

Ancient Characters and Patterns of Migration and Their Role in Understanding the Current Crisis of Migrants and Refugees

Abstract:

The aim of the present paper is to address the issue of the role played by well-known ancient characters in creating the established image of the migrant/exile/refugee/asylum seeker, conferring a likely understanding of the refugee crisis that mankind faces today, from East to West.

The three characters presented in this paper lie at the intersection between stability and growth, and political instability and change. The narratives surrounding the ancient Egyptian official Sinuhe, Josephus of Canaan, or even the wily Greek hero Odysseus, King of Ithaca and 'master of any craft', who facilitated the conquest of Troy, reveal the metamorphoses and archetypal experiences of fugitive migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in unknown territories, as well as their relationship to facing the Other(ness) through difference, whatever form that Other(ness) might take. These narratives and famous ancient characters have entered the cultural and ideational heritage of mankind, owing to their manner of relating to the *Other* - world, landscape, population, traditions, mindsets and, in particular, by the way their experiences marked and transformed their identities. Sinuhe, Josephus and Odysseus embody and epitomize human intelligence in action. Their accounts speak of people for whom the various ways of forced displacement such as migration or refugee status have prompted both positive and negative feedback. They are archetypal characters in whose experiences all of mankind has found universal patterns and potential solutions to migratory phenomena which humans experienced regularly. Discussing all this, one may emphasize that education and literature (read acquiring *knowledge*) are our only salvation.

Keywords: Sinuhe, Josephus, Odysseus, migration, refugee

Introductory remarks

At present, the issue of forced migration has reached new highs, becoming one of the biggest global challenges facing us today. According to the latest report of the United Nations Refugee Agency, there were over 79.5 million forcibly displaced individuals worldwide at the end of 2019¹, as a consequence of violence, conflicts, persecutions, human rights violations or events seen to considerably affect public order. That is a total increase of 300.000 individuals over the previous years' figures. The responsibility for this alarming number, a record high, falls on relevant factors such as persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations. Forced migration has variously been labelled as a security threat, implicating several global categories of displaced persons (refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people); as an economic problem, as a social burden, and as a polarizing political issue. Throughout history, when global economic crises hit historical highs, potential migration crises, population displacements and forced refugees were pulled along in the slipstream.

For contemporary scholars, the refugee crisis and the phenomenon and processes of migration have promising prospects for achieving a deeper understanding of their root causes; of the reactions of migrants facing the unknown the new and unfamiliar; of how spaces and mentalities are altered; of the momentous transformations underway and the new image of a changing world; of the meaning of the crises such migrations are responsible for; and of finding solutions to these through input from both sides (both from migrants/refugees themselves, and from their destinations) in order to better cope with such a crisis in the future.

For many writers, however, the migrant's journey could be shaped into a narrative that blends both real and imaginary elements. The transition from one part of the world to another is filled with anticipation, conflict and inherent (literary) drama. While, for most contemporary travellers, trains and planes have merely become mundane means of transport, for a migrant the same venture can herald life-changing transformations that remake their life through the journey itself. It is not that travellers would remain unchanged after such experience, but rather that the experience and hardship of forced displacement will greatly affect the perception of the observer – in this case, that of the refugee or migrant.

¹ Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019, UNHCR The Refugee Agency 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>.

Arnold Toynbee described and partially explained the fates of individual civilizations in terms of the “challenge and response” model: civilizations in their growth phase successfully solve problems which are, usually, physical in nature at first, but that later take on spiritual and societal qualities, serving to generate awe and inspiration within the societies attempting their resolution².

On the historical scale, migrations and refugee crises are consequences of and responses to such problems facing civilizations. At times, civilizations managed to overcome such challenges, while at others they succumbed in their attempts.

The concepts: a not-so-different issue after-all?

While there are indisputable differences between the terms *migrant* and *refugee*, they often were, and still are, used interchangeably. This is why, with respect to the status of Sinuhe, Josephus or Odysseus, the secondary bibliographic sources cited in this paper provide a rather unclear interpretation of their condition as foreigners, muddling the internationally legally accepted categories. Given this reality, the issue addressed herein therefore becomes either one of identifying certain shared features between the two notions of migrant and refugee or, conversely, a matter of resolving the confusion between the two.

Various factors, such as the pressure of a quick understanding (and its direct consequences: misunderstanding and misuse) or of a deep, multifaceted reality with closely related characteristics, often lead people to assign ambiguous and confusing meanings to certain concepts, and the ones addressed here are no exception. The psychological mechanisms of mixing concepts close in meaning (yet sometimes divergent) were explained by Onghena, who addressed the very issue of the distinction between *migrant* and *refugee*.

“Some words acquire an almost magical sense, activating non-existent structures meant to act as tranquillisers when dealing with the new uncertainty. They become abstract terms that convert what is happening into anonymous, indefinite events that (most of the time) mask political arrogance and genuine opposition. Their job is to reduce the uncertainty, but they help neither to understand it nor to make it comprehensible. They neutralise the uncertain by setting it in an everyday vocabulary, and in this way allow phenomena,

² Toynbee, 1947, p. 273.

situations and problems to be handled with fleeting, almost instantaneous comprehension. Nevertheless, the debate that has arisen shows that there is no such instantaneous comprehension and the challenge of placing mixed flows of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with smuggling and people trafficking operations is a symptom of an imbalance between the international response to the forced displacements and the needs of the displaced.”³

On a personal as well as on societal level, the three characters of Sinuhe, Josephus and Odysseus are closely related to times of dramatic change – which is exactly what humankind is facing and experiencing at present (yet another way of ‘crossing borders’, and particularly geographically fluid ones at that!): crossing borders of any kind.

