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AMASIS, BIAS AND THE SEVEN SAGES AS RIDDLERS

1. Introduction: the tale of Amasis and Bias and Plutarch's adaptation

In Plutarch's 'Convivium septem sapientium' we read about the relations of the Egyptian Pharaoh Amasis with the legendary Seven Sages, especially with Bias of Priene. In one occasion Amasis tests Bias' sagacity by proposing to him a riddle to solve: he sends a sacrificial animal to Bias and asks him to cut off and send back that part of it which is the best and the worst; Bias cleverly chooses the tongue (Conv. 146 F). Later, Amasis gets involved in a riddle-contest with the king of Ethiopia. The two rival kings propose riddles to each other, and the prize for the winner will be cities and land from his rival's dominion: if the Ethiopian wins, Amasis must cede to him the territory around Elephantine (at the first cataract of the Nile, the border between Egypt and Ethiopia); if Amasis wins, the Ethiopian will give him many villages and cities of his country. In this riddle-contest the Ethiopian king sets to Amasis an *adynaton*, an impossible task, asking him to drink up the sea. Amasis is unable to find a solution to this demand and asks for the help of Bias, whose sagacity he had tested and appreciated in the past with the riddle of the sacrificial animal. Bias easily finds a solution: the Pharaoh must ask the Ethiopian king to stop first all the rivers, while Amasis will be engaged in drinking the sea; for the problem requires him to drink up the sea that exists now, not the water that will be added to it by the rivers (Conv. 151 B–D).

I have examined the origins and development of this tale in another essay¹, showing that the Greek tale is based on an Egyptian popular story about a contest of wisdom between Amasis and the king of Kush. Like many other Egyptian stories about Amasis, this tale was taken up by Greek storytellers, who refashioned and developed it, so as to integrate it into the Greek narrative tradition. For that purpose the Greek storytellers connected the tale with the famous circle of the Seven Sages: Amasis was shown asking for the sages' help in the riddle-contest and Bias assumed the role of the Pharaoh's helper or counsellor in it; in this way, the story was incorporated in the cycle of legends about the Seven Sages. The Egyptian tale may have passed into the Greek tradition in the 5th century, at about the time of Herodotus and Hellanikos, who narrate other popular stories about Amasis (Hdt. 2,172–174; Hellanikos FGrHist 4 F 55), or later. But at least by the Hellenistic period it must have been fashioned more or less as we know it and written down by some author, probably being included in a work on the Seven

¹ Konstantakos 2004a.

Sages or a collection of stories about them. Plutarch presumably found the tale in one of the many works about the Seven Sages and their circle, which he had read and excerpted².

Plutarch seems to have taken over the core of the story from his source. But he must have made some modifications or additions in matters of detail, so as to accommodate the story into the context of his work, which was a fictional account of the banquet of the Seven Sages at Periandros' court in Corinth. Since Plutarch had chosen this setting for his work, the action had to take place in Corinth, in Periandros' dining-hall, and to be confined within a few hours, from the time Periandros' guests started arriving until the end of the soirée. All the material from the legends of the Seven Sages, which Plutarch wished to exploit in his work, had to be accommodated into this given narrative framework. Bias and the other sages were necessarily shown in Corinth, taking part in the banquet. So, Plutarch had to present Amasis sending a messenger to Bias, in order to submit to him the Ethiopian king's problem and ask for his advice. For that purpose Plutarch apparently invented the figure of Neiloxenos, a Greek from Naukratis, who comes to Corinth as Amasis' envoy, participates in Periandros' banquet and reads to the company a letter from the Pharaoh, in which the Ethiopian's problem is stated³.

² On all this see Konstantakos 2004a with more bibliography. On the Egyptian origin of the story cf. also M. Pieper, *Das ägyptische Märchen*, Leipzig 1935, 65; S. Sauneron/J. Yoyotte, *La campagne nubienne de Psammétique II et sa signification historique*, in: BIAO 50, 1952, 193 f.; La Penna 1962, 293. On the passage of Egyptian tales, like those about Amasis, into the Greek narrative tradition cf. W. Spiegelberg, *Die Glaubwürdigkeit von Herodots Bericht über Ägypten im Lichte der ägyptischen Denkmäler*, Heidelberg 1926, 31; H. De Meulenaere, *Herodotos over de 26ste Dynastie*, Leuven 1951, 140–145; E. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Märchen*, Düsseldorf/Köln 1965, 248 f.; C. Froidefond, *Le mirage Égyptien dans la littérature grecque d'Homère à Aristote*, Gap 1971, 182–184; C.W. Müller, *Der Schelm als König und Weiser. Amasis von Ägypten in der Darstellung Herodots*, in: *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz 1949–1989 (Festschrift)*, Mainz/Stuttgart 1989, 227–231. On Plutarch's written sources about the Seven Sages cf. Hirzel 1895, II 133–142; Barkowski 1923, 2252–2254; Ziegler 1951, 883, 885; Paladini 1956, 377–411; L. Piccirilli, *Cronologia relativa e fonti della Vita Solonis di Plutarco*, in: ASNP 7, 1977, 1005–1016; Aune 1978, 53–56, 62 f.; Hershbell 1986, 178–180; Adrados 1996, 130–139; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 11, 69; Lo Cascio 1997, 11 f. 32–39, 67 f.; Mossman 1997, 121; Matelli 2000, 418, 437 f.; Busine 2002, 96–98, 103 f.

³ See Hirzel 1895, II 141; Ziegler 1951, 885; Defradas 1954, 27 f.; Aalders 1977, 29. Generally on the ways in which Plutarch adapted his material in order to fit it into his sympotic framework see Aune 1978, 60–66. Neiloxenos is said to have become a friend of Solon and Thales, when they had visited Egypt (Conv. 146 E), and so his name is doubly appropriate to his role: he is the 'ξένος-stranger from the Nile', the visitor from Naukratis travelling in mainland Greece; and he is also the 'ξένος-friend (of Solon and Thales) in the country of the Nile'. The 'speaking' name strongly suggests that Neiloxenos is a figure specially invented by Plutarch for this particular role. In addition, he does not display any striking individual characteristics or a memorable personality; he is a rather colourless figure, clearly invented *ad hoc* to serve a specific narrative need.

Bias finds the solution on the spot and commissions Neilo Xenos to report it back to the Pharaoh.

In the original story, as fashioned by earlier Greek storytellers, Bias would presumably not be shown in Periandros' banquet and probably not even in the company of the other sages: these details are the result of Plutarch's particular setting. Originally Bias may well have been shown travelling to Egypt, as other members of the Seven Sages (Solon, Thales, Kleoboulos) were said to have done, and meeting Amasis there (like Solon, Hdt. 1,30,1)⁴. Amasis would then ask him directly for his advice on the Ethiopian king's problem. Alternatively, the original story may have shown Bias in Greece, e.g. in his home city, Priene, where he would naturally be expected to live. Amasis would then send envoys to him, and they would report back Bias' answer on the problem. Such is apparently the case in the tale about the "best and worst" part of the sacrificial animal (Plut. Conv. 146 F; De aud. 38 B): that tale does not specify where Bias is found, but it is clear that Amasis sends to him envoys with the animal and the accompanying riddle and Bias sends back the required part with them (note the verbs *πέμπειν* and *ἀποπέμπειν* used in the Greek text); so Bias is presumably in Greece, perhaps in his home city, and receives there the Pharaoh's envoys. The Greek legendary tradition knows about such 'relationships from a distance' between Amasis and various Greek figures, like Polykrates and Kleoboulos of Lindos, who exchange letters or gifts with the Pharaoh but do not appear to meet him actually⁵.

A relevant tradition may underlie the reference to Bias' connections with Egypt found in a late source, St. Basil's 'Address to Young Men', ch. 10 (p. 60 Boulenger = Migne, PG 31 p. 588 B–C): Bias' son was preparing to travel to Egypt and asked his father how he should act in order to please him; Bias advised him to "make provisions for his old age", meaning that he should acquire virtue⁶. We do not know how old this story is: as it is often the case with tales in such late sources, Basil could be preserving a much older tradition, and the fact that the story has not survived in earlier sources could be due to pure chance. Indeed, the story seems to have developed from a saying, which was attributed to Bias already in the collection compiled by Demetrios of Phaleron (4th/3rd c.)⁷ and was therefore current for a long time before Basil. In any case,

⁴ Cf. also the story in Hdt. 1,27, in which Bias travels to Sardis and meets personally king Kroisos.

⁵ See Hdt. 2,182; 3,39–43; Georgios Kedrenos I p. 616 Bekker, cf. p. 564; Anagraphe of Lindos FGrHist 532 C 29, cf. C. Blinkenberg, *Die Lindische Tempelchronik*, Bonn 1915, 24–27; Ael. NA 9,17; Plin. HN 19,12; A.B. Lloyd, *Herodotus. Book II*, vol. III, Leiden 1988, 236 f. 239.

⁶ Ὁ μὲν οὖν Βίας τῷ υἱεῖ, πρὸς Αἰγυπτίους ἀπαίροντι, καὶ πυνθανομένῳ τί ἂν ποιῶν αὐτῷ μάλιστα κεχαρισμένα πράττοι. "Ἐφόδιον, ἔφη, πρὸς γῆρας κτησάμενος", τὴν ἀρετὴν δὴ τὸ ἐφόδιον λέγων.

⁷ See Stob. Anth. 3,1,172 ζ' 16 (III p. 123,2 f. Hense) κτῆσαι ἐν μὲν νεότητι εὐπραξίαν, ἐν δὲ τῷ γήρᾳ σοφίαν; on Demetrios' collection of the sayings of the Seven Sages see below, section 4. A variant formulation is found in D.L. 1,88 ἐφόδιον ἀπὸ νεότη-

there may be a connection between this story and the other tales associating Bias with Egypt and Amasis: in some version of Bias' legend the son might have functioned as an intermediary between Bias and the Pharaoh. In Basil's story the son appears to be travelling to Egypt for commercial or educational purposes (compare Solon, who visits Egypt κατ' ἐμπορίαν ἅμα καὶ θεωρίαν, Arist. Ath. pol. 11,1). Bias' advice (ἐφόδιον ... πρὸς γῆρας κτησάμενος) plays ambiguously on two senses: one literal and superficial (the son must acquire material provisions, i.e. amass a fortune with his commercial enterprises, so as to secure a prosperous old age), the other metaphorical but deeper and more important (the son must acquire virtue, the true equipment for human life). But whatever the purpose of the trip, the young man could have been shown meeting Amasis in Egypt and conveying the Pharaoh's messages or questions to his father.

In this essay I want to explore two issues relevant to the tale of Amasis' riddle-contest and its development in Greece. The original Egyptian tale about Amasis was hellenized and integrated into the Greek narrative tradition mainly through being connected to the cycle of legends about the Seven Sages. That connection must have been largely facilitated by the fact that the Seven Sages were very often presented as experts on riddles and similar problems. Firstly, therefore, I should like to survey the rich tradition about the Seven Sages as riddlers and examine how it influenced the Greek storytellers in reworking the tale of Amasis and the Ethiopian. The Greek legend, however, did not only connect Amasis with the circle of the Seven Sages in general but presented one of them in particular, Bias of Priene, as counsellor of the Pharaoh in his riddle-contest. Secondly, therefore, I should like to explore the legendary personality of Bias and enquire why it was he in particular that was chosen among all the sages for the role of Amasis' counsellor.

2. *The Seven Sages as riddlers*

From early on there was in Greece a copious tradition, which presented several members of the Seven Sages inventing and propounding riddles or solving them with admirable sagacity. One of the sages, Kleoboulos of Lindos, was shown as especially devoted to this activity and his name had become almost a synonym of riddling⁸. Among other poems, Kleoboulos was said to have composed riddles in verse (D.L. 1,89 ἐποίησεν ᾄσματα καὶ γρίφους εἰς ἔπη τρισχίλια, cf. Suda κ 1719). This presumably means that at least in the Hellenistic age there was a collection of poems at-

τος εἰς γῆρας ἀναλάμβανε σοφίαν· βεβαιότερον γὰρ τοῦτο τῶν ἄλλων κτημάτων; cf. Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 232 f.

⁸ On the tradition about Kleoboulos and his riddles see Ohlert 1912, 158; Schultz 1914, 95 f.; Snell 1952, 15. 31. 36–39; Wilamowitz 1962, 61 f.; Colli 1977–80, I 340–343. 435; Lo Cascio 1997, 48 f.

tributed to Kleoboulos, which contained also verse riddles, most probably in dactylic hexameters or elegiacs (the commonest metres of ancient Greek riddles). Indeed, poems attributed to Kleoboulos were circulating already from the 5th c. (Simonides PMG 581 Page criticizes Kleoboulos for his funerary epigram on Midas); we may plausibly suppose that riddles were included among them⁹. One such riddle, attributed to Kleoboulos by various sources, is the well-known riddle of the year¹⁰. Of course, the riddles circulating under Kleoboulos' name need not have been actually composed by him: they could have originally been anonymous, popular material, which was at some point attributed to Kleoboulos and gathered together in a collection¹¹. The riddle of the year seems indeed to stem from popular lore: similar riddles are widely known in the traditions of many peoples, especially in the Orient (India, Persia, Syria, Arabia etc.)¹².

Probably from the 5th c., therefore, there was a tradition presenting Kleoboulos as a composer of riddles. In the context of that tradition Kleoboulos was also given a

⁹ Cf. Ohlert 1912, 93 f.; Wilamowitz 1962, 61 f.

¹⁰ Εἷς ὁ πατήρ, παῖδες δυοκαίδεκα· τὼν δὲ ἐκάστω / παῖδες <δὶς> τριήκοντα διάνδιχα εἶδος ἔχουσαι· / αἱ μὲν λευκαὶ ἔασιν ἰδεῖν, αἱ δ' αὖτε μέλαιναι· / ἀθάνατοι δὲ τ' ἐοῦσαι, ἀποφθινύθουσιν ἅπασαι, i.e. the year, its twelve months, the thirty days and the thirty nights of each month: AP 14,101; D.L. 1,91; Stob. Anth. 1,8,37.

¹¹ Cf. Snell 1952, 31; Colli 1977–80, I 435. An interesting parallel is the riddle attributed to Simonides (69 D = 172 B) by Chamaileon (fr. 34 Wehrli = Ath. 10,456 C–D). That apparently quite old riddle was probably an originally anonymous piece, which was at some point connected with Simonides and included into a collection of his poems: see R. Reitzenstein, *Epigramm und Skolion*, Giessen 1893, 116–119; F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, vol. IX, Basel 1957, 83; Konstantakos 2003, 100.

