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ἡμετέρη ἀρχἇθεν γενεή : redefining ethnic identity in the cult origins and mythical aetiologies of Rhianus' ethnographical poetry

ὑμετέρη ἀρχῆθεν γενεή: **Redefining Ethnic Identity in the Cult Origins and Mythical Aetiologies of Rhianus' Ethnographical Poetry**

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Abstract

This is a meticulous survey about foundation stories, cult origins and mythical Aetia in Rhianus' ethnographic poetry. During the Hellenistic period, interest in aetiology became very strong and there was an increasing focus on obscure and local stories from all over the Greek world and beyond. Harder (2012: p. 25) claims that as "the world became larger the need for a shared Greek past became stronger as well". Rhianus of Crete was a Hellenistic epic poet and grammarian of the second half of the third century BC. My contribution aims to give a fresh rereading of the poetic fragments and suggests that Rhianus chose places and myths that Greeks of the third century BC, and especially immigrants to Egypt, Syria or Italy, would enjoy reading because they were reminded of mainland Greece and their Greek identity. Both genealogy and aetiology leap from the crucial beginning, be that a legendary founder or one-time ritual event, to the present with a tendency to elide all time in between. The powerful aetiological drive of Rhianus' ethnography works to break down distance and problematize the nature of epic time. In Rhianus' aetiologies, we find a strong connection between the narrative present and the mythical past as a "betrayal" of the Homeric tradition. The absolute devotion to the past in Homer collapses in Rhianus' aetiology, where we find a sense of cultural continuation.

Keywords

Rhianus of Crete; aetiology; cult origins; ethnographic poetry; concept of time; identities; foundation stories

1. Introduction

This presentation examines the importance of aetiology's role in bridging the gap between the mythical past and the historical present of Rhianus' own time and defining the ethnic identity in the poet's ethnographical epics. Indeed, foundation stories and cult origins along with mythical *aetia* run across Rhianus' ethnographical poetry. Rhianus of Crete was a Hellenistic epic poet and grammarian of the second half of the third century BC.[1] Aetiological stories were always an important element in Greek cults and from an early date they found their way into Greek literature, where before Callimachus they were always incorporated into other literary genres.

One of the most conspicuous hallmarks of Greek aetiological myths is their unique capacity to conceptualize both cultural memory and political space. The standard 'ever since then' formula of aetiological narratives is indeed only possible in the presence of a directly perceptible material anchor (a natural feature, a monument, or a ritual) that can be declared to preserve the memory of how things were in the mythical past.[2] But most Greek aetiological myths also involve movement in space. Myths of gods and heroes either traveling with the express goal to found a city or a sanctuary or simply leaving enduring traces on their longer journeys not only serve to account for the spread of Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean but also cohere into a mental map of socio-cultural links among countless Greek communities.[3] Thus, in addition to creating the sense of physical continuity within specific locations, aetiological myths serve to endow local traditions with a larger meaning by connecting them to the overarching network of shared cultural memories.[4]

Besides, as the title of this paper indicates, cult and mythical origins define ethnic identities of the Hellenistic period. Identity became an issue of increasing prominence

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[1]   See Rigsby (1986: pp. 351f.), Castelli (1994: pp. 75f.), and Cameron (1995: pp. 298f.), for Rhianus' possible date of *floruit* in the second half of the third century BC.

[2]   Kowalzig (2007: pp. 25–32, esp. p. 27): "The visible locality or the ritual space where the story happens or a rite is still to be observed form the most important link between the events portrayed in the aetiological tale and the religious reality which the myth seeks to explain. […] After this one point of metamorphosis in a primordial time, the *aition* claims, the state of affairs has always remained the same." Cf. Asper (2013: pp. 64–69), a brief discussion of what he calls "embedded aetiologies".

[3]   Kowalzig (2007: p. 24): "Religious aetiology creates a map of Greece entirely shaped by itinerant gods, heroes and humans from a distant past, who establish cults and rituals, and set up and carry around cult images and other spoils from a time long ago. Apollo founded his shrine at Delphi, Demeter hers at Eleusis; Herakles established the mysteries at Thasos and the cult of Zeus at Olympia; and Diomedes carted around the Palladion of Trojan Athena to the Italian West. […] Few are the cult places in Greece which are not either themselves the product of an individual story or linked into a mythical cycle: the Athenian hero Theseus travels around the Aegean on his way to and from the Minotaur on Crete and litters the island world with cults giving testimony to his journey […]. If we traced all the voyages of the gods and heroes on a giant map of the Mediterranean, positioning little figures where they left behind a cult, few spots would remain blank."

