Towards a classification of Greek proverbs

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Γεωργίᾳ
εἰς τὰ μέλλοντα

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Abstract: The present article is an attempt of classification of Greek proverbs, starting from Aristotle's and other contemporary scholars' theories till more actual approaches to Greek Proverbs collections.
Key words: Paremiology. Proverb. Greek. Classification.

Título: "Aproximación a una clasificación de los proverbios griegos".
Resumen: El presente artículo es un intento de clasificación de los proverbios griegos, tomando como punto de partida las teorías de Aristóteles y de otros estudiosos de la época, hasta aproximaciones más recientes a los proverbios griegos.
Palabras clave: Paremiología. Proverbio. Griego. Clasificación.

Titre : « Approche d'un classement des proverbes grecs ».
Résumé : Dans cet article l'auteur propose un classement des proverbes grecs et prend comme point de départ les théories d'Aristote ainsi que d'autres érudits de cette même époque. Par ailleurs l'étude met l'accent sur des approches plus récentes des proverbes grecs.
Mots-Clé : Parémiologie. Proverbe. Grec. Classement.

Ancient Greek civilization offers an extensive repertory of proverbs and proverbial expressions, which appears interesting from many points of view. Already at the end of the 4th century BC, first with Aristotle and afterward with the Stoic school, Greek scholars started to collect proverbial material in anthologies, possibly organized by theme or by formal analogy. Later on, around the 1st century, grammarian Didymus gathered a monumental collection (a synthesis of the previous ones), in which expressions of different nature and various origins converged. The collection of Didymus was subsequently reworked through syntheses and epitomes in late Antique and Byzantine collections structured in alphabetical order: it is precisely focusing on these collections, especially Zenobius' and Diogenianus' ones (here Zen. and Diog.)[1], that modern scholars ought to initiate their approach to proverbs.

An attempt to apply the morphological typologies gradually identified by modern paremiologists to this repertory, in order to analyze the intersections between those typologies and the contents of proverbs (subjects, references, fields), can outline an interesting and coherent global framework, which allows the scholar to advance some general considerations[2].

[1] The first italian translation of these collections is now: *I proverbi greci. Le raccolte di Zenobio e Diogeniano*, a cura di E. Lelli, ("Altri classici. 1"), Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2006.
[2] One can read other attempts in setting ancient greek proverbs in the Pauly-Wissowa extensive entry on

The most frequent typology is unquestionably that of 'proverbs' properly speaking (aXb = cXd, where X is the action or the quality that permits the analogy between the proverbial term of comparison and its metaphorical significance applied to another situation). A 'sub-genre', quite common within this typology, is that of *adýnata,* i.e. useless actions, which share a series of recurring structural elements (etymological figures, for instance); this typology is the object of a brief collection, falsely attributed to Plutarch, which demonstrates the importance it had in the Ancient world.

Among the categories we may consider not entirely 'proverbial', the most frequent one regards the expressions founded on antonomasia, often simple links made of subject + specification/ qualification.

Another typology, equally frequent, includes expressions of comparison, which can be found in different degrees, either positive or comparative[3]. In the Greek repertory as well as in modern ones an important subgenre, even though less common, is given the label 'proverbs of preference', describing those which follow the pattern 'A is better than B' (Cirese, 1979).

Among the other documented examples, mention should be made of the recurring record of idiomatic expressions and colloquial set phrases, which are necessarily built around a verbal form.

All these morphological typologies combine, and are represented, understandably in a different manner, in the main thematic categories that can be identified in the proverbial material examined herein. As it is known, the debate on the modalities of organizing proverbial material is still open amongst modern scholars of paremiology. In my opinion, for Greek civilization the classification based upon the genuine area of the content of proverbs proves to be more efficient, and identifies, if one looks carefully, well defined anthropological and psychological fields in which a proverbial expression "comes to life": therefore, the value of this categorization seems to me particularly noteworthy, at least at a heuristic level.

