

# HANDING DOWN BY MEANS OF SPEECH: GESTURE AND MEMORY IN THE EXEGESIS OF RELIGION

PETER JACKSON

Many students of religion have grown allergic to the different, earlier as well as more recent attempts at defining religion. To avoid the accusation of essentialism, it is considered advisable to simply skip this pretentious task by regarding “religion” as a local and rather recent academic construct. A construct that, for all what it is worth, one is more or less forced to use. If necessary, religion should be defined in the most general terms as “ultimate concern” or “mode of constructing worlds of meaning,” since every attempt to be more specific might cause suspicion. A crucial issue is of course where such more specific definitions come from. If we merely invent them to serve our own arbitrary purpose, or if we are led to them by properties suggested by the term itself.

From the languages of antiquity comes a set of terms (*credo, traditio, religio, anáthēma, êthos, thémis*), most of which are still used to denote salient features of religious practice and belief, and the totality of which describes a sequence of contiguous everyday gestures: that of laying down or setting up, handing down or leaving behind, picking up or recollecting. They may all be taken literally as kinetic operations, but also as gestural imitations signalling mental or linguistic operations, so that “recollection” comes to mean calling something to mind, and “handing down” the oral or scriptural transmission of words and phrases to future generations. Since this set of terms apparently forms a consistent whole, a kind of device, one may ask how it operates in specific domains of society: what it does and what it pretends to do?

It would be anachronistic to evoke etymology, originally understood as a search for ultimate truth, as a means of purifying academic vocabulary. In this essay, however, the etymological endeavour has some undeniable heuristic advantages, for it principally sets out to understand how certain aspects of culture were construed before some of the terms at stake (especially *religio* and *traditio*) became associated with Christian theology and eventually implanted in the academic jargon of the West. Such an instance of self-referentiality may also be referred to as *exegesis*, which I take to

mean an interpretation that remains an inherent part of the system it interprets. Cicero is consequently an exegete in so far as he dwells upon the significance of Roman customs, whereas approaches to Germanic customs in the writings of Caesar and Tacitus would belong to the area of *interpretatio*. Indeed all analytical concepts employed in order to highlight other concepts or phenomena within the same system could be conceived as exegetical tools. We should keep in mind, however, that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic interpretations is in itself the outcome of interpretation. Furthermore, the very need for an exegesis, for an interpretation *by* and *for* the system, is indicative of the difficulty in deciding when and where a system ends or passes into another one. Nevertheless, every single concept has a tradition of its own, and not even the most idiosyncratic definitions can resist this tradition.

A final task of this essay is to test the applicability of the semantic field uncovered in Greek and Latin literature to similar instances of self-referentiality in societies outside the ancient Mediterranean world. This will be done in the hope that correspondences may help preparing the ground for further theorizing.

### 1. *Religio*, *thrēskeía*, and *anámnesis*

It is well-known that the original sense of the term *religio* was a matter of dispute among classical authors, as seen especially in Cicero (who derived it from *relego* “to pick up again, to go back over, retrace (a path), to transverse an area again”) and the Christian author Lactantius (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century CE) (who derived it from *religo* “to restrain with bonds, bind fast”). The etymology is usually presented as uncertain in modern dictionaries, and neither of the two suggestions could easily be dismissed as a folk etymology or educated fancy. It should still be kept in mind that neither Cicero nor Lactantius were primarily concerned with the original sense of the word, but that they used their etymologies for obvious rhetorical, apologetic reasons. Cicero did it in an attempt to defend the scrupulous and dutiful attitude towards the *cultus deorum* as opposed to the excess and foolishness of *superstitio*. He saw *religio* as a matter of proper conduct, rejecting at the same time many of the beliefs associated with the gods being worshiped. Lactantius, on the other hand, proposed his etymology in defence of the pious relation (*uinculo pietatis*) between man and God as opposed to Cicero’s rather technical attitude towards ritual. It was in the sense proposed by Lactantius that the term became uniquely associated with Christianity, and the

characteristics of this unprecedented institution still inform contemporary approaches to religion as a universal category. Regardless of which etymology (the Ciceronian or the Lactantian) would appear more plausible from the point of view of contemporary scholarship, one cannot help noticing a conflict between two different systems of belief. These were defended, on the one hand, by a Roman intellectual still paying attention to the prescriptions of an open-ended, indigenous tradition and, on the other hand, by a Christian turned towards the newly revealed, monolithic message of the only true God. It would therefore come as no surprise if the pagan past of the term *religio* had afflicted it with associations that would have appeared improper or obsolete to a Christian.

In *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Émile Benveniste offers a brilliant analysis of the different attempts to etymologize *religio* by playing them off against the connotations of the term in Old Latin authors such as L. Accius and Plautus.<sup>1</sup> From these early strata of Latin literature onwards, the term retains the sense of “being scrupulous (with special regard to ritual matters),” and Benveniste convincingly argues that these associations of the term conform much better to Cicero’s etymology than to Lactantius’. Benveniste brings up some further morphological and textual arguments in support of this observation: 1) There never was an abstract noun *\*ligio*. The abstract of *religare* is *religatio*. 2) Abstracts in *-io* usually proceed from verbs of the 3<sup>rd</sup> conjugation, not from verbs of the first (e.g. *legirupio* from *rupere*, *de-liquio* from *linquere*, *legio* from *legere*, etc.). 3) A quotation from an ancient author (Nigidius Figulus) anticipates Cicero’s etymology by stating that *religentem esse oportet, religiosus nefas* (“it is necessary to be *religens*, not *religiosus*”), which Benveniste takes to imply that it is more appropriate to be mindful of religious things (to be *religens*) than being brought to them (to be *religiosus*). As regretted by Benveniste, the participle *religens* is the only evidence left of the existence of a verb *\*religere*, but verbs with a similar sense and the same formation (such as *diligo* and *intelligo*) help to make a stronger case.

Another merit of Benveniste’s treatment is the initial attention brought to the Greek term *thrēskeía*, which also seems to convey the sense of observance and studiousness in respect of ritual matters. Attested for the first time in Herodotus (in the Ionian form *thrēskeiē*), it is once used to designate the *regulation* (?) among the

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. 2. *Pouvoir, droit, religion*, Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1969, pp. 265-278.

Egyptians not to eat cow's meat (2,18). The noun is most likely derived from a verb *thrēskō* only attested in Hesychius, who glosses *thrēskō* with *noō* "to perceive" (cf. LSJ, s.v. *noēō*) and the variant *thráskein* with *anamimnēskēin* (see below). The suffixed verbal form seems to rest on a verb *\*thrēō* (without the suffix *-skō*) seen in the gloss *enthreín* : *phulássein* "to keep watch and ward, keep guard" (cf. LSJ) and possibly (assuming the existence of a verbal root *\*ther-*) in the privative adjective *atherés* (either *anóētos* "imperceptive" or *anósios* "impious") and the Homeric privative verb *atherízō* "to slight, make light of" (cf. LSJ).<sup>2</sup> *Thrēskeía* has apparently less to do with faith than with the observance of proper conduct, yet the Vulgate invariably translates *thrēskeía* with *religio*.<sup>3</sup> This may seem a little odd, because, while Christianity understood itself as *religio* (in the sense of *religare*) in the writings of the early Church, the context of *thrēskeía* in the New Testament is neither necessarily that of piety (such as in the case of the intrinsically beneficial *eusébeia*) nor something unique as opposed to anything that could be termed heretical or pagan.<sup>4</sup> Just as in earlier Greek literature, *thrēskeía* in the NT seems primarily focused on the practical side of worship.

In the context of Cicero's etymology, *relego* may be understood as "(once more) reading over" in the metaphorical sense of "selecting" or "picking up," an act that is best captured by the likewise ambiguous English verb "to recollect," or with reference to the *pick-up* of a record player *reading off* the tracks on a rotating record, an image to be further elaborated below. Another act of reiteration referred to elsewhere in Cicero's writings seems relevant in this connection. It is the act implied by the rare term *recordatio*, which in Cicero directly translates the Greek term *anámnēsis* in a discussion of Plato's theory of memory (elaborated in *Phaidon* 73a and elsewhere).<sup>5</sup> Plato assumed that learning was nothing but a recollection of previous states of existence of the soul. *Recordatio* literally means "a recalling to heart (→ mind)" with a similar focus on the *cordial* (Latin *cor*) seat of the mind as seen in Latin *credo*, Avestan *zrazdā-*, and Vedic *śraddhā-* (all compounds contain the Indo-European word for heart, *\*kred-* (→ *\*kerd*, *\*krd*), and a verb *\*d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>*, meaning "to set, put, place"), the reverse effect of which could be construed as a hardening of the heart

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 271f.

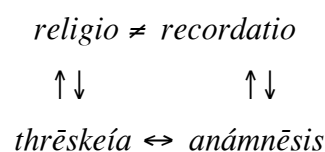
<sup>3</sup> Acts 26:5, Col 2:18, Jas 1:26, 27.

<sup>4</sup> For a slightly different view, cf. Peter Antes' discussion in "'Religion' einmal anders," *Temenos* 14 (1978), pp. 184ff. See also W. Radl (s.v. θρησκεία), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds), vol. 2, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, c1990-1993.