[4]   Cf. Malkin (2011: pp. 3–64, esp. 3): "Greek civilization came into being just when the Greeks were splitting apart. It took the form familiar to us during the Archaic period at the time Greeks were separating, migrating, and founding new communities in ever-widening horizons, reaching both the western Mediterranean and the eastern Black Sea", cf. also Kirichenko (2018: pp. 1–3).

in Hellenistic period, and the question of "who people were and how they defined them-selves" in the new cultural and political environments of the Hellenistic world has always been the central theme. Rachel Mairs (2010) rightly points out that "the conquests of Alexander the Great, and the subsequent evolution of the various Hellenistic kingdoms, meant the introduction of Greek culture, political control, and often sizeable immigrant populations, to the diverse lands of the former Persian Empire". What is more, with reference to the Hellenistic world, "identity" more often has primarily cultural or ethnic implications, especially in Rhianus' epic fragments.

2. *Hic et nunc* in Rhianus' epic narratives

In the Hellenistic period the interest in aetiology becomes very strong and there is an increasing focus on obscure and local stories from all over the Greek world and beyond, made accessible by means of the large amount of scholarly material collected in the Al-exandrian library. This fits in with the notion that "as the world became larger the need for a shared Greek past became stronger as well".[5] A typical aspect of aetiological poetry is that it draws attention to the connections between the past and the present and that, in fact, the present is regarded as the result of the past events. Because poets are free to select and emphasize elements in the past and present as they wish, it is worth investigat-ing whether their connection of past and present implies a view of the world which may suggest a certain reading of their work.[6]

My presentation suggests that Rhianus follows similar traces with that of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* in his aetiological narrative, as far as the concept of time and space is concerned. In Apollonius' epic poem the journey of the Argonauts results in a wide range of monuments, rituals, and other traces along their route. In *Argonautica* the start-ing point is the Argonauts' adventures in the past, which leave traces that "even now" people can observe, whereas in Callimachus' *Aetia* the starting point is the present in which the narrator is confronted by traces from the past which seeks to explain: in both approaches the notion that past and present are closely related as "cause" and "result" is prominent. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of Rhianus' ethnographical poetry will clearly demonstrate that the powerful aetiological drive of his epics works to break down the distance between *hic et nunc* and to problematize the nature of epic time. This is merely one of several strategies by which Rhianus collapses the hierarchy of time which he inherited with the epic tradition. In Rhianus' aetiologies we find a strong connection between the narrative present and the mythical past as a "betrayal" of the Homeric tradi-tion. The absolute devotion of the past in Homer collapses in Rhianus' aetiology, where we find a sense of cultural continuation. Both genealogy and aetiology, as we can see

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5   Cf. Harder (2012: pp. 25-26), on aetiology in Hellenistic poetry.
6   Cf. Harder (1994 and 2003: pp. 290-291), on the interconnection of the past and the present in aetiologi-cal narratives.

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below, leap from the crucial beginning, whether legendary founder or one-time ritual event, to the present, with a tendency to elide all time in between.[7]

2.1 Apia and the revival of the Achaean League (*Ach*. fr. 13 P.)

In the second book of *Achaica*, Rhianus begins his narrative with the genealogy of Apis, son of Phoroneus, son of Inachus:

Ὑμετέρη τοι, τέκνα, Φορωνέος Ἰναχίδαο
ἀρχῆθεν γενεή· τοῦ δὲ κλυτὸς ἐκγένετ᾽ Ἄπις,
ὅς ῥ᾽ Ἀπίην ἐφάτιξε καὶ ἀνέρας Ἀπιδανῆας.

"Your generation, children, originates from Phoroneus, son of Inachus; from him descended the glorious Apis, who named the land Apia and the men Apidanes."
(*Ach*. fr. 13 P.)