These are the main thematic categories, according to their percentage of attestation:

– proverbs centered on human types, concepts, personifications; maxims proper or *sententiae*;

– proverbs having as protagonists objects and inanimate elements of everyday life and of the natural world (*realia*);

– proverbs featuring animals;

– proverbs on places and peoples;

– proverbs having as protagonists anecdotical or historical characters;

– proverbs focusing on mythical characters, gods and heroes.

The first group almost always presents the 'standard' form of the proverbial expression, with a precise situation, a subject and an action that are almost always clearly defined. The more frequent 'actors' are human types embodied by arts and crafts, social categories and characters, ages of life: "Do not despise the peasant's words" (Zen. 1,15), "The fisherman, once bitten, will remember the bite" (Zen. 2,14), "Jaws are the walking-stick of an old man" (Diog. 1,78), "An old woman clapping her hands makes a lot of noise" (Diog. 3,97); another category encompasses general formulations, sometimes centered on ethical concepts: "Favor done, gratitude gone" (Zen. 1,81), "Power discloses the nature of man" (Diog. 2,94), "What is beautiful, twice and thrice" (Diog. 4,20); finally, real and proper maxims, often symmetrically constructed: "Behave now one way, then another, and follow the custom of the place" (Zen.

Paroimia (Rupprecht, 1949: 1707-1735), expecially for divine and practical typologies; see also the *Introduction* of recent Spanish edition of Zenobius (Mariño-García Romero, 1999: 316-335), with thematic indexes.

[3] A list of no less than 40 formulations based on majority comparison (confined to the sole 'ludic' literature: comedy, mime and parody) is provided by Bühler 1999: 232-234.

1,24). Rhetorical figures (repetitions, homeoteleutons, polyptotons)[4]: "Another life, another rule" (Zen. 1,22); "Surprised while surprising" (Zen. 1,35), "Man is a god to man" (Zen. 1,91), "Ripple what should not be rippled" (Zen. 1,55), "Some have toiled, others have enjoyed" (Zen. 1,65), "No sooner said than done" (Zen. 1,66). In this group one may find the highest number of sayings which belong to well-known authors and passed from literary texts to common proverbs: "The word of truth is simple" (Diog. 2,85, borrowed from Euripides), "The better fate is never to be born, or, once born, swiftly return to Hades" (Diog. 3,4, attested in Theognis), "I grow wiser as I grow old" (Diog. 3,80, by Solon); as well as sayings and apophtegms of historical characters, like the famous "*Ipse dixit*" (Diog. 3,19, attributed to Pythagoras' disciples). Sometimes the latter expressions, supposed to belong to philosophers and wise men, politicians and poets, become part of the proverbial heritage, so that their very paternity has sometimes happened to fade into oblivion. The contrary also occurs, as it is not uncommon for a saying to be attributed *tout court* to an author famous as 'proverbial', or for a specific expression to be attributed to several different wise men or poets. However, where the cultural tradition is in agreement, doubts can be easily removed (Tosi, 1988 : 197-199; Tosi, 1992 : 240-242; Tziatzi-Papagianni, 1994 : 1-7; Benítez Rodríguez, 1999 : 57-63).
Finally, it appears significant that, in this thematic category, there are very few instances of expressions having a different formulation (antonomasia, comparison or other).

Everyday life has always offered, in all cultures, inexhaustible material for the elaboration of proverbs that stigmatized, through the metaphor of objects and ordinary actions, precepts and universally acknowledged values. The world of cookery and agriculture, in particular, are the two main fields on which peoples' wisdom drew for the production of a reach paremiographic repertory. Greek culture is no exception, and the group of proverbs having as protagonists the *realia* is quantitatively relevant, as well as important on a quality level, for instance from the anthropological and material culture perspective. All the above-mentioned morphological typologies are put to use in this thematic ambit.