The established discourse on the three characters focused on in this paper appears to somehow be case-insensitive regarding their status as foreigners – *fugitive / refugee / migrant / immigrant / asylum seeker*. However, not all *migrants* are *refugees*; and yet, sometimes refugees can fall under the category of a migrant. Despite their obvious differences, there are also similarities between the two, with respect to international law and to their different psychological responses to change, which is why people might confuse them. In both cases, *they will face various types of stress or shocks associated with paradigm shifts, cultural changes, as well as a forced adaptation to an unpredictable life with new requirements, having to master a new language and customs* (author’s emphasis)-. In effect, for people entering a new country (whether by choice or due to persecution) this will always constitute a stressful process accompanied by an imperative need to seek out a sense of security within their lives. Therefore, for the sake of historical truth and of scientific and legal rigour, the basic differences between these categories are explained hereinafter⁴:

– **Fugitive**: “a person who flees, especially from a legal process, persecution, or danger”⁵; “someone who is running away or hiding from the police or a dangerous situation”⁶; “a person who is fleeing, from prosecution, intolerable circumstances, etc.”⁷; “someone

³ Onghena, 2015.

⁴ *Migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants: What’s the difference?*, Explainer, June 22, 2018, Last updated December 11, 2018, International Rescue Committee 2019.

⁵ “Fugitive”, The Free Dictionary.

⁶ “Fugitive”, Cambridge Dictionary.

⁷ “Fugitive”, Dictionary .

who has escaped from captivity or is in hiding”⁸. The concept of such flight stems from words that all trace their ultimate root to the Latin verb *fugere* (“to flee”, “to avoid”): among them, ‘refugee’ (see below). The status of a fugitive person is defined in different ways, with every definition implying positive or negative connotations and domestic and international legal issues related to the person in question, the answer to which turns them into either an internationally wanted person, a refugee, an asylum seeker, a migrant, or an immigrant.

– **Refugee:** someone who has been forced to flee his/her home because of war, violence or persecution, often without warning. The term ‘refugee’ comes from the Latin verb *refugere* (“to run away” or “to escape”), itself formed from the same Latin verb *fugere* as ‘fugitive’, above. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a *refugee* is a person who, because of a justified fear of persecution on various grounds such as race, religion⁹, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion¹⁰, finds himself outside their native country and cannot or does not want to use the protection of that country¹¹. They are unable to return home, unless and until conditions in their native lands are safe for them again.

– **Migrant:** someone who moves from place to place (either within their country or across borders), usually for economic reasons such as seasonal work; someone who purposefully chooses to leave their country of origin behind and move abroad in search of a better life. Similar to immigrants (see below), they were not forced to leave their native countries because of persecution or violence, but, rather, are seeking better opportunities¹².

– **Immigrant:** someone who makes a conscious decision to leave their home behind and move to a foreign country with the intention of settling there. Immigrants are frequently subjected to long and complex verification and vetting processes before being allowed to enter a new country. Many of them eventually become perfectly legal permanent residents and citizens. Immigrants look into their destinations, seek out job opportunities and learn the language of the country where they intend to settle. Most importantly, they retain the

⁸ “Fugitive”, Word Reference

⁹ Reasons for persecution: religion, EASO Practical Guide: Qualification for international protection, European Asylum Support Office.

¹⁰ Key Migration Terms, IOM UN Migration 70 years.

¹¹ *The 1951 Refugee Convention*, in *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR 2001-2019; Simpson January 2018.

¹² Bundy, 2016, pp. 5-6.

freedom to return home whenever they would like¹³.

– **Asylum seeker:** someone seeking international protection against threats in their country of origin, but whose request for refugee status has not been officially determined. Asylum seekers must apply for protection in the country of destination — meaning they must arrive at or cross a border in order to apply¹⁴.

Edward W. Said's *exile*

However, there is yet another category that carries major political, psychological, and even spiritual connotations and implications: that of the **exile**, which, according to Edward W. Said “carries a touch of solitude and spirituality”¹⁵. The illustrious scholar goes on to argue that “although [...] anyone prevented from returning home is an exile”, there are nevertheless differences between “exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés”¹⁶. Having originated in the ancient custom of banishment, the exile is bound to bear intense suffering “with the stigma of being an outsider”¹⁷. Furthermore, to the prominent theorist of the intellectual history of Orientalism¹⁸, the notion of *refugee* is not an ancient one at all, but rather it is “a creation of the 20th-century state”¹⁹. In this respect, as a political notion, the term *refugee* in the author's view depicts “herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance”²⁰. While Said's inquiry deals primarily with the profiles and tribulations of the two paralleled categories, the exiled and the refugee, his understanding of the former is nevertheless deeply comprehensive, integrating the other concepts as mathematical function variations do, i.e., refugee, émigré, expatriate etc., which he illustrates with examples taken from authors such as Conrad, Hemingway, Lukacs and Homer²¹. His analyses, based in both a firm grasp of literature and life-experience, offer an interesting view in which the international law definitions of the many profiles of exiles are just as many variations of the *exile* function.

¹³ Migration and Immigration Information sources related to immigrants, refugees, and asylees, Berkeley Library, University of California.

¹⁴ Youth Celebrate Diversity, Immigrant and Refugee Youth.

¹⁵ Said, 2013, p. 179.

¹⁶ Said, 2013, p. 179.

¹⁷ Said, 2013, p. 178.