¹² E.g. in a riddle in the 'Mahābhārata' (3,133) the year is described as a wheel having 6 naves, 12 axles, 24 joints and 360 spokes (J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. II, Chicago 1975, 477; P.C. Roy, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, vol. III, Calcutta n.d., 284); similar riddling descriptions are found in other Sanskrit texts (see Schultz 1914, 76; La Penna 1962, 294). In Persian tradition the year is presented as a clump of 12 trees, of which each one has 30 boughs (Schultz 1914, 82). In the 'Arabian Nights' it is a tree with a dozen boughs, of which each one has 30 leaves, and each leaf is half white and half black (Burton 1885–8, XVI 101). In the West Asian 'Tale of Ahikar' the riddle of the year is regarded as a very widespread and famous one (Ahikar says that even the cowherds in Assyria know it); it portrays the year as a pillar on which stand 12 cedars, and on each cedar there are 30 wheels, and on each wheel two cables, one black and the other white (F.C. Conybeare/J.R. Harris/A.S. Lewis, *The Story of Ahikar*, Cambridge ²1913, lxxxix–xc. 49. 81. 121, cf. 20; R.H. Charles (ed.), *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. II: *Pseudepigrapha*, Oxford 1913, 761. 765). Another version is found in the Greek adaptation of 'Ahikar', which is incorporated in the 'Aesop Romance' (ch. 120): the year is a temple with one pillar, and on the pillar there are 12 cities, each one of them covered with 30 beams, and around each beam run two women. In general cf. P. Marc, *Die Achikarsage*. Ein Versuch zur Gruppierung der Quellen, in: *Studien zur vergleichenden Litteraturgeschichte* 2, 1902, 410 f.; Thompson 1955–8, motif H 721.

daughter, Kleoboulina, who was herself famous for her riddles¹³. Kleoboulina is doubtless a creature of legend: Kleoboulos' renown as a riddler resulted in the invention of a suitable daughter for him, who shared her father's riddling talent; in a way, Kleoboulina was the embodiment of Kleoboulos' fame, the personification of his riddling activity¹⁴. Her first known appearance in literature is in a 5th-c. comedy by Kratinos, the 'Kleoboulina', in which Kleoboulos' daughter appeared playing riddle-games, probably with her companions (fr. 94 and fr. 101 most probably come from riddles)¹⁵. Already in the 5th c. riddles were circulating under her name. Around 400 B.C. the sophisticated treatise known as 'Dissoi Logoi' (3,11 f.) attributes to Kleoboulina a riddle (fr. 2 West) which must be considerably older: the author designates it as ποιημάτων παλαιότερων μαρτύριον and couples it with a passage from Aeschylus. Another riddle, about cupping, attributed to Kleoboulina by Plutarch (Conv. 154 B–C = fr. 1 West), must also have been quite old and widespread: it is mentioned by Aristotle as very famous (τῷ αἰνίγματι τῷ εὐδοκιμοῦντι, Rhet. 1405 a 37, cf. Poet. 1458 a 29 f.). In the Hellenistic age there must have existed a collection of riddles attributed to Kleoboulina. This could have been a part or section of the book of Kleoboulos' poems and riddles: it is noteworthy that the riddle of the year, which most sources ascribe to Kleoboulos, is attributed to Kleoboulina by Suda κ 1718; such confusion would have been easy if the same book included riddles both of Kleoboulos and of his daughter. Kleoboulina may conceivably have been a literary creation of Kratinos, invented as a comic female equivalent or a parody of the figure of Kleoboulos, and in that case she will have passed from Kratinos' comedy to the later tradition; or she may have existed in popular legend from earlier on, and Kratinos will then have taken her from the tradi-

¹³ On the figure of Kleoboulina see in general Crusius 1896, 1–4; Ohlert 1912, 158 f.; Schultz 1914, 95 f.; Defradas 1954, 26; Colli 1977–80, I 342 f. 435 f.; Detienne/Vernant 1978, 304 f.; Lo Cascio 1997, 62 f. 201. 209. 218; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 65 f.; Mossman 1997, 124 f.

¹⁴ Cf. Defradas 1954, 26; Lo Cascio 1997, 63. 201.

¹⁵ On Kratinos' play see R. Kassel/C. Austin, PCG IV 167 f.; A. Meineke, *Fragmenta Comicorum Graecorum*, Berlin 1839–1857, I 277, II 67 f.; Körte 1922, 1651; T. Zielinski, *Iresione*, vol. I, Leopolis 1931, 31. 62 f.; G. Norwood, *Greek Comedy*, London 1931, 139; J.T.M.F. Pieters, *Cratinus. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der vroeg-Attische comedie*, Leiden 1946, 144–146; W. Schmid/O. Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, vol. I,4, München 1946, 80; Wilamowitz 1962, 62 f.; P. Geissler, *Chronologie der altattischen Komödie*, Dublin/Zürich ²1969, 23; W.G. Arnott, *Alexis: The Fragments. A Commentary*, Cambridge 1996, 293 f. Later, in the 4th c., Alexis also produced a comedy named 'Kleoboulina', doubtless with the same heroine. The plural in the title of Kratinos' play (cf. other plural play-titles of the same dramatist, like 'Odysseōs' and 'Archilochoi') can be interpreted either as an idiomatic plural signifying a literary work ('Kleoboulina-play' or 'Kleoboulina-comedy': see Wilamowitz 1962, 62 and Körte 1922, 1650) or as a reference to the chorus, which was made up of Kleoboulina's companions ('Kleoboulina and Co.': see Norwood, o.c., 139; Pieters, o.c., 144 f.; Arnott, o.c., 293).

tions about the Seven Sages¹⁶. In any case her figure suggests that already in the 5th c. Kleoboulos was renowned as a creator of riddles, so that literature or legend could attach to him a daughter of corresponding abilities and reputation.

An allusion to this long tradition about Kleoboulos as a riddler can be traced also in Plutarch's narrative about Amasis' riddle-contest. After Neiloxenos has read the Pharaoh's letter, Bias, before giving an answer to the Ethiopian's riddle, takes counsel for a little while with Kleoboulos, who had reclined next to him in the symposium (Conv. 151 C μικρὰ δὲ τῷ Κλεοβούλῳ προσομιλήσας ἐγγὺς κατακειμένῳ); and immediately afterwards he announces the solution. Obviously, Bias consults Kleoboulos about the Ethiopian's riddle, and the text suggests that Kleoboulos gives Bias some idea, which helps him find the solution. Thus, Kleoboulos participates, indirectly at least, in the process of solving the riddle. This detail is, of course, Plutarch's own addition: Bias can consult Kleoboulos because both are present in the same occasion, Periandros' symposium, and the entire setting of the symposium, as we saw, is concocted by Plutarch. In the original Greek tale Bias would probably appear and solve the riddle alone (as in the story about the sacrificial animal). Plutarch added the brief consultation with Kleoboulos because he wished to involve more sages in the riddle-contest of Amasis: in this way the tale about Amasis could be better integrated into the Plutarchean setting, which presented the Seven Sages gathered together¹⁷. But at the same time Plutarch is also referring to the well-known tradition about Kleoboulos as a riddler: Bias consults Kleoboulos about the solution to the riddle precisely because Kleoboulos was renowned as an expert in riddles. In other scenes of his work (Conv. 148 C–E, 150 E–F, 154 A–C) Plutarch has openly exploited that tradition, presenting Kleoboulina as one of the characters and speaking at length about her famous riddles. But in 151 C he limits himself to a *recherche* allusion, of the sort that erudite readers would appreciate.

Apart from Kleoboulos, other members of the Seven Sages were also shown propounding or solving riddles or cognate problems¹⁸. In some stories they speak with phrases which seem paradoxical or incomprehensible, if taken literally, but have a hidden or metaphorical meaning. Such phrases can be taken as a kind of riddle, which the sages propound to their listeners, inviting them to decipher the obscure saying and discover the hidden message. So, for instance, Pittakos tells Kroisos that the most powerful authority is that of "the many-coloured (or spotted) wood" (ἡ τοῦ ποικίλου ... ξύλου), meaning the law (D.L. 1,77; Diod. 9,27,4). This is a kenning, a riddling circumlocution based on synecdoche (laws were inscribed on wooden boards, which thus

¹⁶ The former is suggested by Wilamowitz 1962, 62 f.; Körte 1922, 1651; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 65; the latter by Crusius 1896, 1–4.

¹⁷ For the same reason Plutarch has added himself a second part to the riddle-contest (Conv. 152 E–153 D), in which the role of Amasis' helper is no longer undertaken by Bias but by Thales: see section 4.

¹⁸ On the Seven Sages as riddle-solvers cf. in general Jedrkiewicz 1997, 26 f. 43; Busine 2002, 97 f.

became ‘spotted’ with the letters). This figure of speech is common in ancient riddles¹⁹. In another story the Lydian king Alyattes invites Bias to his court, but Bias sarcastically replies “let Alyattes eat onions” (D.L. 1,83 Ἀλυάττη κελεύω κρόμμυα ἐσθίειν; cf. Plut. Conv. 153 E, where the same response is attributed to Pittakos). This is a circumlocution for the verb κλαίειν, here taken in its idiomatic colloquial sense “go hang”, “go to hell”. In another tale Pittakos receives a stretch of land as a gift from the people of Mytilene, but he divides it in equal parts and distributes them to the people, saying that “the equal part is greater than the greater one” (Diod. 9,12,1 τὸ ἴσον ἐστὶ τοῦ πλείονος πλεῖον); in another version Pittakos keeps only a small part of the land and says even more paradoxically that “the half is greater than the whole” (D.L. 1,75 τὸ ἥμισυ τοῦ παντὸς πλεῖον εἶναι). In these sayings we find the commonest and most characteristic technique of riddles, the paradox or contradiction, i.e. the description of a situation which at first glance appears impossible and contrary to the laws of nature or to common sense²⁰.

In other stories the sage uses a strange, abstruse or baffling metaphor or simile and then proceeds to explain it and make its point clear: e.g. Solon succinctly remarked that the laws are like spider’s webs; for, he went on to explain, if something light and weak falls upon them, they hold it, but something larger can break them and escape (D.L. 1,58 τοὺς δὲ νόμους τοῖς ἀραχνίοις ὁμοίους· καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνα, ἐὰν μὲν ἐμπέσῃ τι κοῦφον καὶ ἀσθενές, στέγειν· ἐὰν δὲ μεῖζον, διακόψαν οἴχεται; cf. Plut. Sol. 5,4 and Val. Max. 7,2 ext. 14, where the saying is attributed to Anacharsis, A 41 Kindstrand). Here the perplexing simile, which is not immediately understandable but needs explanation, gives a riddle-like quality to the sage’s terse statement. Moreover, the sequence of puzzling statement followed by explanation recalls a pattern common in the riddles of Greek and especially of Plautine comedy: there too a short and baffling, riddle-like comparison is followed by its explanation²¹. Even some of the famous maxims

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. AP 14,23 γαιήιος ὑἱός (the earthen cooking-vessel), Νηρέος ... παῖδα (the fish); 14,45 δουρατέων πεδίον (the wooden writing-tablet), Ἄρει (the iron stylus); 14,53 Πηλέος ... θαλάμοις (the earthenware lamp); 14,109 Παλλάδος ... στέλεχος (a trunk of olive wood); and the famous τεῖχος ... ξύλινον (the ships) in the riddle-like oracle given to the Athenians in Hdt. 7,141,3. Cf. F. Buffière, *Anthologie Grecque. Première partie. Anthologie Palatine*, vol. XII: Livres XIII–XV, Paris 1970, 47; Schultz 1914, 108–110.

²⁰ On paradox as a basic constituent of riddles see Konstantakos 2003, 100 with further references. As usually in riddles, so also in Pittakos’ saying the paradox is solved if we take its terms in a broader or metaphorical sense: Pittakos means that the fair and just (the equal distribution to all, τὸ ἴσον) is better than greed (the desire for more, τὸ πλεῖον).

²¹ E.g. Ar. Vesp. 20–23 οὐδὲν ἄρα γρίφου διαφέρει Κλεώνυμος. – πῶς δὴ; – προερεῖ τις τοῖσι συμπόταις, λέγων ὅτι “ταῦτ’ ἐν γῇ τ’ ἀπέβαλεν κὰν οὐρανῷ κὰν τῇ θαλάττῃ θηρίον τὴν ἀσπίδα”; Plaut. Merc. 361 *muscast meu’ pater, nil potest clam illum haberi*. The pattern occurs also in other humorous texts, like Theophrastus’ *Characters* (e.g. 20,9 τοὺς φίλους αὐτοῦ εἶναι τὸν τετρημένον πίθον· εὐ ποιῶν γὰρ αὐτοὺς οὐ δύνασθαι ἐμπληῆσαι). For this pattern in comic riddles see F. Marx, Plautus. Rudens, Leipzig 1928, 84. 130–132; E. Fraenkel, *Plautinisches im Plautus*, Berlin 1922, 38–55; H. MacL. Cur-

of the Seven Sages, as they are formulated with great conciseness and density, look very much like riddles: their meaning is not obvious and the listener is obliged to reflect on them in order to discover it. A maxim of this sort is the obscure ἐγγύα, πάρα δ' ἄτα ("a pledge, and ruin is nigh"), ascribed to Chilon or Thales²². This is a true riddle, in which two seemingly unrelated concepts are combined together in an abstruse expression. Indeed, the ancients found Chilon's saying enigmatic: this becomes clear from the fact that there was no consensus about its meaning but various different interpretations were proposed²³.

There are also stories in which the sages appear in the opposite role, not propounding but solving riddle-like questions. For instance, someone asked Thales which is older, the day or the night; Thales answered "the night is older by one day" (D.L. 1,36). Similarly, someone asked Anacharsis which are more numerous, the living or the dead; Anacharsis answered "in which category do you place those sailing on the sea?" (D.L. 1,104; Gnom. Vat. 130; A 33 Kindstrand). Questions of this sort are a kind of riddle; in Greek we might name them ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα, i.e. intricate, tricky questions which set a trap for the addressee. These sophisms or quibbles do not admit of a true answer: they aim only at ensnaring the addressee and reducing him to perplexity before an insoluble question. The addressee can escape only if he thinks of some clever reply, which reverses the sophism and turns it against the questioner himself, entrapping him into his own trap. In the legend of Alexander and the Gymnosophists Alexander appears setting such ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα to the Indian sages²⁴.

rie, *The Third Eclogue* and the Roman Comic Spirit, in: *Mnem* 4th ser. 29, 1976, 415–417; W. Clausen, *A Commentary on Virgil, Eclogues*, Oxford 1994, 116; Konstantakos 2003, 99. The Seven Sages use the same pattern (puzzling comparison followed by explanation) also in other passages: e.g. D.L. 1,59. 104; Gnom. Vat. 505; Anacharsis A 17, A 37 E–F Kindstrand; Max. Conf. Loc. comm. 41 (Migne, PG 91 p. 917 D).