(πεπωρωμένη ... τὴν καρδίαν) associated with blindness, ignorance, and forgetfulness (Mc 8,17-18). The noun *recordatio* is also used in the context of burnt offerings and sacred gifts of greeting in the Vulgate translation of Numbers 10:10, where the Septuagint not very surprisingly reads *anámñēsis*. With regard to the underlying Jewish tradition, particular attention should be brought to the semantic field represented by the root *zkr* in the sense of “re-presentation, making present the past which can never remain merely past but becomes effective in the present,”<sup>6</sup> and especially to different kinds of “memorials” (e.g. the blast of trumpets) ordained by God with a promise of his grace<sup>7</sup>:

Num. 10:10: And at the time of your rejoicing, on your annual festivals and your new moons, you must blast the trumpets over your burnt offerings (Hebrew *‘ōlāh*, S: *holokautómasin*, V: *holocaustis*) and your sacred gifts of greeting. The [blast] will serve as a reminder (S: *anámñēsis*, V: *recordationem*) of you before God. I am YHWH, your God!<sup>8</sup>

I pointed out above that *anamimnēskō*, the verb underlying the noun *anámñēsis*, was employed by Hesychius as a translation of the otherwise unattested verb *thrāskō* (which, if Benveniste was right, constitutes the basis of *thrēskeía* along with the likewise isolated variant *thrēskō*). Consequently, the terms considered so far seem to be engaged in an exchange of meaning that would have appeared less obvious at the outset:



<sup>5</sup> *Tusculan Disputations* 1,57.

<sup>6</sup> A. Wieser (s.v. ἀνάμνησις), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1.

<sup>7</sup> H. Eising (s.v. *zākhar*, *zēkhar*, *zēkker*, *zikkāron*), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds), vol. IV, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Tr. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible: 4), New York: Doubleday, 1992. This passage, while inciting some hesitation regarding the use of the term *holocaust* (literally a “burnt offering (to God)”) as a designation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, may also turn our attention to the fact that the extermination of European Jewry remains a major theme in contemporary discussions of history, memory, and forgetting. The latter issue is touched upon in Carlo Ginzburg’s essay “Distance and Perspective: Two Metaphors,” in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 141. The term *holocaust* is sometimes falsely assumed to be the translation of Hebrew *šō’ā*, a word that originally meant “dung, excrement, filth,” but which was used to describe a coming disaster in the prophetic

They all refer, directly or indirectly, to mental acts of reiteration in a marked context of behaviour. They seem to imply a fidelity that is directed towards modes of conduct, towards the very process of reiteration, and not primarily towards the beliefs engendered by such modes of conduct.

Despite their most conspicuously different motivations, classical authors relying on either of the two competing trends in the interpretation of *religio* would inevitably have to acknowledge that this phenomenon implied an act of reiteration (signalled by the prefix *re-*). They would probably also agree that it was an act informed by constraint and duty rather than by mere habit. Surely it is not going too far to say that, even today, both practisers and students of religion take these things to be chief concerns and characteristics of religion. As for the many views usually *not* shared by these groups, however, an important point of refraction seems to be the unprecedented and unchanging nature attributed to the situation reiterated.

## 2. *Traditio* and *parádosis*

The next step in the investigation is to address the process of mediation that must precede any act of reiteration signalled by terms such as *religio*, *thrēskeía*, and *anámnesis*. Whether mental or kinetic in nature, a reception requires an act of giving.<sup>9</sup> On a horizontal plane, this process has been studied under the heading of *communication*, by which one usually understands the transmission and exchange of meaning *in space*, whereas the corresponding vertical transmission of meaning *in time* has been studied under the heading of *tradition*. Informed by attempts to model communication upon the structure of sender, message, and receiver, Aleida Assmann suggests that tradition should be modelled upon the structure of memory and authority.<sup>10</sup> I consider this point to be well taken, but hesitate about the emphasis on *meaning* (or *Nachrichten*) as the prime object of transmission. It may seem trivial to

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proclamations of chastisement (cf. Ezk. 4:12) (see discussion in K.-M. Beyse's article (s.v. *šō'ā*, *šē'ā*, *šō'î*), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 12, pp. 195-196).

<sup>9</sup> It may seem trivial to state that *religio* implies *traditio*, and one is not surprised to see this interdependence made explicit in Latin literature ("Servius Sulpicus religionem esse dictam tradidit quae propter sanctitatem aliquam remota ac seposita a nobis sit, quasi a relinquendo dicta, ut a carendo caerimonia" (ap. MACR. Sat. 3,3,8 (GRF 425,14)), yet the nature and background of this interdependence is not necessarily a trivial issue.

<sup>10</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition. Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer*, Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 1999, p. 64.

point out that meaning is an outcome rather than an object of interpretation, yet this distinction is crucial to the discussion of a process involving such salient changes and ruptures of meaning as that of tradition. Let us confine ourselves for the moment with stating that tradition requires an object to be safeguarded, a *traditum*, without suggesting any further specifications as to what that object might be. Tradition also requires a subject, which, depending on its role in the process of transmission, could be termed either *tradent* or *recipient*. If one applies the reciprocity of giving and taking to the acts of recollection and transmission, the choice of a term for the process as a whole becomes a matter of voice and perspective, because a thing passed down as *traditum* has usually been received and retraced before, and it is destined to be received again in an unbroken chain of giving and taking. By virtue of the terms at stake here, classical literature provides some striking examples of this interactive process.

Despite its rather profane context, an example from Horace may serve as starting point: *qui testamentum tradet tibi cumque legendum, abnuere (...) memento*.<sup>11</sup> The sentence concerns the decline of someone's last will (*testamentum*), an inscribed object that he passes on (*tradet*) to be received and read over (*legendum*) by an intended heir. In all its simplicity, the context of the phrase is suggestive of a *traditum*, transmitted through the medium of a tradent, supported by a covenant (*testamentum*), and finally read over by a recipient. As for the verbs *trado* and *lego*, a context giving cause for their conjunction would accordingly be that of inheritance in the intrinsically economic and judicial sense ("to deliver possessions into another's hands") of the verb *trado* and its Greek counterpart *paradídōmi*. An early example in Latin literature, where *trado* clearly means "to transmit as an inheritance," is found in Plautus' *Menaechmi*: Liparo, king of Syracuse and successor of Pintia, who was the successor of Agathocles, is said to have passed on his kingdom to Hiero (... *tertium Liparo, qui in morte regnum Hieroni tradidit*).<sup>12</sup>

I would like to anticipate some of the comparanda to be treated below by quoting the display of a similar context (more precisely the division of an estate) in a Vedic prose passage (TS 3,1,9,4f.):

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<sup>11</sup> Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Satyrarum Libri*, 2,5,51.

<sup>12</sup> 2,3,56-60 (409-410)

Manu divided (*vi-√bhaj*) his property (*dāya-*) among his sons. He deprived Nābhānediṣṭha, who was a student, of any portion. He went to him, and said, ‘How hast thou deprived me of a portion?’ He replied, ‘I have not deprived you of a portion; the Āṅgīrasas here are performing a Sattra; they cannot discern the world of heaven; declare this Brāhmaṇa to them; when they go to the world of heaven they will give (*√dā'*) you their cattle.’<sup>13</sup>

Just as in the case of *trado*, the term *dāyá-* (derived either from a verb *√dā'* meaning “to divide” or from *√dā'* “to give”) evokes both the transmission of material property to a heir and the religious transmission of immaterial *tradita*. An isolated attestation in the oldest collection of Vedic hymns (RV 10,114,10) merely allows us to interpret the same term as an afterlife recompense for the hardships of ritual, but an incontestable example of the marked sense is found in another Vedic prose passage (ŚB 1,5,2,12). Here, the prefixed noun *sampradāya-* evidently refers to the (ritual) object of (oral) tradition. Although most likely associated with a verb *sam-pra-√dā'* “to transmit, hand down by tradition” (attested for the first time in epic language),<sup>14</sup> the nominal element *-dāya-* and Vedic *dāyá-*, if not ultimately derived from the same root, should at least have fallen together at some early stage of development<sup>15</sup>:

Now when he (the Adhvaryu) calls (on the Āgnīdhra), he thereby calls after sacrifice, ‘Listen to us! come back to us!’ and when he (the Āgnīdhra) responds, then the sacrifice comes back, saying ‘so be it!’ and with it thus passing over to them, as with seed, the priests carry on (*√car*) the tradition (*sampradāya-*), imperceptibly to the sacrificer; for even as people hand on from one to the other a full vessel, in the same way they (the priests) hand down that (sacrifice) from one to the other. They hand it down by means of speech (*vāc-*), for the sacrifice is speech (prayer), and speech is seed: therefore they keep up the tradition by means of it.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us back to the classical examples of *tradō* (*traditio*) and *paradīdōmi* (*parádosis*), for it remains to be considered on what grounds these terms are drawn into a context similar to that of the latter Vedic example. Walter Magaß has demonstrated to what high degree the abstract sense of *traditio*, with its particular tinge of religion and canonical literature, draws its meaning from Roman civil law. It

<sup>13</sup> Tr. Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1914.

<sup>14</sup> In both its form and sense, this verb is very similar to Latin *prodo* “to hand down, transmit, bequeath.”

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the amiguities involved in deriving and interpreting *dāyá-* (especially in the light of Pāli *dāya-* “gift” as opposed to *dāyajja-* “inheritance”), see M. Mayrhofer, EWAia, s.v. *√dā'*.