¹⁸ Said, 1979.

¹⁹ Said, 2013, pp. 178-179.

²⁰ Said, 2013.

²¹ Said, 2013.

From this perspective, the three experiences of Sinuhe, Josephus and Odysseus addressed in this paper may be understood as so many variations of the all-encompassing experience of (self-?) *exile*, which changes both the heroes and the worlds they traverse and modify through their actions and presence, and in which they, ultimately, linger – either for a period or to the end of their lives²².

Humans and storytelling: Why are all stories the same?

And yet the topic addressed in this paper implies an approach which goes beyond merely a review of the international legal framework, one that digs into deep history as well, taking mankind back to its origins. And this, because all the characters, migrants and refugees alike, share another common feature, that is *their personal story as narrated, reported, recorded and recreated over millennia*. All these processes belong to the art of storytelling, a defining feature of human behaviour.

The ability to speak and convey information from the real world and about the real and imaginary worlds is a hitherto unique characteristic of the human brain and of our evolution as a species²³. Our storytelling capacity is closely tied to humans' incredible mental skills and to our uniqueness. Moreover, stories matter, since we are defined by the way we share and pass our experiences and legacy to others and to the next generations. The way that we are able to create and share ideas with each other was born, perfected, and perpetuated through stories and tales. Storytelling (and story listening) is an evolutionary trait that we have improved over millennia, that serves to unify and coalesce us as a species.

Fiction has allowed us to imagine things not just individually, but also as a group. We can weave common myths such as the biblical story of Creation, the nationalist myths of statehood, and, of course, modern urban myths and legends. Such myths gave our first ancestors the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers.

At its most basic level, a *story* is a narrative designed to unify people. It contains mixed elements, either real, or fictitious, or both, through which people are retold various experiences so that their understanding begins to overlap and thereby they can better coordinate and work with one another. Furthermore, societal constructs like religion, politics and money that unify mankind trace their roots to the storytelling

²² For current definitions of the specific terms under discussion, see also *Migrant, Refugee, Immigrant and Expatriate: What is the difference?*, 2017.

²³ Signe, 2018.

processes which have always permeated our lives and livelihoods.

A *story* creates more than emotional empathy with a character; studies have shown there is also a physical response from our bodies. The famous neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni gained popularity through his book, *Mirroring People* where he answered his own question, “Why do we give ourselves over to emotion during the carefully crafted, heart-rending scenes in certain movies?” with a novel scientific find:

“[...] mirror neurons in our brains re-create for us the distress (we read) or see on the screen. We have empathy for the fictional characters—we know how they’re feeling—because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves. When we watch movie stars kiss onscreen, some of the cells firing in our brains are the same ones that fire when we kiss our lovers. ‘Vicarious’ is not a strong enough word to describe the effect of these mirror neurons. [...]”²⁴.

Before the tale is put to written words, it must first be concocted in the human mind. Usually, its roots can be traced either to human experience, to the human imagination, or to a combination of both.

Storytelling defines us by exploring how children instinctively create stories, how culture and morals are passed on through stories, and moments in human history that have been changed by a simple story. Storytelling represents a great gift that Nature, in its perpetual change and evolution, awarded human beings, conferring them their ability to efficiently synthesize their past experiences in order to extract from them the essence of learning. Stories also act as models for social aggregation and community evolution, aiming to transform them into a positive legacy to leave behind. And, perhaps most importantly, stories serve to turn the lives and personalities of those remarkable exponents of the human species that most contributed to its development, across centuries and millennia of retelling, into representative, universal myths and symbols. Indeed, the myth is the epitome of the traditional manifestation of *story*(-telling), usually defined as a sacred story typically revolving around the activities of humans, superhumans or supernatural beings, with the purpose to explain the origins of either natural or social, economic, and/or political (in effect, *civilizational*) phenomena and cultural practices²⁵. From the moment *Homo Sapiens* migrated out of

²⁴ Iacoboni, 2008, p. 4. See also Gottschall, 2012; Kamil, 2004, p. 719; Klosin *et al.*, 2017.

²⁵ Drbohlav, 2019, p. 6.

Africa, humans have carried myths all over the world²⁶.

Yet, in the vast universe of human created stories, from the most fundamental ancient myths to contemporary comic book movies, there really are only a handful of ‘types of story.’ “Storytelling has a shape”, Yorke points out²⁷. “It dominates the way all stories are told”, the author continues, tracing the shape’s origins back “not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word”²⁸. This structure may take various forms – be it the art-house, or the airport form – while, in turn, people may absorb it vividly. Finally, Yorke presumes that this shape may indeed be “a universal archetype.” Different tales turn out to have but one shape, and a plethora of derivatives. The universal underlying structure to the archetypal story is, more or less, as follows:

“The characters all have some kind of quest, and all have their own monsters to vanquish too. Though they are superficially different, they all share the same framework and the same story engine: All plunge their characters into a strange new world; all involve a quest to find a way out of it; and in whatever form they choose to take, in every story “monsters” are vanquished. All, at some level, too, have as their goal safety, security, completion, and the importance of home.”²⁹.

These tenets, however, do not just appear in literature, films, novels, TV series etc. Throughout their lives, people too tend to translate their personal growth experiences – personal and career trajectories – following the same essential structural patterns which seem innate to the human mind. The characters in fiction are just “wiggles of ink on paper (or chemical stains on celluloid)”, Jonathan Gottschall recently noted in a famous book on the power and mechanisms of the art of storytelling throughout history.³⁰ The author goes on about the characters of narrative writing:

“they are ink people. They live in ink houses inside ink towns. They work at ink jobs. They have inky problems. They sweat ink and cry ink, and when they are cut, they bleed ink. And yet ink people

²⁶ Connor, 2014; D’Huy, 2016, pp. 62-69.

