

The characteristics of myth through Hercules and Achelous battle

Trying to give a definition to myth we can say that it is a fictional, made up narration often with symbolic or figurative elements. Generally we can say that a myth which contains fictional or actual facts is trying to interpret the creation of the world, to show how the world was made and at the same time the forces that ruins it.

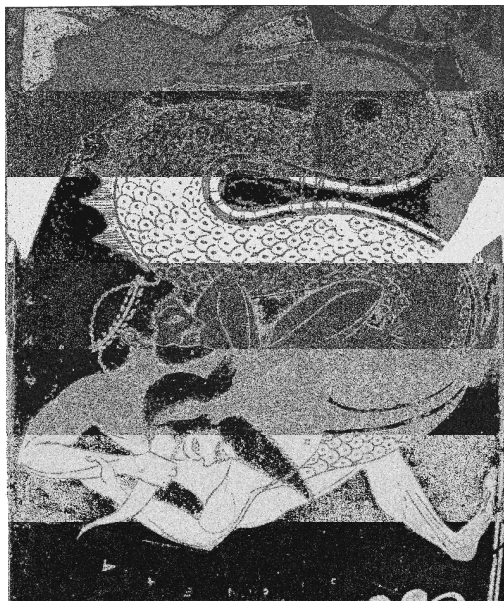
Concerning the reasons why humans create myths are numerous. One basic reason is the need to give answers to the questions that bothered him feeling weak in front of nature's greatness, not able to explain the natural phenomena and logically explain forces and facts that influenced his life. Thus during the period that human was still in the prelogical state of his culture, myth was the only way to express and give answers to the questions that bothered him. Also human used myths in order to remember the things he saw, lived or imagined.

It is a fact that myths were the fundamental elements in both Ancient and Modern Greek culture, so even today we can notice the values and attitudes of the period in question such as love, nature, beauty, the greatness of the human soul and values.

Myths according to content and ideas are distinguished in various categories. The first ones are those which are trying to interpret the creation of the world and gods. Those are called Theogonic or Cosmogonic. There are myths that are trying to interpret the creation and origin of the human kind, the Anthropogonic myths. A third category are those referring to important wars of the past.

Those are Argonautica, Trojan War and the war between Aitolians-Couritians. In those myths some historical truth may exist which is difficult to prove. Those myths can be called historical myths. The last category is the Heroical myths which refer to the life and fights of individual heroes.

Concerning the main characters we can say that they are the Olympian Gods and semi-Gods. Those sometimes have human form, other times animal and beast forms (Achelous). Semi-Gods are special people who have divine origin (Hercules). Their main characteristic was their huge natural strength. They were handsome, strong, wise and brave capable to accomplish works and labours that are over the human nature. Talking about heroes in Greek mythology we often meet the "benevolent" hero who gets rid of bad people and beasts.



The myth

According to the myth, Hercules went down to Hade to take Cerberus, a dreadful dog with three heads and he met Meleagros who asked Hercules to marry Deianeira. Achelous the king of Plevrona had asked Deianeira as his wife too. Achelous was an ugly creature with three hideous forms, that of a bull, snake and a human with bull head and from his thick beard water was running. Hercules wanted to fulfill his promise, went to Calydon and gave an end to Deianeira's torment by asking her as his wife because Oineas did not want to give his daughter to Achelous and Deianeira herself did not want

to marry that beast. So there was a fight between the river-God Achelous and the semi-god Hercules.

Hercules a symbol of strength and bravery managed after a difficult battle to break the left horn of Achelous and made him abandon the fight and give up his strength.

But according to the myth Achelous wanted to take back his horn so he gave Hercules the “Amalthean Horn” which Hercules asked from Amalthea, Ocean’s daughter and offered it to his father in law, Oineas. That horn had the power to give food and drinks for ever. So he took Deianeira as his wife.

Looking closely to the hero of the myth, Hercules, we can see that he is a model of virtue and intelligence.

By offering the horn, Hercules shows that he belongs to those gods who give fertility and euphoria. He goes against to the river-god with his own body and this symbolizes the Titanic human effort to tame the river.

The fight between Achelous and Hercules symbolizes the efforts of ancient Acarnanian people to build big works for fencing the banks of the river.

The “Amalthean Horn” symbolizes the prosperity of the land after the fencing work. But the horns (Achelous’ and Amalthea’s) are the same because a part of the river is used to cultivate the ground so that they can have the prosperity which the second horn symbolizes. Hercules’ victory shows the strength and superiority of the human mind.

It is a fact that Ancient worshiped rivers as Gods. That fact can be interpreted in various ways. Rivers were springs of life for the surrounding area, communicative points and the centre of the human economic activity supporting the native population and culture. Another reason was the fact that the fierce river created the sense of divine. Ancient Greek gave different forms to rivers, a river with curves reminded them the image of a snake and the power of the river to destroy everything on his way and that was similar to the image of a bull. For example the body of a bull and the heart of a strong man with a beard from which water was running and his forehead had horns showed the movement of the river. Achelous was the greater river-god son of Ocean and Titheas in honour of which games were performed in Acarnania and offerings too which were suggested by the Dodoni oracle.

In the battle with Hercules at first he appears as a man with a bull’s head, but when Hercules hit him, he fell on the ground and was transformed into a snake. And when Hercules was about to strangle him, the river-god was transformed into a bull with huge horns and attacked Hercules. Achelous symbolizes the water spirit which destroys all human work when passing by.

The battle between Hercules and Achelous was the theme in a lot of ancient pottery but also in more modern paintings such as those in the Metropolitan museum of New York and the Louvre museum. It was the theme in coins and jewellery. The forms were bull with human head, human with horns in his head or with the Tritonian snake form or even as a Centaur.