²² D.L. 1,73; Diod. 9,10,1; Plut. Conv. 164 B–C; Stob. Anth. 3,1,172 δ' 1 (III p. 118,4 Hense); Suda 9 17; PSI 1093,23; Clem. Strom. 1,14 (Migne, PG 8 p. 760 B–C); Plin. HN 7,119; Aus. Lud. sept. sap. 69–71. 180–187; cf. Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 188–190. 199 f. 424. Pl. Charm. 164 d–165 a comments on the riddle-like character (αἰνιγματώδεςτερον) of other such sayings, like γνῶθι σαυτόν (which he regards as a kenning for σωφρόνει); similarly Clem. Strom. 1,14 (Migne, PG 8 p. 760 A), also referring to the sages' laconic maxims, remarks ὁ δὲ τρόπος τῆς παρ' αὐτοῖς φιλοσοφίας ... αἰνιγματώδης.

²³ See Diod. 9,10,4 f.; Plut. Conv. 164 B; Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 188 f.

²⁴ See Plut. Alex. 64,1–7: ἐρωτήματα προύβαλεν αὐτοῖς ἄπορα ... ὁ μὲν οὖν πρῶτος ἐρωτηθεὶς πότερον οἶεται τοὺς ζῶντας εἶναι πλείονας ἢ τοὺς τεθνηκότας, ἔφη τοὺς ζῶντας· οὐκέτι γὰρ εἶναι τοὺς τεθνηκότας ... ὁ δὲ πέμπτος ἐρωτηθεὶς πότερον οἶεται τὴν ἡμέραν ἢ τὴν νύκτα προτέραν γεγονέναι, τὴν ἡμέραν, εἶπεν, ἡμέρα μὲν καὶ προσεπέειπεν οὗτος, θαυμάσαντος τοῦ βασιλέως, ὅτι τῶν ἀπόρων ἐρωτήσεων ἀνάγκη καὶ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις ἀπόρους εἶναι; cf. similarly *Historia Alexandri Magni* 3,6,2–4; Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca* I 145 f. On ἄπορα ἐρωτήματα see in general Ohlert 1912, 12–17. 72. 112–114; Schultz 1914, 110 f. For examples from other traditions cf. Thompson 1955–8, motifs H 771–H 774.

A type of riddles which the Seven Sages are very often shown tackling are the so-called “riddles of the superlative”, i.e. questions which ask what thing or what person possesses a certain quality to the highest degree. The simplest form, to which all riddles of this sort can be reduced, consists of an interrogative pronoun and a superlative adjective (e.g. τί ἥδιστον, τί δικαιοτάτον, τί πρεσβύτατον, τίς ὀλβιώτατος, and also for undesirable qualities, e.g. τί χαλεπώτατον, τί βλαβερώτατον); in the schematic formulation of Iamblichos (VP 82 f.) these are the questions asking τί μάλιστα. The riddles of the superlative were connected *par excellence* with the Seven Sages and regarded as a kind of problem especially akin to their practical wisdom and apophthegmatic manner of expression²⁵. This connection seems to have been established from early on. Iamblichos (VP 83) remarks that questions of the τί μάλιστα type are characteristic of the wisdom of the Seven Sages and that Pythagoras followed their model in including questions of this sort into his ἀκούσματα²⁶. Like Iamblichos’ entire discussion about the Pythagorean ἀκούσματα (VP 82–86), this passage draws its material from a treatise of Aristotle on the Pythagoreans. The remark on the Seven Sages must also go back to Aristotle: it is significant that Iamblichos uses for them the term ἐπὶ σοφισταί, an expression characteristically attested for Aristotle (fr. 5 Rose)²⁷. Therefore, already from the 4th c. the association of superlative riddles with the Seven Sages was well established.

But the tradition can be traced even earlier back to the 5th c. In the celebrated tale of Solon and Kroisos in Herodotus, one of the most famous stories about any member of the Seven Sages, Kroisos propounds to Solon a question that is in fact a superlative riddle: “who is the happiest man?” (Hdt. 1,30,2 ἐπειρέσθαι ... σε εἴ τινα ἤδη πάντων εἶδες ὀλβιώτατον). A variant is found in D.L. 1,51, with the question formulated in the comparative degree (Kroisos appears before Solon lavishly adorned and seated on his throne and asks him εἴ τι θέαμα κάλλιον τεθέαται). Another story of this kind is told in Diod. 9,26 f., where Kroisos propounds to some of the Seven Sages

²⁵ On the “riddles of the superlative” see Konstantakos 2004a, appendix 2, with more bibliography. On the connection of the riddles of the superlative with the Seven Sages see Ohlert 1912, 107–112; Snell 1952, 96 f. 104–107, 109; R. Vischer, *Das einfache Leben. Wort- und motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu einem Wertbegriff der antiken Literatur*, Göttingen 1965, 40–42; Burkert 1972, 169; Wehrli 1973, 196; Aune 1978, 96 f.; Kindstrand 1981, 40 f.; Santoni 1983, 106; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 39, 45 f. 87; Lo Cascio 1997, 214 f.; W. Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread. A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*, Ithaca/London 2002, 417.

²⁶ Ἔστι δ’ αὕτη ἡ αὐτὴ τῇ τῶν ἐπὶ σοφιστῶν λεγομένη σοφία. καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι ἐζητοῦν, οὐ τί ἐστι τάγαθόν, ἀλλὰ τί μάλιστα· οὐδὲ τί τὸ χαλεπόν, ἀλλὰ τί τὸ χαλεπώτατον (ὅτι τὸ αὐτὸν γινῶναι ἐστίν)· οὐδὲ τί τὸ ῥάδιον, ἀλλὰ τί τὸ ῥᾶστον (ὅτι τὸ εἶθι χρῆσθαι). τῇ τοιαύτῃ γὰρ σοφία μετηκολουθηκέναι ἔοικε τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀκούσματα· πρότεροι γὰρ οὗτοι Πυθαγόρου ἐγένοντο.

²⁷ The Aristotelian origin of the passage was magisterially proved by Burkert 1972, 166–170; on Aristotle’s use of the term σοφισταί for the Seven Sages cf. also Busine 2002, 49.

(Anacharsis, Solon, Pittakos) a series of superlative riddles (9,26,3 τίνα ... τῶν ὄντων ἀνδρειότατον; 26,4 τίνα δικαιοτάτον ... τῶν ὄντων; 27,1 τίνα τῶν ὄντων εὐδαιμονέστατον; 27,4 ποίαν ... ἀρχὴν κρατίστην; cf. 26,5 on what is the wisest being, and 27,2 on who is the richest man). The entire tale is probably taken from the 4th-c. historian Ephoros, who had narrated a meeting of the Seven Sages in Kroisos' court²⁸. A similar tale about Kroisos asking the sages τίς τῶν ὄντων εὐδαιμονέστατος is preserved in lexica and paroemiographers (Zenob. 5,16; Suda μ 116; Phot. Lex. μ 78 Theodoridis). This tale looks like a variation of Ephoros' story about Kroisos' interview with the sages: it was probably invented by a Hellenistic grammarian, who was inspired by Ephoros' narrative²⁹. In many other passages the sages answer superlative questions³⁰, and occasionally they are also shown posing them: see e.g. Gnom. Vat. 456 (Pittakos asks Bias τί δυσχερέστερον ἐν τῷ βίῳ) and 508 (Solon asks Kroisos τί παρὰ τῆς βασιλείας ἔσχε τιμιώτατον); Klearchos in PSI 1093,33–41 (fr. 69 Wehrli: Chilon asks the oracle of Apollo τί ἄρ[ιστον ἂν εἴ]η)³¹.

The association of the Seven Sages with superlative riddles is exploited also in the well-known legend about the tripod or cup which had to be offered to the wisest of the sages (on this see below, section 3). This story can be read as a reversal or flipside of the famous tradition about the Seven Sages solving superlative riddles. In a lot of stories the sages were asked and answered superlative questions, like “what is the best”, “who is the happiest” etc.; now, ironically, this pattern is inverted and a question of this sort (“who is the wisest”) is asked not of the sages but about them. The famous solvers

²⁸ See Ephoros FGrHist 70 F 181 = D.L. 1,40, cf. F 182. On the dependence of Diodoros' narrative on Ephoros see F. Jacoby in: FGrHist II C, pp. 54, 87; E. Schwartz, Diodoros (38), RE V, 1905, 678 f.; Snell 1952, 85–91; Bühler 1982–99, IV 76 f.; Santoni 1983, 134. 136–138; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 138 f.; Busine 2002, 73. Kindstrand 1981, 42–44. 79 f. suggests that the story may be even older, fashioned by the sophists (Anacharsis' responses to Kroisos clearly reflect sophistic ideas).

²⁹ See Snell 1952, 85. 90 f.; Kindstrand 1981, 43; Bühler 1982–99, 74–77.

³⁰ E.g. D.L. 1,36 (Thales is asked τί ἥδιστον, πῶς ἂν τις ἀτυχίαν ῥᾶστα φέροι and πῶς ἂν ἄριστα καὶ δικαιοτάτα βιώσασιν, cf. Gnom. Vat. 321); 1,59 (Solon, πῶς ... ἤκιστ' ἂν ἀδικοῖεν οἱ ἄνθρωποι); 1,77 (Pittakos, τί ἄριστον and τίς ἀρχὴ μέγιστη); 1,104 (Anacharsis A 35 Kindstrand, τίνα τῶν πλοίων εἰσὶν ἀσφαλέστερα); Plut. Conv. 147 B (Thales, τί παραδοξότατον, cf. De gen. Socr. 578 D ὅ τι καινότερον); Gnom. Vat. 21 (Anacharsis A 48 Kindstrand, ποῖός ἐστι θάνατος χαλεπώτερος); 550 (Chilon, τί παραδοξότατον); 552 (Chilon, τί κράτιστον ἐν βίῳ); Stob. Anth. 3,3,45 (Periandros, τί μέγιστον ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ); 4,1,89 and 4,1,91 (Solon, πῶς ἄριστα αἱ πόλεις οἰκοῖντο and τίς ἀρίστη πόλις, cf. 4,1,76). Compare also Plut. Conv. 147 B (Thales' maxim κάκιστον εἶναι τῶν μὲν ἀγρίων θηρίων τὸν τύραννον, τῶν δ' ἡμέρων τὸν κόλακα is obviously an answer to an implied question ποῖον θηρίον κάκιστον, cf. Plut. Quom. adul. 61 C) and Gnom. Vat. 503. See also section 4 for a tradition which presented Thales solving a whole cluster of such superlative riddles.

³¹ So F. Montanari in: Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini, vol. I.1*, Firenze 1989, 433 f.; in Stob. Anth. 3,21,26 (= fr. 69 a Wehrli) the question has the form τί ἄριστον ἀνθρώποις μαθεῖν.

of superlative riddles become now themselves the object of the riddle³². It is significant, however, that, as the story proceeds, the sages resume their traditional role of riddle-solvers. In most versions of the legend someone external to the group of the Seven Sages attempts in the first instance to solve the question and offers the tripod or cup to one of the sages (e.g. Thales or Bias). But the chosen sage is not himself satisfied with this solution and sends the prize to another sage, whom he himself considers as the wisest; the second sage sends it to a third one and so on, until the prize returns to the first sage. In this way, each one of the Seven Sages in turn gives his own answer to the superlative question. Thus, their traditional function of solving superlative riddles is restored; the story of the tripod or cup plays with the traditional pattern but in the end acknowledges its all-powerful predominance.

Related to the riddles of the superlative is another kind of problems, which the Seven Sages are equally often shown tackling. These are again general questions, asking for an object distinguished by a certain quality, but not formulated in the superlative degree; they consist simply of an interrogative and an adjective. In ancient sources we find such questions set to various sages: e.g. Thales (D.L. 1,36 τί δύσκολον, τί ... εὐκόλον, τί ... καινόν; 1,37 τίς εὐδαίμων; cf. Gnom. Vat. 321); Chilon (D.L. 1,69 and Gnom. Vat. 554 τί δύσκολον); Pittakos (D.L. 1,77 τί εὐχάριστον, ἀφανές, πιστόν, ἄπιστον); Bias (D.L. 1,86 and Gnom. Vat. 154 τί δυσχερές; D.L. 1,87 and Gnom. Vat. 155 τί γλυκὺ ἀνθρώποις; Gnom. Vat. 147 and Stob. Anth. 3,24,11 τί ... ἄφοβον; Gnom. Vat. 456 τί ... ῥόδιον); and Anacharsis (D.L. 1,105 and Gnom. Vat. 131 τί ἐστὶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἀγαθόν τε καὶ φαῦλον; Gnom. Vat. 18 and Stob. Anth. 3,2,42 τί ἐστὶ πολέμιον ἀνθρώποις; Gnom. Vat. 20 τί ... παράδοξον); many of them are found also in other manuscript collections of sayings³³. These questions are closely similar to the riddles of the superlative, because they too enquire in essence about the object most strongly distinguished by the stated quality (what thing is *par excellence* difficult, easy, pleasant etc.). In a variant form the adjective may be replaced by a periphrastic verbal construction, but the essence remains the same and the question can again be reduced to the rudimentary form "τί + adjective": e.g. in D.L. 1,87 Bias is asked τί ποιῶν ἄνθρωπος τέρπεται, which is a periphrastic formulation of the simple question τί τερπνόν, focused particularly on the field of human activity.

In some other questions posed to the sages instead of an adjective of positive or superlative degree we find an abstract noun, so that the issue is practically the definition of a general concept: e.g. D.L. 1,36 (Thales is asked τί τὸ θεῖον, cf. Gnom. Vat. 321); D.L. 1,86 (an impious man asks Bias τί ποτέ ἐστὶν εὐσέβεια, cf. Gnom. Vat. 149); Gnom. Vat. 450 and Stob. Anth. 3,24,12 (Periandros is asked τί ἐστὶν ἐλευ-

³² Cf. Snell 1952, 109. Compare the stories in which a sage (e.g. Anacharsis or Chilon) asks the oracle who is wiser (τίς σοφώτερος or sim.) than himself (D.L. 1,30. 106; Diod. 9,6).

³³ See the comments of Sternbach 1963, 57 f. 64. 66. 125–128. 198; Kindstrand 1981, 110 f.