Most of them consist of proverbs proper, built on the mechanism of analogy. The agricultural-naturalistic ambit is the most frequent one: "Knock down another oak tree" (Zen. 2,41), "Ripple the bush" (Zen. 2,55), "I was asking for shovels, and they denied me the buckets" (Zen. 1,83), "Some have reaped, others gather the harvest" (Diog. 2,62); the universe of cooking and culinary is equally present: "Do not offend the salt and the table" (Zen. 1,62), "The pestle is growing" (Zen. 3,40), "When the pot is warm, friendship is warm too" (Zen. 4,12) and so is the one of physical elements of the human body: "The knee is closer than the shin" (Zen. 3,2), "It hangs on to a hair" (Zen. 3,47); a significant place is occupied by proverbs connected to sailing, an utmost important life ambit for the Greek civilization: "You sleep while you carry the salt" (Zen. 1,23), "From the oar to the deck" (Diog. 1,98), "We drain the water on one side, it comes back on the other" (Zen. 1,75), "The load of salt goes back to where it came from" (Zen. 2,20), "Do not dance the *motone* (a dirthy dance) near the oar" (Diog. 3,27); the sphere of music appears interesting: "You're comparing an aulos to a trumpet" (Diog. 1,19), "A man on the run cannot hear the sound of the lyre" (Zen. 1,86), "You lead an auletes' life" (Diog. 3,14); expressions derived from the sports are also present: "From the same starting line" (Diog. 2,83a), "Beyond the outline" (Zen. 6,23); and so are expressions inspired by the games of the symposium, but also those of children: "From the sacred line" (Diog. 3,36), "You are being carried in a pennant" (Zen. 3,60). There are many attestations of the subgenre of *adýnata*:

[4] Such modality can be found in all proverbial cultures. C. Lapucci dealt on several occasions with the "linguistic creativity" of Italian proverbs: see among his latest works (Lapucci, 2005: XXXI-XXXV), where the author goes over particular adjectives and nouns adapted, for instance, to the effect of the rhyme; improper augmentatives and unusual deverbatives.

"You're talking to the sand" (Zen. 1,38), "You're growing winds" (Zen. 1,99), "You're chasing the wind by using a net" (Zen. 3,17).
The typologies of comparison and antonomasia are also used, even if to a lesser extent. For what concerns the former see: "Cleaner than a rudder" (Diog. 1,11), "Less yielding than a dry bramble" (Diog. 1,13), "More sterile than an oleander" (Zen. 1,60), "More naked than a nail" (Diog. 3,98), "Fairer than a steelyard" (Zen. 3,16). As to the latter see: "A sea of goods" (Zen. 1,9), "Son of the wind" (Diog. 1,82), "a vegetable main course" (Diog. 2,52).

Proverbs centered on animals play an important role, as a direct consequence of the great relevance they have always had for human life, and especially in ancient societies. Ever since the most remote epochs, on the other hand, the world of animals has arisen the curiosity of man, and has gradually become protagonist of tales, fables and proverbs. In this perspective, animals have often represented the privileged "mirror" of human nature: near and distant at the same time, able to stir up daydreams and meditations, in short, according to a famous and inspired definition, for the human being they constitute in the first place irreplaceable things "good for thinking"[5]. This high potential of transformation into metaphors inherent to the animal world has facilitated, in many cultures, just as in the Ancient Greek culture, the use of these "actors" in the most dissimilar morphological categories. There are numerous proverbs in the proper sense in which all the types of animals familiar to the Greeks are represented, from the domestic to the wild and ferocious ones, and to the distant exotic animals, from mammals to fish, from birds to insects. An important place is occupied by animals that are perceived as "symbols" par excellence of specific qualities, positive, and, more often, negative: the donkey, the pig, the dog, the mouse, the lion, the fox; it is rather difficult to single out a few exemples, given the abundance of the material. Think only of those proverbs kept on in Western tradition: "If you can't wear a lion leather, wear a fox leather instead" (Zen. 1,93), "From horses to donkeys" (Zen. 2,33), "A fox won't let herself caught a second time" (Zen. 1,67), "The donkey thinks one thing, the donkey-driver another" (Zen. 1,74), "A mouse in the pitch" (Diog. 2,64), "Don't look for the bear when you have seen the tracks" (Diog. 2,70), "The oxcart pulls the ox" (Diog. 3,30), "Ants get angry too" (Zen. 3,70). A similar phenomenon regards the subgenre of *adýnata*: "Go teach an eagle how to fly" (Zen. 2,49), "Chicken milk" (Diog. 3,92), "You're looking for donkey wool" (Zen. 5,38).