²⁷Yorke, 2016.

²⁸ Yorke 2016.

²⁹ Yorke, 2016.

³⁰ Gottschall, 2012.

press effortlessly through the porous membrane separating their inky world from ours. They move through our flesh-and-blood world and wield real power in it.”³¹

While, in the author’s opinion, this is true of sacred fiction like scriptures, assumed to be sacred to the world religions, or myths, *their ink people having if not a real, then at least a living presence in our world, shaping our behaviours and customs and, in so doing, transforming societies and histories – this is also true of ordinary fiction.* Indeed,

“stories not only change people and influence history, they also help to make predictable and systematic changes”³².

Unlike the many myths keen to stress civilizational kills and autochthony, the myths of migration emphasize the moment of a people’s arrival in a given area, while the myth’s re-enactment in cultic proceedings serves to continuously reaffirm, reinterpret and reinvent their arrival. Because they involve the elaboration of at least two mythical time levels, these cult aetiologies are an extreme instance of how present religious experience influences the nature of an imagined past, providing an excellent illustration of aetiology’s propensity for anachronism.³³

Scientists have noticed that, when writing – even spontaneously – the individual may exhibit a prior knowledge of story structure that harkens to generations of tales that have gone before. People continue to draw their stories from the same well, in no small part because each successive generation copies from the last, therefore allowing for a series of conventions to become established. In this respect, one may notice the sheer pervasiveness of the pattern. However, it does not explain the mechanisms and the novel ways of reinventing itself. One interesting fact is that the more you read or write stories, the more you realize that the underlying pattern of these plots – the ways in which an audience demands certain things – is extraordinarily uniform.

“The three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age, but an articulation of something much more primal; the modern act structure was a reaction to dwindling audience attention

³¹ Gottschall, 2012.

³² Gottschall, 2012.

³³ Kowalzig, 2008, p. 328.

spans and the invention of the curtain.” [...] “if there really was an archetype, it had to apply not just to screenwriting, but to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern, or none at all. If storytelling does have a universal shape, this has to be self-evident”³⁴.

Fluidity/liquidity: the dominant feature of times, characters and stories

My current intent is to focus on three characters and their personal life experiences during times of political instability and change – that is to say, the ‘fluid’ times (or, from the point of view of cultural sociology, rather ‘liquid’ times, as we admittedly are living, even today, in an age of uncertainty³⁵) of the ancient Egyptian Intermediate period - which is yet another way to express both the crossing of borders and their geographical fluidity. It is important to highlight that, *we currently face the same fluidity, changes and transition of borders of any kind*.

The structure of the three stories shares another significant feature related to their main characters, namely that all three have at least three points in common: geography (in particular, northern, *Lower*, Egypt, connected to the Levant and to the Mediterranean); instability, and invasions, whether we are referring to Sinuhe, Josephus, or Odysseus, in turn³⁶.

Chronologically, the three different and apparently unrelated ancient Near Eastern narratives on the tribulations of their migrant/refugee characters (indeed, heroes all, no matter what the definition of “heroism” might imply in any of these Near Eastern approaches) are, in order:

- the Egyptian nobleman Sinuhe, during the Middle Kingdom, who was about to become an important chieftain in Canaan;
- Josephus, from the Israelite tribes, who would forge himself a career as a vizier at the pharaoh’s court;
- the Trojan hero Odysseus who, after the fall of Troy, would wander from East to West and back for 20 years as a migrant, before finally managing to return home to Ithaca.

These narratives equally mean and are:

- a) stories of identity & stories of cultural admixture;
- b) myths of migration & migratory myths;
- c) means of acquiring knowledge through fiction.

³⁴ Yorke, 2016.

³⁵ Bauman, 2006.

³⁶ Stanišić, 2008.

One must also note the fluidity of views and perceptions of people's status while crossing borders, along with the fluidity of the borders themselves. In their crossing, the characters find their status changed, for example from a high-ranking official to a mere refugee in the case of Sinuhe, a development which lasted until his rehabilitation and return home; Odysseus, the astute *basileus* and fierce and cunning warrior in the siege of Troy, became a 20-year sea-wanderer before arriving home and regaining his status of high royalty; conversely, in crossing borders the status of Josephus fluctuated and changed until he reached that highest rank of vizier of the Pharaoh.

It is important to note that in these three particular instances of ancient fugitive refugee migration, crossing borders does not mean changing social and political status. We are here in the presence of three outstanding people, remarkable for their brilliant minds, for their cleverness, cunning and astuteness. Actually, all three belong to the high elite, being either a king (the *basileus* Odysseus), the son of tribal union chieftain (Josephus), or a high-ranking official of a central power, as in the case of Sinuhe.

They were especially noted for their cleverness, which is again a sign of transcending limitations as they were able to adapt, to cooperate, to change themselves in order to survive, and to even change the views others had of them. In this way, they also crossed the status threshold, turning from refugee to elite once arrived at their destination. The narrative threads reflect their transformations and metamorphoses in transcending borders created by psychology, fashion, opposing views, different mentalities, by coping with others and even with themselves. The characters are the epitome of the chameleonic leader³⁷. Just as the chameleon survives at the threshold between forms through adaptation, so too the three heroes are forced to undergo chameleonic changes in order to cross the threshold of migrant/refugee status and reach the highest peak of the elite. This implies crossing borders of different kinds: cultural, psychological, behavioural, narrative etc. However, one must also not neglect the fact that their *real* ancient stories have themselves crossed the borders of fiction, and in so doing changed them from historical characters to fictional types, enriched with the symbolic traits of civilizing heroes.

