

# COPING WITH CHAOS AND THE UNKNOWN: UNDERSTANDING THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN PEOPLE'S PATHOLOGICAL NEED FOR MYTHMAKING BASED ON VIRGIL'S *THE AENEID*

Nur – Al – Nafees

## Abstract

The ancient people's near-universal tendency of mythmaking by imagining deities in their own image serves as the primary driving force in the literature of the time, where the human experience is inseparable from the divine. In the epic poem *The Aeneid* by the ancient Roman poet Virgil, this particular trait of classical mythmaking is about as on the nose as it can be. The narrative and character development of the epic is almost entirely driven by the human characters' constant struggle against divine beings, i.e., the personification of the forces of nature. And yet, rather than making the story overly fantastical and reality-divorced, this type of mythmaking actually brings the story closer to reality, in the sense that the modern reader can get an in-depth look into the psyche of the aforementioned ancient people simply by reading between the lines. For those ancient people, humanizing their deities was the way to create order out of chaos, and finding their place in a world shrouded in darkness. This paper takes an in-depth look into the narrative structure and characterization of Virgil's founding epic *The Aeneid*. This reading, combined with a study of Classical mythology, history, anthropology and psychology, allows this paper to show how *The Aeneid* reveals the true motivation behind the ancient mediterranean people's style of mythmaking. It shows that these people were motivated by a pathological need to create a shared spiritual coping mechanism to deal with the existential dread that resulted from living in the wild, hostile and chaotic ancient world without modern science to light their path.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Psychology, Personification, Spirituality, Classical Mythology, Virgil

## Introduction

Virgil (70 B.C.E – 19 B.C.E) was one of the prominent poets of the Roman Empire and was responsible for creating a poem celebrating the foundation of the great empire. This poem was titled *The Aeneid* and to say that it was an important milestone in the poet's career would be an understatement. In fact, according to Bunson (2002), "...VIRGIL'S *Aeneid* made him the model for every poet of Rome to come" (Bunson, 2002, p. 323). This was particularly significant as Virgil's career took place during the late Augustan period of the Roman Empire, which is also considered the height of this civilization. Given this, it is not surprising that the poet set out

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology (BAUET), Qadirabad Cantonment, Dayarampur, Natore

to celebrate this golden age by rooting the founding of the Roman Empire in one of the greatest myths of the Homeric age, the myth being that of Aeneas and the fall of Troy.

Now, it is worth mentioning that Vergil was motivated primarily by his role as a patriotic poet of the Roman Empire. The reason this is important is because unlike most other societies of the ancient world, the Romans had a very definite sense of what we know today as national identity and they took great pride in the fact that their enlightened republic was the centre of civilization in an otherwise dark and barbaric world. In short, the Roman people – not just the social elites but the general populace – were aware of their place in history. This is significant because it inadvertently leads to Vergil writing *The Aeneid* in such a way that allows modern readers to gain insight into the psyche of people far more ancient than Vergil's own countrymen. And this is due to Vergil retroactively modifying existing myths to fashion a founding myth that was both uniquely Roman and also rooted in a noteworthy past.

The importance of this noteworthy past is clearly visible in Vergil's appropriation of Aeneas's myth. According to Pollok (2017), Augustus's presence as a noble and mighty emperor made him not just a potent source of imperialist propaganda, but the documents of said propaganda were "meant to be seen and read by as many people as possible" (Pollok, 2017, p.11). Thus, when Aeneas descends to the Underworld in Book VI, the narrative purpose is for him to consult the spirit of his father. But Vergil's actual purpose is having the Trojan prince encounter his yet-to-be-born descendent, Augustus, and realize that he is on the right path.

So, it is safe to say that Vergil was driven by equal parts nationalism and patriotism to recreate the Aeneas mythos in his epic poem, thereby giving modern readers (and this paper) an opportunity to glean into the psyche of the people belonging to the heroic age of the Mediterranean. And though Vergil did not intentionally set out to contribute to modern anthropology and psychology, his close proximity (historically speaking) to age in which the Trojan War supposedly took place helped significantly in the matter.