<sup>16</sup> Tr. Julius Eggeling, *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa: According to the Text of the Mādhyandina School*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883.



was especially the obligation to protect a private deposit against theft and forgery that inspired early Christian theologians to incorporate the term *traditio* in their writings.<sup>17</sup> The principles of civil law, as implied by Tertullian, should incite the tradent to be a custodian, not someone who proceeds inquisitively and arbitrarily with a property that has been handed down to him in the strictest confidence.<sup>18</sup> A problematic aspect of this mediating process is the perpetual sacrifice of intelligibility. Whereas tradition always involves some degree of interpretation in so far as things have to be said and heard, written and read, read and translated, and so on, the search for intelligibility must never jeopardize the inviolable deposit. Ideally, tradition is not conceived as a dialogue with the past, but rather as an unilinear process of custody directed towards the future, the safe-keeping of a code that must remain unbroken. In the external world, however, *tradita* evidently do change and invite interpretation: they change *because* they invite interpretation, and they invite interpretation because they seem so oblique and obsolete. Another aspect of this ambiguity, perhaps even the superordinate reason for ambiguity in this connection, is the simple fact that *tradita* have to remain unmolested while still passing from hand to hand. If the phatic and scriptural world of revealed truth (as regulated by divine law) could prove so suggestive of the physical world of deposits and their custody (as regulated by civil law), would it not follow that the revealed truth, since it is circulating in a world of human interaction, eventually gets worn out?<sup>19</sup>

It seems as if the exegesis of tradition feeds on two closely related yet scarcely compatible judicial domains: the law of inheritance, which inevitably has to involve the right of possession, and the law regulating the custody of deposits. The *traditum* is not inherited as a private or public property, but as a deposit. Just like an heirloom, it is not supposed to be consumed by its heirs, but to be passed down intact to the next generation. In a Maussian system of reciprocal gift-giving, we expect the act of giving to trigger a response, a counter-gift, in order to assure the circulation of wealth. The given *traditum* moving along a time axis could not imply any counter-gift, since this would break-off the unilinear movement through time. Yet the *traditum* likewise

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Magaß, "Tradition – Zur Herkunft eines rechtlichen und literarischen Begriffs," *Kairos. Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft und Theologie* 24 (1982), pp. 111-120.

<sup>18</sup> *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7,12. Cf. reference in *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>19</sup> This issue concerned Nietzsche, who explicitly referred to coins losing their embossing, in a text (*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (KGW III/2, 374f.)) that was to become decisive of some early pleas for post-structuralism. For further treatments of this rich metaphor, see H.

resists definite consumption by inciting further transmission through time, the claim to be passed down unexpended as if never truly seized. This double responsibility is sharply outlined against the evocation of *parathékē* and *diathékē*, of *depositum* and *testamentum*, in the New Testament.

In the First Letter of Paul to Timothy (6,20), the author touches upon the custody of apostolic tradition with special emphasis on the principles of civil law. After a series of instructions regarding his duties as a pupil and a leader of the parish in Ephesus, Timothy is urged to guard the deposit of Paul's teachings: "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted on you (ὦ Τιμόθεε, τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον). Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards faith." Similar expressions are also found in 2 T 1,12-14. The judicial term *parathékē* (Latin *depositum*) as utilized in these passages sheds light upon the apparent post-Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. According to the different schools of antiquity (e.g. the Pythagoreans and the neo-Platonics, but perhaps also early guilds of singers such as the Homeridai), the extended teachings of a doctrine were possessions of the original teacher, and could thus safely be ascribed to the teacher without incurring the accusation of forgery. By the members of the Pauline school, Paul was likewise conceived as the testator, whose teachings they had been summoned to pass down and protect against unlawful dispossession, because the course of Pauline tradition ultimately leads back to God and the teachings of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Although absent from the Pastorals, the verb *paradídōmi* occurs in similar contexts elsewhere in Greek literature. An early example is a passage in Plato's *Philebus* (16c) relating how "a gift of the gods to men" (θεῶν ... εἰς ἀνθρώπους δόσις), along with bright fire, was thrown down from heaven through the agency of Prometheus. The ancients, who lived closer to the gods, handed down (παρέδοσαν) this gift in the form of the *phēmē* ("(divine) saying" or "report") that all things said to exist stem from one and from many, and that they carry both the finite and the infinite within them (ὥς ἐξ ἑνὸς μὲν καὶ πολλῶν ὄντων τῶν ἀεὶ λεγομένων εἶναι, πέρας δὲ καὶ ἀπειρίαν ἐν αὐτοῖς ξύμφυτον ἐχόντων). Just as the post-Pauline author of 1 Tim with regard to *parathékē*, Plato retraces the path of the divine gift through an intermediary agent (Prometheus). It is also significant that

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Weinrich, "Münze und Wort. Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld," in *Sprache in Texten*, Stuttgart 1976; and J. Derrida, "La mythologie blanche," *Poétique* 5 (1971), pp. 1-52.

<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Roloff, s.v. "Pastoralbriefe," in Horst Balz et al. (eds), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. XXVI, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996, p. 55.

both authors hint at a multidirectional transmission of the *traditum*: a vertical transmission from the eternal world of God/gods to the temporal world of men, and a horizontal transmission from hand to hand within the temporal world of men.

Another judicial concept, that of *diathēkē* (Latin *testamentum*), deserves attention in this connection. It is pivotal to say the least, because it is situated at the very core of both Christian canon and ritual: the new covenant or testament proclaimed during the Lord's Supper. The saying over the cup, "this is the new covenant of my blood" (L 22,20; 1 K 11,25) or "this is my blood of the (new) covenant" (Mc 14,22; Mt 26,28), recalls God's first covenant with Israel on the mount Sinai as expressed in Exod 24,8 ("behold the blood of the covenant"). The covenant on mount Sinai was a one-sided obligation (with a pledge attached to it) rather than a two-sided contractual agreement.<sup>21</sup> However, the meaning of the word *diathēkē* in secular Greek usage primarily recalls the establishment of a last will or testament, which only takes effect at the death of the testator. This ambiguity is further elaborated in the Letter to the Hebrews (9,15-17), where Christ is said to be the mediator of a new covenant (*diathēkē*), so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. Where a will (*diathēkē*) is involved, the text continues, it is not in force as long as the testator is still alive. Even the first covenant on Sinai involved death, because the people and the book were sprinkled with the blood of calves and goats when the commandment of the law had been declared.

Let us pay some further attention to the description of the Lord's Supper. As we shall see, many of the concepts touched upon so far coincide in the treatment of this event. In the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (11,23-25), a text is quoted that is strongly reminiscent of the different variants handed down by the Synoptics (especially L 22,17-20):

For I received (παρέλαβον) from the Lord what I also delivered (παρέδωκα) to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed (παρεδίδετο)

(he) took (ἔλαβεν) the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it (ἔκλασεν), and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance (ἀνάμνησιν) of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant (καινὴ διαθήκη) in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

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<sup>21</sup> H. Hegermann (s.v. διαθήκη), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1.

It is notable that Paul, while passing from the plain text of the letter to the apparent quotation, makes use of a chiastic arrangement that seems to explore the different connotations of the verbs *(para)lambánō* and *paradídōmi*. On the one hand, the verbs are used by Paul in the figurative sense of receiving and handing down an oral testimony, on the other hand, they are used in the literary sense of taking up (a loaf of bread) and handing over something/someone (to death/destruction). The latter sense is underscored by the reference to the breaking of the bread representing the body of Christ. Since the word order in the beginning of the verse (παρέλαβον ... ὁ καὶ παρέδωκα) seems to be marked, as suggested by the expression παρέδωκα ... ὁ καὶ παρέλαβον in the same letter (15,3), it is all the more probable that the chiastic arrangement was intentional. It has been noticed by others that the occurrence of *paradídōmi*, especially in passages associated with Jesus' Passion, defy simple classification as to whether the verb refers bluntly to the seizure and handing down of Jesus to Pilate, or to the soteriological notion of self-surrender, the act of God underlying these human events (see especially Mc 9,31).<sup>22</sup> In Paul, the ambiguity of the verb may have been consciously inserted into a chiastic arrangement, the center or turning-point of which becomes "an apophthegmatic summary of its contents."<sup>23</sup> God through Christ, by being handed over to death, hands himself down to mankind through sacrifice and spreads by means of tradition in the circulatory system of an ever growing body of disciples.

The occurrence of *anamnēsis* in this passage also deserves some consideration. We noticed in the previous section that this term shared certain textual and conceptual associations with *religio*. *Religio* could be understood as an act of recollection in a more or less literal sense, whereas *anamnēsis* is vaguely suggestive of the same act from a figurative point of view. Aristototele, in his treatise *On Memory and Recollection*, interprets the act of recollection (*anamnēsis*) as a recovery of previous knowledge. Memory proper can only be established posterior to this act, because it is impossible to remember the present.<sup>24</sup> The act of recovery (*analambánō*) characterizing the *anamnēsis* is metaphorically understood as a seizure preceded by the search for previous knowledge or experience rather than the memory of this

<sup>22</sup> Günter Bornkamm, "Herrenmahl und Kirche bei Paulus," in *Studien zum Neuen Testament*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985, pp. 278ff. Cf. also Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Zürich and Düsseldorf: Benziger Verlag, 1999, pp. 31f.