"The characters in fiction are just wiggles of ink on paper (or chemical stains on celluloid)", Jonathan Gottschall recently noted in a famous book on the power and mechanisms of the storytelling art

³⁷Reinhoudt, 2017.

throughout history³⁸. The author continues his thoughts, coalesced around the characters of narrative writing:

“they are ink people. They live in ink houses, inside ink towns. They work at ink jobs. They have inky problems. They sweat ink and cry ink, and when they are cut, they bleed ink. And yet, ink people press effortlessly through the porous membrane separating their inky world from ours. They move through our flesh-and-blood world, and wield real power in it.”³⁹

While, in the author’s view, this is true of sacred fiction such as the Scripture of world religions or broad myths – their ink people having if not a real, then at least a live presence in our world, shaping our behaviours and customs and in so doing transforming societies and histories – this is also true of ordinary fiction. Stories not only change people and influence history: they also help to make predictable and systematic changes⁴⁰.

During the Iron Age, increased travel and movement between Egypt and the Levant resulted in an increase in cross-cultural learning after millennia of preceding mobility. The consequence was an Egyptian-Levantine *koine*, which historians often fail to identify as significant because of the uncritical replication of ancient separation myths. The language, the iconography of the region, the history of the alphabet, literary motifs, the portrayal of prominent figures in the Hebrew Bible and, last but not least, the emergence of new religions which incorporated the experience of *Otherness* in a new ideology, all bear witness to this extensive cultural exchange generated by migration.

Many writers throughout history viewed the migrant’s journey as a storytellers’ dream, and in many cases the foreigners’ transition from one state to another carries with it expectations, anticipation, conflict and, at times, literary drama. For migrants and refugees, their particular journeys mean life-changing transformations and the possibility to remake their lives. Far from being a new phenomenon, migration to Europe has deep historical roots. African migrants have long attempted to reach Spain via Morocco, or the Canary Islands via Senegal. For so long have Libya, Turkey, and Egypt served as points of transit for people attempting to reach Italy, Greece, or Bulgaria. However, never before

³⁸ Gottschall, 2012, pp. 425-426.

³⁹ Gottschall, 2012, pp. 425-426.

⁴⁰ Gottschall, 2012, pp. 425-426.

have migrants come in such extraordinarily high numbers⁴¹.

Arnold Toynbee has tried to describe and in part explain the fates of individual civilizations in terms of the “challenge and response” model. According to this paradigm, civilizations succeed in solving difficulties that are initially physical in structure but which, in time, become spiritual and societal in nature, resulting in awe and inspiration in the societies around them⁴².

Before analysing these approaches to refugee/migration/asylum seekers, we must highlight one essential feature they all share in common: they are all narratives – and written narratives at that. This is highly significant, since before the tale is put down into written words, it must first be imagined in the human mind. Usually, its roots can be traced either to human experiences, or to the human imagination. More often, to both in varying degrees.

The tale of Sinuhe, the fugitive refugee

Many people around the world left their countries of origin and relocated to new lands. What is the motivation behind this? For many, the urge for a better life might be the prevailing reason. However, in the short *Tale of Sinuhe*, the main character leaves his home country of Egypt only because he wants to save his own life. His early life, which was spent at the heart of an ancient superpower riddled with courtly political intrigue, prompted his exile in Canaan. This is a general pattern similarly recognized across ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean literature in the sense that Abraham’s retreat, Moses’ relocation and David’s internal exile all happened, according to similar patterns, in the same Levantine space. Like the account of Sinuhe’s life and experience as a refugee, those of Abraham, Moses and David were most likely also preserved both in the oral tradition as well as in written texts⁴³.

The Tale of Sinuhe, the Egyptian who left Egypt without having a purpose or a destination, is not only one of the best works in the genre across all ancient Egyptian literature, but it also holds an important place therein. Egyptologists consider this account, retold in several papyri and displayed in museums worldwide, as the first Egyptian narrative of the sorrow of living in a foreign land, and also the first known biography. It tells the story of Sinuhe leaving Egypt and his life in a foreign land,

⁴¹ Kingsley, 2018.

⁴² Toynbee, 1989.


⁴³ Shinkoskey 2012, p. 50; Bárta, 2003.

followed by his longing to return home, to die in his motherland and be buried in its soil many years later. In contemporary terms, Sinuhe can be viewed as an ambitious representative of the ancient Egyptian elite, as well as a brilliant fugitive refugee who successfully manages to overcome all hardships in his life. For this reason, he may well be viewed as an epitome of the modern refugee/migrant/immigrant.

Although *The Tale of Sinuhe* is set in the early 12th Dynasty, around the time of the death of king Amenemhat I Sehetepibre, (1991-1962 BCE), the founder of the Egyptian 12th Dynasty, it was only written down about 100 years later, and proved popular in ancient Egypt for at least 750 years. It bears comparison with other ancient Near Eastern literature such as the story of Abraham, or that of Josephus in the biblical Book of Genesis.