Rhianus says that after Apis the land was named Apia and its people Apidanes. The mythical tradition offers different versions of Apis' genealogy. Rhianus follows the tradition according to which Apis was the son of Phoroneus and nymph Teledike (or Laodike), a grandson of the river Inachus and Oceanis Melia, and a brother of Niobe. These prefatory verses seem to initiate a song of a mythical origin from the old (ἀρχῆθεν). The use of the second person plural (ὑμετέρη) shows that Rhianus addresses the inhabitants (τέκνα) of Peloponnese, considering them descendants of Apis.[8] The main question raised by these hexameters is why Rhianus begins his narrative in the second book of his ethnographical epic about Achaia with the mythical origin of Apis. The significant name Apia denoting the peninsula of Peloponnese could indicate that the poet tried to build a quite comprehensive Peloponnesian *periegesis*. Apia could be a geographical allusion recalling the revival of the Achaean League by Aratus of Sicyon in 251 BC. Apis came from Argos, or Arcadia (or Sicyon), and saved the Peloponnese from serpents. Similarly, Aratus plotting from Argos against the tyranny of Sicyon, managed to free his native city and secure its accession to the Achaean League (Spanakis 2018: pp. 316–317).

Here Hesiod's *Theogony* is evoked, as ancient poems standardly were, by its 'opening'. Comparing Hesiod with the Hellenistic poet Rhianus, we observe that aetiology takes the place of genealogy as the predominant explanatory mode, but the similarities between the two are as important as the differences. Genealogy, at least as practised in Greece, is an even more strongly teleological narrative form than aetiology, and particularly Rhianus' aetiology, with its frequently disconcerting randomness. Genealogy constructs the past out of the present for particular contextualised purposes (Fantuzzi & Hunter 2004: pp. 51–53). Both genealogy and aetiology leap from the crucial beginning,

7   Fantuzzi & Hunter (2004: pp. 51–60), on Hesiodic elements in Callimachus' aetiology and *Aetia* in general.

8   For the common formula ὑμετέρη γενεή, cf. *Il*. 20.214, *Od*. 16.117, *H. Hom. Ven*. 201, 219, Nonn. *D*. 10.115, see also Spanakis (2018: pp. 315–317), on Apis' origin and the foundation of the Apia land (Peloponnese).

whether legendary founder (here Apis, Phoroneus' son) or one-time ritual event, to the present (τέκνα meaning the residents of the peninsula of Peloponnese), with a tendency to elide all time in between. Moreover, the Hesiodic concern with sequence and order, the telling ἐξ ἀρχῆς, 'from the beginning' (*Theog.* 45), is replaced in the *Achaica* by a sequencing dependent (ἀρχῆθεν) upon the interests of the poet-enquirer. The immanent teleology of the *Theogony* has been replaced by a purely human, poetic ordering.

2.2 Cult origins and the foundation of the Olympic Games (*El*. frr. 21 and 24 P.)

The city of Λαπέρσα (*FGrHist* 265 F 7 = fr. 21 Pow.) mentioned by Rhianus in the first book of *Eliaca*, is difficult to contextualize. Stephanus' entry on a city named Λᾶ (λ 1 Bill.) is essential in our understanding of Λαπέρσα. The city's earliest testimony is *Il*. II 585 οἵ τε Λάαν … ἀμφενέμοντο. The city was apparently located on a high rock, thus the name Λᾶς (meaning "stone") and its inhabitants Λᾶοι. According to Strabo (VIII 5,3), the Dioscuri conquered Las, which was named after them Λαπέρσα (Λᾶς and πέρθω, 'conquer'). The Dioscuri were already invoked as τὼ Λαπέρσα by Sophocles (fr. 957,1 R.²) and similarly by Lyc. 511 τοῖς ἡμιθνήτοις διπτύχοις Λαπερσίοις. Lycophron also mentions a Ζεὺς Λαπέρσιος at v. 1369, identified as Ζεὺς Ἀγαμέμνων by a scholium and honoured with a temple at the Attic deme of Lapersai (schol. Lyc. 1369b L.).