θερία); Gnom. Vat. 507 (Solon is asked τί ἐστὶ νόμος). Here too the periphrastic formulation is occasionally found, e.g. in the question put to Chilon (D.L. 1,69, cf. Anacharsis A 8 Kindstrand): τίνι διαφέρουσιν οἱ πεπαιδευμένοι τῶν ἀπαιδευτῶν; this can be actually reduced to the simple form τί ἐστὶν ἡ παιδεία. The questions of this sort are similar in form and in substance to the Socratic questions for the definition of abstract concepts, as we know them from Platonic dialogues³⁴. With them we move away from riddles and we enter deeper into the area of popular philosophy and wisdom. Nonetheless, the stories in which the Seven Sages answer such questions display the same structure and the same narrative features as those tales, in which the sages solve common riddle-like problems, like ἄπορα and superlative questions. Here too the question is addressed to the sage as a challenge and a test of his wisdom, not as a disinterested quest for philosophical knowledge. And the sage does not use it as an opportunity for extensive philosophical discussion, as in the Socratic dialogues, but answers it tersely and sententiously, with a catchy aphorism, just as in the cases of ἄπορα and superlative riddles. The purpose is not the philosophical conversation and the pursuit of true knowledge but the display of the sage's sagacity and ready wit, which the sage shows off by rapidly working out a clever solution to a difficult problem.

Finally, another related activity of the Seven Sages is the interpretation of oracles, omens and portents and the explanation of their hidden meaning³⁵. So Chilon explains an omen in Hdt. 1,59 (cf. D.L. 1,68): while the Athenian Hippocrates was offering a sacrifice in Olympia, the cauldrons suddenly started boiling of their own accord, without a fire; Chilon then advised Hippocrates not to beget children or, if he already had, to disinherit them. Hippocrates disregarded his advice and begot a son, Peisistratos, the future tyrant, who caused great turmoil to Athens. In another tale, included in Plut. Conv. 149 C–E, Thales is shown a monstrous creature, a newborn colt with the body of a horse but a human head, neck and arms. Thales explains this wondrous portent in a rationalistic manner: the horse-groom must have copulated with the mare which gave birth to that colt³⁶. The interpretation of such omens and prodigies, just like the expla-

³⁴ Cf. F. Ferrari in: F. Ferrari/G. Bonelli/G. Sandrolini, *Romanzo di Esopo*, Milano 1997, 27.

³⁵ On this capacity of the Seven Sages cf. Martin 1993, 121 f.

³⁶ On this story see Ziegler 1951, 884; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 59. 140 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 71; Hershbell 1986, 182; E. Oberg, *Phaedrus-Kommentar*, Stuttgart 2000, 122–125. Phaedrus 3,3 narrates the same story, but with Aesop in place of Thales. It is probable that the story was originally created for Thales, because it seems especially apt for his figure. Thales was traditionally regarded as a connoisseur and explicator of natural prodigies, a wise man who rationally explains marvelous or amazing physical phenomena: e.g. he was said to have predicted and explained scientifically the eclipse of the sun (Hdt. 1,74,2; Eudemos fr. 143–145 Wehrli; D.L. 1,23; Cic. Rep. 1,25; Aët. Plac. 2,24,1; Themist. Or. 26,317 b; Sch. Pl. Resp. 600 a, p. 272 Greene), to have proposed a naturalistic explanation of earthquakes (Aët. Plac. 3,15,1; Sen. NQ 3,14,1; 6,6,1 f.) and of the floods of the Nile (D.L. 1,37; Diod. 1,38,2; Aët. Plac. 4,1,1; Sen. NQ 4,2,22; Sch. Ap. Rh. 4,269–271 a, p. 277 Wendel; cf. Hdt. 2,20,2); cf. Classen

nation of oracles, is a process akin to the solution of riddles. The responses of ancient oracles are often formulated in obscure and riddling language and look like a kind of riddle propounded by the god to the mortals. The portent or the natural prodigy is similarly a riddle made of images, a 'rebus' or 'picture-riddle' set by the god³⁷. Thus, the capacity of the Seven Sages in interpreting omens and portents is a complement of their skill in solving riddles.

To sum up: there was an old, extensive and widespread tradition, which presented the Seven Sages as expert riddlers. This tradition was doubtless a crucial factor for the association of the story about Amasis' riddle-contest with the circle of the Seven Sages. In order to link the Egyptian tale with the Greek tradition, the Greek storytellers decided to cast a Greek hero as Amasis' helper in the riddle-contest – either themselves inventing this role *in toto* or replacing an Egyptian counsellor who helped the Pharaoh in the original story. Obviously, the Greek candidate for this role had to be sought among those heroes of the Greek legendary tradition, who were especially distinguished for their expertise in riddles. As we saw, the Seven Sages were *par excellence* the cultural heroes excelling in this field: at least from among the figures whom traditional chronology regarded as contemporary with Amasis no-one else could compete with them in the art of inventing and solving riddles. So, the very theme of the Egyptian story, the riddle-contest of the kings, favoured its association with the cycle of the Seven Sages, in which tales with riddles and similar problems abounded; it seemed natural to choose one of the Seven Sages for the role of Amasis' Greek counsellor in the contest. We must now examine why Bias in particular was selected.

3. *The traditions about Bias and the tale of Amasis*

In Plutarch's narrative Amasis expressly chooses Bias for his counsellor because he considers him as the wisest of the Greeks. This becomes clear from the tale about the sacrificial animal, which serves as a prelude to the main riddle-contest: when Bias

1965, 943–945. The story about the human-headed colt, which also shows the sage explaining naturalistically a prodigious phenomenon, tallies well with this image; it reads like a humorous popular version of the tradition about Thales as a rationalistic interpreter of natural occurrences. Someone, probably Phaedrus himself, transferred the story from Thales to Aesop, just as the author of the 'Aesop Romance' has transferred to Aesop several stories about the Seven Sages (Aesop Romance ch. 51–55 ~ Plut. Mor. 38 B, 146 F, 506 C, fr. 89 Sandb.; ch. 69–73 ~ Plut. Conv. 151 B–E; ch. 98–100 ~ Hdt. 1,27) or as the famous story about Thales falling into a well (Pl. Tht. 174 a; D.L. 1,34; Gnom. Vat. 319) has been transformed into an Aesopic fable (nr. 40 Hausrath). Aune 1978, 90–92 thinks that the story of the colt was invented by Plutarch (cf. Hershbell 1986, 182), but this is ruled out by its presence in Phaedrus, who wrote earlier. The story was doubtless an older, traditional tale about Thales, and both Phaedrus and Plutarch drew it from the rich legendary tradition about the Seven Sages.

³⁷ On the close relationship between oracles, portents and riddles see Konstantakos 2004a, appendix 4, with more bibliography.

solves Amasis' problem about the "best and worst" part, Amasis develops great esteem and admiration for him (146 F ὅθεν εὐδοκιμῶν δῆλός ἐστι καὶ θαυμαζόμενος). This admiration is displayed in Amasis' letter to Bias, which opens with the phrase βασιλεὺς Αἰγυπτίων Ἀμασις λέγει Βίαντι σοφωτάτῳ Ἑλλήνων (151 B). Amasis has formed the impression that Bias is the greatest Greek sage, and for this reason he consults him, when need arises, about the Ethiopian's riddle. In Plutarch's narrative, of course, Amasis has instructed Neiloxenos to disclose the riddle also to the other sages, if Bias proves unable to solve it (146 E). But this detail is doubtless an addition of Plutarch: it presupposes the gathering of all the sages in Periandros' symposium, which is inextricably connected with Plutarch's own choice of setting³⁸. Once again we detect here Plutarch's endeavour to implicate more sages into the riddle-contest, to present it not as an affair between Amasis and Bias exclusively (as was probably the case in the original Greek tale) but as an issue concerning and involving all the sages; in this manner, as we saw, Plutarch tries to integrate the riddle-contest more organically into his narrative. On the contrary, the Pharaoh's conviction that Bias is the wisest Greek seems to be an integral constituent of the tale, since it explains Amasis' decision to turn to Bias in particular for advice; therefore, it must have been contained already in the original, pre-Plutarchean form of the story.

The tale about Amasis is not the only testimony to Bias' fame as the wisest of the Greeks. Bias belonged to what we might describe as the 'hard core' of the group of the Seven Sages, being one of its standard and most illustrious members. According to Dikaiarchos (fr. 38 Mirhady = D.L. 1,41), Thales, Bias, Solon and Pittakos were the four universally acknowledged and fixed members of the Seven Sages, who were included in all catalogues, in all the variant traditions about the composition of the group (while the remaining three places were assigned to different sages in different accounts). The material preserved in ancient sources confirms Dikaiarchos' assertion³⁹. But certain stories went beyond this and actually awarded to Bias the primacy in wisdom, presenting him as the greatest of the Seven Sages⁴⁰. Those stories are preserved by various authors from early Hellenistic times onwards and seem to have been fairly well disseminated

³⁸ Indeed, Neiloxenos is delighted to find all the sages gathered together in the symposium, so as to read to them Amasis' letter and the Ethiopian's riddle: 146 E ἔρμαιον ... μοι γέγονεν ἐνταῦθα λαβεῖν ἅπαντας ὑμᾶς, καὶ κομίζω τὸ βιβλίον ὡς ὀρᾶς ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον.

³⁹ Cf. Crusius 1899, 383; Barkowski 1923, 2245; Pórtulas 1993, 153; J. Bollansée, Herimippos of Smyrna and his Biographical Writings. A Reappraisal, Leuven 1999, 32 f.; Bollansée 1999, 169; S.A. White, *Principes Sapientiae*: Dicaearchus' Biography of Philosophy, in: W.W. Fortenbaugh/E. Schütrumpf (eds.), *Dicaearchus of Messana. Text, Translation, and Discussion*, New Brunswick/London 2001, 204 f.

⁴⁰ On this tradition see in general Crusius 1899, 383 f.; Wilamowitz 1937, 135; Defradas 1954, 22; Paladini 1956, 381; Von der Mühl 1965, 178; Pórtulas 1993, 152 f.; Lo Cascio 1997, 45 f.

within the overall cycle of legends about the Seven Sages: they may be regarded as forming a particular branch of the tradition about them.

One of the most outright statements is given by the Hellenistic biographer Satyros (3rd c.), who placed Bias at the top of the Seven Sages (FHG III 162, fr. 9 Müller = D.L. 1,82 Βίας Τευτάμου Πριηνεύς, προκεκριμένος τῶν ἑπτὰ ὑπὸ Σατύρου). His judgement is doubtless based on an earlier tradition. Already Herakleitos, about two generations after Bias' time, had remarked that Bias had a greater reputation than "the others" (VS 22 B 39 ἐν Πριήνῃ Βίας ἐγένετο ὁ Τευτάμεω, οὗ πλείων λόγος ἢ τῶν ἄλλων). Such a positive appreciation by the surly Ephesian philosopher is remarkable, especially if we recall his acrimonious comments on many other celebrated personalities of archaic Greece, like Homer, Hesiod, Pythagoras and Xenophanes. From Herakleitos' fragment it does not become clear who those "others" are, over whom Bias is promoted. It does not seem likely that Herakleitos meant specifically the Seven Sages at such an early age: although tales about individual sages, who are later included in the circle of the Seven, were in circulation already from that time, it is not certain that the tradition had yet connected them together into a circle, a distinct group of seven sages, as we see it later in Plato and other sources from the 4th c. onwards⁴¹. Herakleitos presumably has in mind generally men like Bias, acknowledged 'intellectual figures' of the time, with some reputation for good sense and wisdom⁴². Herakleitos' passage suggests, therefore, that from a very early time, at the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 5th c., just a few decades after his death, Bias was considered as the wisest man of his age, at least in some circles of Ionia. Bias' prominent place among the Seven Sages must have arisen from that early reputation: in time, as the group of the Seven Sages was formed in popular imagination and legends about it started developing, Bias' fame as the wisest man of his age was transferred and focused specifically within the circle of the Seven Sages, and so it gave birth to the tradition that Bias was the greatest of them.

To the tradition about Bias' primacy belong also certain versions of one of the most famous legends about the Seven Sages, the story of the tripod or cup which had to be offered as a prize to the wisest of them. In the commonest versions of this legend the sage initially chosen as the wisest and awarded the prize is Thales. Of course, Thales believes that he is not worth that prize and sends it to another sage, the latter to a third

⁴¹ On the gradual formation of the circle of the Seven Sages during the 5th and early 4th c., between Herodotus and Plato, see now the discussion of Busine 2002, 15–34. 37–46, with more bibliography. However, several scholars believe that the circle must have been formed already from the late 6th or the 5th c.: see Wilamowitz, *Zu Plutarchs Gastmahl der sieben Weisen*, in: *Kleine Schriften*, vol. III, Berlin 1969, 118 f.; Hirzel 1895, II 133–135; Barkowski 1923, 2248; E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, vol. III, Stuttgart 1937, 168. 661–663; Snell 1952, 15. 60 f.; B. Snell, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Göttingen 1966, 118; Wehrli 1973, 196; Kindstrand 1981, 33. 37–39. 75. 77; Santoni 1983, 94–97; Martin 1993, 112 f. 120f. 125; A. Kerkhecker, *Callimachus' Book of Iambi*, Oxford 1999, 30. 35.

⁴² Cf. Von der Mühl 1965, 178; Pörtulas 1993, 152 f.; Lo Cascio 1997, 45.

one and so on, until the tripod or cup has passed from the hands of all seven sages and is in the end dedicated to Apollo⁴³. However, there were also other versions, in which the tripod was offered first to Bias, because he was regarded as the wisest of the Seven. Like the Thales-versions, the Bias-versions too had been formed at least from the early Hellenistic period⁴⁴. Theophrastos, at the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 3rd c., narrated that the tripod was first sent to Bias in Priene; but Bias sent it to Thales in Miletos, and so on, until the tripod made the round of the Seven Sages and returned to Bias, who sent it then to Delphi as a gift for Apollo (T 583 Fortenbaugh = Plut. Sol. 4,7 f.). Theophrastos perhaps told this story in his work *Περὶ τῶν σοφῶν* (T 727,12 Fortenbaugh = D.L. 5,48), which may have dealt with the Seven Sages⁴⁵.