The ambit of animal imaginary also offers many expressions of comparison: "Healthier than a tick" (Zen. 6,27), "Wiser than a scarab" (Zen. 4,65), "More wordless than a sea thrush" (Zen. 4,66), "More talkative than a turtledove (a swallow)" (Zen. 6,8), "Blinder than a mole" (Diog. 8,25); antonomastic formulations are also very frequent: "The honour of anchovies" (Diog. 1,42), "To do like storks" (Zen. 1,94), "A gang of wolves" (Diog. 2,49), often related to places that are themselves proverbial: "A donkey from Anthron" (Diog. 1,26), "A cicada from Acanthos" (Zen. 1,51), "A scarab of Aethna" (Diog. 1,59), "A goat from Scyros" (Zen. 2,18).

"Many peoples have formulated offenses against other peoples, in proverbial form", noted Suetonius already in his treatise *On offenses*[6]. In fact, it is innate in every culture of any epoch to assign to one people or another (to one country or another) a characteristic feature, a peculiar nature, either positive, or, more often than not, negative, which soon becomes a proverbial and a symbol by antonomasia[7]. The proverbs focusing on peoples and places constitute an important

[5] This is the famous definition by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Man tends to "construct" animals on the basis of his own categories, according to a double and contradictory tendency: on the one hand, the 'Aesopization' (i.e. the levelling of the animal according to the model of human society), on the other hand the 'animalization' (that is to say the emphasizing of its wonderful and exceptional characteristics). On the relationship between animals and cultural symbology in the modern world see for example the study of Piñel López, 1999.
[6] Perˆ blasfhmiîn (XIII, p.62 Taill.).
[7] Suffice it to think of the Italian "fare il Portoghese" or "humor inglese" or "puntuale come un (orologio)

category of the great paremiographic tank and, together with the animal and pragmatic categories can undoubtedly boast the most clearly folkloristic genesis; they reveal profound social and cultural convictions, common places and anthropologicall relevant prejudices[8]. In the 5th century B.C. Athens opens like never before to commercial and cultural traffics, thus becoming an essential point of transit for the connections of the Hellenized world (and not only): as a consequence, it finds itself at the center of this paremiographic circulation, in the same way as Strabo will constitute a sort of collecting basin which will transmit many 'geographical proverbs' to subsequent anthologies (Keim, 1909). Plutarch would then make up a sylloge, the so-called *Alexandrian Proverbs*, devoted for the most part precisely to this thematic category. The morphological categories here represented are basically two: the 'standard' proverbs and the expressions by antonomasia, particularly adequate to stigmatize in an efficient link the quality exalted or, more often, ridiculized, of one place or another. Think of proverbs such as "You hum as if you were heading to Delos" (Zen. 2,37), "You are asking Arcadia from me" (Diog. 2,69), "Again the route for Pytho" (Diog. 3,34), "No everyone gets to go to Corinth" (Zen. 5,37); Athens and Attica are particularly aimed at, definitely because of the grudge due to the imperialism of the 5th century B.C, as well as to the cultural supremacy exercised by the city for a long time; hence the series of ironical and antiphrastic proverbs, all of them negative: "the Attics and the Eleusinian mysteries" (Zen. 2,26), "an Attic at mooring" (Zen. 2,10), "an Attic lays his hand even on his deathbed" (Diog. 3,12); it is worth recalling the frequency of expressions related to the colonies of Magna Graecia and Sicily, characterized by a strong rivalry and sharp irony: "the Lentinoi always before a cup" (Diog. 2,50), "to Aphanna" (Zen. 3,92) "a Sikelos steals unripe grapes" (Diog. 8,15), "a Sibarite in the *agora*" (Diog. 8,10); obviously, foreign countries are considered "barbarian" and dangerous: "From Lybia always something bad" (Zen. 2,51), "Egyptians are tremendous when it comes to deceit" (Zen. 3,37); amusing the *adýnaton* "you're clearing up an Ethiopian" (Zen. 1,46). Antonomastic expressions make up this framework: on Athens and Attica, by antiphrasis: "Attic loyalty" (Diog. 2,80), "an Attic witness" (Diog. 3,11); on "barbarians": "an Arab auletes" (Zen. 2,39), "a Phoenician plot" (Diog. 8,67); on the cities of Magna Graecia: "a Syracusan table" (Zen. 5,94), "more coward than the Rhegians" (Diog. 8,97b); and, more commonly, "the poverty of Azenias" (Zen. 2,54), "a kingdom in Scyros" (Zen. 1,32), "an Arcadian shoot" (Diog. 3,42), "a Boeiotian ear" (Diog. 3,46); and so on until the famous "Abydene afternoon", which opens the collections of Zenobius and Diogenianus[9].