Rhianus' preference for the name Λαπέρσα, instead of Λᾶς, recalls the Spartan mythical origin of a city conquered by the Dioscuri, brothers of the Spartan Helen and protectors of the region of Laconia.[9] Shipley (2000: p. 384) points out that Las was an Eleutherolaconian city, where Philip V was repulsed (cf. Paus. III 24,6) and it remained Spartan after the battle of Sellasia (222 BC). In the 230s, Cleomenes III revived Sparta and turned it into a considerable force in the Peloponnese and an important rival of the Achaean League.[10] Sparta's relationship with Elis had always been one of rivalry (cf. the Elean war in c. 401/400 BC) reflecting a Spartan goal of annexing Elis and controlling the coastline of the North-West Peloponnese. Accordingly, it would be understandable that Rhianus would mention Laconian places in the *Eliaca*, recalling warfare and political involvement between Sparta and Elis from the earlier fifth century to his own time.

Finally, the genealogical fragment on Amythaon and Ἀμυθαονία in the fourth book is the only explicit reference to a city within the Elean territory (Spanakis 2018: pp. 325-326, n. 70, 71). Ἀμυθαονία, near Pylos in ancient Triphylia, is traced back to its founder Amythaon, who is said to have moved from Iolcus in Thessaly to Triphylia with his half-brother, Neleus.[11] Amythaon is also mentioned among the founders of the Olympic Games in Pausanias' account (5.8.2), together with his half-brothers, Neleus and Pelias. Elis, of course, was responsible for organizing the Olympic Games in the

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9   Cf. Spanakis (2018: p. 322), on Lapersa in Rhianus' *Eliaca*.

10   Cf. Plut. *Cleom*. 4; cf. also Polyb. 2.46.2-6.

11   Cf. Hellan. *FGrHist* 4 F 124b, *schol. Il*. 2.591.

sanctuary of Olympian Zeus.[12] Hence, Rhianus was probably interested in narrating the establishment of the Olympic Games in a hexameter poem about their host, Elis (as perhaps too in fr. 20 P. about Heraea, Melaenae and the ancient road leading to Olympia).

2.3 Thessalian origins and the genealogy of Pyrrhus (*Thess*. frr. 25, 27 and 28 P.)

The most conspicuous fragment of the *Thessalica* is fr. 25 P., deriving from a *scholium* of Apollonius Rhodius:

> Πυρραίην ποτὲ τήν γε παλαιότεροι καλέεσκον
> Πύρρης Δευκαλίωνος ἀπ' ἀρχαίης ἀλόχοιο,
> Αἱμονίην δ' ἐξαῦτις ἀφ' Αἵμονος, ὅν ῥα Πελασγὸς
> γείνατο φέρτατον υἱόν· ὁ δ' αὖ τέκε Θεσσαλὸν Αἵμων,
> τοῦ δ' ἄπο Θεσσαλίην λαοὶ μετεφημίξαντο.

> "Once the ancients called it Pyrrhaiē from Pyrrhē, the ancient bride of Deucalion; later they called it Haimonie from Haimon, whom Pelasgos begot as best son; and in turn Haimon begot Thessalos, and from this one the people changed the name in Thessaly".

Rhianus narrates the successive changes of the Thessalian name through the mythical ages using temporal adverbs, such as τὸ παλαιὸν.. ποτὲ ... ἐξαῦτις... αὖ... The tendency to change regions' names (*metonomasia*) was a topos in the Hellenistic poetry, as attested by Callimachus (fr. 412 Pfeiffer), to which also this fragment may refer. According to Rhianus the first name of Thessaly, Pyrrhaiē, would be derived from Pyrrhē, Deucalion's bride. Here the poet links up with an ancient tradition, harking back to Hellanicus and Hecateus and less to Hesiod, according to whom Deucalion, son of Prometheus, reigned over Thessaly.[13] The second name derives from Haimon, son of Pelasgus. Haimonia is a name regularly used in Hellenistic poetry and indicates Thessaly in heroic ages harking back to the Argonauts.[14] This name also referred to mountain Ossa.[15] Haimonians resided Magnesia and Larisa, while the name Haimonia was also prominent for Pelasgians in the Thessalian tradition.[16] The last name derived from Thessalos, son of Haimon. Rhianus' quotation is followed by a scholium (*Sch*. Ap. Rhod. *Arg*. 3.1090b) and claims

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12 For the origins of the ancient Olympic Games, cf. Yalouris (1998: pp. 167–172); Nelson (2007); Hubbard (2007).