## Literature Review

Modern anthropology plays a vital role in understanding the motives and rationales of the people of both pre-history and parts of history that lack written records. Harari (2015) not only bases his discussion on modern anthropological findings on early humans, but he also talks at length about mythmaking (or fiction

making as he puts it) as a quintessentially human tendency that has not really changed since the age of cave dwellers. And while he does not talk about ancient Mediterranean people specifically, it is his discussion on the mindset and mentality of the ancient settlers of the world that is important, since according to him, the human tendency to weave stories and shared myths is what held societies together in the face of the wild and hostile ancient world. Fiedel (1992) makes further contributions to the anthropological outlook since the early settlers of the Americas have a semi-parallel relationship with the Trojans trying to settle the Italian peninsula in Vergil's epic.

Going from anthropology to history, Bunson (2002) provides an encyclopaedic outline of the various stages and figures of the Roman Empire. In particular, his presentation of Vergil as a model poet of the Augustan age is a great help in understanding the poet's motivation and rationale in creating the narrative structure and character development of the epic poem. Adding to this is Pollok's (2017) senior thesis on Roman propaganda. As for the specifics of Vergil's handling of the Aeneas myth, Casali (2010) gives important insights based on history and politics. As for the Aeneas myth itself, it is part of a series of ancient myths relating to the Hellenic-Trojan conflict, the most famous portrayal of which is attributed to the Greek poet Homer. Since Vergil's work is seen as a 'follow up' of Homer's *The Iliad*, Lang's (1906) discussion of the Homeric age provides important insights into the mythological canon that Vergil appropriates in his epic.

Hamilton's (1998) classic treatment of the myths of ancient Greece and Rome not only provides an excellent narrative treatment of the various gods and heroes, but it creates an accessible timeline for those myths. This makes it easy to connect these myths with the topics of history, anthropology and psychology. However, there is a particularly noteworthy aspect of Greco-Roman mythmaking – anthropomorphism. This tendency to assign human-like characteristics to non-human entities like the forces of nature is elaborated by Epley et al (2007).

Speaking of psychology, Jung's (2003) theory of the Four Archetypes serves as the backbone for understanding the mentality and thought processes of the ancient people. This is because Jung's Archetypes are parts of what he calls the Collective Unconscious – a structure of the mind shared by all humans across history. Going further into psychology, Baqutayan's (2015) paper provides a decent base from which the role of mythmaking as a coping mechanism can be analysed.

Finally, Shalini and Samundeswari's (2017) paper on the role of literature as a mirror of society helps to combine all the aforementioned areas of study into a coherent topic relating to the mindset of ancient Mediterranean people.

### **Research Question**

How does Vergil's *The Aeneid*, with its narrative structure representing the ancient world of the Bronze Age and its characterization representing the people of that age, shed light on the ancients' motivation behind their mythmaking, and did the hostile ancient world necessitate the creation of these myths as coping mechanism for those people?

## Analysis and Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, Vergil appropriated the Classical Hellenic myth of the Trojan War and its aftermath to create the founding myth of his home nation. The story of the Greek conquest of the kingdom of Ilium – of which the city state of Troy was the capital – was originally told by the Classical Greek poet Homer and is titled *The Iliad*. Or at least that is the name assigned to the person (or group of people) responsible for weaving the heroic poem. Unlike Virgil, the identity of Homer is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. Despite being one of if not the most celebrated literary figure of his age, many scholars claim that the person named Homer may not have existed at all. Lang (1906) has the following to say about this:

All attempts to prove that the Homeric poems are the work of several centuries appear to rest on a double hypothesis: first, that the later contributors to the *Iliad* kept a steady eye on the traditions of the remote Achaean age of bronze; next, that they innovated as much as they pleased. (Lang, 1906, p. 3)

Now, the lack of evidence regarding the existence of Homer provides some valuable context for the purposes of this paper. Homer's case is not like that of Shakespeare – who is another case of the authenticity of an author's identity not being entirely confirmed. Rather, Homer and his age are so ancient that it is actually normal that there is no valid biographical information regarding the author.

This is important for the purposes of this paper due to the scale of historical periods and timelines. A popular saying in history circles state that the Great Pyramids of Egypt were as old to the ancient Romans as the ancient Romans are to us. Based on this, it can be said that while Virgil's era can be considered 'modern' compared to that of Homer, the myths and stories upon which *The Aeneid* is based predate the Roman poet by multiple centuries at the very least, and because of this Virgil has had to depart significantly from the Hellenic writers of mythology. Casali (2010) puts it like this:

In the pre-Vergilian tradition things went differently: the Trojans landed slightly to the in Latium, in the ager Laurens, the shore immediately facing the site where Aeneas

would settle Lavinium; there was the traditional location of the first Trojan settlement ("Toria"). (Farrel & Putnam, 2010, Chapter 3, p. 37).