Another variant is found in two Hellenistic authors, the aforementioned Satyros (fr. 9 Müller) and Phanodikos (FGrHist 397 F 4 (a)–(b) = D.L. 1,31. 82 f.). About the latter we know little; he is probably to be identified with the Phanodikos who composed a history of Delos (*Δηλιακά*, FGrHist 397 F 1–3). In any case, he seems to have been familiar with Satyros' work and must be dated after Satyros, perhaps in the 2nd c.⁴⁶ According to Satyros and Phanodikos, Bias had ransomed some Messenian girls, who had been captured at war, he had given them dowries and sent them back to their parents. In the course of time, some fishermen pulled up off the coast of Attica a tripod bearing an inscription "for him that is wise" (τῷ σοφῷ) and brought it to Athens. Then the Messenian girls (according to Satyros) or their father (according to Phanodikos) appeared before the Athenian assembly and claimed that Bias was the wise man required,

⁴³ See Callim. Iamb. I fr. 191,52–77 Pf. and Dieg. VI 6–19 (p. 163 Pf.); Eudoxos fr. 371 Lasserre = FGrHist 1006 F 1; Phoinix of Kolophon fr. 4 Powell; D.L. 1,28 f. 32 f.; Plut. Sol. 4,2–6; Diod. 9,3; Porphy. fr. 203–203 a Smith; Val. Max. 4,1 ext. 7.

⁴⁴ On these variants of the legend see Wulf 1897, 175–178. 206–208; K. Kuiper, *Le récit de la coupe de Bathyclès dans les lambes de Callimaque*, in: REG 29, 1916, 417; Wiersma 1934, 152–154; Wilamowitz 1937, 135; F. Jacoby in: FGrHist III b (Text) 209 f. and III b (Noten) 136; Paladini 1956, 380 f.; A. Yoshida, *Sur quelques coupes de la fable grecque*, in: REA 67, 1965, 32; Santoni 1983, 145–147; Pórtulas 1993, 145; Lo Cascio 1997, 45; Busine 2002, 57. 59.

⁴⁵ See F. Montanari in: *Corpus dei papiri filosofici Greci e Latini*, vol. I.1**, Firenze 1992, 260 f.; Bollansée 1998, 115; Matelli 2000, 441 f.; Busine 2002, 79. For the extreme position of D. Fehling, who claimed that the story was invented later by Plutarch and that Plutarch falsely attributed it to Theophrastos, see the criticism of J. Bollansée, *Fact and Fiction, Falsehood and Truth*. D. Fehling and Ancient Legendry about the Seven Sages, in: MH 56, 1999, 65–75, and Bollansée 1998, 112–119.

⁴⁶ Wilamowitz 1937, 135 asserted that Phanodikos wrote earlier than Theophrastos, but there is no evidence for this. On the contrary, F 4 (b) (from D.L. 1,82) suggests that Phanodikos has drawn the story from Satyros: in Phanodikos' narrative, as reported by Diogenes Laertios, a reference to Satyros is suddenly inserted, and Diogenes implies that Phanodikos criticized or corrected a detail of Satyros' version; see F. Jacoby in: FGrHist III b (Text) 208–210 and III b (Noten) 135. For Fehling's extreme view that Phanodikos is an invention of Diogenes Laertios see the criticism of Bollansée 1998, 128–131 and the references in the previous note.

narrating how he had saved them. So the tripod was offered to Bias; but he dedicated it to Apollo, saying that only Apollo is wise, or to the temple of Heracles in Thebes. The same story is told by Diodoros (9,13,1 f.), but in his version the tripod is pulled up by Messenian fishermen, presumably off the coast of Messenia, and they give it to Bias. This version tallies better with Bias' kindness to the Messenian maidens (which Diodoros narrates immediately before the tale of the tripod, 9,13,1): the tripod is found in Messenia, where the ransomed girls themselves live; in this setting it appears more natural that the girls learn about the tripod and intervene to persuade their fellow-citizens to award it to Bias. On the contrary, in Satyros' and Phanodikos' version the tripod is found off the coast of Attica, and we have to assume that the news are spread as far as Messenia and the girls or their parents travel to Athens on purpose, in order to support Bias. Thus, Diodoros seems to have preserved the older, original version of the story, while Satyros and Phanodikos narrate a later Athenian version of it, which transferred the centre of action to Athens (but without avoiding the resulting topographical inconsistencies)⁴⁷. If so, the story must have been in circulation already for some time before Satyros, who presumably drew it from an earlier source or tradition. We do not know the exact sources, from which Diodoros has drawn the original version of the story. Diodoros introduces his narrative about the Messenian maidens with the words *φασὶν οἱ Πριηνεῖς* (9,13,1): this probably means that his sources presented this narrative, and doubtless also the tale about the tripod which follows immediately, as coming from the local tradition of Priene.

Indeed, it seems likely that the Bias-versions of the tripod story, as well as the entire tradition about Bias as the greatest of the Seven Sages, stem ultimately from local popular lore of Priene. The entire cycle of legends about the Seven Sages may have originated in such local traditions of various Greek cities or regions, with each region promoting its own local wise man. Naturally, the local tales of Priene would extol Bias, the celebrated native figure, placing him at the head of the Seven Sages⁴⁸. It must be noted, however, that the tradition about Bias' primacy, even if it originated in local Prienean lore, spread quickly beyond the confines of Priene and was disseminated very widely, so as to acquire a pan-Hellenic character. Already Herakleitos' aforementioned statement suggests that not long after Bias' death his fame as the greatest of Greek wise men had reached Ephesos; it will probably have spread also to other parts of Ionia. In a similar way, the story about Bias as the first recipient of the tripod may have started from local legends of Priene; but in Satyros and Phanodikos we find a version which is set in Athens and thus seems to be of Athenian fabrication. By the early Hellenistic period the stories about Bias' primacy were clearly widespread in the Greek world and occurred in works which had nothing to do with the local history or traditions of Priene

⁴⁷ Cf. Wulf 1897, 207; Wiersma 1934, 153 f.; F. Jacoby in: *FGrHist* III b (Text) 209 and III b (Noten) 136; Santoni 1983, 145 f.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hirzel 1895, II 133 f.; Barkowski 1923, 2262. 2264; Wiersma 1934, 153 f.; Kindstrand 1981, 39; Pórtulas 1993, 145; Busine 2002, 27. 34–39. 59 f.

but were written by authors of pan-Hellenic reputation and readership, like Theophrastos and Satyros. The tradition must have become the property of storytellers everywhere in the Greek world.

How strong and widespread was the tradition about Bias' preeminence transpires also from another significant phenomenon. In the commonest version of the tripod legend Thales, who receives the prize first, cedes it out of modesty to another sage, the latter in his turn to a third etc. In some cases the other sages, who receive the prize after Thales, are not named, or we hear only the name of the last in the series, who finally dedicates the tripod to the god⁴⁹. But certain narratives name also the sage coming second in the series, to whom Thales sends the tripod regarding him as his superior in wisdom; and it is significant that this second sage is always Bias. Sometimes Thales and Bias are the only sages mentioned by name (Plut. Sol. 4,5 f.; Porphyry. Φιλόσοφος ἱστορία fr. 203–203 a Smith = FGGrHist 260 F 5)⁵⁰; in one case the third sage is also named (Pittakos, Val. Max. 4,1 ext. 7); and Kallimachos stated the names of all seven sages, in the order that they received the prize (Thales, Bias, Periandros, Solon, Chilon, Pittakos, Kleoboulos: Iamb. I, Dieg. VI 10–18 and fr. 191,73–75 Pf.). Thus, even that branch of the tradition which awarded the first place to Thales assigned standardly the second place to Bias, putting him immediately next to Thales in order of importance. We may detect here an influence from the parallel tradition about Bias' primacy: that tradition was so famous and powerful, that it managed to infiltrate and infect even the rival Thales-tradition and promote its own hero, Bias, to the second place.

Within the overall legend of the Seven Sages, therefore, there was a strong tradition upholding Bias as the greatest of all. It was fully-fledged by the late 4th c. or the early Hellenistic period, but it presumably goes back to a considerably earlier age; its origins can be traced already in the 6th or early 5th c., shortly after Bias' death. The Greek storytellers who reworked and hellenized the Egyptian tale about Amasis no doubt knew and followed that tradition about Bias' primacy: Bias was chosen for the role of Amasis' consultant because he was considered as the wisest of the Seven.

In Plutarch's narrative of Amasis' riddle-contest we may detect an endeavour to reconcile the tradition promoting Bias with that awarding the first place to Thales and to combine them together in one whole. Plutarch was of course familiar with both traditions and cites them both when he narrates the tripod legend in Sol. 4,2–8; thus, he could well perceive the rivalry between them. This was probably the reason why he has added himself a second part to the riddle-contest of Amasis, in which Thales undertakes the role of the Pharaoh's helper and proves that the Ethiopian king's answers to Ama-

⁴⁹ See Diod. 9,3; D.L. 1,28–30. 32 f.; Phoinix of Kolophon fr. 4 Powell; Eudoxos fr. 371 Lasserre.

⁵⁰ On Porphyry's passage in particular, which can be reconstructed from Cyril, Contr. Iul. 1,28 a–c (Migne, PG 76 p. 544 D–545 A) and a medieval Arabic text see the appendix of A.-P. Segonds, in: É. des Places, Porphyre. Vie de Pythagore. Lettre à Marcella, Paris 1982, 170 f. 180 f.

sis' superlative riddles are all mistaken (152 E–153 D; for this part as an addition of Plutarch see section 4 below). In this way Plutarch attempted to reconcile the two antagonistic traditions about Thales and Bias, by presenting both sages in turn in the role of the Pharaoh's consultant. For the same reason in the beginning of the work (147 A–B) Neiloxenos asserts that the Pharaoh admires greatly Thales too for his wisdom and has preferred to resort to Bias only because the latter does not shun the friendship of kings, while Thales is notorious for his antimonarchic convictions. In this way, Bias is presented as Amasis' favourite, but at the same time it is clearly suggested that Thales has an equal claim on the title of the wisest man. Here too we perceive Plutarch's conscious effort to collect and combine within his work all the variant traditions he knew about the Seven Sages, like a good antiquary and encyclopedist⁵¹. The pre-Plutarchean form of the story must have been plainer and unequivocal: it would belong to the tradition extolling Bias, and Bias would appear as the sole protagonist on the Greek side.

Bias' legendary figure also had a series of other qualities, which made him especially apt for the role of the Pharaoh's helper in a riddle-contest: various tales show Bias in similar roles and present striking similarities with the story about Amasis' riddle-contest. Like all the other sages, Bias was shown solving or propounding riddles in many stories (see above). But one of those stories was more closely similar to the tale about Amasis, because it too combined the riddle-element and the dealings of Bias with an Oriental monarch: in D.L. 1,83 the Lydian king Alyattes invites Bias to his court, but Bias proudly tells him to “eat onions” (κρόμμυα ἐσθίειν), a riddle-like circumlocution for κλαίειν, “go to hell”. Here Bias propounds a kind of riddle to an Oriental king – exactly the reverse from what he does in the tale of Amasis, in which he must solve the riddle propounded by a foreign monarch. Perhaps in the original, pre-Plutarchean form of the tale of Amasis the parallel with D.L. 1,83 was even closer. The original Greek tale may have included a second part, in which Bias helped Amasis invent and propound in his turn a riddle to the Ethiopian king, according to the model of several Greek and Oriental stories of this sort (see below, section 4); if so, Bias was also shown inventing and proposing riddles to the rival foreign monarch, just as he does in the story with Alyattes. Stories about Bias' relations with Lydian monarchs circulated from early on (see below Hdt. 1,27 about Bias and Kroisos); and the tale about κρόμμυα ἐσθίειν must have been fairly well-known, because it circulated in more than one version (in Plut. Conv. 153 E the phrase takes the form κρόμμυα καὶ θερμὸν ἄρτον ἐσθίειν and is attributed to Pittakos), which suggests some diffusion. This story or similar ones may have contributed to the selection of Bias for the helper's role in Amasis' riddle-contest.

From early on various tales presented Bias advising a foreign king, like the story in Hdt. 1,27 (cf. Diod. 9,25). Kroisos, having subjugated the Greek cities of the Asian

⁵¹ On Plutarch's endeavour to collect and incorporate in Conv. as much lore as possible on the Seven Sages (tales, maxims etc.) see Hirzel 1895, II 133; Ziegler 1951, 883; Defradas 1954, 12. 29; Aune 1978, 54. 60.

coast, plans to build a navy and attack the Greek islands. But Bias arrives at Sardis and dissuades him with a clever piece of advice: he pretends that the Greek islanders are preparing a cavalry force in order to attack Lydia, and when Kroisos is delighted by this prospect (the superiority of Lydian cavalry being incontestable), Bias warns him that the islanders would be equally happy to see Kroisos attack them with a navy, since they can easily prevail in the sea. Kroisos takes Bias' advice, gives up his naval plans and makes peace with the islands. In this story Bias acts of course in the interests of the Greek islanders (for whom a war with the Lydian empire would not actually be so welcome a prospect); but he also plays the role of the wise consultant, who gives prudent advice to the Lydian monarch and warns him against a hazardous undertaking with unforeseeable consequences. In another story in Diod. 9,27,3 Bias counsels Kroisos on matters of philosophy of life, the nature of human happiness and its true conditions, and the false character of many so-called 'friendships'; here Bias plays a role similar to that of Solon in the famous tale of his encounter with Kroisos. Like Diodoros' entire narrative about the Seven Sages in Kroisos' court, the encounter of Bias and Kroisos must be drawn from Ephoros (see above, section 2 and n. 28).

Already from the 5th and 4th c., therefore, a tradition had been formed, which presented Bias as counsellor of an Oriental king – the very role that the sage has to play in the story of Amasis' riddle-contest. This tradition must have been another important factor in the selection of Bias for this role. Of course, other sages too were shown as advisors of Oriental kings, especially of Kroisos: the pattern of 'Greek sage counselling an Oriental monarch' is a recurrent narrative motif in the overall cycle of the Seven Sages⁵². However, unlike the other stories of this sort, the tale about Bias and Kroisos in Hdt. 1,27 presents more specific similarities to the story about Amasis' riddle-contest. In Hdt. 1,27 Bias advises Kroisos on an issue of foreign policy and the relations of the king with other states. Bias helps the Lydian king settle his relations with a rival power (the Greek islanders), which are tense and threaten to result in a military clash; thanks to Bias' advice, the king avoids the war and its risks. Something similar happens in the tale about Amasis: the wise counsellor helps the Pharaoh in a matter of foreign affairs, in his relations with a rival power (Ethiopia), which are again characterized by tension and hostility (the Ethiopian king threatens to wrest away from Egypt the area of Elephantine). But thanks to his counsellor's help, by means of which he wins in the riddle-contest, Amasis avoids the danger to his dominion posed by the enemy power and settles the affair to the benefit of his own country. There is an obvious analogy between these two stories as to the function of the king's consultant. On the con-

⁵² See e.g. the story about Solon advising Kroisos (its many occurrences collected in A. Martina, *Solone. Testimonianze sulla vita e l'opera*, Roma 1968, 32–50), the story about Thales assisting him with his technical expertise (Hdt. 1,75,3–5), and the aforementioned narrative of Ephoros about the Seven Sages giving philosophical advice to Kroisos (Diod. 9,26–28); cf. Snell 1952, 42–59; Kindstrand 1981, 42; Asheri 1988, lli–liiii. 279 f.; P. Oliva, *Solon – Legende und Wirklichkeit*, Konstanz 1988, 11–16; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 19; Bollansée 1998, 173.

trary, in the tales featuring other sages in the counsellor's role, their advice to the king concerns entirely different matters: e.g. Solon and Anacharsis counsel Kroisos on issues of practical philosophy, on human existence, the essence of happiness or concepts like bravery, justice and wisdom; while Pittakos talks to him about the power of the law (Hdt. 1,30–33; Diod. 9,26 f.). None of these tales has to do with the king's foreign policy or his relations with a foreign state. It is this latter theme that connects in particular the story of Bias and Kroisos with the riddle-contest of Amasis.