13 *Schol*. in Ap. Rhod. *Arg*. 3.1086 e 1085 = *FGrHist* 4 F6a–b = F32a–b Ambaglio, on Hellanicus; *Schol*. in Ap. Rhod. *Arg*. 4.266 = *FGrHist* 1 F14 = F16 Nenci, on Hecateus; frr. 2, 4 e 6 M.–W., on Hesiod.

14 Cf. Ap. Rhod. *Arg*. 2.504; 690; 3.1090; 1244; 4.1000; 1075.

15 Cf. Ael. *NA* 8.11.

16 Cf. Sakellariou (1977: p. 251); see also an inscription (1st century BC) from Larissa about an epigram celebrating the birth of Haimon from Melia and Zeus, "joy for the Pelasgians" (*IG* IX 2, 582); an inscription from Thera, containing an epigram about Admetus, son of Theocleidas, priest of Apollo Carneus, begins by mentioning the Haimonians of the ancient Pherai (*IG* XII 3, 869).

a different tradition from Homer, narrating that Thessaly was founded by Thessalus, son of Heracleides and father of Pheidippus and Antiphus, the Coan rulers (Pherecyd. *FGrHist* 3 F 78).

An important chapter of the most ancient mythical history of the text touched by Rhianus concerns the figure of Neoptolemus, mentioned as the father of the eponymous Ethnestes, from whom derived the homonymous Thessalian population (*Thess.* fr. 28 P.), and Genoas, from whom derived the Thessalian people Genoaioi (*Thess.* fr. 27 P.). According to Homer, at the end of the Trojan war Neoptolemus returned to his father's kingdom (*Od.* 3.187-188; 4.3-9), though the *Nostoi* foretold a longer return path than before arriving in Phthia crossing the country of the Molossians.[17] Subsequently the Neoptolemus saga will acquire Epirotic characters and the Aeacidean hero will become the progenitor of the Molossians. This process knows several steps, but reaches the most complete form in the period of Pyrrhus Molossus, who will use the motif of the common Aeacidean ancestry to affirm his kinship of the Thessalians and endorse his right to dominate over Thessaly, as it is alluded to an epigram affixed to the weapons he dedicated to the temple of Athena Itonia (Paus. 1.13.2-3 = *AP* 6.130).[18]

The Aeacidean genealogy not only provides an explanation for the origins of the ruling dynasty but, like the Latin legend of Aeneas, it aims to be an instrument of ethnic aetiology. Therefore, in Neoptolemus' myth, the name that the sources have given to Neoptolemus' descendant (who is anonymous in Euripides) is filled with deep significance. According the version reported by Pausanias (1.11.1-3), Andromache begat three sons by Neoptolemus (Molossus, Pielus and Pergamus) and Cestrinus by Helenus. Molossus succeeded Helenus after his death, and reigned over the people named after him, the Molossians. Cestrinus was the king of a country near that of his half-brother. Pielus remained in Epirus and became the founder of a branch of the Molossian royal family; Pergamus instead moved to Asia Minor, where he founded the homonymous city of Pergamon. Beneath this mythical genealogy it is not hard to trace the signs of a policy designed to stress the links between the different Epirotic tribes and the Attalid dynasty ruled in the Pergamon kingdom. Troad was a small part of the Pergamon kingdom. This process represents an enlargement of the mythological category called by Malkin (2004: p. 166) "heroic genealogy" (self-attribution by royal families of heroic ancestors for the purposes of self-glorification) and is part of a diplomatic strategy aimed at justifying alliances and domination on a genealogical basis.

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17 Cf. *Nosti Arg.* p. 95, 13-16 Bernabe = p. 67, 20-24 Davies.

18 Cf. Bottin (1925: pp. 67-76); Cross (1932: pp. 100-102); Delcourt (1965: pp. 98-99); Pousadoux (1998: pp. 419-443); Funke (2000), on the Aekidean myth and political propaganda in Pyrrhus Molossus. See also Paus. 1.13.2-3, about the epigram on Pyrrhus and his relation to Itonia Athena: Pyrrhus appealing to the Thessalians and defining himself Aeacidean, not only enhances kinship with the Thessalian ethnos, but also presents himself as the liberator of Thessaly from Macedonian control. See also Hammond (1992: p. 307) and Flacelière (1968: p. 302), on the importance of this dedication in the federal sanctuary of Thessaly.