What this means is that the characters who inhabit the world of Virgil's epic are true representations of the people of antiquity. This notion, combined with the outlook that "Literature is a mirror of society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged" (Shalini & Samundeswari, 2017, p. 170), makes it clear that by reading through the adventures of Aeneas and his companions across the Mediterranean, the modern reader can get an up-close look into the psyche of the people of antiquity that these characters represent. This is further enforced by Shalini & Samundeswari (2017):

Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. (Shalini & Samundeswari, 2017, p. 170).

Now, with the historical context of Virgil's sources, motivations and patriotic inspiration firmly established, along with the fact that his Aeneid serves as a mirror of the way ancient people's minds worked, the primary focus of this paper can be addressed, which is the pathological tendency of mythmaking displayed by ancient people and how it was used as a coping mechanism.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term pathological as a person unable to control part of their behaviour, or someone who is unreasonable. A pathological liar, for example, is incapable of telling the truth regardless of the situation. So, it is perfectly reasonable to call the ancient people's mythmaking tendency as pathological as it was driven purely by instinctual need. This instinct in turn was driven by the nature of world in which they lived – the sparsely settled world of the ancient bronze age (Approximately 3000 B.C.E – 1200 B.C.E).

The ancient world was a wild and untamed land, far different from the domesticated modern world tailored for human safety and comfort. The people who inhabited that hostile land lacked not only modern tools and weaponry, but also the scientific knowledge of how the natural world actually works. Fear and uncertainty regarding the world were commonplace, and thus people found solace in the worship of the very nature that surrounded them and threatened their safety. But unlike animists like the Celtic tribes, the people of the Mediterranean made a point of assigning human characteristics to their nature-centric deities. This is called anthropocentrism and Epley et al. (2007) defines it as "the tendency to imbue the

real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions.” (Epley et al., 2007, p.864)

These deities represented both the very best and the very worst of human nature. As Hamilton (1998) puts it:

For the most part the immortal gods were of little use to human beings and often they were quite the reverse of useful: Zeus a dangerous lover for moral maidens and completely incalculable in his use of the terrible thunderbolt; Ares the maker of war and a general pest; Hera with no idea of justice when she was jealous as she perpetually was; Athena also a war maker, and wielding the lightning's sharp lance quite as irresponsibly as Zeus did; Aphrodite using her power chiefly to ensnare and betray (Hamilton, 1998, p. 53).

This pest-like nature of the gods, as Hamilton puts it, is no coincidence. This is a clear reflection of the hostile, unpredictable and anti-humanistic nature of the world that the ancient people inhabited. In today's industrial world, humans see the natural world as something to subjugate for the purposes of safety, security and comfort. While we are aware that our relentless conquest of the natural world in the form of deforestation and urbanization will affect us in the long term – the climate crisis being the most obvious example of this – we still hold on to the paradigm that an industrial civilization can never live in harmony with the natural world. The ancient people, however, could never imagine living a life divorced from nature. It was an inseparable part of their normal lives.

This is the reason why whenever we see the appearance of god characters in heroic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, the event is never really treated as a miracle like how the Abrahamic religions would treat such an event. The Virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus Christ is one of the most notable miracles in not just Christianity but in Islam as well. Yet when we see divine births in the contexts of the epic poems mentioned above, they are treated in a very matter-of-fact way. Both Achilles and Aeneas have goddesses as mothers – Thetis and Aphrodite respectively – yet the fact that these goddesses had relationship with mortals like Peleus and Anchises is not seen as surprising or even unusual. So, it is safe to say that the divine is extremely humanised in the Classical Greco-Roman mythos. Additionally, to paraphrase Fairclough (1995), the discourse stemming from that mythos is naturalized among the general populace.