<sup>23</sup> Ian H. Thompson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, p. 43.

knowledge or experience. In the context of oral tradition, any seizure has to be taken metaphorically. It does not literally involve the hand, but rather the ears and the mind. One may thus conjecture that Paul's reference to what he "received (from another)" (παρέλαβον), what he has handed down so that it might be received once more, reflects and forestalls the situation described in the following verses: the disciples being urged to recover and reiterate through an act of *anamnēsis* the situation initiated at the Lord's Supper.

I suggested above that the wearing down, consumption, and eventual destruction of the *tradtum* is an involuntary consequence rather than a deliberate aim of tradition, which sets out (or pretends) to counteract this degradation process. Yet these things may turn out to be less clear-cut. Not only is the very notion of destruction inscribed in the concept itself (the *leftover*, that which is *surrendered*, *handed over to death*, *left behind*, etc.), but the ambiguity of *traditio* is also covered by two closely related aspects of religious behaviour: the studious transmission of cultural inheritance and the sacrificial consumption regulated by such inherited customs. The logical connection between these two aspects of behaviour becomes even clearer when we turn to some culturally discrete comparanda.

### 3. The footprint code of tradition in Vedic poetics

We now move from the familiar example of the Lord's Supper to the less familiar example of Vedic ritual exegesis. Needless to say, Vedic literature differs fundamentally from the texts of the New Testament with regard to its trajectory, historical context, and style. The Vedic hymns were composed within an open-ended oral tradition spanning a considerable space of time. The earliest hymns contained in the *RigVeda* probably belong to the latter half of the second millennium BC. Nevertheless, this *terminus a quo* merely marks the closure of historical vision. Vedic religion did not acknowledge any historically transparent founder or circumscribed creed. The progenitors of Vedic tradition were said to be poet-priests, to whom the secrets of ritual had been revealed in a distant past. Their actions were considered prescriptive with regard to the perpetual duties of ritual. Overlapping yet at times contradictory hymns and exegetical treatises were composed and handed down within family traditions or by specific priestly offices. After a process of codification, which

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<sup>24</sup> 451a-451b.

may have begun during the middle of the first millenium BC, the extensive Vedic corpus gradually entered into a state of fixed oral transmission. The Vedic texts revolve around the ritual (*yajñá-* or *yájus-*), either by providing the actual liturgy or by offering a painstaking exegesis of the ritual details. These perspectives occasionally interlock, because the mantras performed as a part of the ritual may also be considered exegetical in so far as they contain ritual metaphors or touch upon the nature of ritual action.

Despite the apparent lack of a cultural interface between Indian society and the Graeco-Roman world before the time of Alexander, there is another common trait that could add new dimensions to a comparison between these cultures. I am referring to the shared Indo-European vocabulary. This linguistic background has informed assumptions regarding ideological commonalities unaffected by any direct linguistic traits (e.g. in the works of Georges Dumézil), but a sceptical attitude towards the reconstruction of an Indo-European ideology is not tantamount to rejecting the heuristic value of a common linguistic heritage. Unlike concepts translated from one, less familiar system into another, more familiar one, cognates share certain formal features that may be pinpointed without an in-depth study of their pragmatics. A probing into their *Sitz im Leben* is thus underpinned by the simple fact that they belong to the same diachronic continuum. As for such common traits in terms referring to the transmission and establishment of cultural heritage, a particularly high degree of concentration involves nouns and verbs derived from the commonplace verbal roots *\*deh<sub>3</sub>* “to give” and *\*d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>* “to set, put, place.” The prefixed verbs *tra(ns)do* and *paradidómi* contain the verbal root *\*deh<sub>3</sub>*, whereas *prodo* and *sam-pra-√dā* (see above) share the same verbal root as well as the preverb *\*pró* “forward.” The root *\*d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>* is found in deverbative nouns such as Greek *parathékē* and *diathékē* (see above), in Greek *thémis* and Vedic *dhāman-*, referring to that which is *laid down* or *established* by custom, as well as in nouns denoting the very custom itself, the “own established usage,” exemplified by Greek *ēthos/éthos* (proto-Greek *\*(s)wéthos*), Latin *s(u)odālis*, and Vedic *svadhā-* (*\*sue-d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>*).<sup>25</sup> The devotion characteristic of ritual observance and the transmission of customs is expressed with reference to committing (literally “putting”) one’s heart to something, as seen in Latin *credo* and Vedic *śraddhā-* (*\*Kred-d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>*). The verbal compound *śraddhā-* provides a suitable point of

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Calvert Watkins, “New Parameters in Historical Linguistics, Philology, and Culture History,” *Language* 65 (1989), pp. 787ff.

departure in this connection, because it allows us to uncover a series of actions directed towards and proceeding from the very heart of the Vedic tradent. Before entering upon this path, however, we must shortly touch upon another datum in the Vedic exegesis of tradition.

George Thompson, in two important articles from 1995<sup>26</sup>, has shed new light upon an early Vedic doctrine of signs centered on the notion of *padá*- “footprint.” This doctrine, on the one hand, applied to the concerns of poets and ritual specialists in the present by inciting them to pursue the verbal precedent left behind by their ancestors.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the same doctrine was transferred to mythical narratives involving gods or the apotheosized poet-priests tracking down the lost cows captured in the cave of Vala, or pursuing the hidden tracks of the god Agni “fleeing from his responsibilities as a priest.”<sup>28</sup> In accordance with this notion, furthermore, the *padá*- (understood as a visible, transient, or invisible track) could be hidden, deposited, or left behind (*ni-√dhā*) by a divine agent or tradent, and then found or recognized by the “knowers of the track” (*padajñjā*) or “track seekers” (*padavī*) entering upon a prescriptive course. In his capacity as a manifestation of the sacrificial fire reflecting the mediating function of the priest, Agni was conceived as a patron of sacrifice and chief custodian of proper ritual conduct. This notion is already firmly established in the opening hymn of the RigVeda, which characterizes the god as “ruling over the ceremonies, the shepherd of *ṛtá*- (= the governing principle of cosmic and ritual order)” (8a-b. *rājantam adhvarānām ' gopām ṛtasya*). The pursuit of Agni’s hidden tracks essentially implies a return to the principles once and for all established by him.

Consider, for instance, the following passage quoted by Thompson

RV 1,146,4: “Insightful poets follow (Agni’s) track (*padám*), protecting variously the unaging (= Agni/Agni’s track?) in their hearts (*hṛdā*). Wishing to win him, they have searched the river. He, the sun, has become visible to them, (illuminating) heroes!”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> George Thompson, “The Pursuit of Hidden Tracks in Vedic,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 38 (1995), pp. 1-30; and id., “From ‘footstep’ to ‘word’ in Sanskrit,” *Semiotica* 106-1/2 (1995), pp. 77-98.

<sup>27</sup> Similar conceptions, such as the *chijikijilu* “landmark, ritual unit” among the Ndembu, prevail in modern ethnography (cf. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 15). While undoubtedly relevant to a probing into the universals of tradition’s exegesis, an inventory of this kind would by far exceed the limits of this paper.

<sup>28</sup> George Thompson, “The Pursuit of Hidden Tracks in Vedic,” p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

A similar notion is expressed in the two following passages:

RV 1,67,2-3: Keeping all manhood (pl.) in his hand, he (Agni) caused stupefaction among the gods as he took a seat in the hiding-place (*gúhā*). They find him there, the devout (*dhiyaṃdhā́*) men, when they pronounced the formulas fashioned in their hearts (*hṛdā́*).

RV 1,72,2: Among us, they—all the desiring, immortal, judicious ones—would not find the one who had clasped the calf (= Agni). Ambitious, pursuing his tracks, devoutly (*dhiyaṃdhā́s*) they stopped by the farthest track (*padé paramé*), by the dear (track) of Agni.

The tentative translation of *dhiyaṃdhā́*- (“devout ones” or “devoutly”) does not fully capture the actual sense of the compound. Taken at face value it evokes the same notion of cordial or mental commitment as the more familiar verbal compound *śraddhā́*- (\**kred-d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>*). Vedic *dhíyam*- (from *√dhay*, PIE \**d<sup>h</sup>eǵH-*) covers a broad semantic spectrum ranging from “perception,” “vision,” and “thought” to the formulation of thought as “poetry” or “praise.” To be devout is consequently to commit one’s vision to something (preferably the track, the verbal precedent), figuratively grasping it with one’s hand, whereupon it enters one’s heart or mind as if entering a vessel. Furthermore, this active and gestural recognition (*dhiyaṃdhā́*-) of the track has been preceded by a divine act of marking or concealing sometimes signalled by the same verbal root *√dhā* and a preverb *ní* “down.” This is the sense in which the three strides of Viṣṇu (by means of which the god measures up the world) are described as his *padā́*- three times “left behind” (*ní dadhe*) (RV 1,22,17). It is also the sense in which the “udder of the cow” (*dhenúr ūdhaḥ*), a parabolical designation of poetic speech, has been “concealed” (cf. RV 3,55,13). In the shape of a great steer, Agni puts his feet (or leaves his footprint behind) on the face of the earth (RV 1,146,2c) so that his track may be pursued by the poet-priests and protected in their hearts (RV 1,146,4):

2c. *urvyāḥ padó ní dadhāti sānau* [---] 4ab. *dhīrāsaḥ padāṃ kavāyo nayanti ' nānā hṛdā́ rākṣamāṇā ajuryām*

“He (Agni) leaves his footprint on the broad back (of earth) [---] insightful poets follow his track, protecting variously the unaging (= Agni/Agni’s track?) in their hearts.”