2.4 Mysteries at Andania and the re-foundation of Messene (*Mess*. fr. 55 P.)

Pausanias' evidence is important for two reasons: first, the relationship between *Messeniaca* by Myron of Priene and those by Rhianus; second, nature and character of Rhianus' *Messeniaca*. Pausanias makes documentary use of epic, with a keen exegesis of geographical and genealogical issues in particular. The example of Messenia is of interest, in that the loss of political autonomy prevented a local historiography from being established in Messenia prior to 370 BC: the understanding of Messenian identity therefore had to be derived from epic poetry, for accounts of remotest history, and from oral traditions for the Messenian wars and more recent events.[19] In this perspective, we find epic poetry being used as a matrix for new epic compositions (Rhianus of Crete) and as providing the grounds for erudite discussions, such as those in Pausanias.

The Elaion mentioned in Rhianus' verse is not otherwise known:

πάρ τε τρηχὺν Ἐλαιὸν ὑπὲρ δρυμόν τε Λύκοιο

"By rugged Elaion and above Lykos' grove"
(*Mess*. fr. 55 P.)

Pausanias (8.41.7; 42.1-2) recalls a place with this name near Phigaleia in Arcadia, known as the seat of the cult of Black Demeter (Melaina); and quotes the line as a proof of the existence of the Mysteries at Andania. According to his account these rituals are tied to the founding of the city, since Caucon son of Phlyus (eponymous hero of the Attic deme of Phlya) showed Messene, together with her husband Polycaon the mythical founder of the region called Messenia and of the city of Andania (4.1.2), the 'Mysteries of the Great Goddesses' (Demeter, and Kore under the name of Hagne: Paus. 4.33.4-5), bringing them from Eleusis.[20]

One must ask: "How were the Mysteries of Andania related to Rhianus' narrative about the Messenian Aristomenes?" In Pausanias' account there are two moments at which the reference to the Mysteries is important: in expectation of Eira's fall, foretold by Delphic oracle, Aristomenes secures the aporrheton (secret object), namely the oracles of Lycus prophesying the return of the Messenians to their homeland, in the 'most desolate place of mount Ithome' (Paus. 4.20.1-4); after Leuctra the 're-founding' of Messene is linked to two dreams in which the figure of the old hierophant orders first Epaminondas to 'reconstruct' Messene, then Epiteles, general of the Argives, to seek on Mount Ithome a bronze hydria containing the small plates engraved with the Mysteries of the Great Goddesses, the aporrheton buried by Aristomenes himself (Paus. 4.26.6-8). The episode of the dreams of Epaminondas and Epiteles can hardly have Rhianus as a source, unless he spoke of it as predicting the future, while in the case of

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19   Cf. Nicolai (2015: pp. 1123-1124), on the importance of epic poetry in Pausanias' narrative about the Messenian history.

20   Cf. Bremmer (2014: pp. 82-99), on local mysteries and local cults at Andania.

the concealment of the aporrheton by Aristomenes on Mount Ithome it couldn't be excluded, despite the difficulty to locate the story in a place abandoned by Messenians at the beginning of the war. Castelli claims that it could be a contamination carried by Pausanias, who will have transferred to Andania an episode that took place elsewhere in Rhianus' poem, to highlight once again the role of these Mysteries in Messenian history and identity (Castelli 1998: p. 14).

3. *Aetia* and Greek identity

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Rhianus chooses places and myths that Greeks of the third century BC, and especially immigrants to Egypt or Syria and Italy, would enjoy reading because they reminded them of mainland Greece and of their Greek identity.[21] For example, in the *Messeniaca* (*P. Oxy.* 2552 A/B = *SH* 923,16-18 ..]. ετερην ξείνην διζ[ͺησόμεθαͺ |]εισιν ἐπὶ προτέροισι [θεμͺείλͺοις |]...[ ] πυργωσομεθ[ͺπ . ͺ "we will search for another foreign land ... on the ancient foundation ... to strengthen ..."), the speaker, probably the Messenian Aristomenes or his son Gorgo, invites the companions to abandon their homeland and to seek a new home.[22] What is more, Rhianus' reference to Ἄγυλλα (*FGrHist* 265 F 31 = fr. 48 P.), an Etruscan city (of Caere) with a Thessalian origin in the Thessalica, is a reminiscence of the spread of 'Pelasgoi' and their vicissitudes out of Thessaly.