If Athens constituted, within the sphere of 'geographical' proverbs, a tradition and frequent target, it also offered, almost exclusively, significant material for the creation of another group of proverbs, typical insofar as specifical to a 'closed' and comunitarian ancient society: the expressions having anecdotical and, in part, historical characters as protagonists. Walking through the ¢gor£ or in front of the Athenian Lšsch in the 5th Century must have been an extraordinary, though daily, experience. Politicians and philosophers, masters of rhetorics and artists used to mix up within the mob of the mariners and peasants. Everyone there was at hand.

svizzero". The negativity that often characterizes proverbs on 'other' cultures indicates the profound nationalisitc and xenophobe spirit that lies in any nation, in any cultural context. Obviously the Greeks were not at all exempt from such prejudices. Quite on the contrary. On the other hand, they were themselves subsequently "victims" of negative Roman proverbs, think of *impostor et Graecus est*, "he's a scoundrel, and a Greek on top of that", and *ad kalendas Graecas* "(defer something) to the Greek Calends".

[8] Proverbs on people and places are the object of a dense dissertation by Goebel, 1915.

[9] A particular kind of antonomastic, 'geographical' type is constituted by denominative verbs based on an ethnical noun, such as a„gupti£zein "act like an Egyptian", kilik…zein "act like a Cilician" among many others: a list of the most frequent ones in Bühler, 1999 : 242s. See here Zen. 2,21.

You could run into those characters, more or less noble, famous for their extravagant features or notorious for their peculiar endowments in the restrained framework of the city's community. Where everyone knows everything about everyone else. And where a shortcoming or a merit, a physical characteristic or an anecdote quickly become the talk of the town, and gradually become antonomastic, and eventually proverbial: a jumble of proverbs centered on the most different characters – politicians or sicophants, merchants or auletai – which constitutes one of the most interesting and peculiar paremiographical categories, definitely the most conspicuous within the Athens-centered sphere[10]. A vast and significant category, but also one of the most problematic, because of its connections, not always clear, with literary evidence (on which see *infra*), as well as for the frequency of 'speaking names' for the protagonists of such proverbial expressions[11].