Tradition presented Bias also as resourceful and inventive, characterized by that cunning intelligence which the Greeks called *μητις*, skilful in devising artifices in order to trick his opponents and achieve his goal; Bias was a trickster. This is clearly shown in a tale in D.L. 1,83. The Lydian king Alyattes was besieging Priene. To beguile him, Bias fattened two mules and let them wander into the Lydian camp. Seeing how well-fed they were, Alyattes was taken in and formed the impression that Priene was well supplied with provisions to withstand his siege; so he decided to make a treaty and sent a messenger to Priene. Bias heaped up piles of sand in the city, strewing only a thin layer of corn on the top of each one of them, so that the messenger was fooled into taking them for piles of corn. Hearing about those piles Alyattes was definitively convinced that Priene was prospering, and so he stopped the siege and made peace. The core of this tale goes back to Hdt. 1,21, where a similar stratagem is attributed to Thrasyboulos the tyrant of Miletos: Thrasyboulos gathered in the marketplace all the corn that could be found in the city, from the houses of all the citizens, and ordered the people to drink and make merry; in this way he deceived Alyattes, who had expected that the Milesians would be suffering from severe hardship and shortage of food due to his war against them. Since the core of the story goes as far back as Herodotus, it is possible that the version about Bias is equally old⁵³.

In this tale Bias invents cunning tricks to trap Alyattes. The same kind of ability is required from the Pharaoh's helper in the tale about Amasis' riddle-contest. In order to solve the Ethiopian's riddle, the impossible demand to drink up the sea, Bias must find an equally impossible counter-demand of the same sort, which the opponent will be obliged to perform first. In essence, Bias has to reverse the opponent's contrivance and turn it back against the opponent himself; he must entrap the opponent in his own sophism. In the tale of Amasis too, therefore, the solution of the riddle demands the quality of *μητις*, a capacity to contrive a trap for the opponent, just as in the tale of Bias and Alyattes. Moreover, once again both tales concern tense relations between opposed

⁵³ On this story see Crusius 1899, 386 f.; Wilamowitz 1937, 135; Asheri 1988, 276; Pórtulas 1993, 155. The story about Bias is a developed and expanded version of the Herodotean tale about Thrasyboulos. In the Bias-version the central stratagem (the corn gathered at the marketplace and displayed to the messenger) has become more wily and adventurous or 'romance-like': the real heap of corn has been replaced by fake piles of sand. Moreover, the trick with the mules has been added as an introduction, doubling the fraud against Alyattes. The same combination of these two stratagems is found in a tale in Polyainos, *Strat.* 7,36, with an otherwise unknown Mygdonios as the wily protagonist.

states. In the tale in D.L. 1,83 Bias invents the trick in order to thwart a foreign, enemy king, who is coming to conquer Priene. More or less the same happens in the tale about Amasis' riddle-contest, only this time Bias is not striving for his own country but for the kingdom of the Pharaoh who has asked his help: Bias invents a tricky reply in order to cope with the enemy king of Ethiopia and thwart his expansionist designs against Egypt. Of course, the tradition presented also other sages contriving wily tricks for various purposes⁵⁴. But in the story of Bias and Alyattes, just as in Amasis' riddle-contest, the cunning contrivance is characteristically interwoven with the motif of fending off a foreign enemy king; it is this common pattern that brings the two stories particularly close to one another.

The characteristics of Bias enumerated up to now are common also to other members of the Seven Sages, although in every case there are special similarities between the tales about Bias and the story of the Pharaoh's riddle-contest. But there is also another feature which seems to have been peculiar to Bias; it is based on a historically attested achievement of his, which became very famous and was commemorated and nourishing tales about Bias for centuries. That accomplishment was Bias' mediation between the Prieneans and the Samians about the possession of a region called Βα-τινῆτις χώρα. This was a region in Asia Minor to which both Priene and Samos laid claim, probably situated at the border between the territory of Priene and the dominions of Samos on the opposite Asian coast. Information about the case is offered by two Hellenistic inscriptions, which concern subsequent arbitrations for the settlement of the dispute between the two cities: a letter of king Lysimachos to the Samians (283/2), in which the king states that he has listened to both sides and awards the contested territory to Samos (I. Prien. 500 = Welles 1934, nr. 7); and a decision of Rhodian arbitrators, from the beginning of the 2nd c., about the area of Dryoussa and the fortress Karion, which may have formed part of the Batinetis or in any case lay very close to it (I. Prien. 37)⁵⁵. To these we may add a passage from Plutarch (Qu. gr. 295 F–296 B),

⁵⁴ On the Seven Sages as tricksters see Detienne/Vernant 1978, 36. 50; Martin 1993, 108. 116 f. 124; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 76 f. Various stories present the sages so: e.g. Arist. Pol. 1259 a 6–19; D.L. 1,26; Plut. Sol. 6 (Thales); D.L. 1,71 (Chilon); Plut. Sol. 14,2 (Solon). Some stories of this sort resemble the tale of D.L. 1,83, because the sage's trick ensues again from a conflict with an enemy power and aims at obtaining contested territory for the sage's own country: e.g. Pittakos uses a cunning trick to beat the chief of the Athenian army in a duel, during the war between Athens and Mytilene for a contested area in the Troad (D.L. 1,74; Strab. 13,1,38; Plut. De Herod. malign. 858 A; Suda π 1659); Solon devises various tricks in order to get back Salamis from the Megarians (e.g. he dresses up young Athenian soldiers as women, in order to deceive the enemy, and he inserts spurious lines into the 'Iliad' in order to forge Homeric support for the Athenian claims: Plut. Sol. 8; 10,2; D.L. 1,46. 48; Strab. 9,1,10; Ael. VH 7,19; Polyain. Strat. 1,20; Sch. Hom. Il. 2,558). But in these cases the enemy power is another Greek city, not a foreign monarch.

⁵⁵ On these inscriptions and generally on the dispute between Samos and Priene see Crusius 1899, 386; Welles 1934, 46–51; Wilamowitz 1937, 129–135; Von der Mühl 1965, 179; Piccirilli 1973, 16–21; Pórtulas 1993, 145–151; A. Magonetto, Gli arbitrati interstatali Greci,

who draws information from Aristotle's Σαμίων πολιτεία (fr. 576 Rose; cf. Zenob. 2,108 Bühler, who expressly draws from the same source)⁵⁶.

As it seems, there was an old conflict between Samos and Priene about the Batinetis region, which at some point led to a war between the two cities. Initially the Prieneans won an important battle, killing a thousand Samians (Plut. Qu. gr. 296 A); this obliged Samos to stop fighting and there probably followed a truce, which lasted for six years (Welles 1934, nr. 7,13 τῶν ἐξετῶν σ[πον]δῶ[ν]). But on the seventh year the Samians stroke back, assisted by the Milesians; they seized the Batinetis (Welles 1934, nr. 7,20 f. ὕστερον δ[ε] ὑποστρέψαντας μετὰ β[ι]ίας Σαμίους παρελῆσθαι τὴν χώραν) and utterly vanquished the Prieneans near a place called Drys. In that battle many distinguished men of Priene were killed; the memory of the disaster was preserved in popular imagination in the form of a proverb, τὸ παρὰ Δρυῖν (or παρὰ Δρυῖ) σκότος (Plut. Qu. gr. 295 F–296 B; Zenob. 2,108). This time it was the Prieneans' turn to ask for a truce: they sent Bias as ambassador to Samos, to settle the dispute and reconcile the two cities (Welles 1934, nr. 7,21–23 ἀπ[ο]σταλῆναι οὖν παρὰ τῶν] Πριηνέων Βίαντα περὶ διαλύσεων τοῖς Σα[μ]ίοις αὐτοκράτορα). Bias seems to have made excellent negotiations and was widely acclaimed for his success in the mediator's role (Plut. Qu. gr. 296 A ὅτε καὶ Βίας ὁ σοφὸς εἰς Σάμον ἐκ Πριήνης πρεσβεύσας εὐδοκίμησε, a statement most probably coming from Aristotle, like the entire passage)⁵⁷. In this way, Bias acquired fame as a capable mediator and negotiator in a case of contested territory. The sources do not make clear exactly what results Bias managed to achieve and how he reconciled in practice the two sides. According to the Prieneans' report to Lysimachos (Welles 1934, nr. 7,23 f.), Bias achieved an agreement between the two cities, and the Samian inhabitants withdrew from the Batinetis, which thus came under the rule of Priene ([τοῦτο]ν δὲ διαλύσαι τε τὰς πόλεις καὶ τοὺς οἰκ[ο]ύντας ἀ[πο]χωρῆσαι τῆς Βα[τι]νιήτιδος χώρας)⁵⁸: so Bias managed to secure the contested area for his own city, despite the Samians' victory in the war. But the version given by the Samians, as we read it on the inscription about the Rhodians' arbitration (I. Prien. 37,105–107), claims exactly the opposite, viz. that after the Samian vic-

vol. II: Dal 337 al 196 a.C., Pisa 1997, 124–141; Bühler 1982–99, V 612 f. For the Rhodians' decision I follow the edition of F. Hiller von Gaertringen, *Inscriptionen von Priene*, Berlin 1906, nr. 37 (henceforward I. Prien.); for Lysimachos' letter (I. Prien. 500) I cite from the more recent edition of Welles 1934, 46 f. nr. 7.

⁵⁶ On the dependence of those passages on Aristotle see Bühler 1982–99, V 612 f.

⁵⁷ V. Rose, *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta*, Leipzig 1886, 356 (on fr. 576) and Bühler 1982–99, V 612 aptly point out the similarity of this phrase with the formulation in Arist. fr. 573 (= Sch. Ar. Av. 471 b, again from Σαμίων πολιτεία): Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῇ Σαμίων πολιτεία εἰπὼντα φησὶν αὐτὸν (sc. Αἴσωπον) μῦθον ηὐδοκίμηκεναι.

⁵⁸ Those who withdraw are clearly the Samian inhabitants of the region. The context leaves no doubt about this, since immediately afterwards we hear that the region was occupied by Priene for a long time (Welles 1934, nr. 7,24–27 πρότερον μὲν οὖν ἔφασαν τὰ πράγματα αὐτοῖς] μένειν ἐν τούτοις καὶ μέχρι τοῦ ἐσχάτου χρό[νου] κρατεῖν τῆς χώρας).

tory near Drys the treaty concluded awarded the contested region to Samos (μετὰ δὲ τὰν παράταξιν τὰν γενομένην αὐτοῖς ποτὶ Πριανεῖς ἐπὶ Δρυὶ καὶ νίκας κρίσιν ἔχειν, [καὶ] ταύταν τὰν χώραν ἐν ταῖς συνθήκαις αὐτῶν γενέσθαι ὀρίζεσθαι γὰρ ποτ' αὐτούς ὡς ὕδατων ῥοαί). It is not difficult to guess why these two reports contradict each other. They are obviously opposed versions, given respectively by the two enemy sides centuries after the events concerned had taken place, at a time when both sides are submitting their case again to the judgement of arbitrators: naturally, each side would present the events in such a manner as to suit its own interests and forward its own claims on the contested territory. Of course, the existence of contradictory reports prevents us from ascertaining what really happened. Many scholars believe that Bias could not possibly have won the Batinetis for Priene after the overwhelming victory of the Samians, and consequently the region must have been surrendered to Samos⁵⁹. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that Bias accomplished a real diplomatic triumph and secured the area for Priene, presumably making important concessions to the Samians in return⁶⁰. Aristotle's statement that Bias was acclaimed for his success (εὐδοκίμησε) in those negotiations suggests an impressive diplomatic feat.

In any case, whatever the actual result of the negotiations, Bias became famous for having settled a dispute about territory contested by opposed states. His fame remained alive for a very long time: three centuries later, in the beginning of the 3rd c., when the case is rekindled and the arbitration is entrusted to king Lysimachos, the opponents still remember and adduce Bias' negotiations; the authors of historical or antiquarian works, like Aristotle and Plutarch, also mention them. Bias' mediation probably became also the theme of popular tales or traditions: at least the Prieneans' defeat at Drys gave rise to a popular proverb (τὸ παρὰ Δρυῖν σκότος), and Aristotle mentions Bias' negotiations as part of his explanation of that proverb; since the defeat at Drys was the immediate cause of the negotiations, the two events could well have been bound together in popular memory and imagination. In this way a tradition was formed about Bias as an expert in issues of contested territory. So, it is very interesting that in the tale about Amasis' riddle-contest Bias has to deal with an issue of the same kind. There too the contest is waged for disputed areas, which are claimed by both the opposed powers, Egypt and Ethiopia: Amasis struggles to acquire cities and villages of Ethiopia, while the Ethiopian king covets the region of Elephantine – at the frontier between Egypt and Ethiopia, just as the Batinetis lay at the border between the mainland territories of Priene and Samos. In his role as consultant of Amasis, then, Bias is called to help in a case of contested frontier land: he must prevent the Ethiopian king from taking Elephantine for himself and secure for Amasis the Ethiopian areas which the Pharaoh is claiming, just as he had allegedly won for his own city the contested Batinetis region. Thus, the story about the Batinetis must have played an important role in the associa-

⁵⁹ See Wilamowitz 1937, 132. 134 f.; Piccirilli 1973, 19; Pórtulas 1993, 147 f.

