||

In these cases we are dealing with a final clause of proverbial matrix (as underlined by the paremiac structure of the *colon*, for which see § 3.2.1 below; in the Hesiodic case see also the testimony of Pl. *Symp.* 222b). The Hesiodic passage expresses a widespread idea: 'learning through suffering', summarized in the formulation of Aesch. *Ag.* 177 πάθει μάθος (cf. the It. proverb "danno fa far senno").<sup>22</sup> The Homeric formulation (concluding a larger repeated sequence: ἀλλά σ' ἔγωγ'

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<sup>19</sup> See Ieraci Bio 1978; 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Recent collections of Greek and Roman gnomic/proverbial material, complementing ancient ones, are now offered by Tosi 2017a and Lelli 2021.

<sup>21</sup> With the exception of the epos, I give a single example for each poetic 'genre' in which proverbs are found. The data are far more conspicuous: see the pioneering and still useful collection by Ahrens 1937; for the presence of proverbs in various 'literary genres' (both Greek and Roman) see the contributions collected by Lelli 2009; 2010; 2011; a summary in Lelli 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Comparison material and wider discussion in Ercolani 2010 *ad loc.*

ἀναχωρήσαντα κελεύω | ἐς πληθὺν ἰέναι, μηδ' ἀντίος ἴστασ' ἐμεῖο πρίν τι κακὸν παθέειν- ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω)<sup>23</sup> seem to express a slightly different sense, comparable to the It. proverb “uomo avvisato mezzo salvato”.<sup>24</sup> The contiguity of the utterances is evident in itself: one is dealing with a proverb ‘declined’ to fit the context. It is difficult, as well as useless, to establish which is the starting model and which the derived outcome (see also *infra* § 3.2.2).

Precisely because of controversial and decidedly unclear interpretation, I point out the case of Hes. *Theog.* 35 ἀλλὰ τί μοι ταῦτα περὶ δρῦν ἢ περὶ πέτρην (But why all this about oak or stone?) in comparison to Hom. *Il.* 22.126 f. οὐ μὲν πῶς νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης; | τῷ ὀαριζέμεναι (“In no wise may I now from oak-tree or from rock | hold dalliance with him”) and Hom. *Od.* 19.163 οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ δρυὸς ἔσοι παλαιφάτου οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης (“for thou art not sprung from an oak of ancient story, or from a stone”) (both transl. by A.T. Murray). This could be an oath formula, a simple exclamation, but also an expression of proverbial derivation, maybe even derived from a fairytale story. Certainly in the Homeric passages the expression is problematic.<sup>25</sup>

## Lyric Poetry

### a. monodic<sup>26</sup>

Alc. fr. 393 V. (Mantiss. prov. II 46 [CPG 2: 765])

Πάλιν ἢ ὕς παρορίνει

the sow outsteps the boundaries once more

### b. choral<sup>27</sup>

Pind. *Isthm.* 2.11

χρήματα χρήματ' ἀνήρ

man is wealth

<sup>23</sup> Hom. *Il.* 17.30-2 = 20.196-8.

<sup>24</sup> Vd. Lardinois 1997, 216; Lelli 2023, 6. On proverbs and *gnomai* in the Homeric poems see Lardinois 1997 (with previous bibliography); 2000; 2001; Lelli 2023, 5-6. For the Hesiodic poems see *infra* § 3.2.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. West 1966, *ad* 35, and Richardson 1993, *ad* 126-8.

<sup>26</sup> For an overview see Lelli 2023, 10-12. The frequency of proverbial expressions in Alceo is significant: in the approximately 600 readable verses we possess, one finds “a proverb every twenty lines” (Lelli 2023, 10).

<sup>27</sup> For Pindar, after Bischoff 1938, see Boeke 2007 (esp. chapters 2 and 3), with bibliography.

## Tragedy<sup>28</sup>

Aesch. Ag. 36

βοῦς ἐπὶ γλώσσηι (cf. Diogen. III 48 [CPG 1: 223] βοῦς ἐπὶ γλώσσης)  
an ox on the tongue

## Comedy<sup>29</sup>

Ar. Pac. 1083

οὔποτε ποιήσεις τὸν καρκίνον ὀρθὰ βαδίζειν (cf. Apostol. XIII 46a [CPG 2: 586])  
you'll never make the crab walk straight

In short: proverbs are to be found in most of (if not all) poetic genres and, of course, in the prosa-genres.