As the story and characterisation of *The Aeneid* is discussed in greater detail, this factor becomes even more obvious. However, before getting into that, there is a need for justifying the use of this particular text and how it actually relates to the

subject matter of this paper. In terms of age, The Aeneid is actually a fairly recent phenomena, especially when compared to its predecessor The Iliad. So, seeing as how the paper deals with the psyche of the people of antiquity, The Iliad seems like a much better reference point for the study. However, the story of The Iliad is completely centred around the Trojan War – the middle of the war to be precise. Nearly every major narrative event that leads to the events told of within the epic itself, like the Judgement of Paris (Hamilton, 1998, p.257 – 259) for example, all take place before the epic begins. Similarly, all the iconic narrative events that proceed from the funeral of Hector, like the Fall of Troy and the entirety of Homer’s Odyssey.

The Aeneid, on the other hand, features not just great battles between brave heroes and warriors, but it also has an element of travel and adventure. More specifically, it features a destitute people looking for a land to settle. This brings into the story the element of ancient people struggling to survive in a wild and turbulent world full of hostile forces that are constantly trying to either kill the migratory humans (in this case, Trojans), or greatly deter their progress of finding a suitable settlement. In many ways, the migration of the Trojans under the kingship of Aeneas mimics the migration of early humans crossing the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska and settling into what is now known as North America. As Fiedel (1992) puts it:

The journey of the ancestral Paleo-Indians across the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska, more than 12,000 years ago, was the final stage of a process of migration and colonization that had begun 1.5 million years earlier...In adapting to the diverse environments of this vast region, humans had changed both physically and culturally (Fiedel, 1992, p. 22).

And indeed, these early settlers faced a completely unknown world filled with dangers and hostilities. They encountered ancient animals that were more than a match for some of the most fantastical creatures found in Classical mythology. Harari (2015) describes these encounters in the following way:

When the first Americans marched south from Alaska into the plains of Canada and the western United States, they encountered mammoths and mastodons, rodents the size of bears, herds of horses and camels, oversized lions and dozens of large sabre-tooth cats and giant ground sloths that weighed up to eight tons and reached a height of six metres (Harari, 2015, p. 78 – 79).

Considering how alien this world that Harari (2015) describes appears to the modern mind, it is quite safe to say that the experience of those ancient American settlers encountering the giant ground sloth was not that different from the experi

ence of the Trojans escaping from Scylla and Charybdis off the coast of Sicily in Book III of *The Aeneid*. Therefore, it is not too of a stretch to say the characters of this epic are the ideal representations of ancient people living in the prehistoric world.

Therefore, by looking into the human characters' encounters and interactions with the mythical characters within the story of Virgil's epic, it can be confidently stated that the characters struggling against the divine to establish their place in their world is a perfect representation of prehistoric or ancient people using mythmaking as a coping mechanism to make sense of the unknown and hostile world that they inhabited.

It has been mentioned before that before the scientific age, mythmaking was the only way for humans to make sense of their world. In fact, for scholars of Anthropology like Harari (2015), it is the quintessential human characteristic – one that allowed early humans to form large bands or tribes that would later become the kingdoms and city states that ultimately domesticated the natural world:

How did *Homo sapiens* manage to cross this critical threshold, eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundreds of millions? The secret was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths (Harari, 2015, p. 30).

Harari further insists that “Any large-scale human cooperation...is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination (Harari, 2015, p. 30). Meanwhile, Hamilton's (1998) introduction of Classical Greco-Roman mythology gives the following insight:

Greek and Roman mythology is quite generally supposed to show us the way the human race thought and felt untold ages ago. Through it, according to this view, we can retrace path from civilized man who lives far from nature, to man who lived in close companionship with nature...they lead us back to a time when the world was young and people had a connection with the earth...unlike anything we ourselves can feel (Hamilton, 1998, p. 3).

By combining these two complementary views on mythology and ancient people, it becomes apparent that mythmaking allowed ancient people to band together in the face of superhuman forces. But what is arguably even more important is that it also gave them a spiritual coping mechanism to deal with the fact that not only did they understand next to nothing about their surroundings but that those surroundings were essentially out to kill them. At the same time, these people also considered themselves as part of the natural world (Hamilton, 1998, p. 3) and

therefore also needed a way to make sense of how and why this cruel world also acted as a nurturing mother by providing shelter and sustenance.