⁶⁰ Cf. Welles 1934, 49.

tion of Bias with the tale of Amasis' riddle-contest. Indeed, Bias' reputation as an expert in issues of contested territory was a characteristic peculiar to him, which distinguished him from the other sages; as such it may have been the decisive factor in the selection of Bias for the role of Amasis' consultant⁶¹.

-4. The second part of Amasis' riddle-contest (Conv. 152 E–153 D)

In Plutarch's narrative the riddle-contest between Amasis and the Ethiopian king has also a second part. After Bias has solved the riddle about drinking up the sea (151 B–D), there is an intervening discussion on political matters (151 E–152 E), and then Neilo Xenos resumes the story about Amasis and the Ethiopian king (152 E–153 A): as part of their ongoing riddle-contest, Amasis in his turn has propounded to his opponent a series of riddles of the superlative, asking him what is the oldest thing, the most beautiful, the greatest, the wisest, the most common, the most beneficial, the most harmful, the strongest and the easiest. The Ethiopian king has attempted to solve all those riddles, and Neilo Xenos reads to the sages the answers he has given (153 A). At this point Thales intervenes and criticizes the Ethiopian's answers as mistaken and ignorant; he easily refutes many of them (153 A–C) and goes on to give what he himself considers as the correct answers⁶². There are strong indications that this second round did not

⁶¹ Periandros had acquired a similar reputation for his arbitration in the dispute between Athens and Mytilene about the territory of Sigeion: after a long war, the two opposed sides appealed to Periandros, who heard their claims and awarded the contested territory to the Athenians (Hdt. 5.95; Arist. Rhet. 1375 b 30 f.; Apollodoros FGrHist 244 F 27 a = D.L. 1.74; see Piccirilli 1973, 28–35 with much bibliography). But Periandros did not occupy a secure place among the Seven Sages in the tradition. Many authors refused to count him as one of the sages because he was a cruel tyrant: already Plato omitted him from the list of the sages in Prot. 343 a (cf. Resp. 335 e–336 a); so also many later sources (see Ephoros FGrHist 70 F 182 = D.L. 1.41; Diod. 9.7; Paus. 10.24.1; Nikolaos of Damaskos FGrHist 90 F 58.4; Plut. De E Delph. 385 D–F; in Conv. too Plutarch does not count Periandros as one of the sages; Dikaiarchos fr. 38 Mirhady does not include Periandros in the standard core of the Seven Sages); cf. Barkowski 1923, 2243; F. Schachermeyr, Periandros (1), RE XIX 1, 1937, 709; Snell 1952, 31. 61. 67; Defradas 1954, 17 f.; Matelli 2000, 437 f.; Bollansée 1999, 177; Busine 2002, 21 f. 35. 94 f. So Bias, as a fixed member of the sages' circle, was much more suitable for the consultant's role. His participation made the story conform to the well-known pattern of 'Oriental monarch counselled by a Greek sage' (see above n. 52) in a way that Periandros' controversial figure could not.

⁶² 153 C–D: "τί πρεσβύτατον;" "θεός" ἔφη Θαλῆς. "ἀγέννητον γάρ ἐστι." "τί μέγιστον;" "τόπος· τᾶλλα μὲν γὰρ ὁ κόσμος, τὸν δὲ κόσμον οὗτος περιέχει." "τί κάλλιστον;" "κόσμος· πᾶν γὰρ τὸ κατὰ τάξιν τούτου μέρος ἐστί." "τί σοφώτατον;" "χρόνος· τὰ μὲν γὰρ εὗρηκεν οὗτος ἦδη, τὰ δ' εὗρήσει." "τί κοινώτατον;" "ἐλπίς· καὶ γὰρ οἷς ἄλλο μηδὲν, αὕτη πάρεστι." "τί ὠφελιμώτατον;" "ἀρετή· καὶ γὰρ τᾶλλα τῷ χρησθαι καλῶς ὠφέλιμα ποιεῖ." "τί βλαβερώτατον;" "κακία· καὶ γὰρ τὰ χρηστά

form part of the original Greek tale about the riddle-contest of Amasis but has been added here by Plutarch himself. Plutarch has apparently fashioned this part from other material, which has also been drawn from the legendary cycle of the Seven Sages but which was originally independent from the tale about Amasis and unrelated to it. It is obvious that the two parts of the riddle-contest in Plutarch's narrative do not form an integral, organic whole: the form taken by the riddle-contest with the addition of the second part presents odd features, which are otherwise unparalleled in tales about riddle-contests of this sort and suggest that the two parts do not belong together.

Firstly, the Pharaoh's counsellor changes in the course of the contest. In the first part Bias solves for Amasis the Ethiopian's riddle, but in the second part Bias is no longer involved: the Pharaoh apparently makes up himself the riddles he propounds to the Ethiopian, and Thales becomes now Amasis' helper, proving the Ethiopian's solutions wrong. Such a change of counsellor is unusual: in other similar ancient tales about riddle-contests of kings, when a king is using a counsellor and the contest comprises two parts (with each one of the opponents propounding his riddles in turn), the counsellor remains throughout the same and assists his king in both parts of the contest, both in solving the opponent's riddles and in inventing riddles to propound in his turn. This happens e.g. in the fullest version of the legend about the riddle-contest between Solomon and Hiram of Tyre (Jos. AJ 8,148 f.; c. Ap. 1,114 f.): Hiram's counsellor, Abde-mon the Tyrian, helps Hiram both to solve the riddles propounded by Solomon and to propose in his turn other riddles, which Solomon fails to solve⁶³. The same pattern occurs in the 'Aesop Romance' (ch. 102: Aesop solves for king Lykourgos the riddles of rival kings and then invents riddles of his own to send to those kings) and in some stories in Ferdowsi's 'Shāhnāma'⁶⁴. According to this standard pattern, therefore, Bias should have appeared as the Pharaoh's counsellor in both parts of the riddle-contest. His replacement by another sage, Thales, in the second part is not in accordance with the comparative material from popular legends, as we find them in various traditions. But it tallies well with Plutarch's tendency to implicate more sages in the riddle-contest of the Pharaoh, so as to integrate it better in the context of the sages' banquet (cf. above, section 2), and also with Plutarch's attempt to reconcile the tradition about the primacy of Bias with the one awarding first place to Thales, of which we have found

βλάπτει παραγενομένη." "τί ἰσχυρότατον;" "ἀνάγκη· μόνον γὰρ ἀνίκητον." "τί ῥᾶστον;" "τὸ κατὰ φύσιν, ἐπεὶ πρὸς ἡδονάς γε πολλᾶκις ἀπαγορεύουσιν."

⁶³ For a discussion of this legend, which must be ultimately drawn from popular traditions of Phoenicia, see Konstantakos 2004b.

⁶⁴ See A.G. Warner/E. Warner, *The Shāhnāma of Firdausi*, vol. VII, London 1915, 101–105: the high priest of the Persian king Bahram Gur solves all the problems posed by the envoy of the Roman emperor, and then propounds himself a question, to which the envoy fails to reply correctly. Ibid. 384–394: Buzurjmihr, the sage vizier of Khosrau I, solves for his king the problem propounded by the king of India and then invents and sends to the Indian king another problem, which the Indian cannot solve.

another specimen in Conv. 147 A. This creates a strong suspicion that Thales' involvement in the riddle-contest is Plutarch's own contribution.

Secondly, the type of riddle used in the contest also changes in the second part. The Ethiopian king propounds to Amasis an *adynaton*, an impossible task; but the riddles which Amasis poses to his rival belong to a different kind, being superlative questions. This change too is unusual. The symmetry of the tale, as well as the fairness of the contest, would demand that both opponents propound and solve riddles of the same kind, so as to measure their intellectual abilities by tackling the same type of mental exercise. In other tales about similar bipartite riddle-contests both opponents propose to each other riddles of the same or of a similar sort. E.g. in the contest between the seers Mopsos and Kalchas, narrated in the Hesiodic 'Melampodia' and in several later sources, each one of the seers in turn sets to his opponent an arithmetical problem, which must be solved by divination: Kalchas shows to Mopsos a wild fig-tree and asks how many figs it is bearing, Mopsos shows to Kalchas a pregnant sow and asks him how many pigs she is carrying in her womb⁶⁵. In the riddle-contest which closes the singing match of Damoetas and Menalcas in Verg. Ecl. 3,104–107 each one of the opponents propounds to the other a 'riddle proper' (i.e. a classic enigma, in the narrow sense of the word). The same happens in many riddle-contests known from other traditions⁶⁶. So, the fact that in the second part of the Plutarchean contest the type of riddle changes is another indication that this latter part did not originally belong together with the first one. Besides, the Ethiopian's *adynaton*, an intellectual game demanding ready wit but trivial in content, gives way to the superlative riddles which, as expounded by Thales, acquire serious philosophical and cosmological substance; this gives to Plutarch the opportunity to remark that this latter kind of philosophical questions is the aptest for intellectual contests between kings, not idle games like that of 'drinking the sea' (153

⁶⁵ [Hes.] Melampodia fr. 278 M/W; Pherekydes FGrHist 3 F 142; Lykophron 426–430 with Sch. on 427 and 980 (pp. 157 f. and 308 Scheer); Apollod. Epit. 6,3 f.; Strab. 14,1,27; on the versions of this legend and the ancient sources transmitting it see Ohlert 1912, 27–29; Schultz 1914, 113 f.; J. Schwartz, Pseudo-Hesiodica. Recherches sur la composition, la diffusion et la disparition ancienne d'œuvres attribuées à Hésiode, Leiden 1960, 220–224. I. Löf-fler, Die Melampodie. Versuch einer Rekonstruktion des Inhalts, Meisenheim a.G. 1963, 48 f. argues (against Schwartz) that the bipartite structure of the contest was already present in the 'Melampodia'.

⁶⁶ E.g. in the stories from the 'Shāhnāma' mentioned above: the Roman envoy sets to Bahram Gur's high priest a series of questions about objects with certain qualities (what is the within, the without, the above, the beneath, the infinite, the vile); the priest in his turn propounds to the envoy superlative riddles (what is the most injurious thing and what the most useful; on the affinity between these two kinds of question see above, section 2). Similarly, the king of India sends to Khosrau the game of chess, asking him to figure out how it is played; in return, Buzurjmihr invents and sends to the Indian king the game of backgammon, posing to him an analogous problem. In a tale from central Celebes two rajahs set to each other hard or impossible tasks to perform (to straighten out an iron staff bent into a loop and a tube of sego bent into a loop while baked, to draw all the threads out of a piece of cotton and out of a piece of bark-cloth; J.G. Frazer, Folk-Lore in the Old Testament, vol. II, London 1919, 566 f.).

D–E), and thus to introduce once again the theme of political power and the good ruler, which has a prominent place in *Conv.*⁶⁷ This makes us again suspect that the second part has been fashioned by Plutarch, in order to connect the tale of the riddle-contest with important general themes of his work.

Apart from such internal indications, furnished by the structure of the narrative itself, there is also clear external evidence that the superlative riddles of the second part belonged to a different tradition, independent from the original tale about Amasis' riddle-contest. Most of Thales' responses to the superlative riddles in *Conv.* 153 C–D are also found in various other ancient sources, attributed again to Thales. They may retain the form of response to a superlative question or they may be transformed into maxims (*gnomai*), plain affirmative statements about a thing possessing a certain quality in the highest degree. In some sources many of them are combined together into a series, as in *Conv.*: so in D.L. 1,35, where six of Thales' responses are turned into *gnomai*⁶⁸; the same happens in *Gnomologium Vaticanum* 320, which cites the same six sayings and in almost the same words as D.L. but preserves the pattern of question and answer⁶⁹. But more often the maxims appear scattered and isolated, a single maxim being recorded each time under Thales' name: this happens in many sections in Stobaios (which have the form of question and answer) and in works by Plutarch and Pseudo-Galen (where we find the plain maxim form)⁷⁰. A few of those sayings were also ascribed to figures other than Thales (e.g. Simonides) or circulated anonymously as pieces of general wisdom⁷¹.

⁶⁷ See e.g. 147 A–D; 151 D–152 D; 154 C–F; on the political theme in *Conv.* see Aalders 1977, 31–39; A. Masaracchia, *Sul Plutarco politico*, in: *RCCM* 36, 1994, 32–34; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 18 f.; Busine 2002, 99.

⁶⁸ Φέρεται δὲ καὶ ἀποφθέγματα αὐτοῦ τάδε· πρεσβύτατον τῶν ὄντων θεός· ἀγέννητον γάρ· κάλλιστον κόσμος· ποίημα γὰρ θεοῦ· μέγιστον τόπος· ἅπαντα γὰρ χωρεῖ· τάχιστον νοῦς· διὰ παντός γὰρ τρέχει· ἰσχυρότατον ἀνάγκη· κρατεῖ γὰρ πάντων· σοφώτατον χρόνος· ἀνευρίσκει γὰρ πάντα.

⁶⁹ See Sternbach 1963, 124 nr. 320 (from cod. Vat. Gr. 743): Θαλῆς ἐρωτηθεὶς (a) τί πρεσβύτατον τῶν ὄντων εἶπε· “θεός· ἀγέννητος γάρ”· (b) κάλλιστον· “κόσμος· ποίημα <γὰρ> τοῦ θεοῦ”· (c) μέγιστον· “[ὁ] τόπος· ἅπαντα γὰρ χωρεῖ” etc. Obviously, the passage of D.L. and the lemma of the *Gnomologium* are connected to each other, most probably drawing from a common source; cf. Kindstrand 1986, 235 f.; O. Luschnat in: Sternbach 1963, vi. Sternbach reports that a similar series of maxims occurs in codd. Vat. Gr. 742 (f. 66^v) and Vat. Gr. 1144 (f. 228^v).

⁷⁰ Stob. Anth. 1,1,29^a (Θαλῆς ἐρωτηθεὶς, Τί πρεσβύτατον τῶν ὄντων; ἀπεκρίνατο· Θεός, ἀγέννητον γάρ); 1,4,7^a; 1,18,1^c; 1,8,40^a; 3,2,19; 4,46,24. In wording some of these maxims accord with D.L. 1,35 (1,4,7^a; 1,8,40^a), others with Plut. *Conv.* 153 C–D (1,18,1^c; cf. 3,2,19 and 4,46,24, which occur only in Plut., not in D.L.). The maxims in Plut. *Plac. philos.* 884 E (Θαλῆς· ἰσχυρότατον ἀνάγκη, κρατεῖ γὰρ τοῦ παντός) and [Gal.] *De hist. philos.* XIX p. 261 Kühn (τὴν ἀνάγκην Θαλῆς ἰσχυροτάτην εἶναι φησι. κρατεῖν γὰρ αὐτὴν τοῦ παντός) accord in wording with D.L.