A passage from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*<sup>30</sup> helps to understand the reason for the dissemination of the *gnome* (and thus of proverbs, which from a logical point of view function like *gnomai*) in Greek texts of all kinds and times.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle illustrates the use of the *gnome* as the premise or conclusion of an *enthymeme*, i.e. of an argumentative/demonstrative reasoning (even a very short one): it is precisely this logical function of the *gnome* that makes it employable in the most varied contexts.

Περὶ δὲ γνωμολογίας, ῥηθέντος τί ἐστὶν γνώμη μάλιστ' ἂν γένοιτο φανερόν περὶ ποίων τε καὶ πότε καὶ τίσιν ἀρμόττει χρῆσθαι τῷ γνωμολογεῖν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις. ἔστι δὴ γνώμη ἀπόφανσις, οὐ μέντοι οὔτε περὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστον, οἷον ποιός τις Ἴφικράτης, ἀλλὰ καθόλου, οὔτε περὶ πάντων, οἷον ὅτι τὸ εὐθὺ τῷ καμπύλῳ ἐναντίον, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὅσων αἱ πράξεις εἰσὶ, καὶ <ἄ> αἰρετὰ ἢ φευκτὰ ἐστὶ πρὸς τὸ πράττειν, ὥστ' ἐπεὶ τὸ ἐνθύμημα ὁ περὶ τοιούτων συλλογισμὸς ἐστίν, σχεδὸν τὰ συμπεράσματα τῶν ἐνθυμημάτων καὶ αἱ ἀρχαὶ ἀφαιρεθέντος τοῦ συλλογισμοῦ γνώμαί εἰσιν κτλ.

**28** In tragedy *gnomai* and proverbs play an important role both on the conceptual and on the structural level (= *actio*, turn-taking: Ercolani 2000, 143-77). On the proverb in tragedy see also Martin 2005; for Aeschylus see Grimaldi 2009, for Sophocles see Cuny 2007, for Euripides see Most 2003, each with previous bibliography.

**29** Numerous works have been devoted to proverbs in comedy; for an initial orientation see Lelli 2007; Schirru 2009; Tosi 2017b.

**30** From historiography to oratory etc.: see e.g. Huart 1973 (*gnomai* in Thucydides), Russo 1997 and Shapiro 2000 (*gnomai* in Herodotus; the first one with a very useful concluding appendix).

**31** Arist. *Rh.* 2.21.1-2 (1394a 19 ff.).

[1] In regard to the use of maxims, it will most readily be evident on what subjects, and on what occasions, and by whom it is appropriate that maxims should be employed in speeches, after a maxim has been defined. [2] Now, a maxim (γνώμη) is a statement, not however concerning particulars, as, for instance, what sort of a man Iphicrates was, but generals; it does not even deal with all general things, as for instance that the straight is the opposite of the crooked, but with the objects of human actions, and with what should be chosen or avoided with reference to them. And as the enthymeme is, we may say, the syllogism dealing with such things, maxims are the premises or conclusions of enthymemes without the syllogism etc.<sup>32</sup>

*Gnomai* and proverbs, therefore, stand out as logical-expository modules that are widely and massively used within all kinds of texts or communicative acts, yesterday as today, since they serve to affirm or demonstrate authoritatively the goodness or badness of whatever it is that we are dealing with.

It is good to remember, with Mieder, that

proverbs are a significant rhetorical force in various modes of communication, from friendly chats, powerful political speeches, and religious sermons on to lyrical poetry, best-seller novels, and the influential mass-media.<sup>33</sup>

### 3 Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions

#### 3.1 Wisdom Traditions in Greece: A Brief (and Partial) Survey

Before proceeding to a sampling (partial as it may be) of the wisdom traditions in Greece, it is necessary to give firstly an operational definition of wisdom. The notion of wisdom that I adopt (and which, in my opinion, is the most correct from a historical point of view) is essentially based on the results of von Rad 1970's analysis, whereby what we define as 'wisdom' does not respond to a formal criterion, i.e. it is not a literary genre, but is a content: wisdom is the set of knowledge (including technical knowledge) and conceptions that a society has acquired through experience and transmitted over time.

