Anchoring through Aetiology

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Aetiology is a popular concept, found all through Greek and Latin history in a great variety of sources, particularly in poetry. Its helps to create a firm basis for the present in the past by showing that the present is the result or continuation of what happened or was begun in the past. Thus a story from the past is used as a means of legitimizing or explaining the present and of creating a sense of roots and continuity, i.e. of anchoring the present. We can find examples of this in poets like Pindar, Aeschylus and Euripides, but the device becomes increasingly popular in the Hellenistic period, when the need to trace one’s roots and to be part of an ongoing tradition seems to have been stronger than ever.

Basically the pattern of aetiology is that something is there and that you explain it by relating it to an event in the past which caused the present situation, thus creating a sense of continuity. Many examples of this kind of aetiology are found at the end of plays by Euripides, where a deus ex machina may announce a

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ritual following from the events in the play. In this way the distant world of the play may be connected with the present of the audience. A typical example is for instance the end of the *Hippolytus* 1423-30:

σοί δ’, ὠ ταλαίπωρ’, ἀντὶ τῶν τῶν κακῶν
timᾶς μεγίστας ἐν πόλει Τροζήνηα
dῶσω· κόραι γὰρ ἄξυγες γάμων πάρος
cόμας κεφοῦνται σοι, δι’ αἰώνος μακροῦ
πένθη μέγιστα δακρύων καρπουμένων
ἀεὶ δὲ μουσηποῖας ἐς σὲ παρθένον
ἔσται μέριμνα, κοῦκ ἀνένυμος πεσὼν
ἔρως ὁ Φαιόδας ἐς σὲ σιγήθησεται.

On you, poor youth, I will bestow, in solace for your suffering, high ritual honours in the city of Trozen. Unmarried virgins shall, before their wedding, shear their tresses in your memory; age after age a rich harvest of tears and mourning shall be yours. And maiden skill in music flow perpetually to tell your story. Phaedra too shall give her name to memory, and songs recall her love for you (translation: P.Vellacott)

or Ion 1581-88 where Athena predicts the future of Ion’s descendants – sketching a future which at the time of performance around 413 BC might seem somewhat utopic:

οἱ τῶν δ’ αὖ
παῖδες γενόμενοι σὺν χρόνω πεπρωμένωι
Κυκλάδας ἐποικίσουσι νησιαῖς πόλεις
χέρσους τε παράλους, ὃ σθένος τῇμην θόνι
δίδωσιν· ἀντίπορθμα δ’ ἥπερφοιν δυοῖν
πεδία κατοικήσουσιν, Ἀσιάδας τε γῆς
Εὐρωπίας τε· τούδε δ’ ὀνόματος χάριν
Ἰωνες ὀνομασθέντες ἐξουσιν κλέος.

They in their turn shall have sons who in the appointed course of time shall found cities on the islands of the Cyclades and on the mainland coasts, to lend their strength to my city. They shall colonize the lowlands on either side of the

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2 See e.g. F.M.Dunn, *Tragedy’s End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama*, Oxford 1996.
strait that divides Europe from Asia; called after this prince, they shall bear the glorious name of Ionians (translation: P.Vellacott)

In Hellenistic narrative poetry one finds different approaches. There it is the narrator who connects past and present on behalf of his readers and in these cases one can start either from the present, explaining that something is still as it is today because of what happened in the past, or one can start from the past, drawing attention to the fact that traces of the events from the past are still present in the world of today. The first approach we find in the *Aetia* of Callimachus, where present rituals are causing surprise and are subsequently explained with stories from the past. The second we find in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius, where many episodes in the Argonauts’ journey end with a remark that traces of it are still visible today3.

However, the device is not only used to anchor a well-established present, but one may also relate the concept of anchoring *innovation* to aetiology. Here we may distinguish two ways of anchoring:

1. Sometimes we see that a new or future institution in the present could be linked to an aetiological story from the past and be presented as sanctioned by these events, as if they were a continuation of something that had been predicted a long time ago or had, in some way, been there all the time. Another example from Euripides may serve to show how this could be achieved, i.e. the passage about the alliance of Athens and Argos at the end of Euripides’ *Supplices*. There Athena as *deus ex machina* explains that in repayment for the help offered by Theseus Adrastus must swear an oath (E. Su.1191-95):

   ὁ δ’ ὄρκος ἔσται μῆτπος’ Ἄργειος χθόνα ἐς τήνδ’ ἐποίησεν πολέμιον παντευχίαν ἄλλων τ’ ιόντων ἐμποδων θήσειν δόγμ.

3 See Harder (n.1), 2,25.
And this shall be the form of the oath: ‘Never shall Argives march against Attica in arms; if others march, Argos shall interpose her sword. And if they break their oath and march, then let them bring down upon Argos shame, destruction and defeat’ (translation: P.Vellacott).