An additional interpretation of the simile in 2c (Agni as steer (*ukṣán*-) treading the earth) is vaguely suggested by a passage (RV 3,55,17) depicting Parjanya’s (the god of rain and thunder) fertilization of the earth as a bull (*vr̥ṣán*-) “placing his seed” (*ní*



*dadhāti rétaḥ* (cf. *padó ní dadhāti*)) in the herd. The simile in 2c may thus be double-edged in so far as it simultaneously interprets the track left behind by Agni as the verbal precedent of ritual and the seed (or protoypal *traditum*) initially planted by the god. We should recall the Vedic prose passage quoted above (ŚB 1,5,2,12): “as with seed (*retas*), the priests carry on the tradition [...] they hand it (the sacrifice) down by means of speech (*vāc-*), for the sacrifice is speech, and speech is seed: therefore they keep up the tradition by means of it.”<sup>30</sup>

This ongoing process of tracking and tracing, of sowing and reaping, while always recalling the exemplary events of the past, also implies a continuous change of status. Agni’s role as disseminator succeeds to the poet-priests who once pursued his tracks. They become the new vessels of his seed, and their imitators in the present become the future disseminators of the past:

RV 10,71,3: With ritual/sacrifice they (the next generation of poet-priests?) tracked down (*padavīyam āyan*) speech (*vācāḥ*). Then they found those (tracks, words?) having entered into the sages (*śṛṣṭu*).<sup>31</sup> Having brought them forth (*ābhṛtyā*), they divided them amongst many (*vy ādadhuḥ purutrā*). The seven singers (original poet-priests?) jointly extol them.

As for the traced matter hinted at in this passage, whether literally understood as the verbal precedent of ritual or anything else left behind by a previous generation of ritual specialists, its distribution is once more signalled by the verbal root *√dhā* (PIE *\*d<sup>h</sup>eh<sub>1</sub>*) “to set, put, place” and a preverb *vi* “away, forth.” This verb completes and unites a series of operations, all of which may pertain to the *padā-*:

- a1) *ni-√dhā* “leaving behind, concealing”
- b) *dhīyam-√dhā* “committing one’s mind to”
- a2) *vi-√dhā* “distributing, redistributing” → a1) “leaving behind”

Operations *a1* and *a2* describe acts of coding, the creation of a (new) track or path, whereas operation *b* describes the decoding or tracing of *a*, the retracing of a path. Yet the act of decoding could eventually turn into a coding as well, into something left behind, because the *dhīyam-* by means of which the track is recognized may also

<sup>30</sup> Cf. footnote 16 above.

<sup>31</sup> The “sages” referred to in this line, the seven poet-priests (or Aṅgiras), were the first to find (*√ved*) the track or path (cf. RV 10,46,2 and 3,31,5).

denote the object of recognition. By way of example, according to RV 10,67,1, the seven-headed “poem” (*dhīyam-*) found by the ancestor (or “father”) apparently refers to a poem fashioned and left behind by the seven poet-priests through an act of devotional decoding (*dhiyaṁdhā-*).

A similar formulaic appropriation of *vi-√dhā* occurs in two other hymns (both in the 10<sup>th</sup> Maṇḍala of the RigVeda).<sup>32</sup> The verb in these hymns not only pertains to the distribution of speech, as in the Hymn to Vāc (10,125,3c), but also to the division of a sacrificial victim, as in the cosmogonic so called “Puruṣasūkta” (10,90,11a). Through their division of Vāc (or Speech), the gods allow speech to enter different regions of space and assume different (marked and unmarked) verbal shapes. Through the dismemberment of the prototypal victim (the anthropomorphic Puruṣa), on the other hand, the gods create the cosmic and social foundations of human society. This being so, the distribution of speech (in 10,125,3c) or ancestral *tradita* (10,71,3c) may have been imagined as the dismemberment of a sacrificial victim:

10,71,3c: *tām mā devā vy ādadhuḥ purutrā* “the gods divided me amongst many”

10,90,11a: *yāt puruṣaṁ vy ādadhuḥ* “when they (the gods) divided Puruṣa”

10,125,3c: *tām ābhītyā vy ādadhuḥ purutrā* “having brought them forth, they (the poet-priests) divided them amongst many”

It is notable that the two latter myths have informed one another conceptually in other respects as well. It is said of both Vāc and Puruṣa that they consist of four parts (literally “measured up into four tracks”<sup>33</sup>), three of which remain hidden or divine while only the last one enters into creation or starts to circulate among ordinary men (cf. RV 1,164,45; 10,90,3-4). They “do not disturb (or disarrange)” (*nēṅgayanti* (*ná + √ing*)) the three hidden parts of speech (1,164,45c). The same verb (*√ing*), in post-Vedic grammar, came to denote the division of a compound into separate members.<sup>34</sup> While thus alluding to the decomposition of performative speech into analysable members, the restraint from such interpretative endeavours is also characteristic of other approaches to tradition, not least with reference to the perpetual sacrifice of intelligibility discussed by early Christian authors (see above). The theme of sacrifice as an indicative path was further elaborated in brahmanic literature. Whereas the

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Vladimir N. Toporov, “Die Ursprünge der indoeuropäischen Poetik,” *Poetica* 13 (1981), p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> George Thompson, “The Pursuit of Hidden Tracks in Vedic,” p. 6.

earliest Vedic texts seem less explicit in this regard, the *Brāhmaṇas* occasionally present gods and humans as antagonistic competitors for the science of sacrifice. The gods, who were the first to invent sacrifice, rendered their own language opaque and tried to erase their tracks so as to obstruct the indices of operations that once made them obtain the celestial world. According to some such aetiological accounts (e.g. AitB 2,1; ŚB 1,4,3), the gods used the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) to erase the traces of sacrifice (i.e. by pointing its tip downwards). As observed by Charles Malamoud, this myth seems to explore the ambiguous etymological sense of *yūpa* as that which both “unites” ( $\sqrt{yav}^1$ ), “separates” ( $\sqrt{yav}^2$ ), and “causes the tracks to disappear” ( $\sqrt{yop}$ ).<sup>35</sup>

Let us shortly sum up the Vedic exegesis. The chief object of tradition is a unit that has to remain undisturbed and hidden, but which still lends itself to scrupulous recollection and transmission along a time axis. Since they retain the apparition of a track, such units are always potential objects of interrogation. Nevertheless, any interrogation threatens to disarrange them and ultimately erase them from the path on which they keep appearing. Furthermore, the transmission of *tradita* is analogous to the dismemberment of a sacrificial victim. Just as the ritual prescriptions (or tracks) have been found and divided amongst many by the apotheosized poet-priests, the first sacrificial victim was divided by the gods so as to establish human society. The origin of tradition and the origin of the sacrifice maintained within such a tradition unfolds itself as the trace of divine intervention. By repeatedly pursuing the tracks left behind by the gods, the ritual specialists retrace the creative origins of ritual.

#### 4. Gothic *anaþilhan* and the Germanic concept of tradition

The 4th century Gothic translation of the Bible is the oldest comprehensive document written in a Germanic dialect. The extant manuscripts contain large portions of the New Testament and a few fragments of the Old Testament. Due to the scarcity of literary sources of pre-Christian Germanic culture before the Viking Age, a document like this provides a helpful insight into an early Germanic dialect set to the task of interpreting a foreign religious vocabulary in the light of indigenous concepts and

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Monier Monier-Wiliams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899 [1956], s.v.  $\sqrt{yav}$ , “to divide or separate the members of a compound word.”

<sup>35</sup> Charles Malamoud, “The Gods Have no Shadows: Reflections on the Secret Language of the Gods in Ancient India,” in id., *Cooking the World. Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 202.

categories. The prospect of grasping aspects of early Germanic religion through the medium of Gothic language seems particularly favourable in cases when indigenous Gothic terms, such as *blotan* (= Greek *latreúein* “to worship”) and *gudja* (= Greek *hiereús* “priest”), display younger offshoots in other literary (especially Old Norse) sources concerned with religious and judicial institutions that had begun to lose their importance as a direct result of the propagation of Christianity. Such a favourable case emerges from the Gothic translations of the Greek terms *paradídōmi*, *parádosis*, and *parathékē*. While we can show that the Gothic translator(s) gave prominence to the intrinsic unity of these terms by assigning the whole set to a verb *filhan*, further attention to the notions proceeding from this verb may help us to grasp the systematic analysis of cultural inheritance in pre-Christian Germanic culture. Let us first take a closer look at the Gothic attestations.