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<sup>32</sup> Transl. J.H. Freese.

<sup>33</sup> Mieder 2008, 9.



In archaic Greek culture, sapiential contents are entrusted primarily (if not exclusively) to the poetic word,<sup>34</sup> and in particular to the epos, the poetic word par excellence. In the form of epos the most significant Greek sapiential traditions take shape: Hesiod and the *corpus Hesiodicum*, Empedocles, the oracles, the ‘Seven Wisemen’.

To the Seven Wisemen<sup>35</sup> the sources assign a varied production, mostly poetic, where hexameter poetry seems to dominate (not to mention that many of the sayings attributed to them are compatible with metrical patterns): the sources say of many of them that they composed *epe* ἔπη, a quasi-technical term usually denoting dactylic hexameters (6da): Thales ἔγραψε περὶ μετεώρων ἐν ἔπεσι (wrote about astronomical phenomena in verses),<sup>36</sup> Periander is said to have composed *hypothekai* for 2,000 verses (ἐποίησε δὲ καὶ ὑποθήκας εἰς ἔπη δισχίλια ‘he also composed exhortations for 2,000 verses’)<sup>37</sup>; Cleobulus is said to have composed songs and riddles for 3,000 verses (οὗτος ἐποίησεν ᾄσματα καὶ γρίφους εἰς ἔπη τρισχίλια ‘he composed songs and riddles for 3,000 verses’);<sup>38</sup> cf. also the information on Anacarsi author of a poem of 800 verses (ἔπη ὀκτακόσια),<sup>39</sup> or Museo<sup>40</sup> or Orpheus, wise men *de iure* and *de facto*.

Significant sapiential traditions (often containing moral teachings) are also expressed in elegiac couplets: I am thinking of Solon (author of *hypothekai* in elegiac form),<sup>41</sup> Chilon,<sup>42</sup> Pittacus (author of 600

**34** For a detailed discussion of the ‘wise man-poet’ relationship in Greek culture see Ornaghi in this volume. The conclusion is that the figure of the poet and the wise man coincide, are one and the same. The poet is the ‘master of truth’: Detienne 1967 (see also Martin 1993).

**35** I follow the list by Diog. Laert. 1.13: σοφοὶ δὲ ἐνομιζόντο οἶδε· Θαλῆς, Σόλων, Περίανδρος, Κλεόβουλος, Χεῖλων, Βίας, Πιττακός (“The men who were commonly regarded as sages were the following: Thales, Solon, Periander, Cleobulus, Chilon, Bias, Pittacus”; transl. R.D. Hicks). The names, however, vary according to the sources, and if we put the various lists together, the Seven Wisemen, in total, turn out to be far more than seven: see, for example, the continuation of Diogenes Laertius himself: τούτοις προσαρθμοῦσιν Ἀνάχαρσιν τὸν Σκύθην, Μύσωνα τὸν Χηνέα, Φερεκύδην τὸν Σύριον, Ἐπιμενίδην τὸν Κρήτα· ἐνιοὶ καὶ Πεισίστρατον τὸν τύραννον. καὶ οἱ <δε> μὲν σοφοί (“To these are added Anacharsis the Scythian, Myson of Chen, Pherecydes of Syros, Epimenides the Cretan; and by some even Pisistratus the tyrant. So much for the sages or wise men”; transl. R.D. Hicks; the last sentence, however, should be translated as follows: ‘these too were wise men’). On the traditions of the Seven Wisemen, preliminary information in Ercolani 2013, 272 f. (see also Di Giglio 2022, with bibliographical updates). In a more comprehensive manner Martin 1993.

**36** Suid. θ 17 Adler.

**37** Diog. Laert. 1.94; cf. Suid. n 1067 Adler.

**38** Diog. Laert. 1.89.

**39** Diog. Laert. 1.101.

**40** See Ercolani 2016.

**41** Suid. σ 776 Adler.

**42** E.g. Diog. Laert. 1.68.

elegiac verses),<sup>43</sup> all included in the list of the Seven Wisemen; and I am thinking above all of Theognis,<sup>44</sup> Phocylides and ps.-Phocylides.