The Ancient Egyptians were so captivated by this narrative that they recounted it orally and engraved it on the walls of tombs to be read by the deceased in the afterlife. It was taught for at least 800 years in ancient Egypt, and scribal students would copy parts of it as calligraphy practice. Well-known writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Egyptologists such as Sir Alan Gardiner regarded the story of Sinuhe as nothing short of a literary masterpiece. It is one of the few ancient works that has survived to the present day, and it was transferred from ancient Egypt to Western literature alongside other literary manuscripts⁴⁴.

Synopsis

The Egyptian royal courtier, Sinuhe (Egyptian  . sa nht, meaning “the son of the sycamore”) was on an expedition in Libya to the west, when he heard of his king's untimely death. Upon his return home, he found himself in close proximity to a palace conspiracy; hence, he panicked and ran for his life, only too aware that he could also be crushed in the manoeuvres of the power politics to come. In an attempt to save his life, he fled north to the region of Byblos and then to southern Syria (QdSw, ‘Kadesh’), where he spent a long time, only to live with the “sand-farers” and eventually set up a home in upper Retjenu (rTnw), somewhere between present-day northern Palestine and southern Syria. It's little surprise, then, that for a man of his standing, so used to good living in the most sophisticated society of the time, the harsh reality he experienced living as a fugitive refugee constituted a great and humbling culture shock. Fortunately, he eventually met Ammunenshi, the king of Retenu who, upon seeing the educated Egyptian, hired him as a translator,

⁴⁴ Breasted, 1999, p. 199.

appointed him head of his army, and permitted him to marry his eldest daughter, also bequeathing giving him the land of Yaa. Sinuhe fought for Retenu against its fiercest enemies, becoming Ammunenshi's most trusted companion. There, Sinuhe built a new family and life, grew rich, exhibited his valiant qualities, and established himself in that land, where he became a tribal chieftain. Sinuhe had everything that he needed and wanted for his life: power, food, family, and status. Yet, despite his comfortable and prosperous life, he was tormented by a fervent yearning to return home. His heart's desire was to die in Egypt and be buried there. The new Egyptian king graciously granted this wish, restoring him to favour in Egypt.

The fugitive refugee and his life journey

Egyptologist Claire Lalouette translated the story of Sinuhe and raised many questions regarding the reason for Sinuhe's flight. Was Sinuhe real, or a fictional character? What compelled him to go into self-imposed exile? Was it a sudden fear? Had he caught information about a conspiracy that would jeopardize his life, if revealed? All this makes little sense because the ascent of Senusert to the throne would have eliminated any danger, Lalouette argues⁴⁵. Might he have been a secret envoy to the Asians? We must remind keep in mind that during this era Egypt was constantly threatened by foreign invaders. That is why we cannot rule out the possibility that Sinuhe was sent on an intelligence mission – perhaps as a spy – to strengthen ties with the chieftains of the desert and Phoenician cities, as well as to investigate their loyalty to Egypt's king. In this conjecture, his status as a fugitive or political refugee (in the modern sense) would put their political stance to the test⁴⁶. Is it possible that the entire story was a ruse to conceal a secret political context?

Moreover, for Egyptologist Mervat Abdel-Nasser, the tale of Sinuhe is an interwoven account of dreams and half-truths⁴⁷. She draws attention to the relationship between man and place, particularly to the peculiar connection between Sinuhe's places of birth and death. She rhetorically inquires about the reason of Sinuhe flight, and whether it was due to a persistent urge to venture into the unknown, or a voyage of self-discovery and self-fulfilment. This view interprets Sinuhe's dilemma as existential:

⁴⁵ Lalouette, 1991; Radwan, 2015.

⁴⁶ In fact, in his letter to the king he mentions that some of the Asian princes are loyal and can be trusted. Radwan, 2015.

⁴⁷ Radwan, 2015.

exile could well be a place where Sinuhe seeks to achieve the harmony that the mind establishes over the earthly chaos resulting from the absence of an ultimate authority⁴⁸. The account begins in the grave, where Sinuhe is in a state of “imaginary death”. This confirms the relation between death and a new beginning. Death, itself, is buried in the beginning; and so, in order to find the true meaning of his previous life, Sinuhe willingly enters the grave. He assumes a journey that bears striking similarities to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* where the soul suffers in the beginning and burns with desire, ambition and earthly struggles through the ‘Inferno’. In the paradise of pure souls, il ‘Paradiso,’ the soul is gradually elevated until it achieves perfection. Likewise, Sinuhe’s new life as a refugee in Retjenu continually improves until he attains the same elite status he was forced to leave behind in Egypt.

In the story, the word ‘Asiatic(s)’ (Egyptian, aAm(w)) is used repeatedly to symbolise danger, exile and alienation. On a psychological level, one may understand Sinuhe’s conflict as one of identity, in which he tries to confirm he is Egyptian. He uses common Egyptian expressions and formulas such as “joyful land” (rS.wj tA pn HqA.n=f, “How joyful is this land that he rules!”⁴⁹), and in his dreams he even Egyptianizes the exile. The author operates with conflictual, antithetical depictions between greenery and desert, rural and urban, living in one’s stable and secure homeland versus living in the vast arid desert full of shifting sands⁵⁰.

The poem ends with a new birth, being Sinuhe’s symbolic rebirth and his return to Egypt, which also renders unto him a new name. From the previous ‘Son of the Sycamore’, upon his return he will be the “‘son of the north wind’, the barbarian born in Egypt!” (Egyptian, sA-mHyt pDtj msw m tA-mri)⁵¹, a powerful reference to his exile, his growth, his evolution, while nevertheless still confirming his intrinsically Egyptian identity.