The unmarked sense of *filhan* (proto-Germanic *\*felhan*) corresponds to the Greek verbs *krubénai* “to conceal” (L 10,21) and *thápsai* “to bury” (Mt 8,22 and 1T 5,25), whereas the marked sense inherent in latter manifestations of the same verb (e.g. Old Norse *fela*) is expressed in Gothic by adding the preposition *ana-* “at, on.” As seen in the Old Norse expression *fela á hendi* “to give into one’s keeping, entrust,” the marked sense of *\*felhan* seems consistent with that of Latin *trado* and Greek *paradídōmi*. The Gothic deverbative noun *ana-filh* translates *parádosis*, *parathékē*, and *sustatikós* (in the expression *sustatikà epistolàí* “letters of recommendation” (2 K 3,1)). The verb *ana-filhan* accordingly translates *paradidónai*, *ekdídosthai* “to give up, surrender,” *paratítesthai* “to commit,” and *sunistánein* “to commend.” Cognates of the same verb are still found in German *befehlen* and *empfehlen*. Since the primary sense of the verbal root could either have been that of Old English *feolan* “to penetrate (→ to commit)” or Gothic *filhan* “to conceal,”<sup>36</sup> we may assume that these two notions were assigned to the same gesture. To pass something down along a time axis was consequently understood as an operation that required encoding, the *traditum* had to be concealed in order to penetrate the change of generations. As observed above, the Vedic verb *ni-√dhā* exhibits a similar ambiguity in that it either denotes the impression of a visible track or the encoding of a secret message (the parabolic “udder of the cow”).

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Brigitte Schirmer (s.v. *\*pelk*) in Helmut Rix (ed.), *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben*, Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1998.

Now if we proceed from the twice attested noun *fulhsni* (from *filhan*), which occurs as a translation of “that which is done or said in secret (*tò kruptón*)” in a passage concerning the practice of piety (M 6,1-18) and in a fragmentary translation of a lost commentary on the Gospel of John (*Skeireins* (4,23)) as the direct object of the verb *anafilhan*, another Gothic noun comes to mind. It is the term *runa* (Greek *mustérion* “mystery, secret,” *boulé* “plan,” *sumboulion* “counsel”), which (as I will argue below) in some Germanic dialects became associated with the indigenous “runic” script. In the Gothic Bible, however, such scriptural connotations are absent, and it may be assumed that Gothic preserves an early sense of the term having more to do with things said, whispered, or sung in a context of confidentiality or performative markedness (cf. Old English *rūnian* “whisper,” Old Saxon and Old High German *rūnōn* “whisper,” the presumed Old Irish cognate *rūn* “secret, mystery,” and the Finnish loan word *runo* “(traditional) song, poem”).

Compare the following passages:

*Skeireins* 4,23:

“But (Christ) born of heaven, handing down (*anafilhands*) the hidden things (*fulhsna*) he had seen and heard from the father.”

L 8,10 (cf. Mc 4,1):

“To you it has been given to know the secrets (*mustéria* : *runos*) of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables (*parabolaís* : *gajukom* (i.e. things ‘yoked together’)), so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.”

1 K 15,51:

“Lo! I tell you a mystery (*mustérion* : *runa*). We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”

E 3,9:

“[A]nd to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery (*mustériou* : *runos*) hidden (*apokekrumménou* : *gafulginos* (from *filhan*)) for ages in God who created all things.”

Not unlike the use of the term in classical Greek literature, *mustérion* in the New Testament especially denotes something that has been or is in the process of being revealed to some but which remains hidden (a puzzle or a parable) to others. In classical and hellenistic Greece, a mystery did not belong to discursive reason and was only accessible through the deeper level of experience characteristic of ritual

participation.<sup>37</sup> The term is derived from a verbal root *mu-*, which either refers to the closing of the eyes or lips, or to the production of inarticulate sounds when one tries to speak with closed lips. Just as “hidden things” (*fulhsna*) are the objects of tradition (*anafilhands*) in the *Skeireins*, the *runa* could function as an object of a similar action in the sense that it has been “hidden” (*gafulginos*) in God for ages (E 3,9).

Whereas the quality of being partially concealed apparently belongs to the semantic property of *runa*, the term also seems to concern that which is passed down, received, encoded, and decoded through human interaction within a context of marked behaviour, through a specific competence or initiatory status. Granted that this was the primary sense of the term in prehistoric times, it would be consistent to derive its association with the indigenuous runic script from a situation in which a set of fixed characters becomes legible through an acquired interpretative competence. Despite some recent attempts to dismiss the idea that Northwest-Germanic *rūn* originally had anything to do with “mystery, secret,” I would insist that this association remains highly plausible. A major reason for arguing that *\*rūnō* “mystery” and Northwest-Germanic *rūn* “rune” should be considered homonyms has been “the problem of how to explain satisfactorily the semantic gap separating the two meanings without relying on the presumed magical nature in the runes.”<sup>38</sup> On account of this apparent semantic gap, Richard L. Morris has suggested that Northwest-Germanic *rūn*, even if it fits phonetically into the group of Gothic *runa*, German *raunen* “to whisper,” developed independently from an inherited Indo-European root *\*reŭ-*, *\*ru-*, *\*rū-* with the original sense “to dig” and the developed sense “to scratch, carve, write.” It is certainly possible, however, to find etymological support for a common origin of the two meanings without presuming that a magical quality was ascribed to the runic script. Furthermore, the idiomatic and textual conjunction of the two meanings in early dialects other than Gothic would speak against a case of homonymy. Let us emphasize once more that a mystery, in the sense of classical Greek and Koiné usage, has nothing to do with magic, not even necessarily with the supernatural, but with things that have acquired a marked status, so that they may only be seen or shown, heard or said, in a special way.

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<sup>37</sup> H. Krämer (s.v. μυστήριον), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Richard L. Morris, “Northwest-Germanic *rūn*- ‘rune’: A case of homonymy with Go. *rūna* ‘mystery,’” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 107 (1985), pp. 344-358.

While Morris rightly presupposes that it lies in the nature of an alphabetic system to be accessible to large numbers of people<sup>39</sup>, it also lies in the nature of a written message to be a codification and fixation of human speech in all its performative efficacy. If Gothic *runa* had nothing to do with notions that also could invite scriptural associations, Morris has yet to explain how Northwest-Germanic *rūn-* (just as Gothic *runa*) could function as an object of the verb *\*felhan*. I quote the introductory phrases of two early runic inscriptions (Björketorp and Stentoften), both of which are followed by a curse (approximately “he who breaks this (monument) is condemned to an insidious death through baseness (or perversity)”):

St. *hideRruno[ro]no felAheka* (*falh ak* < proto-Germanic *\*felh ek*) *hederA ginoronoR*

Looijenga (p. 178, p. 183)<sup>40</sup>: “A clear rune row I bury here / runes from the ruling gods”

Antonsen (p. 304)<sup>41</sup>: “To the sequence of clear runes I commit hither mighty runes”

Bj. *HAidRrunoronu fAlAhAk hAidera ginArunAR*

Looijenga (p. 178) takes *fAlAhAk* as a 1 sg. pret. ind. (“I buried”).

As suggested by the choice of verb in both variants, it seems unlikely that the carver merely wished to commit a message to writing and thus expose it to the public eye, especially when we consider the conjunction of *filhan* and *runa* in the Gothic translation of E 3,9 (*runos pizos gafulginos*), or the conjunction of *fela* and *rún* in the Old Norse phrase *fólgit i rúnum*. The latter phrase, found in Snorri Sturluson’s treatise on poetic diction (*Skáldskaparmál* (Edda 47)), concerns an operation by means of which one word gets to represent another in the poetic language of the skalds (e.g. when “gold” is referred to as the “speech,” “words,” or “reckoning” of the giant Thjazi, because he and his brothers divided their inheritance by taking the same-sized mouthfuls of their dead father’s gold). When “gold” is thus called “Thjazi’s speech,” the word has been *fólgit i runum*, it has been concealed and passed down in the form of a poetic message that simultaneously obscures, as it seems, the purport of a poem and provides the same poem with an index to the world of myth. The *rún* is that into which an unmarked word is deposited so as to provide it with marked status.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

<sup>40</sup> Tineke Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Elmer H. Antonsen, *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002.

Another suggestive evidence against Morris' general assumption that an alphabetic system always invites public access is a passage concerning the invention of the indigenous Ogham alphabet in the Middle Irish *Auraicept na n-éces* (*The Scholars' Primer*) (5471ff.). According to this text, Ogma ("a man well skilled in speech and in poetry" (*fer reolach a mberla 7 a filidecht*) invented the Ogham letters so "that this speech should belong to the learned apart, to the exclusion of rustics and herdsmen."<sup>42</sup> Julius Caesar, in his *De bello Gallico* (6,14,3-4), had earlier assumed that writing was partly avoided by the Druids because it might obstruct the hermetic claims of this privileged community. Now this perspective is completely inverted in the *Auraicept*, a document emerging from a younger layer of the cultured circle once ethnographically treated by Caesar.