Not always poetic is the tradition of the so-called ‘pre-Socratic’ philosophers, who are nonetheless a constitutive and integrated part of Greek wisdom;<sup>45</sup> the Pythagorean *akousmata* (= oral teachings handed down within the Pythagorean school) are also to be traced back to this tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Some fable traditions with a clear sapiential content are preserved in a prosaic form (e.g. the corpus of Aesop’s fables). But the fable, it should be emphasized, is more than a literary ‘genre’, it is a communicative module proper to sapiential traditions (not only Greek) and is found, just like the proverb, scattered throughout the various ‘genres’ (poetic and otherwise). It should also be noted that the fable is often the framework for proverbs, especially in the *epimythion*.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.2 Hesiod

The Hesiodic corpus in its entirety constitutes one of the clearest examples of Greek wisdom tradition of the archaic period. It is an articulate and complex tradition whose contents encompass virtually all relevant aspects of experience: behavioural and procedural norms, technical notions and practical knowledge, ethical precepts, theodicy, mythical traditions and much more.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from the macroscopic case of *Works and Days* (for which see *infra*), the titles of the poems attributed to Hesiod suffice to show the variety of their contents: *Wedding of Ceyx* (where at least a part of the narrative seems to have been focused on witticisms and riddles at the wedding banquet), *Melampodia* (a poem on the seer Melampus: a sage, like all seers), *Precepts of Chiron*

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<sup>43</sup> Suid. π 1659 Adler.

<sup>44</sup> See Condello 2009.

<sup>45</sup> The entire reflection of the pre-Socratics is sapiential: Colli 1977; many of the pre-Socratics are epic poets: e.g. the already mentioned Empedocles.

<sup>46</sup> *Akousmata* aside (see *supra* fn. 34), on the various ‘Pythagorean’ teachings (παρανέσεις ‘recommendations’, ὑποθήκαι ‘exhortations’, παραγγέλματα ‘precepts’, σύμβολα ‘secret codes’, αινίγματα ‘riddles’) see Lelli 2023, 13.

<sup>47</sup> For more details and bibliography see Ercolani 2010, 40-1, 204-8. For a broadening of perspective see now Oegema, Pater, Stoutjesdijk 2022. For the relationship between fable and proverb see van Thiel 1971; Carnes 1988. A (also non-exhaustive) listing of Greek wisdom traditions and materials in Ercolani 2013.

<sup>48</sup> I have tried repeatedly and with more accomplished arguments to show the validity of the equation ‘Hesiod = sapiential tradition’: Ercolani 2009; 2010, 41-2; 2012; 2016; 2017. See now also Horne 2018 (who focuses on *hypothekai*, which come to constitute entire poems or sections of poems).

(Χείρωνος ὑποθήκαι, *Cheironos hypothekai*: a collection of teachings and precepts of the centaur Chiron, master of many Greek heroes, including Jason, Achilles and Asclepius: see <https://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/KentaurosKheiron.html> for sources and details), *Astronomy*, *Ornithomancy* and others, all with varying degrees of sapiential content.<sup>49</sup>

This multifarious ‘Hesiodic’ wisdom is very often conveyed in the form of proverbs or proverbial expressions, precisely because the proverb is a particularly effective linguistic and conceptual unit for conveying and disseminating information (§ 1 above).

In what follows, I discuss in more detail some of the proverbs in the *corpus Hesiodeum*, especially in *Works and Days*,<sup>50</sup> presenting specific cases illustrative of more general issues.

### 3.2.1 Proverbs/*gnomai* and Metrical Patterns: The Case of *Works and Days*

Epos is a metrically organized poetic discourse, where the text is arranged to form a sequence of long and short syllables according to the prototypical pattern of a verse, the dactylic hexameter (6da).

In the hexameter we identify *cola*, or ‘members’, as smaller textual segments that constitute not only metric, but often also logical and syntactic units.