The metamorphosis of Josephus the Israelite

The Old Testament does not mention any words that bear the meaning of *refugee/migrant/immigrant/asylum seeker*. At the very outset, however, in *Genesis*, it is full of accounts relevant to the condition

⁴⁸ Radwan, 2015.

⁴⁹ Nederhof, 2011, pp. 1-51, p. 12. Koch, 1990; Ben-Dor Evian 2017; Goedicke, 1986, pp. 167-174.

⁵⁰ Radwan, 2015; Dollinger, 2000 to present.

⁵¹ Nederhof, 2011, p. 47.

of either the *foreigner*⁵², or the *wandering*⁵³ one. The four aforementioned concepts express peculiarities related to how modernity view them. Instead, the Bible's two-notion-approach mirrors a raw dichotomy between two profiles: on one hand, the recognized, group-integrated individual, a member of the sedentary population, generally associated with a territory and the organized state; and on the other hand, the *wandering foreigner*, a member of pastoral nomad tribes, looking for a free piece of land to settle while building his own, strong identity⁵⁴. The Bible's recognized sacred texts exemplify several instances of God's acts of love and compassion for those who left their homes and moved to new lands. Sometimes, this relocation occurred by choice, as with today's immigrants; often, however, people were fugitives, forcibly relocated to other countries due to war, drought, persecution, or other circumstances beyond their control, similar to today's refugees. The Bible is replete with stories of migrants and refugees (referred to as "aliens" or "strangers"), and Josephus's particular story brings into focus a case of forcibly displaced people. In several ways, this narrative echoes Sinuhe's journey; indeed, in this regard Arndt Meinhold has suggested that the Egyptian story of Sinuhe served as the prototype for Josephus' story, and certainly the sequences of events in both show striking similarities⁵⁵.

From an initial position of privilege, the protagonist is displaced from his power base and forced to live with strangers; while in this new society, he prospers; eventually, for the sake of the greater good, he is reconciled with his original community. The trope of the reconciliation between exiled and exiler is extremely popular throughout world literary works, and it was held in great esteem in ancient Near Eastern literature. Together with Josephus' and Sinuhe's narratives, the tale of Idrimi, the Apology of Hattusilis, Esarhaddon's fight for the throne, Nabonidus and his God and the biblical stories of Jacob, Moses, and David can all be considered accounts of exile and reconciliation⁵⁶.

In fact, an examination of these narratives indicates not just a startling resemblance in their storyline chains of events, but also similar character roles connected to specific plot components and, eventually, similar topics. Indeed, the common characteristics are so apparent that they can be identified as variations of a specific type of heroic story from

⁵² Deuteronomy, 10:18-19; Deuteronomy, 24:14; Deuteronomy, 27:19; Exodus, 12:49; Exodus, 22:21; Exodus, 23:9; Ezekiel, 22:7.

⁵³ Deuteronomy, 26:5.

⁵⁴ Genesis, 12:1, 12:10.

⁵⁵ Meinhold, 1975, pp. 306-325; Meinhold, 1976, pp. 79-93.

⁵⁶ See also King, 1987.

the ancient Near East. In this respect, folklorist A. Dundes suggests that we might understand this specific type as an “oicotype” (after Carl Von Sydow), that is, a recurrent, predictable, cultural variant of a general plot sequence⁵⁷.

According to this paradigm, the theme of the foreigner displaced from their homeland is recurrent throughout the Biblical accounts. In general, one may understand it in the immigrant-key (with all its connotations) applied to the mythical-historical narratives of biblical heroes.

Hence, Noah was pushed out of his home by natural disaster. Later on, Abraham (whom scholars view as the world’s first immigrant), was called by God to leave his home and go to a land he did not yet know:

“The Lord said to Abram,
‘Go forth from your native land
and from your father’s house
to the land that I will show you.
I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you
and curse him that curses you;
and all the families of the earth
shall bless themselves by you.’” (Gen 12:1–3)

As we can see, Canaan was not just the homeland for Abraham and his family, but the very place where they were once strangers – immigrants – too.

Such instances continue: Josephus himself was sold into slavery in Egypt by his very own brothers. Furthermore, scholars agree with his particular situation, seeing his story, from a modern perspective, as an ancient case of displacement by international human trafficking and viewing Josephus as a human trafficking survivor⁵⁸.

“So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Josephus up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.”
(Genesis 37:28)

⁵⁷ Dundes, 1999, pp. 137-152; Vernon, pp. 1-4.

⁵⁸ Waters, 2010, p. 8; Shinkoskey, 2012.

Towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, the Israelites, led by Moses, fled slavery and oppression in Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and, before entering the Promised Land, they roamed the desert for 40 years. Famine forced Naomi and her family to flee their homeland⁵⁹, while Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were captives in Babylonian exile after their home country was besieged. Eventually, at the beginning of the common era, Josephus, Mary, and Jesus fled Nazareth to Egypt as refugees.

“[...] an angel of the Lord appeared to Josephus in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. [...]”.
(Matthew 2: 13-15)

These ancient Levantine narratives from the Bible can guide us in our relationships with refugees, immigrants, the exiled etc., and, more broadly, with all people in need.

Odysseus, the itinerant hero in exile

Occurring somewhere around 1200 BCE during the Late Bronze Age collapse – a time of invasions and turmoil – the attacks of the ‘Sea People’ confederation devastated important regions of the East Mediterranean and, alongside other factors such as climate change, led to the collapse and decline of all minor and major centres of civilization, such as the Minoans in the Aegean, the ancient Egyptian New Kingdom etc. As for the Egyptians, they had a simple answer to what caused all the Late Bronze Age states to collapse: they placed the blame on migrants, arguing that it was all the fault of the different groups from around the Mediterranean, groups they collectively called ‘the Sea Peoples’.