Now, the use of a modern psychology term like ‘coping mechanism’ might seem strange in the context of a Classical epic poem like *The Aeneid*. However, this is neither unscientific nor illogical since the human psyche has not changed fundamentally during the millennia between the Bronze Age (when the events of *The Aeneid* supposedly take place) and the modern era. In fact, this is perfectly in line with Jung’s (2014) concept of the Four Archetypes that state that all humans are parts of a collective unconscious that remains the same across generation. Baqutayan (2015) has the following to say about coping mechanisms in response to stressful situations:

...problem-solving strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful Circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate The emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Therefore, researcher concludes that coping has two major functions: dealing with the problem that is causing the distress (problem-focused coping) and regulating emotion (emotion-focused coping) (Baqutayan, 2015, p. 482).

When this idea is applied to the narrative and character development of *The Aeneid*, a lot of the events and character interactions can be seen in a new light. For example, when in Book I, a perfectly calm sea at the Eastern Mediterranean suddenly becomes engulfed in a violent storm, the wind god Aeolus is said to be responsible, and when the storm subsides just as suddenly, it is the result of the sea god Poseidon asserting dominance over his realm and ousting Aeolus. In both of these incidents, nature acts in a chaotic and unpredictable fashion, and reimagining these events as the works of two powerful yet territorial gods, helps the human characters to make sense of these seemingly disconnected events.

Later in Book IV, a wealthy, strategically brilliant, strong-minded, philanthropic and ruthlessly efficient political leader like Queen Dido suddenly falls in love with Aeneas – a king in name only. It is common knowledge that in the past, marriage was driven by promise of mutual benefit. Marriage for romantic love was seen as impractical if not idiotic. And when it came to royal marriage, this view was taken to the extreme. When talking about marriage as a way to form political alliances, Potter (1934) gives the example of a Gallic chieftain who married off both his mother and sister to powerful men from other states and himself married a high-born woman from another state. He goes on to paint the Roman Empire as perhaps the greatest example of this phenomenon. He mentions how an “orgy of marriages and divorces” (Potter, 1934, p. 663) took place between various Roman leaders as a

desperate attempt to hold onto power in the dying years of the Empire. So, when a pragmatic character like Dido suddenly becomes obsessed with someone like Aeneas – who is of divine blood but without a kingdom of his own – the only way such an event would make sense is if there were an intervention by a deity. And therefore, the notion of Venus using her powers as the goddess of love to force Dido to fall in love with her son to secure his future, helps to explain the sudden shift in Dido's personality.

In all of these narrative events can be found the recurring theme mankind's place in the world. This theme is still very much commonplace in the literature of the modern era. But whereas the modern man is divorced from nature and sees himself a completely separate from it, the ancient people sought to establish themselves as a part of this world. The characters in *The Aeneid* lamented being pawns in the schemes and meddling of the Olympians. Yet at the same time these same schemes and meddling meant that they were important enough that through them the gods – and in turn, nature itself – exerted their will. This in turn meant that, though they were weak and helpless by default, they also mattered a great deal.

## Conclusion

Based on all of this, it is safe to say that the ancient mediterranean people's mythmaking tradition followed a fixed pattern of humanising their gods and goddesses. And by humanising their deities, who were representations of natural forces, these people also humanised the natural world surrounding them. This was very important for the spiritual and emotional well being of those people. As previously mentioned, the ancient people lacked the knowledge and understanding that present-day people. They did not know that lightning is created when oppositely charged ions collide in the upper atmosphere. So, for example, when a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky or fell on someone's head without warning, those people could only rationalize it as the work of a capricious but powerful deity. And by portraying the diasporic Trojans as a people raging against this mythical order – which is in fact the natural order – Virgil unintentionally gives as a fairly authoritative picture of the inner workings of the ancient people's psyche and how these peoples dealt with overwhelming hostility and adversity despite being so underwhelmingly equipped compared to today's people.

However, the same story and characterization also shows that lacking as they were in scientific knowledge and understanding, in terms of mentality and emotion they were not so different from us. Modern people often view ancient people as being infinitely tougher and more adaptable to changes – both of which they lament losing as a result of their lifestyle. Now, while the ancients definitely

were better than moderners in terms of physical prowess at least, they were far from being as accepting and tolerant as we are today, hence their need for mythmaking as a coping mechanism. And considering how widespread the use of various coping mechanisms is in the modern mental health scene, it is safe to say that the ancient were prone to the same mental weaknesses the we deal with, albeit in a different setting. So, not only did mythmaking allow ancient humans to humanise the world around them, but by understanding the motive behind that mythmaking, we can in turn humanise those ancient humans and even relate our experiences with them.

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