A particular type of *colon* with specific metrical features is frequently employed in gnomic/proverbial expressions, so much so that it is referred to by ancient scholars as ‘paremiac’, i.e. ‘proverbial’.<sup>51</sup>

˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ ||

The use of this ‘proverbial’ *colon* is insistent in *Works and Days*, that is, precisely in that traditional poem whose sapiential content is particularly evident.<sup>52</sup> In the second part of the poem, in the section of vv. 383-828, prescriptions (or the like) are present in a high degree and very often such expressions take the form of the paremiac colon: the

<sup>49</sup> For an introduction to all these poems, see Cingano 2009.

<sup>50</sup> For a more extensive discussion see Ercolani 2009 (where all the proverbial material from *Works and Days* is also collected) with bibliography (fundamental Pellizer 1972 and Fernández Delgado 1978), and then Lelli 2023, 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Heph. 8.6, 26 f. Consbruch.

<sup>52</sup> Ercolani 2012.

percentage of verses with these features is remarkable (60.1%)<sup>53</sup> and clearly underlines the peculiarity of the Hesiodic poetry, which also highlights through a precise rhythmic trend the notions and teachings generally recognized as valid.<sup>54</sup> Of a more overtly proverbial nature with paremic colon are vv. 412, 451, 456, 471, 524, 560, 603, 694, 730.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2.2 Proverbs as Generative Patterns: Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs<sup>56</sup>

If the proverb fits, use it, and if it doesn't, choose another one or change it.<sup>57</sup>

Hes. fr. 321 M.-W.

ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men.

The phrasing is clearly proverbial: apart from its structure, which clearly shows the features of a proverb (tripartite sentence with nominal structure), it is quoted as such by Hyperides (fr. 57), according to Harpocration and Apostolius:

Harpocrat. ε 130 [133.18 Dindorf]

Ἔργα νέων· τοῦτο καὶ Ὑπερείδης ἐν τῷ κατ' Αὐτοκλέους φησὶν εἶναι. παροιμία τις ἐστίν, ἣν ἀνέγραψεν καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικὸς οὕτως ἔχουσαν “ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων.”

Works by young men: Hyperides also says this in *Against Autocles*. It is a proverb, which also recalls Aristophanes the grammarian in

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<sup>53</sup> See Sbardella 1995. The total number of *gnomai* in the Homeric poems (without taking into account the paremiac structure of the colon, in which case the number is bound to decrease) is 154, according to Lardinois 1997 (other counts offer lower figures: see Lelli 2023, 5): when put in relation to the approximately 30,000 verses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the percentage is insignificant (just over 0.5%).

<sup>54</sup> In *Works and Days* we find a sententious utterance every 8.7 lines: a very high frequency not recorded elsewhere (see Ercolani 2009, 39-40). Precisely on the basis of an examination of the Hesiodic material, Fernández Delgado 1982 reconstructed an autonomous tradition of 'gnomic poetry' variously flowing into or picked up by the epic traditions.

<sup>55</sup> I leave out here the question of the *hemiepes* and their possible combination with paremiacs, for which see Ercolani 2009, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Anti-proverb is a modified proverb (see at length Mieder 2008, ch. 2). A more precise definition of anti-proverb is: “an allusive distortion, parody, misapplication, or unexpected contextualization of a recognized proverb, usually for comic or satiric effect” (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012, XI).

<sup>57</sup> Mieder 2008, 2.

the following way: “Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men”.

**Apostol. VII 90 (CPG 2: 419)**

Ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων. τοῦτο Ὑπερείδης ἐν τῷ κατ’ Αὐτοκλέους. Ἡσιόδου φησὶν εἶναι παροιμίαν, ἣν ἀνέγραψεν καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικός.

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men: this [quotes *vel sim.*] Hyperides in *Against Autocles*. He says it is a proverb of Hesiod, which Aristophanes the grammarian also records.