In early Old Norse poetry, furthermore, *rún* is an object of interrogation and recollection that has much more to do with sententious specimens of prescriptive knowledge than with writing or written messages. Scriptural associations evidently do occur, but it is impossible to assign these to a completely different semantic field. When the term *rún* occurs as the focus of agonistic riddling in the mythological poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, that which is said *frá jǫtna rúnom ok allra goða* (Vm. 42, 43) ("about the giants' *rúnar* and those of all gods") is precisely that which is true but remains hidden to a majority of beings. It is also notable that, apart from being potentially carved or scraped off, *rúnar* could also be directly told.<sup>43</sup>

It thus seems (*pace* Morris' objections) highly plausible that Gothic *runa*, Northwest-Germanic *rūn*, and Old Norse *rún* all belonged to the same family. This familiarity is further substantiated by an etymology first suggested by Sigmund Feist in 1939. It proceeds from a Greek denominative *ereunáō* "to find out" (from *eréō*, *eiromai* "to ask, seek" (PIE *\*h<sub>1</sub>reh<sub>1</sub>*)), and connects the noun *éreuna* ("inquiry, search") from which this verb is derived with Old Norse *raun* "trial, experiment, investigation" (PG *\*raunō*). The Germanic noun can easily be explained as an ablaut grade related to Gothic *runa*, Old Norse *rún*, etc. The current etymology would be consistent with the understanding of proto-Germanic *\*rūnō* as an object of inquiry or investigation. In specific contexts, the Greek verb *ereunáō* could in fact literally refer to the decoding of a vestige, such as the "tracks" (*ikhnia*) left behind by Apollo's stolen cattle in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (176-7): "And if glorious Leto's son is going to track me

<sup>42</sup> George Calder (ed./tr.), *Auraicept na n-éces/The Scholars' Primer*, Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1917.



down (εἰ δέ μ' ἐρευνήσῃ Λετοῦς ἐρικυδέος υἱός), then I shall set out [...] to be the prince of thieves.”<sup>44</sup> *Ereunáō* could also take as its object the noun *boulḗ*, which the Gothic Bible invariably translates with *runa* (L 7,30; 1 K 4,5): “For it is impossible that he will search out the gods’ plans (θεῶν βουλέματ’ ἐρευνάσει) with a mortal mind.”<sup>45</sup>

The heroic and mythological (so-called “eddic”) poetry contained in the 13th century Codex Regius often presents the *rúnar* as a special property of the god Óðinn. Although little is known about the history of eddic poetry, whether most of the poems were composed after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity or if they merely received their final shape during this period (preceded by a long period of oral transmission), we are not led to look for its primary sources in the literary canon of Christian Europe. Nothing in the form or content of eddic poetry speaks against the assumption that it was linked to the oral traditions of pre-Christian western Scandinavia. This poetry depicts Óðinn as “the great Þulr” or *Fimbulþulr* (from a verb *þylja* “to chant, murmur”) (*Hávamál* (Háv.) 80, 142) who first painted or embellished the *rúnar*, he is in search of the kind of knowledge represented by the *rúnar* in the context of agonistic code-testing (e.g. in *Vafþrúðnismál*), and in yet another passage he “took up *rúnar*” (*nam ... upp rúnar*) (Háv. 138-141) so as to acquire ritual competence through a sacrificial giving up of himself. The latter passage, the so-called *Rúnatals Þáttr*, belongs to the most controversial in the study of Old Norse mythology. I quote Turville-Petre’s translation:

138. I know that I hung / on the windswept tree / for nine full nights, / wounded with a spear / and given to Óðinn, / myself to myself; / on that three / of which none know / from what roots it rises. 139. They did not comfort me with bread, / and not with the drinking horn; / I peered downward, / I grasped the ‘runes’, / screeching I grasped them; / I fell back from there. 140. I learned nine mighty songs / from the famous son / of Bölthór, father of Bestla, / and I got a drink / of the precious mead, / I was sprinkled with Óðrerir. 141. Then I began to be fruitful / and to be fertile, / to grow and to prosper; / one word sought / another word from me / one deed sought / another deed from me.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the expression “to tell true *rúnar*” (*segja sannar rúnir*) (*Fornaldar Sögur*, ii. 302 (in a verse)).

<sup>44</sup> Martin L. West (ed./tr.), *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Pindar, fr. 61 (Paean 21), William H. Race (ed./tr.), *Pindar: Nemean Odes, Isthmian Odes, Fragments*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.

<sup>46</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p. 42.

Since the days of Sophus Bugge (1889), many scholars have interpreted this passage as a reflection of the scene on Calvary. Bugge found expressions of popular Christian piety in other parts of northern Europe that were strongly reminiscent of the myth of the hanging Óðinn, such as the notion of the rood-tree in Old English poetry and a 19<sup>th</sup> century folksong recorded in Unst (Shetland), according to which Christ “hang pa de rütless tree [...] Nine lang nichts, / i’ da nippin rime.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, other scholars have been more prone to regard this as a sign of confluence between, on the one hand, a pre-Christian myth of sacrificial death on a tree and the martyrdom of Christ on the cross. Gabriel Turville-Petre has convincingly argued that “nearly every element in the Norse myth can be explained as a part of pagan tradition, and even of the cult of Óðinn.” Considering the importance of Óðinn as a recipient of human sacrifice (in some cases even human self-sacrifice<sup>48</sup>) in the Old Icelandic sagas, it is tempting to regard the *Rúnatal* *Pátr* as an aetiology of sacrifice. The god, in days of yore, exhausted himself so as to establish the performative pattern of sacrifice. Such an interpretation is further supported by the following verses. Verses 142 and 143 refer to the search, acquisition, and distribution of *rúnar* and *stafar* (“staffs, staves, letters”) first painted or embellished (*fáði*), made (*gørðo*), and carved (*reist*) by the gods. Verses 144 and 145 call attention to the proper use of the runic script (*rísta*, *ráða* (“to counsel, read”), *fá*, *freista* (“to try”)) as well as different cultic duties (*biðia* (“to bid”), *blóta* (“to worship”), *senda* (“to send”), *sóa* (“to sacrifice”)). All these verbs are preceded by the question *veiztu hvé?* (“do you know how?”) in 144, whereas in 145 the proper practice of the four latter duties are compared with regard to their respective non-appearance and excess (“it is better not to bid than to worship too much [...] it is better not to ‘send’ than to sacrifice too much”). Although the specific sense of *senda* in this connection remains somewhat unclear, it is plausible that it refers to some kind of ritual procedure associated with the killing of animals. While the verbs *biðia* and *blóta* seem to denote more abstract aspects of worship, *sóa* may rather denote the making of an offering or even the actual slaughter. In this case, *senda* possibly refers to the apportionment of meat or shares subsequent to a sacrificial slaughter. Such a share of meat is sometimes referred to as a *sending* (“a dish of meat”) in Old Norse literature, and the verb *senda* occasionally denotes the exchange

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. the Swedish King Erik the Victorious, who gave himself (*gafsk*) to Óðinn in order to win a battle (*Flateyrbók*, II, 72).

of precious gifts (*gjafar*).<sup>49</sup> The moral of the last verse would thus, as it seems, involve the moderation expected from ritual participants. Just as a request (*bæn*) or petition (*bón*) in the context of worship (*blót*) is always subordinate to the worship itself, the apportionment and consumption of sacrificial food (*sendi*) among the ritual participants is always subordinate to the sacrificial atonement (*són*) as such. Verse 145 closes with an apparent return to the context of the two opening verses: “So Þundr (= Óðinn) carved [...] when he rose up (as opposed to “fell down” in verse 139), when he came back.” The god returns from a liminal state of sacrificial exhaustion, bestowing upon mankind the prescriptions of sacrifice. Arguably, these prescriptions are presented to mankind in the form of *rúnar*, as primeval revelations or objects of inquiry to be passed on from generation to generation.

Óðinn in his capacity as a god who entrusts insight to future generations is also thematized in the myth of the loss of his eye. According to a famous strophe in the poem *Völuspá* (28), the sibyl (or *völva*) knows that he “hid” or “deposited” (*falt*, from *fela* < \**felhan*) his eye as a pledge in the well of Mímir. By thus depositing his vision into the fleeting substance of the well, Óðinn provides a perpetual source of knowledge from which the god of the well (Mímir) is thought to profit. Mímir drinks mead every morning from Óðinn’s pledge (28), and from the same pledge a wet clay (*aurr*) is seen pouring down from the World Tree (27). I leave it to others to decide whether the name *mímir* has anything to do with the perfect participle (PIE \**me-mn-us* → \**men*) underlying Latin *memor*, but it is tempting to imagine this god as a personification or supervisor of living memory.

A closer look at the context of the verb *senda* gives us further reasons to associate this term, not only with the apportionment of sacrificial shares, but also with the distribution of *tradita*. In the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, the hero Sigurðr is brought “tidings from all worlds” from the valkyrie Sigrdrífa. She teaches him about the use and origin of secret lore, and pays particular attention to the *rúnar* associated with the mind (*hugrúnar*). They, she says, one must know in order to be wise (13). They were first “read” (*réd*), “carved” (*resist*), and “thought out” (*hugði*) by Hroþr (= Óðinn) from a liquid dripping from the head and horn of two mythical beasts. The next verse (14) abruptly introduces a change of scene by seemingly quoting five verses from a different poem. The subject of the first line once again seems to be Óðinn, who stood