Rhianus' concern for identity did not exist in a vacuum. In order to understand how identity is constructed by his works, they must be placed in their author's intellectual, social and political context (Preston 2001: p. 89). *Aetia*, that is, 'Causes' or 'Reasons', link Rhianus' ethnographical poetry to the aetiological tradition, which includes Hellenistic poetry, most notably the *Aetia* of Callimachus, numerous, mostly lost works on local Greek history. These aetiological works focus their interest in explanation and causation, and in the origins of places, peoples and customs, which clearly connects such texts with central contemporary concerns. Remarkably, Preston (2001: p. 94) considers that "the pervasive tactic, in the aetiological tradition, of using reasons located in the past, often in the remote and mythical past, to explain the state of things in the present, is therefore clearly linked to the question of identity". First, by repeatedly connecting the present and the past by *aetia*, aetiological texts assert the persistence of identity - of places, peoples and customs - over time. Secondly, the topics discussed, for example the foundation

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21 Cf. Burstein (2008: pp. 59-77), for the Greek identity in the Hellenistic Period.

22 The phrase ἐπὶ προτέροισι θεμείλια recalls Callimachus' *H. Ap.* 15 ἐστήξειν δὲ τὸ τεῖχος ἐπ' ἀρχαίοισι θεμέθλοις: the word θεμείλια is rarer than Callimachus' θέμεθλα, cf. also *Il.* 12.28, 23.255, *H. Hym. Ap.* 254, Call. *H. Del.* 260, Opp. *Hal.* 5.680, Cyr. Hyp. *PA* 9.808. Verses 16-18 also recall Nonn. *D.* 26.55 οἵ τε Σεσίνδιον αἰπύ, καὶ οἳ λινοερκέι κύκλῳ | Γάζον ἐπυργώσαντο λινοπλέκτοισι δομαίοις, | ἀρραγές, εὐποίητον ἐυκλώστοισι θεμέθλοις. Lloyd-Jones & Parsons (*SH* 923, *ad loc.*) and Lobel (1964: p. 56) suggest that Rhianus' verses are a reminiscent of the Messenians' future return and the reconstruction of Messene by Epaminondas. However, Livrea (1984: pp. 599-600) conjectured the foundation of Zankle: the metaphorical use of the lines προτέροισι θεμείλοις generally recall the historical memory of the Messenians in a new foundation (*ktisis* motif), cf. Verg. *Aen.* 2.293-295.

of cities, or the legendary migrations of peoples, or the origins of a particular custom, are key elements in the construction of identity. Works of aetiology, far from being dull antiquarianism, were deeply implicated in the construction of identity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Rhianus' immense knowledge and erudition is displayed by his ethnographical poetry, ranging over the obscurest details of the Hellenistic Peloponnese and the Thessalian territory. Rhianus represents lost identities and ancient civilizations and is competent to explain the significance of the mythological past upon his own historical present. His erudition encompasses both the canon of famous writers and poets, such as Homer, or his contemporaries, Callimachus and Apollonius Rhodius. The constant appeal to the authority of the past to legitimate assertions in the present was typical of the Greek elite in the late Hellenistic periods and beyond. Rhianus' repeated explanation of the present by the past, the typical strategy of the aetiological tradition, uses the authority of the past to legitimate his interpretations. Identity and culture are thus represented as unchanging, connecting the remotest past to the contemporary world. The sense of 'Greek culture' as real entity is reinforced. On the other hand, there is a tension between the local differences of the poleis and *ethne*, and a sense of a unified Greek culture and identity. The second-century Greek writer Pausanias (one of our basic sources for Rhianus' *Messeniaca*) uses the construction of religious identity as a way of transcending the realities of intra-Greek strife in the classical world. It is highly possible that Rhianus uses the past to create, or better, to establish Greek identity in the past in a Peloponnesian *periegesis*.

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