A few centuries later we find the expression in a slightly modified form adapted to a new context:

**Strabo 14.5.14<sup>58</sup>**

οἱ δὲ πρῶτον μὲν κατετοιχογράφησαν αὐτοῦ τοιαῦτα “ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, πορδαὶ δὲ γερόντων”. ἐπεὶ δ’ ἐκεῖνος ἐν παιδιᾷς μέρει δεξάμενος ἐκέλευσε παρεπιγράψαι “βρονταὶ δὲ γερόντων” καταφρονήσας τις τοῦ ἐπιεικοῦς εὐλυτον τὸ κοιλίδιον ἔχων προσέρρανε πολὺ τῇ θύρᾳ καὶ τῷ τοίχῳ νύκτωρ παρῶν τὴν οἰκίαν· ὁ δὲ τῆς στάσεως κατηγορῶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ “τὴν νόσον τῆς πόλεως” ἔφη “καὶ τὴν καχεξίαν πολλὰχόθεν σκοπεῖν ἕξῃστι, καὶ διὴ καὶ ἐκ τῶν διαχωρημάτων”.

These [i.e. Boethus and his followers] at first indicted him (i.e. Athenodorus) with the following inscription on the walls: “Work for young men, counsels for the middle-aged, and flatulence for old men” and when he, taking the inscription as a joke, ordered the following words to be inscribed beside it, “thunder for old men”, someone, contemptuous of all decency and afflicted with looseness of the bowels, profusely bespattered the door and wall of Athenodorus’ house as he was passing by it at night. Athenodorus, while bringing accusations in the assembly against the faction, said: “One may see the sickly plight and the disaffection of the city in many ways, and in particular from its excrements.”<sup>59</sup>

Strabo does not seem to be aware of the Hesiodic hypotext, since he mentions neither Hesiod nor his poems. It could be that the ‘Hesiodic’

<sup>58</sup> The context of the anecdote is scarcely relevant to this discussion; however, the episode described takes place in Tarsus, and has to do with problems concerning the city administration after the battle of Philippi (42 BCE).

<sup>59</sup> Transl. H.L. Jones.

model was not 'Hesiodic' at all, i.e. that it was not exclusive to the Hesiodic tradition: it could already have been originally an anonymous proverb circulating autonomously, which was also received by the poetic tradition linked to the name of Hesiod; but it could also be that the verse, 'Hesiodic' at the outset, had progressively become part of the collective linguistic horizon of the *langue*, losing its original 'authorial' imprint and dissolving into an anonymous oral tradition.

Be that as it may, Strabo's quotation reports a modified proverb, an anti-proverb, which implies that the underlying model (it matters little, for this reasoning, whether Hesiodic or not) was a productive one, i.e. a proverb in the proper sense, capable of generating, by re-adaptation, anti-proverbs.

It is worth noting that the anti-proverb reported by Strabo, in turn, was transposed as an autonomous proverb in the collection of Macarius IV 11:<sup>60</sup>

Ἔργα νεῶν, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, πορδαὶ δὲ γερόντων: τὸ δὲ λέγειν  
εὐχαὶ γερόντων κρεῖττον καὶ εὐφημότατον

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, farts by old men:  
saying 'prayers of old' [is/would be] better and much more graceful

The proverb is quoted in its 'modified' and anonymous version, without indication of its origin; the commentary note refers back to the source model, apparently ignoring its Hesiodic matrix. The proverb/anti-proverb relationship, in Macarius, seems to be completely lost, ignored, confused.

The practice of modifying a proverbial pattern to generate similar proverbs is not unknown to Greek culture, as another Hesiodic passage, *Works and Days* (vv. 23-6), shows quite clearly:

ζήλοῖ δέ τε γείτονα γείτων  
εἰς ἄφενος σπεύδοντ'· ἀγαθὴ δ' Ἔρις ἦδε βροτοῖσιν.  
καὶ κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει καὶ τέκτωνι τέκτων  
καὶ πτωχὸς πτωχῷ φθονέει καὶ ἀοιδὸς ἀοιδῷ.

and neighbor vies with his neighbor  
as he hurries after wealth. This Strife is wholesome for men.  
And potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman,  
and beggar is jealous of beggar, and minstrel of minstrel

60 CPG 2: 167.

Most likely proverbial in the proper sense is only v. 23, while vv. 25-6 are adaptations of this model:<sup>61</sup> true anti-proverbs that broaden its spectrum of application, extending it from a generic neighbourly contrast to a contrast between socially recognized professional figures ('beggar' included).

