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The Milesian Tale: Short Story or Novel?

That the ancient 'milesian tale' or *Milesia* (*sc. fabula*) was an erotic 'short story' has long been a commonplace of commentaries and literary histories. However, even a brief examination of the few extant ancient references to this literary type shows that the assumption is not warranted by the evidence. Instead, it appears that the standard usage of the term derives from false analogy with such later works as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353), but also with a German literary form called *Novellen* which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries in the works of Kleist, Goethe and Hauptmann. German *Novellen*, whose formal model was the *Decameron*, were often encompassed within a frame story based on a striking news item (plague, war, or flood), either real or imaginary. This structure is not Greco-Roman in origin, but seems to go back to an Arabic story-telling tradition that influenced the Italian medieval *novelle*. The prevailing association of milesian tales with this genre appears to result from a debate between *fin de siècle* philologists Bürger and Rohde on the question of who invented the realistic novel, Greeks or Romans!

By briefly reconstructing the "true" history of the 'milesian tale', in so far as this is still possible, I shall argue that the term is Roman and strictly speaking refers to Latin adaptations of Greek works after the style of Sisenna's first century BC adaptation of the notorious *Milesiaká* of Aristides. From a fresh analysis of the evidence (especially the rich source of Lucian's *Erotes*) it appears that a 'milesian tale' was not a short story but a type of first-person novel, a travelogue told from memory by a narrator who every now and then would relate how he encountered other characters who told him stories which he would then incorporate into the main tale through the rhetorical technique of narrative impersonation. The result is a complicated narrative fabric: a travelogue carried by a main narrator with numerous subordinate tales carried by subordinate narrative voices. If my analysis of the form is correct, we still have one partially preserved and one fully extant exemplar of this artful type in Petronius' *Satyrica* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* respectively. There is also some evidence to support the contention that the prosimetric form of the *Satyrica* is within the generic parameters of 'milesian tale'.

I conclude therefore that Aristides' *Milesiaká* was essentially a novel, a road novel if you will, and that it was significantly different from a mere collection of short stories or *novelle*, and furthermore that the paradigm of *Rahmenerzählung* is not applicable, since not only is the central *fabula* of milesian tales too substantial to be reduced to a 'frame', the subordinate narratives woven into it lack the regularity and neatly circumscribed nature of *Novellen*. Even more importantly the reported material in milesian tales is not necessarily erotic or anecdotal, the type seems to easily accommodate a variety of discourse types such as verses and formal speeches. The 'milesian tale' as a literary form may thus count as the first and, paradoxically, the most sophisticated subspecies of the Novel to appear in Greco-Roman antiquity.