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Richard Cleasby/Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon

with sword and helmet on a cliff. Mím's head<sup>50</sup> then spoke the first word and true letters (*sanna stafí*). What follows in the next three verses is an extensive enumeration of different objects, or physical locations, on which the *rúnar* were originally carved (the feminine object underlying the participle *ristnar* could hardly be anything but *rúnar*). Some of these locations are directly associated with myth and mythical geography (the shield standing before the sun (15), the ears and hoof of the two horses pulling the sun (15), the tongue of Bragi (= god of poetry) (16), the point of Gungnir (= Óðinn's spear) (17)), whereas others recall the spheres of human remedy (delivering hands, the track of healing (16)) and prosperity (glass and gold, wine and wort (17)). In view of the *líknar spori* ("track of healing") in verse 16, it is significant that many of the other objects enumerated, while all bearing the signatures of carved markings, are themselves capable of leaving behind a trail or mark (a hoof, teeth, a wheel, a paw, a claw, a beak, the point of a spear, a nail). In the final verse (18) of this apparent quotation, the *rúnar* are all "scraped off" (*af skafnar*), they are "mixed" (*hverfðar*) with the holy mead, and "sent" (*sendar*) far around. They are among the Æsir, among the elves. Some are with the Vanir, some are with men. The verbal sequence *af skafnar* - *hverfðar* - *sendar* is striking in all its physical concretion, yet one should keep in mind that the concrete sense in which something is scraped or shaved (PIE *\*skab<sup>h</sup>*) also underlies verbs like Gothic *gaskapjan* and Old English *scyppan* ("to create"). On the analogy of a carpenter's knife or chisel, the removing of redundant matter is understood as the basis of any creative process. An example of a similar semantic development is Pahlavi *kirrēnīdan* "create" (sometimes "mis-create") from PIE *\*(s)ker* (as in Greek *keírō* "shear, cut down, cut through," and Armenian *k'erem* "scratch off, scrape off"), which may derive its developed sense from an Old Iranian belief in the creative origins of sacrificial dismemberment.<sup>51</sup> If the verbal sequence in verse 18 is thus taken in its widest metaphorical sense, we are led to compare it with a similar formulaic sequence containing two cognate verbal roots. It occurs in the Old English *Nine Herbs Charm*:

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Press, 1957, s.v. *senda*, *sending*.

<sup>50</sup> Mím is presumably identical with Mímir. According to Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga* (IV), Mímir was the wisest of the Æsir. His head was chopped off as he was held hostage among the Vanir, but Óðinn brought the head back to life by the use of herbs. The head talks to him and he derives wisdom from it. Although this story is not told elsewhere, the two references to the talking head of Mím in eddic poetry (Vsp. 46, Sd. 14) most likely allude to a similar myth.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce Lincoln, "Pahlavi *kirrēnīdan*: Traces of Iranian Creation

A snake came crawling, killed a man,  
 then took Woden nine twigs of glory,  
 smote then that adder that it flew apart into nine parts.  
 There did apple and venom/gall bring it about (?),  
 that she [the adder] never would turn into the house. 35  
 Chervil and fennel, great and mighty two,  
 those herbs did the wise Lord create (*gesceop*),  
 holy in the heavens, when he hung (*þa he hongode*);  
 he set (*sette*) and sent (*sænde*) them into the seven worlds,  
 to the poor and the rich, as a help to all.<sup>52</sup> 40

The “wise Lord” (*witig drihten*) referred to in line 37 is evidently Christ, but it is still significant to what extent the charm rather indiscriminately mixes Christian and pre-Christian motifs. The presumably rather late archetype underlying the manuscript (ms Harley 585) (approximately from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century) might suggest that the apparent syncretism of the charm was partly due to the increasing presence of Norse Vikings on the British isles. Yet the benevolent function of Woden (or Wodan) in another continental charm, the Old High German *Second Merseburg Charm*, rather indicates that pre-Christian motifs were particularly persistent in this kind of popular literature. It would thus be fair to assume that the image of Christ (lines 37-40), and especially the creative achievements assigned to him as he “hung” (on the cross), was likewise an outcome of syncretistic popular belief. Just as the folksong from Unst (see above), the *Nine Herbs Charm* represents Christ in a context that likewise recalls the myth of the hanging Óðinn/Woden. Through an act of sacrificial exhaustion, the hanging god shares his achievements with mankind. No less conspicuous is the verbal sequence associated with the herbs created on the cross. Christ “created” (*gesceop*) them, “set” (*sette*) them, and “sent” (*sænde*) them into seven worlds, to the poor and the rich. They become a remedy for all. Save for the alliterative verb *sette*, the sequence is perfectly consistent with the one in *Sigrdrífumál* (18):

Sd. 18: *af skafnar* (\**skab<sup>h</sup>*) - *hverfðar* - *sendar*

NHCh. 37-39: *gesceop* (\**skab<sup>h</sup>*) – *sette* - *sænde*

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Mythology,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117/4, 1997, pp. 681-686.

<sup>52</sup> The English translation, based on those of Grattan/Singer, Storms, and Krapp/Van Kirk Dobbie, is found in Anna Helene Feuler’s paper “Zur Metrik der Merseburger Zaubersprüche,” *Die Sprache. Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft*, 41/2, 1999, p. 126.

The two herbs in the *Nine Herbs Charm* are of course not directly interchangeable with the *rúnar* in *Sigrdrífumál*. Nevertheless, both texts present the zero point of transmission by highlighting the same threefold gesture. It is also notable that many of the *rúnar* in the eddic poem are carved on objects that seem to be sources of remedy. More importantly, however, the Old English passage allows us to bridge over that which, in eddic poetry, comes out as two different, seemingly independent versions of the origins of *rúnar*.

To sum up, the Germanic concept of tradition (*\*felhan*) is seen to oscillate between the notion of handing down and that of concealing. A typical object of such an operation, the *\*rūnō*, likewise involves the notion of secrecy and that of coded knowledge to be distributed and passed down. Just as in the Vedic cases touched upon above, the traditional unit (or *traditum*) bears the trace of divine intervention. It reaches mankind vertically, as it were, before it starts passing from hand to hand along a horizontal time axis. According to Old Norse poetry, Óðinn acquired the *rúnar* as he hung on the tree. They were handed down to mankind in the form of coded specimens of sacrificial knowledge. Furthermore, they were “apportioned” (*sendar*) on the analogy of a victim shared among the participants in a ritual slaughter.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The testing ground of this essay has been the re-utilization of the earliest accessible definitions of *religio* in lieu of an understanding that can be traced back to the hegemonic appropriation of the concept by early Christian writers. In its earlier sense, as it seems, this term did not principally refer to the re-establishment of man’s relation to a coexisting divine force, but rather to a reiteration of the past in terms of duty and scrupulosity. With this emphasis on the flow of time rather than on ontology, religion seems more closely connected to tradition than to any all-embracing understanding of the world. Religion is the mental reception of things (*tradita*) passed down by means of tradition, it is the retracing of a path left behind by tradition. These complementary concepts (*religio* and *traditio*) could now start serving a heuristic purpose. In so far as similar concepts in other cultural settings are assigned to the same device, they become clues to the ways in which societies think and rethink their own past, how they are affected by their past in the present, and how they prospect their own future.

Heuristic undertakings at best display unexpected connections in the material analyzed, they challenge us to put new questions, and to seek new solutions to problems that were less obvious at the outset. A common trait in the separate “cases” treated in this study is the way in which the exegesis of tradition informs that of sacrificial apportionment. While I do not feel prepared to offer more than a provisional account of this issue here, I still hope that others will acknowledge the issue at stake and feel encouraged to pursue it further. Let me use an analogy in order to make things a little clearer. The gesture of tradition resembles the pick-up simultaneously reading off and wearing down a rotating grammophone record. The record generates no sounds by itself. Certain additional rules of use and information regarding the date of its origin may be attached to it, but the actual content of the record can only be traced by means of an external decoding device. Unlike the developed visual trace of a photography, the grooves of the grammophone record are virtually impossible to appreciate without access to this external device. Besides, the more we use the record, touch it with our hands, expose it to dust and the markings of the pick-up, the more worn out it gets, and the more difficult it becomes to trace the event once recorded. Designed to do the best possible justice to the code without transforming it, the decoding device eventually and inevitably changes it anyway. The pick-up wears down the record, as it were, by creating new tracks in the course of tracing the original code. That which was never meant to be a code, but simply remained as a trace of the decoding process, becomes a new track to be traced on this already worn out surface, a new code (or “pseudo-code” if you like) to be recorded and decoded. The pick-up eventually picks up nothing but the traces of its own past. This is where the analogy becomes applicable to the issues concerning us here, for in the case of tradition the modification of perpetual deposits is an unavoidable consequence of an operation that pretends to do the opposite: to decode and pass down in exactly the same fashion as before without disarranging the *traditum*. A slightly different story always remains to be told. The continuous gestures of tradition, even if imagined as a series of identical gestures, inevitably leave some trace in their matter of commitment.

All the more conspicuous, therefore, is the degree to which religious activity entails the active affirmation of disarrangement and consumption, at least from the point of view of everyday life: the deliberate destruction of artifacts in mortuary rituals, initiation rites involving bodily mutilations, or the abstruseness of ritual

speech. At the risk of promoting generalizations, we may assume that such encroachments on the perceived “natural” order of things often seek legitimacy in a higher or invisible order of things. While tradition stands between the not yet or no longer present heirs of a legacy, sacrifice (and to some extent ritual in general) is commonly thought of as a channel between ontologically differentiated agents. In neither case do we recognize the interaction between present agents involved in utilitarian exchange or communication. Situations in which communication is obstructed by a highly formalized diction, in which usefull things are destroyed and useless things are considered priceless vehicles of symbolic power, are all characteristic of these modes of action. Something is given up, exhausted, and consumed to the same extent as it is not to be given up, exhausted, and consumed. The impossible is reconstrued as a possibility and the obstacle as an unifying force. This is at least how the story goes in some specific cultural settings.