The panorama of paremiographic material is in any event extremely various from a morphological point of view. There is a great variety of proverbs, both on anecdotical characters: "Akesias treated him" (Zen. 1,52), "Bunes judges him" (Zen. 2,67); and on historical characters, poets, leaders, artists, politicians: "you are an acquaintance of Archilochus'" (Diog. 2,95), "the hatred of Empedocles" (Diog. 4,77), "feats worthy of Akesseus and Helikon" (Zen. 1,56). The forms of comparison and antonomasia are quite frequent, as they are able to depict the characteristics of the protagonist: "more naive than Ibicus" (Diog. 1,71), "more ungodly than Hippomenes" (Diog. 3,1), "more noble than Codrus" (Diog. 4,84); also: "a sonata worthy of Agathon" (Zen. 1,2), "the cranes of Ibicus" (Zen. 1,37), "the promises of Charetes" (Zen. 2,13), "law of Zaleucus" (Zen. 4,10). A particular category, as suggested before, is that of expressions built on 'speaking names': "a life of Lucky-man" (Zen. 1,4), "the door of Open-man"(Zen. 4,24).

The relationship of the Greek man with the divine was omnicomprehensive and largely spread, but exempt from dogmas. The absence of sacred books or of a religious cast, the 'light' value of the very concept of faith, the completely disenchanted vision of the netherworld explain why the religious sensitivity of the Greek was extremely different from the conceptions of the great monotheist religions of Western and Oriental tradition. Therefore, if precisely in the latter, that is in Hebrew, Christian and Arab cultures, one can notice a relevant presence of a paremiographic typology based on the characteristics and anecdotes of God and his prophets, engendered by the people's feeling and the syncretism of the many preexisting religious traditions with the new universal faiths, it is not surprising to see the huge presence, in the Greek patrimony of proverbs, of maxims and expressions focused on gods and heroes, depicted with their qualities and shortcomings, with their passions and with the most various happenings of the myth. Such proverbs are all characterized by the same lightness and distance that distinguishes the Greek vision of the divine, integrated in the most adequate and natural way into the spirit of ironical and often sarcastic wisdom of the popular imagery[12].

In this mythological-religious framework the most functional morphological typology is that of antonomastic expressions, which turn to account, in an efficient and concise manner, a peculiar feature of the divine (or heroic) character known to everyone and immediately usable: think, for example, of the Italian "patience of Job" or "passion of the Christ". We thus come accross: "a gathering of Cercopes" (Zen. 1,5), "the gardens of Adonis" (Diog. 1,14), "the helmet of Ades" (Zen. 1,41), "the gaze of Atreus" (Zen. 2,34), "Daedalus' wings" (Diog. 4,25); most frequent appears the Iliadic subject: "The sacrifice of Agamemnon" (Zen. 1,13), "the story of Alkinoos" (Diog. 2,86); and the Theban: "Curses of Oedipus" (Zen. 5,43), "Boeotian riddles" (Zen. 2,68).

[10] On this typology of proverbs a valuable tool may still be the dissertation of Wiesenthal, 1895.
[11] On the Italian repertory see the studies of Lapucci, 1990 and 1991.
[12] Wiesenthal, 1895: 13-20, and Dobesch, 1962 (see also Dobesch, 1965) are, to my knowledge, the only two main studies devoted to the presence of gods and heroes in the Greek proverbs.

Less frequent the proper proverbs: "the darts of Zeus always fall the right way" (Zen. 2,44), "Atlas and the sky" (Diog. 2,67), "the god spontaneously bestows the goods" (Diog. 3,15) "in time Zeus reads his whole agenda" (Zen. 4,11). A particularly present figure is that of Heracles, a 'popular' hero from another viewpoint insofar as he is a frequent subject of commedy, because of his somewhat 'burlesque' characteristics (gluttony, big talk): "Heracles' disease" (Zen. 4,26), "the apple of Heracle" (Zen. 5,22), "this one is another Heracles" (Zen. 5,48), "not even Heracles against two" (Zen. 5,49), "a quail saved the strong Heracles" (Zen. 5,56). Rather peculiar the *adýnaton* "a barren Zeus" (Diog. 4,95b), and irreverent the famous "a pig defied Athens" (from Theocr. *id*. 5,23).

These are, therefore, the main 'thematic' categories of ancient Greek proverbial repertory. Beside these, or sometimes in a transversal manner, one can find other 'thematic' traditions that provide an opportunity for interesting considerations, also on the basis of a comparison with the repertories of modern cultures.