### iii. The Inability to Understand: Proverbs in Context Without Rhetorical 'Framework'

The following example is intended to show how difficult, if not impossible, it is to understand a proverb when the linguistic reference context is missing, i.e. we do not know the rhetorical code in which to place it.<sup>62</sup> I quote once again a passage from *Work and Days*, vv. 40-1:

νήπιοι, οὐδὲ ἴσασιν ὅσῳ πλέον ἥμισυ παντός  
οὐδ' ὅσον ἐν μαλάχῃ τε καὶ ἀσφοδέλῳ μέγ' ὄνειαρ

Fools! They know not how much more the half is than the whole,  
nor what great advantage there is in mallow and asphodel

The verses are proverbial, as the linguistic structure clearly shows

[X is] Y. οὐδέ + vb.<sup>63</sup>

This is a typologically well-documented pattern (*Op.* 187 σχέτλιοι, οὐδὲ θεῶν ὅπιν εἰδότες, 'hard-hearted they, not knowing the fear of the gods'; 456 νήπιος, οὐδὲ τὸ οἶδ'· ἑκατὸν δέ τε δούρατ' ἀμάξης, 'the fool! he does not know that there are a hundred timbers to a wagon'),<sup>64</sup> with a formulaic incipit (for σχέτλιος, οὐδέ see *Hom. Il.* 9.630; *Od.* 21.28; for νήπιος, οὐδέ see *Hom. Il.* 2.38, 5.406; *Od.* 3.146 and cf. *Il.* 21.410). The verses are often quoted and discussed in antiquity: *Gell.* 18.2.13, *Stob.* 3.10.11 etc.<sup>65</sup>

The meaning of both is controversial. It is generally held to be an invitation to measure and moderation, or an exhortation to prefer honest poverty to dishonest wealth.<sup>66</sup> V. 41 seems to go in this very direction, since the reference to mallow and asphodel refers to poor food: it is quite plausible that it represents an invitation to thrift or

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<sup>61</sup> Fernández Delgado 1982, 164-5; see also Ercolani 2010, *ad* 25-6.

<sup>62</sup> See § 2.1 above.

<sup>63</sup> For similar proverbial structures see Ercolani 2009, 32-4.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. also Simon. fr. 8. 10-11 W.

<sup>65</sup> Complete list in Rzach 1902, in *app. test. ad loc.*, 134 f.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. already schol./Procl. *ad* 41.

to be content with what one has.<sup>67</sup> Much more problematic is v. 40,<sup>68</sup> the meaning of which, at first glance, is by no means intuitive, and which seems to fit with difficulty into a context in which material goods are involved.

Here, tentatively, I try to imagine hypothetical contexts that would explain the preferability of the half to the whole (I refer to the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* in its latest version known as the 'ATU Index').<sup>69</sup>

1. A fairytale context of the kind described in ATU J1161.8

*Ruler orders doctor to wear his hair and his robe 'not too long and not too short'. Has both his hair and his cloak cut half short and half long. (Italics in original)*

Here clearly half is better than the whole, as this is the only way to save the doctor from the risk of excess.<sup>70</sup>

2. a context in which a loan or similar is requested, according to the model ATU J1552.4:

*Better to donate half of what is asked than lend all. Two farmers ask a priest to lend two measures of grain to each of them. The priest refuses to lend them any but donates one measure to each. Thus he saves two measures.<sup>71</sup> (Italics in original)*

3. a context in which the whole represents or entails an evil, so that half is definitely better: so for example in ATU K551.2:

*Respite from death until prisoner has finished drinking his glass. It is left half finished. (Italics in original)*

If we imagine scenarios such as those mentioned above, then the meaning of the proverb can be better determined, and may well be valid as an exhortation to careful moderation, since any excess, any overshooting of the middle, would only bring harm.

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<sup>67</sup> Detailed discussion of these verses in Ercolani 2010, *ad locc.* (138 f.).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Ov. Fast.* 5.718 *dimidium toto munere maius erit.*

<sup>69</sup> Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (see Uther 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Less likely but not impossible is a context such as ATU J1193.2.1: "*The Court keeps the change.* Man is fined half-ducat. Judge has no change. Defendant strikes judge for the change". Here, the lack of a half (= the change) allows the whole to be maintained.