From Greece and Italy in the West to Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia in the East, this was not the downfall of a single empire or civilization, but that of a large, globalized world system of several civilizations. It included large empires and small kingdoms alike, all of which, within about one hundred years between 1225 BCE and 1175–1130 BCE, fell like a stack of dominoes, down to a final collapse⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ Brandon, 2015.

⁶⁰ Mallam, 2021.

Robert Drews views this time as “the worst disaster in ancient history, even more calamitous than the collapse of the Western Roman Empire”⁶¹. In his book, Drews writes that barbarian fighters, including the Sea Peoples, themselves motivated by elements of the catastrophe such as droughts, brought about the final collapse:

“... the Catastrophe came about when men in ‘barbarian’ lands awoke to the truth that had been with them for some time: the chariot-based forces on which the Great Kingdoms relied could be overwhelmed by swarming infantries, the infantrymen being equipped with javelins, long swords, and a few essential pieces of defensive armor. ... found it within their means to assault, plunder, and raze the richest palaces and cities on the horizon, and this they proceeded to do.”⁶²

Unlike charioteers, they were able to approach target palaces and cities across any terrain and inflict general mayhem throughout the region by burning, killing, and pillaging.

To these historical realities we must add another landmark event: the Trojan War (as it was documented by Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey*), and in particular one of Homer’s heroes’ own narratives: that of Odysseus, whose story may well contain actual historical glimpses on the situation of the exile at that time.

Connections between the Homeric poems and the various literatures of the Near East have attracted scholarly attention for well over a century, and increasingly so in the last 40 years⁶³. Among the common elements, we might also include those addressing Odysseus’ account, the Egyptian story of Sinuhe, and even that of Josephus⁶⁴. However, West opines that,

“rather than postulating Homeric influence on Genesis, it seems reasonable to assume a tradition of storytelling, common to the Levant and early archaic Greece, of the sort that later gave rise to the Greek literary romance”⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Drews, 1993, p. 3.

⁶² Drews, 1993, p. 104.

⁶³ On the links between the *Odyssey* and the Near Eastern narratives, see Loudon, 2011.

⁶⁴ Loudon, 2011; Matthews, 2018; Meinhold, 1975, pp. 306-325; Meinhold, 1976, pp. 79-93.

⁶⁵ West, 2011, pp. 611-615.

Therefore, in the wake of these older narratives' dissemination, over 800 years after Sinuhe's account, Odysseus' 20-year-long sojourn in his attempt to return home after the sacking of Troy tells another migration and refugee story.

The forced exile of Odysseus, the shrewd king of Ithaca⁶⁶, from his island and his family is, perhaps, one of the most emblematic narratives of Western literature. It is one of the deepest expressions of the sentiments of exile and homesickness, and of the pain caused by the impossibility of return.

If this epic has reverberated so strongly in the minds of European peoples, it is perhaps because Europe has been the scene of immense wars and conflicts that have made this exile a collective experience that is difficult to erase from the continent's shared memory. However, if Homer's story still speaks to us today, it likely does so less for the people already living in Europe than for the ones washing up on its shores.

Odysseus' hardships, travels and tribulations following the siege of Troy echo a migratory pattern of evolution often developed by wandering groups: in this particular instance, it is applied to the Greeks, who understood their past in terms of wandering, which we can trace in a complicated set of traditions well established by the time of Thucydides and, presumably, reaching back much further⁶⁷.

Conclusions

The world we inhabit today is still rich with ancient Near Eastern and Homeric meaning⁶⁸. Today, there are significant recorded accounts of professors in the Middle East who teach the *Odyssey* to a class filled with refugees. In doing so, they suddenly shine an entirely new light onto Homer's epic. Simply put, Odysseus resembles the most famous refugee in literature. These teachers also argue that those reacting hysterically to Syrian, Iraqi or Palestinian refugees would do well to revisit the poem.

Describing the journeys of Odysseus, Homer's epic may be understood as a survey of the Ancient Greek practice of *xenia*—reciprocal hospitality. However, in our modern paradigm, it also depicts the exile's

⁶⁶ Reinhoudt, 2017.

⁶⁷ Kowalzig, 2008, p. 328.

⁶⁸ Reasons for persecution: religion, EASO Practical Guide: Qualification for international protection, EUROPEAN ASYLUM SUPPORT OFFICE, <https://easo.europa.eu/practical-guide-qualification/reasons-persecution-religion>; Refugees in the Bible 2015, pp. 1-8; Refugees & Faith, Josephus House of Cleveland.

anxiety in a world in which the principle of *xenia* is threatened, one in which the stranger's welcome is in doubt. The *Odyssey* contains numerous examples of how strangers are treated. In it, generous hospitality marks the greatness of a ruler. Yet, not everyone welcomes strangers (see, for instance, the cyclop Polyphemus). Being a stranger in a strange land can indeed be perilous; that is why the epic is highly relevant to our current approaches to refugees in Europe⁶⁹.

Today, this set of issues from ancient narratives has again surfaced in political debates all around the world: What is the morally appropriate way to respond to a stranger in need, a person from a distant land who arrives on your shore in need of aid and shelter? In a world rife with slaughter and destruction, what obligations does civilized society owe the homeless stranger? Furthermore, what about those who refuse to accept such obligations? In attempting to unravel all these questions, one may well emphasize that *education and literature are our only salvation*.

⁶⁹ See also Bates, 2015.

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