⁷¹ The maxim about ἀνάγκη as the strongest thing is cited as an anonymous saying in *Lib. Decl.* 11,1; so is the one about time as the wisest thing in *Arist. Phys.* 222 b 16 f. and the

It is noteworthy that in many sources (D.L., several sections of Stob., Plut. Plac. philos., Pseudo-Galen) the wording of these maxims is different from that of Plut. Conv. 153 C–D. This shows that the other sources are not dependent on the passage of Conv.: rather, all the sources ascribing those maxims to Thales must ultimately be drawing from a common tradition. We may guess the form of that tradition by the fact that in all sources other than Conv. Thales' maxims are not integrated into a narrative context, a *Rahmenerzählung* like the tale about Amasis' riddle-contest, but simply cited, whether singly or in a series, without reference to the occasion in which they were pronounced. This suggests that originally these utterances were part of a collection of Thales' sayings – either a collection concerning Thales in particular or a general collection of *gnomai* of the Seven Sages, in which Thales' sayings were included. In that collection the utterances may have taken the form of responses to superlative questions or that of plain maxims; in any case, they will have been cited one after the other, without narrative context, like the *gnomai* in the surviving collections of sayings of the Seven Sages (on which see below). From that collection Plutarch must have taken the utterances of Thales; then he himself integrated them into his story about Amasis' riddle-contest, fashioning out of them the second round.

Collections of sayings of the Seven Sages were widely circulating in the ancient world at least from early Hellenistic times. The first known collection was compiled by Demetrios of Phaleron (late 4th or early 3rd c.) and appears to have been substantially preserved in Stobaios under the title Δημητρίου Φαληρέως τῶν ἐπτὰ σοφῶν ἀποθέγματα⁷². From the Hellenistic period onwards various collections must have been in circulation and achieved wide acclaim. Sometimes they were even inscribed on *stelai* and set up in public places; inscriptions with collected sayings of the Seven Sages, dating from the 4th and the 3rd c., have been found in various places, like Thera, Miletoupolis (near Kyzikos) in Asia Minor, and even as far as Ai-Khanoum in modern Afghanistan, at the remotest end of the Greek-speaking world⁷³. This testifies to the

tragic poet Agathon fr. 19. This latter maxim is attributed to Simonides (PMG 645 Page) by Themist. in Arist. Phys. p. 158,25–159,1 Schenkl and Simplic. in Arist. Phys. p. 754,5–17 Diels; Simonides may have used the maxim in a lyric poem (just as Agathon has cited it in a tragedy). Generally on the dissemination of those superlative maxims of Thales outside Plut. Conv. see Sternbach 1963, 124 f.; Snell 1952, 97. 104 f.; Defradas 1954, 102; Classen 1965, 936 f.; Aune 1978, 96 f.; Hershbell 1986, 183; Busine 2002, 96.

⁷² Stob. Anth. 3,1,172 (III pp. 111–125 Hense); see F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, vol. IV: Demetrios von Phaleron, Basel 1949, 27 (fr. 114), 69; W.W. Fortenbaugh/E. Schütrumpf (eds.), *Demetrius of Phalerum. Text, Translation and Discussion*, New Brunswick/London 2000, 154–165 (nr. 87); Martini, Demetrios (85), RE IV 2, 1901, 2835 f.; Kindstrand 1986, 236 f.; Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 2–5; Matelli 2000, 418. 437 f. 442; Busine 2002, 66 f. It has been suggested that such collections may have existed already before Demetrios, from an early age: see Hirzel 1895, I 145; Barkowski 1923, 2256; Wehrli 1973, 196–199. 201; Santoni 1983, 110; Kindstrand 1986, 230 f.

⁷³ IG XII 3,1020 (Thera); SIG³ 1268 (= E. Schwertheim, *Die Inschriften von Kyzikos und Umgebung*, vol. II, Bonn 1983, 3–5, nr. 2, Miletoupolis); L. Robert, *De Delphes à l'Oxus*.

wide dissemination and the great popularity of such collections. Stobaios has preserved also another collection of the Seven Sages' sayings, under the name of Sosiades (3,1,173); other collections are found in various manuscripts⁷⁴. In all those collections the sayings usually have the form of a commandment: they are general exhortations to act or not act in a certain way, formulated in the imperative or equivalent expressions (e.g. infinitive or δεῖ + infinitive), sometimes accompanied by an explanation of the commandment. Demetrios' collection also includes sporadically a few maxims expressing general truths⁷⁵.

But apart from maxims of this sort, there apparently existed also collections of another type of sayings attributed to the Seven Sages: viz. superlative statements, about a thing possessing a certain quality to the highest degree, which may be taken as answers to implied superlative riddles. Already Demetrios' collection includes a couple of sayings of this kind: the famous μέτρον ἄριστον (Kleoboulos, Stob. Anth. 3,1,172 α' 1, III p. 112,2 Hense) and ἥδιστον τὸ ἐπιθυμίας τυχεῖν (Thales, Anth. 3,1,172 δ' 10, III p. 119,3; cf. a statement in the comparative, δημοκρατία κρεῖττον τυραννίδος, Periandros, Anth. 3,1,172 η' 4, III p. 124,1 f.)⁷⁶. An indication that such superlative say-

Inscriptions grecques nouvelles de la Bactriane, in: CRAI 1968, 421–457 (Ai-Khanoum); see further A.N. Oikonomides, The Lost Delphic Inscription with the Commandments of the Seven and P. Univ. Athen. 2782, in: ZPE 37, 1980, 179–183; A.N. Oikonomides, Records of "The Commandments of the Seven Wise Men" in the 3rd c. B.C., in: CB 63, 1987, 67–76; V.-P. Yailenko, Les maximes delphiques d'Ai Khanoum et la formation de la doctrine du *dhamma* d'Asoka, in: DHA 16, 1990, 239–256. It seems that in the 4th c. there was also a *stèle* with inscribed sayings of the sages in the temple of Apollo in Delphi.

⁷⁴ On the collections of the Seven Sages' sayings see further H. Diels on SIG³ 1268 (vol. III, pp. 392–395); Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca* I 135–144; Barkowski 1923, 2255–2261; Snell 1952, 96–107. 177 f.; Santoni 1983, 92 f. 109; Kindstrand 1986, 230 f. 234–237; W. Bühler, Zur handschriftlichen Überlieferung der Sprüche der sieben Weisen, *Nachr. Akad. Göttingen, phil.-hist. Kl.* 1989.1, 3–36; F. Montanari, in: *Corpus dei papiri filosofici Greci e Latini*, vol. I.1**, Firenze 1992, 261–264; Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994; M. Huys, P. Oxy. 61.4099: A Combination of Mythographic Lists with Sentences of the Seven Wise Men, in: ZPE 113, 1996, 205–212; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 37–39; M. Tziatzi-Papagianni, Eine gekürzte Fassung der delphischen Sprüche der sieben Weisen, in: H 125, 1997, 309–329; R. Führer, Zur handschriftlichen Anordnung der inschriftlichen 7-Weisen-Sprüche, in: ZPE 118, 1997, 153–161; Busine 2002, 66–69.

⁷⁵ E.g. χαλεπὸν τὸ εὖ γνῶναι· ἀνιάρων ἀργία· βαρὺ ἀπαιδευσία· δεινὸν συνιδεῖν τὸ μέλλον, ἀσφαλὲς τὸ γενόμενον· πιστὸν γῆ, ἀπιστον θάλασσα· οἱ πλείστοι ἀνθρώποι κακοί· αἱ μὲν ἡδοναὶ θνηταί, αἱ δ' ἄρεται ἀθάνατοι etc. So also other manuscript collections: see Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 16. 55. 197–201. 215 f. 236–240. 251 f. 392 f. 417–419. 425–428.

⁷⁶ So also other manuscript collections: see Tziatzi-Papagianni 1994, 198 f. (ἥδιστον οὐ ἐπιθυμῆς τυχεῖν), 214 (χρόνος μέγιστον ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἁρμόσει, φρένας), 239 f. (δημοκρατία κρεῖττων τυραννίδος), 373 f. (ἀληθείας οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ἄμεινον), 394 (πᾶν μέτρον ἄριστον), 421 f. (κάλλιστος κόσμος ἡσυχία ἐν βίῳ).

ings were also gathered together into collections, like those of the ‘commandment’ type, is given by Plut. Conv. On three occasions in Plutarch’s narrative the Seven Sages utter a series of superlative maxims (each sage pronouncing a maxim in turn), which are in fact answers to superlative questions clearly implied by the context: in Conv. 152 A–B the sages pronounce on ‘how a ruler could acquire the best reputation’; in 154 D–F they state their opinions on ‘which is the best democracy (or the best state)’, and in 155 C–D on ‘which is the best household’. Thus, in each one of those sections we find an accumulation of seven superlative sayings. Similarly, in 147 B two responses of Thales to superlative questions are given in immediate succession⁷⁷. In all those passages Plutarch must be drawing from collections of superlative sayings attributed to the Seven Sages⁷⁸. Since there was a strong tradition which presented the sages answering superlative questions (see above, section 2), it would have been easy to gather a number of the sages’ answers into collections of superlative sayings; thus, collections of this sort must have also been well known in antiquity. Plutarch will have used at least one, if not more of them; in other sources too (e.g. D.L., Gnom. Vat., Stobaios) passages in which the sages answer superlative questions may also ultimately stem from such collections⁷⁹.

From such a collection of superlative sayings Plutarch must have drawn Thales’ responses in Conv. 153 C–D. Several scholars have detected in Thales’ responses the echo of philosophical ideas, especially Platonic ones⁸⁰. Perhaps Plutarch decided to include those utterances in his work because he was interested in their philosophical content and found them congenial to the overall strain of Platonizing thought which runs through Conv. We may imagine that, searching for a place to accommodate them in his literary banquet, he thought of using them as material to fabricate a second part for Amasis’ riddle-contest. So, he turned the superlative questions, which were stated or implied in the sayings, into superlative riddles propounded by Amasis to his Ethiopian opponent. He probably invented himself the Ethiopian’s wrong answers to those riddles and Thales’ refutation of them – exploiting again, as it seems, Platonic ideas⁸¹. And fi-

⁷⁷ ἐρωτηθεὶς ... τί παραδοξότατον εἴης ἑωρακώς, ἀποκρίναιο “τύραννον γέροντα”, καὶ πάλιν ... φαίης κάκιστον εἶναι τῶν μὲν ἀγρίων θηρίων τὸν τύραννον, τῶν δ’ ἡμέρων τὸν κόλακα.

⁷⁸ Cf. Snell 1952, 96 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 39. Among his other sources on the Seven Sages Plutarch definitely knew and used also collections of their sayings: see Hirzel 1895, II 140 f.; Defradas 1954, 11; Aune 1978, 54 f. 62–65; Hershbell 1986, 180 f.; Adrados 1996, 131. 138 f.; Lo Cascio 1997, 12. 38; Busine 2002, 96–98. 102.

⁷⁹ On the collections of sayings used by D.L. see Kindstrand 1986, 219 f. 226–238; R. Goulet, *Études sur les vies de philosophes dans l’antiquité tardive*, Paris 2001, 94 f.; Busine 2002, 54 f.

⁸⁰ See Defradas 1954, 102; Hershbell 1986, 182 f.; Jedrkiewicz 1997, 68 f.; Busine 2002, 96. 98 f. Classen 1965, 936 f. prefers to detect an influence from cosmological ideas of 5th-c. sophists.

⁸¹ Cf. Defradas 1954, 101 f.; Hershbell 1986, 182 f.

nally he appended Thales' utterances as the correct answers to the riddles, thus making Thales intervene in the riddle-contest, so as to give those answers and rebut the Ethiopian.

In the original Greek tale about Amasis and Bias the riddle-contest may have been limited to a single part: the Ethiopian king would set his riddle to Amasis, the Pharaoh would find the solution with Bias' help, and that would be the end of the game; by solving the riddle Amasis would *ipso facto* win the contest. This pattern is indeed the commonest in ancient stories, both Greek and Oriental, about such riddle-contests, as well as in many similar tales recorded in modern times: the riddle-contest operates as a one-way process, with one of the opponents always propounding the riddles and the other one solving them, never vice versa; the propounder may set a series of riddles, one after the other, but the addressee never strikes back by proposing riddles in his turn, and the contest never develops a second part, in which the roles of the two opponents are reversed⁸². However, as we saw, there are also tales in which the riddle-contest is structured in two parts, with each one of the opponents proposing riddles in turn⁸³. The original version of the riddle-contest between Amasis and the Ethiopian king may also have followed this latter pattern. If so, after the riddle of drinking up the sea had been solved, Amasis would strike back: just as Bias had helped him in the first part to solve the riddle, so now Bias would invent another riddle for Amasis to propound to the Ethiopian king – a riddle which the Ethiopian would prove unable to solve, and so Amasis would emerge as the winner of the contest⁸⁴. In that case, the bipartite structure of the original tale presumably gave to Plutarch the idea to provide his own version of it with a second part of the riddle-contest. But Plutarch suppressed the original second part, in which Bias helped Amasis, and replaced it with a piece of his own fabrication,

⁸² For many examples of this one-way pattern from Greek, Egyptian and Middle-Eastern texts see Konstantakos 2004b.

⁸³ We have mentioned above tales in which this bipartite structure is combined with the presence of a counsellor of the king. There are also bipartite contests in which the two opponents set to each other riddles in turn but propound and solve them alone, without the help of any counsellor: so Solomon and Hiram in a version in Jos. c. Ap. 1,111; Kalchas and Mopsos in the Hesiodic 'Melampodia' (above n. 65); Damoetas and Menalcas in Verg. Ecl. 3,104–107; the two rajahs in the tale from central Celebes (above n. 66); Odin and Vafthrudnir in the 'Poetic Edda' (C. Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford 1996, 41–49); similarly in some tales of the type of 'Turandot' (A. Aarne/S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki 1961, type 851 A) the princess sets first to her suitor a series of riddles, which he solves, and then the suitor proposes in his turn a riddle to the princess, which she cannot answer (see Burton 1885–8, XVI 97–106; C. Goldberg, *Rätselprinzessin*, in: *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 11.1, Berlin/New York 2003, 287. 290).

⁸⁴ Compare the aforementioned stories about Hiram and Abdemon versus Solomon, Lykourgos and Aesop versus the other kings, Bahram Gur and his priest versus the Roman emperor, Khosrau and Buzurjmihir versus the king of India, which follow the same pattern.

in which Thales took the place of Bias, so as to implicate Thales too in the contest and incorporate in his narrative the superlative responses he had found in a collection of Thales' sayings.

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