As Collard in his commentary on 1165-1234 and in his introduction p.10-11⁴ observes the actual phrasing reflects that of contemporary peace treaties. He plausibly argues that it is likely that Euripides conceived this play and the speech of Athena “when an Athens-Argos alliance was one possible direction of Athenian diplomacy”, and, in fact, in 420 BC an alliance between Argos and Athens was made. So here we may observe how a new step in current war diplomacy was given a basis in the past by means of an aetiologicl passage.

Two further points are worth observing here: (a) the aetiological explanation acquires extra authority because it is the deus ex machina who is announcing it; (b) from a chronological point there is an interesting ambiguity, because this divinity and the watching audience operate at different moments in time: on the one hand the aetiology refers to an institution which for the audience is part of their present or, in the case of the Supplices, of their near future, on the other hand it is predicted by a divinity from the distant past for whom in any case this institution is still in the future. Basically this means that the god or goddess in his or her present is shaping the past of his or her own future; this future then overlaps with the present or future of the audience. Thus they are helping later generations, such as the audience in the theatre, to accept the innovations by anchoring them in their past.

A good example of this technique from the Hellenistic period is the way in which Apollonius Rhodius ends his Argonautica in 4,1730-64 with a passage explaining how the descendants of the Argonauts came to North Africa and settled

⁴ C.Collard, Euripides Supplices, Groningen 1975.
in Cyrene. Euphemus dreams that he breast-fed and slept with a clod of earth, given to him by Triton (1552-63), which turned into a woman; she tells him that she is a daughter of Triton and Libya and nurse of his children and asks to be thrown into the sea near Anaphe. From there she promises to rise again as a home for Euphemus’ descendants. When he tells his dream to Jason, Jason remembers a prophecy by Apollo and explains that the clod, which is part of the Libyan land, will become an island (Thera) where the descendants of Euphemus will live (AR 4,1749-54):

“Ὡ πέπον, ἢ μέγα δή σε καὶ ἀγλαὸν ἐμμορε κύδος.
βώλακα γὰρ τεῦξοσι θεοὶ πόντονδε βαλόντι
νήσου, ἵν’ ὀπλότεροι παίδων σέθεν ἐννάσσονται
παίδες, ἐπεὶ Τρίτων ἕξεινόν ἐγγυάλιξεν
τήνδε τοι ἥπειρῳ Διβυσσιδός: οὔ νῦ τίς ἄλλος
ἀθανάτων ἢ κεῖνος, δ’ μοι πόρεν ἀντιβολήσασ.”

‘Truly, my dear friend, great and glorious fame has been allotted to you, for after you cast the clod into the sea, the gods will turn it into an island, where later generations will dwell, because Triton gave you this piece of the Libyan mainland as a guest-gift. It was he and no other of the immortals, who met us and gave it to you’ (translation: W.H.Race).

Euphemus then throws the clod into the sea. Then the island Calliste emerges, where the descendants of Euphemus, driven from Lemnos to Sparta and travelling from there to Calliste, led by Theras, will live. They will then call the island Thera. Apollonius leaves out the sequel, which must have been familiar for his readers from Pindar and Herodotus and was also told by Callimachus: that from Thera Cyrene in Libya was colonized, which brought the Greeks to North Africa. This story helps to legitimate the still relatively new presence and rule of the Greeks in Egypt in III BC and to explain the importance of Cyrene as well as to show how these later Greeks are part of a Greek tradition that began well before the Trojan War. This is more

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5 See on this passage now R.Hunter, *Apollonius Rhodius Argonautica Book IV*, Cambridge 2015, 312-313 and his commentary on the individual lines.
straightforward than the tragic examples, as the reader and the narrator may be regarded as operating at the same moment in time. It should be noticed, though, that the narrator when quoting Jason refers to a divine authority at some length, so that the prediction as it were gains status and may convince his readers as well as the Argonauts. Thus the epic seems to recall the device of the *deus ex machina* from tragedy as a means to sanction the aetiological connection at the end of a literary work. It would be interesting to relate what Apollonius is doing here in more detail to the aetiological aspects of Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

2. More experimentally, the present can be cast as the past of the future by a narrator who, unlike the tragic *deus ex machina*, operates at the same moment in time as his audience: an event in the present will then provide a reason for a specific institution in the future and acquire, as it were, aetiological status. This kind of proceeding we find in e.g. the catasterismus of the lock of Berenice at the end of Callimachus’ *Aetia* and the apotheosis of Caesar at the end of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. A closer look at these texts reveals that here too some extra authority seems to have been necessary for making the aetiology convincing and giving it status. Thus the speaker in the *Lock of Berenice* is not just some mortal narrator, but the lock of Berenice herself. This lock was sacrificed for the safe return of Berenice’s husband, Ptolemaeus III Euergetes, from the Syrian War and has just been lifted up to the realm of the stars and gods through the agency of Aphrodite (fr.110,52-64):