First of all the proverbs on women. Traditionally considered as a cause of misfortune and dangerous on account of her characteristics of deceitful charm, the woman is the negative protagonist of the largest part of the ancient literary attestations. Besides, Greek culture, as it is known, is marked by misogyny, starting from Homer and Hesiod up to the syncretism introduced by Christianity. It should therefore be natural if not obvious to expect from the Greek proverbial repertory a great number of expressions focused on the woman's negativity. Surprisingly enough, this is not the case. There are very few proverbs metaphorically applicable to the feminine dimension (the literary attestations in which they are contextualized play an important part in identifying them): "more talkative than a swallow/ turtledove" (Zen. 6,8), or "like the bronze of Dodone" (Zen. 6,5), for the loquacity traditionally attributed to the woman. Even rarer the proverbs explicitly dedicated to the woman: "a woman is in charge here" (Diog. 4,1), "womanly thoughts" (Diog. 4,3), "a womanly death" (Diog. 4,5), "do not trust a woman, not even on her deathbed" (Diog. 4,4). The latter expression, which is a iambic trimeter also found in the collections of Menander's *monosticha* (*mon*. 86), introduces by contrast the abundance of misogynist material that can be found in the repertory of maxims and sayings of literary tradition. It is precisely in this field that reflections against women appear more frequent: "the woman is a necessary evil", "the woman is to men a tempest in the house", "three are the evils: the sea, the fire, and the woman", "women are so artful in weaving plots", "when the light is off all women are equal" (all of these sayings are attested in literary *florilegia* or, again, in Menander's monostichs). This fact is noteworthy, and leads to think that the 'folkloristic' culture mirrored in the proverbs was actually less misogynist than 'well-read' and literary culture certifiable in the sententious tradition. In any event, the idea that Greek proverbs are dense of misogyny is an erroneous common place to be dismantled.

Much more frequently used the motive of the old age: in this case proverbial tradition and gnomic-sententious tradition seem to coincide. As it was stressed (Tosi 1995)[13] there are two traditional patterns which ancient thought mirrored in the proverbs follows: on the one hand old age is considered to be a source of wisdom and experience: "an old fox won't fall in the trap" (Zen. 2,90), "I'm growing old learning many things" (Zen. 3,4), "the old woman, clapping her hands, raises a lot of dust" (Diog. 3,97); on the other hand old people are often marginalized because of their being weak and unable to reason: "do not transplant an old tree" (Zen. 3,1), "an old man is two times a boy", "the head of an old man is like raisins" (Zen. 1,96).

Besides, for many other reasons, the Greek proverbial material is rather similar to that of modern cultures, which clearly suggests to what extent Western proverbial tradition constitutes a unitary human and cultural path, without radical solutions of continuity. The elements of

[13] See also Menu, 1997, for a general framework.

difference, both on a thematic and formal level, appear, however, equally interesting.

An exceptional feature of paremiographical collections is, for instance, the profusion of oracular verses, originally destined to a specific event, but, precisely on account of their polyfunctional ambiguity, extrapolated from their context and used in form of saying and proverbs. This is one of the major peculiarities on the horizon of Greek paremiography.

Another peculiarity, a negative one this time, is the total absence of proverbs pertaining to the morphological typology of calendar-related warning, a rather frequent category in modern cultures. It is unrealistic to assume that such phrases simply lacked from Greek folkloristic culture, especially if we consider the above-mentioned substantial employment of agricultural metaphors. One explanation could be that calendar expressions became obsolete in Greece with the adoption of the julian calendar first, and then with the Christian age (and with the celebrations connected with names of saints and with the life cycle of the Christ): choosing this perspective we can presume that calendar-related formulations in classical Greece progressively disappeared from common usage, for those were no longer understood, and thus they remained out of late ancient paremiographical collections for good.

From the viewpoint of the (necessarily literary) attestations of the proverb, it is possible, furthermore, to follow the diachronical route of the different 'categories', either formal or thematic.

