

20230128 – Dissecting “And the mule opened her mouth and said,”; a collage by Mark Sanders – after a poem by Sarah Glaz.

And the mule opened her mouth and said,

*Why fill my saddlebags with sponges, master?
Have I not served you well for many years
carrying the salt from your mines on my back?*

This poem references a fable by Aesop in which a mule is tasked by her master, by the name of Thales, to carry salt across a river. Stumbling one day, the mule finds that some of the salt has dissolved, making her burden lighter; thus she contrives to stumble on subsequent visits. Her owner sees through the ruse and fills her saddlebags with sponges instead, designed to teach her a lesson as they become heavier when she falls into the river. Although the mule owner goes by the name Thales, whether Aesop intended his Thales to be the same Thales of Miletus is questionable. Nevertheless, the mule from the fable is pictured bottom right.

*I filled your coffers with gold and your pantry
with goods, while secretly I yearned to learn
the mysteries of triangles, and stars.*

Thales was known for his theoretical and practical use of geometry, and is often considered the first person in the western world to have applied deductive reasoning to geometry and the first western mathematician. Two of his key studies resulted in “Thales’ Theorem” and his “Intercept Theorem” relating to triangles. The Summer and Winter Triangle star constellations are included to the right hand side of the collage, in reference to both his geometry studies and his calculations of the duration of the year and the timings of the equinoxes and solstices.

A masterful astronomer, Thales is said to have predicted the solar eclipse of 28 May 585 BC, represented by the golden arc emerging from behind a bowl, top left, which also includes a postage stamp featuring Thales himself.

He is additionally attributed with the first observation of the Hyades star cluster and with calculating the position of the Pleiades star cluster... and so much more in the night sky! The Pleiades, known as The Seven Sisters are shown to the left of the collage, in their nymph form in detail from the 1885 painting of the same name by American Symbolist painter Elihu Vedder.

*Now I am old. My back aches on the long trek
down to the sea on which the earth’s disk floats;*

Thales believed that "Water constituted the principle of all things" and that the Earth was a solidified area which was floating (flat) on the surface. He theorized that earthquakes were the movement of the Earth among the waves. The image of the Earth is shown, bottom right, floating on a lily pond upon which the Seven Sisters dance.

*where ships wait at the loading docks of the
Miletus bay, prows rocking back and forth.*

Another of Thales' discoveries was of the usefulness of the Ursa Minor star constellation in sea navigation. The Little Bear is included top left.

*I needed a respite.
The heat of high noon
sparked a thought: Water lightens the load. I
rolled in the stream and my burden dissolved.
Why punish me for being clever,
 master Thales?*

The first Greek mathematician, Father of Science, astronomer and regarded by Aristotle as the first philosopher "in the Greek tradition", following science rather than mythology; Thales was born circa 626/623 BCE in Miletus, considered among the greatest and wealthiest of ancient Greek cities, on the western coast of Anatolia, near the mouth of the Maeander River in ancient Ionia. The map, top right, is of this area. The Temple of Apollo in the associated Greek sanctuary of Didyma contains a statue of the river god Maeander, sharing his name with the river and its delta at Miletus; the remains of which statue can be seen superimposed on the bottom of the map.

Thales is recorded as having been the first of The Seven Sages of Greece, created in the archonship of Damasius at Athens about 582 BC, with stories of an valuable object that is to go to the most wise. In one version it is said that an expensive bowl "should be given to him who had done most good by his wisdom.' So it was given to Thales, went the round of all the sages, and came back to Thales again. Having been in receipt of the bowl for a second time, he sent it to Apollo at Didyma, with the dedication, "Thales the Milesian, son of Examyas [dedicates this] to Delphinian Apollo after twice winning the prize from all the Greeks."

The decorated bowl to centre left is representative of the bowl in this story, Greek in design and bearing the pattern known as Meander, in reference to the Maeander river (from which the word "meander" is derived after the river's many twists and turns).

Behind, or maybe astride, the mule, bottom right, is the figure of Apollo.