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καὶ πρόκατε γνωτός Μέμνονος Αἰθίοπος
ίτο κυκλώσας βαλιά πτερά θήλυς ἀήτης,
ἵππος [ι] ιοζωνου λοκρίδος Ἀρσινόης,
[.\.\.\.\& πνοή] με, δι’ ἡμερα δ’ ύγραν ἐνείκας
Κύπρίδος εἰς κολ[πο]ς ἔθηκε
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And straightaway the brother of the Aethiopian Memnon came rushing on, circling his swift wings, a gentle breeze, the Locrian horse of Arsinoe with her purple girdle, and took me with his breath, and carrying me through the humid air he placed me in Cypris’ lap … And in order that … I would also shine, I, the beautiful lock of Berenice, Cypris brought me, washed in the water, to the immortals and placed me as a new star among the old ones

(translation M.A. Harder)

From this authoritative position the lock demands an ongoing ritual of sacrifices to itself, recalling the rituals for the dead in tragedy, as in e.g. the case of Hippolytus, as we know from Catullus’ translation of Callimachus’ poem (Catullus 66,79-94), where the lock asks for sacrifices by young brides and by Berenice on festive days for Aphrodite. At the same time the lock’s position, now that it has acquired a divine status among the stars, is comparable to that of the deus ex machina in tragedy. However, as opposed to these gods it is not something from the past, but shares the same moment in time with the audience and predicts their shared future.

As Apollonius’ aetiological technique may have inspired Vergil, so Callimachus may have been an example for Ovid in his Metamorphoses. In the apotheosis of Caesar (Ov.Met. 15,745-879) the notion of a catasterismus at the end of a catalogue poem is reminiscent of the Aetia. As in the Argonautica the events are told by the narrator, but arranged by the gods, so here too there is a great deal of divine agency, again recalling the device of the tragic deus ex machina. It is Venus who puts herself in charge of the apotheosis of Caesar, when she cannot prevent him being murdered and is aware of the need to provide Augustus with a divine ancestor. Consequently in 15,818-842 Jupiter promises that Casar will become a god and
promises victory to Augustus. Then Venus asks to turn Casar’s soul into a star and in 843-850 she actually brings his soul to the stars:

Vix ea fatus erat, medi cum sede senatus
constitit alma Venus nulli cernenda suique
Caesaris eripuit membris nec in aera solvi
passa recentem animam caelestibus intulit astris
dumque tulit, lumen capere atque ignescere sensit
emisitque sinu: luna volat altius illa
flammiferumque trahens spatioso limite crinem
stella micat

This was hardly said when bountiful Venus already stood, visible for nobody, in the middle of the senate building and took the soul of Caesar, who had just died, from his limbs and she did not allow it to be resolved in the air, but brought it to the heavenly stars, until she felt that it caught light and began to burn. Then she let it go from her bosom and it rose higher than the moon, and trailing a burning tail of hair along a wide road the star is shining.

Thus Augustus is provided with a divine ancestor and a basis has been created for his own apotheosis. The episode ends in 868-870 with a prayer for a long life and subsequent divine status for Augustus and in 871-879 it is added that the poet too will rise above the stars and live for ever.

So, in both cases events in the here and now or very recent past of the reader are cast as the causes of later institutions. Divine agency plays an important part and, as in the Lock of Berenice and the Argonautica, recalls the deus ex machina of tragedy, also because these passages are found towards the end of works.

On the basis of these few examples aetiology can be regarded as an interesting way of anchoring not only the present as the status quo, but also of anchoring innovative elements of the present as well as innovations for the future, particularly on a political and ideological level. In the case of anchoring innovations for the future in the present one might speak of “anticipating aetiology as a means of anchoring innovation”. The means used by the various poets to achieve these effects are well thought out and seem to aim at being as convincing as possible in order to get the
new message across. One of the means to do this is to give the gods a leading role in the anchoring, either as proclaimers of a new situation being caused by earlier events or as the agents who direct more or less current events towards a desired purpose in the future. Besides, a creative use of intertextuality, relating the texts to earlier literary models, particularly in Greek tragedy, provides the gods themselves as agents of aetiology with the background of a long tradition. It anchors them by drawing attention to the aetiology of his particular role in earlier texts.

It would be useful to explore more aetiological texts, Greek as well as Latin, from this angle in order to acquire a clearer and larger picture and to refine the results of this brief investigation.

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7 Besides, also other aspects of aetiology in relation to anchoring innovation would be worth exploring, e.g. the way in which choices are made concerning the question which aspects of the present or future to anchor in which past among the – increasingly – many and sometimes contradictory stories of the past that were available; the various political or cultural contexts of this kind of aetiology; the use of divine organizers and/or speakers to sanction the aition and its innovative outcome; the later reception of these texts as ‘antiquarian’ when past and present in the texts are no longer those of the readers and institutions which were once new have become old or obsolete.