Proverbs on Gods and heroes, for instance, can be found ever more frequently as we draw near to the Hellenistic age: formulations that seem impossible in the symposium and archaic *hetaireia*, two contexts still attached to the sacred essence of life, appear as a matter of fact already in the 'secularized' Athens of comedians and orators, and, in a more achieved manner, in the 'desacralized' Ptolemaic Alexandria, where it is possible to assert, by way of proverbs, even that "a pig defied Athena"[14].

Another phenomenon unquestionably identifiable within the diachronic framework of proverbial presences is the expansion of the physical horizon of the Greek man. 'Geographical' proverbs indicate it clearly. From the narrow local environment depicted by archaic authors – Archilochus and Alcaeus, in particular – for whom the geographical area considered is limited to the neighboring islands, or, at the most, to places that distance makes appear almost fabulous, the literature of the classical age moves on to the more vast – and political – world of democratic Athens, and reaches the Mediterranean horizons (and beyond) with the Hellenistic authors, which by then are present from Sicily to Asia Minor[15].

If starting from the Hellenistic age the horizon of geographical proverbs extends, the frequency of anecdotic proverbs, indissolubly connected to the social-cultural sphere of the life of the *pólis*, diminishes, quite on the contrary, and almost disappears: the comedians are the most evident witnesses of this phenomenon. Besides, history, as well as politics, apparently could no longer belong to the proverbial repertory oh the Hellenistic age: the condition of the intellectual had changed, and the climate which had made possible the assumption of the politicians and the mighty as proverb protagonists during the Archaic and the classical age was gone for good.

In this framework characterized by variations there is, however, one constant element: the proverbs with animals and *realia*, which go along with the whole Greek civilization and render tangible the pragmatic sense and the contact with the real life that the ancient man never lost. Within these categories, on the other hand, there appears clearly a tendency to distribute, according to the genres and 'noble' or 'humble' contexts, proverbs with one animal or another,

[14] Theocr. *id*. 5,23.

[15] In this framework, the high number of resemblances between Greek proverbs and the proverbs of Sumerian tradition employed by Callimachus may be more than just a mere coincidence: in fact Callimachus might have undergone the influence of Egyptian culture.

one object or another, in an ideal relationship between the scale of values of literary genres and that of animal and object symbologies which applies to the whole ancient literary panorama. Thus, for instance, in the comedy, especially in the classical age comedy, a genre considered to be humble and close to 'folkloric' traditions, there is a profusion of proverbs with 'low' and negative animals (the donkey, the pig, insects) and *realia* borrowed from the universes of the sailorship and of cooking. Tragedies, on the contrary, more often depict 'noble' animals (the horse, the eagle) or *realia* belonging to ambits that were seen as aristocratic (hunting, symposium).

This convenience relationship (that the Greek used to call *prépon*) between the ambit of a proverb and its socio-linguistic context involves both the global framework of the relationships between the proverbial material and the system of literary genres.

The classification suggested herein makes it possible to analyze the various genres of Greek literature, including through the different paremiographical categories. The proverbs focusing on gods and heroes are more frequent in the humble genres, such as proverbs involving *realia* and animals. The anecdotic proverbs are abundant in rhetoric and comedy. The 'noble' genres (epic and tragedy) most often offer examples of witty expressions constructed on personifications of ethical concepts. More generally, it can be maintained with certainty that the choice of one proverb rather than another depended for Greek authors upon its socio-linguistic connotation[16].

It seems to me that this comes as evidence of the fact that the Greeks' sensitivity did not ignore, but at least implicitly acknowledged, the distinction between different layers of belonging of proverbs and proverbial expressions, at a sociolinguistic and symbolical level.

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[16] For a survey see: E. Lelli, *Volpe e leone. Il proverbio nella poesia greca (Alceo, Cratino, Callimaco)*, Roma 2006.

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Tout ce qui reluit n'est pas or.