If there is a fairy tale, it is India

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"Barlaam and Ioasaph" studies, when comparing the parables of the novel with other literary traditions, often automatically associate India with a penchant for fairy tales, especially theriomorphic fairy tales and embedded fables. The experience of Burzōy, who was forced to make a spiritual journey to India to find the *Kalīla wa Dimna*, is part of a broader and more pronounced indophilia of the court of Xusraw I, as also attested by Cetrang *namag*,[1] and the studies of Boyce[2] on Parthian minstrels.

However, if we take this Indianophile attitude, and look for a predecessor with
a dialogue form, especially a question-and-answer pattern[3]
speaking animals
we must not necessarily look for Indian inspiration.

R. D. Barnett, studying the fable in ancient Near Eastern literatures, states this clearly: [T]he animal fable, a form of folk-literature of great antiquity in the east and usually unwritten. The home of the animal-fable, in which the normal roles are reversed and animals play the parts of men, is, *par-excellence,* India; but traces of it can be detected in Sumer in the third millennium BBCE in the Royal Graves of Ur.[4]

Late Mesopotamian dynastic seals (2700-2350 BCE) show a predilection for animal motifs, and Sumerian cuneiform tablets from the second millennium BC contain proverbs with animal characters.

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[1] Wizārishn ī Čatrang ud Nihishn ī Nēw Ardaxshīr ('The Unravelled Riddle of Chess and the Counter-Riddle of Backgammon') The solver is that Wuzurgmihr son of Bōxtag, who is also the author of the sapiential Pahlavi work *Ayādgar*, cf. *infra* p. 127. Cf. **Panaino, A. (1999).** Sadwēs, Anāhīd and the Manichaean Maiden of Light. In *Der östliche Manichäismus: Gattungs- und Werksgeschichte*.

[2] **Boyce, M. (1957).** The Parthian gōsān and Iranian minstrel tradition. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 89(1-2), 10-45. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00106938

[3] **Rigolio, A. (2019).** *Christians in conversation: A guide to late antique dialogues in Greek and Syriac*. Oxford University Press.; **Basso, S. (2020).** Circulation périphérique et « fluidité » des textes : *L'exemple du Barlaam kai Ioasaph* au XIe siècle. *Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines,* 2(9),

[4] cf. **Barnett, R. D. (1975).** Phrygia and the peoples of Anatolia in the Iron Age. In I. E. S. Edwards, C. J. Gadd, N. G. L. Hammond, & E. Sollberger (Eds.), *The Cambridge ancient history* (Vol. 2, Part 2, pp. 417-442). Cambridge University Press.

More generally, it should be noted that Folk themes, figures of speech, and entire proverbs migrate across geographical and cultural boundaries by routes which are often impossible to trace or document.[1] There is reason to believe that some Egyptian and Assyrian fables became known to the Greeks in classical times, but no evidence exists to suggest that these influences were either early or important. As far as we can see, therefore, the fable was invented by the Greeks - it may well be, by the Greeks of Asia Minor, the country of the lion which appears so often in these stories, and the traditional birthplace of Aesop.[2]

In this «parable world», Greek elements can also be found. The Greek presence in the Indian subcontinent, in Bactria, was long and literarily fruitful. One need only think of the मिलिन्दपन् *Miliṇḍapañha* («Questions of King Milinda»), a philosophical conversation between King Menander and the Buddhist preacher Nāgasena, a text dating from the first century BCE – first century CE, in which we can find the precursor of the dialogue between Barlaam and Ioasaph.

Walter Burkert[3] has written extensively on this «global village of the parable» in antiquity. The concept of *canovaccio* has been introduced (from the Italian Commedia dell'Arte tradition, see above, p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) to suggest a model to explain the spread of stories along the Silk Road from the third to the tenth centuries CE. We have numerous examples of canovacci along the Silk Road in those centuries, and the author will examine seven such examples that could account for antecedents of the "Barlaam and Joasaph" cycle. Among them, unsuspectedly, an exercise from an ancient handbook of mathematics.

[1] **Lindenberger, J. M. (1983).** *The Aramaic proverbs of Ahiqar*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
[2] **Handford, S. A. (Trans.). (1954).** Fables of Aesop. Penguin Books. p. xiv.
[3] **Burkert, W. (2004).** Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern contexts of Greek culture. Harvard University Press.