<sup>71</sup> Or perhaps ATU J2213.6: "*Selling his half of the house.* A man owns half a house. He wants to sell his half so as to get money to buy the other half and thus have a whole house". The undertaking is obviously in vain, so half is certainly better than the whole.



Of course, one can try to identify other contexts in which 'half is better than the whole': the ones I have given here serve as hypotheses. My aim is not so much to shed light on the meaning of the Hesiodic passage, but rather to show how, in the absence of the context and rhetorical code of reference, the meaning of the proverb is problematic, if not entirely elusive. It is the implicit linguistic competence, taken for granted in the listener, that bridges the partiality of the utterance and defines its meaning. And this competence of ten remains beyond our reach.

#### 4 Conclusions

A message considered relevant (for whatever reason) by the human group that elaborated it must be preserved and passed on, as it conveys 'strategic information' for society and its survival.

In a predominantly oral culture, the primary means of preserving and transmitting these fundamental messages is the word consigned to memory: the data to be transmitted must be converted into words that must be memorized.<sup>72</sup> Memorization can take place more effectively if the formal elaboration of the text succeeds in stimulating the recipient's attention. In archaic Greek culture the maximum of formal elaboration is the poetic word, with its rhythmic and metrical structure.<sup>73</sup>

The poetic word records what is to be remembered; it is authoritative, i.e. the poetic text conveys socially shared relevant content and it is normative in a broad sense.

With specific reference to the Greek culture of the archaic period, characterized by a dominant oral communication system,<sup>74</sup> we can take the following statements as valid: 1. the poetic word (= metrically organized word) is the primary vehicle of relevant content as an effective means of communication, both because it has faster access to memory, and because – sociologically – it is an authoritative word; 2. proverbs and proverbial expressions fit perfectly into this 'authoritative-word system': they confer authority on the poetic word and are themselves authoritative poetic words; 3. the poetic word preserves and transmits socially relevant notions: the wisdom of a society.

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<sup>72</sup> On the importance of memory and the relationship between the poetic word and *memoria rerum* see Giordano-Zecharya 2003; an overview in Ercolani 2006, 65-7.

<sup>73</sup> One wonders, at this point, whether and how much sense it makes to distinguish (as is often done) between epic tradition and 'proverbial' or 'gnomic' tradition of 'popular' matrix. These juxtapositions lose their meaning if we consider epos as an authoritative word, and therefore an expression of all relevant content.

<sup>74</sup> I do not think the statement is any longer open to question: I merely refer here to the works of Havelock 1963; 1981; 1986.

The relationship between proverbs and wisdom traditions in Greek culture should be understood within this quickly sketched general framework.

I will summarize my reasoning in a very concise and point-by-point manner:

1. proverbs represent minimal signifying units entrusted with socially relevant messages;
2. proverbs are easy to memorize and disseminate quickly;
3. proverbs represent a wisdom tradition *per se*, but are also a medium of wisdom, a typical expressive form that could be used in any context of ‘authoritative speech’;
4. proverbs are a primarily oral traditional heritage (as oral are the ‘wisdom’ teachings of every society).<sup>75</sup>

Yesterday as today, today as yesterday, ‘un proverbio al giorno leva il medico di torno’ (a proverb a day keeps the doctor away).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The fact that proverbs are known in written form is, of course, a purely mechanical and accidental fact: we only know those proverbs ‘inserted’ in other texts that have come down to us or those inserted and classified in *corpora* by scholars since antiquity (see e.g. the collection of Stobaeus [on which Piccione 2003] or those of the various paremiographers in *CPG*). See also *supra* § 2.1.

<sup>76</sup> I paraphrase the proverb ‘una mela al giorno leva il medico di torno’ to evoke the title of a work by D. D’Eugenio (2018) “Un proverbio al giorno mette l’allegria intorno”, an anti-proverb cast on the same model. D’Eugenio’s work shows the usefulness of using proverbs in language learning (notably in the glottodidactics of Italian as a second language, L2) and argues that exposure to proverbs promotes problem-solving activities. The fact that some proverbs elicit laughter as a first reaction (D’Eugenio 2018, 600 f.) further demonstrates the proverb’s extraordinary communicative effectiveness.

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