

ANOTHER LOOK AT *KLEOS APHTHITON*

In an important article¹, Edwin Floyd argues persuasively that the meaning of *kléos aphtiton* at *Iliad* IX 413² is different from that of its Indic cognate *śrávas ... áksitam* at *Rig-Veda* 1.9.7. The *kléos* 'fame' that Achilles predicts for himself is *aphtiton* 'imperishable' in the sense that the reputation of this hero as conferred by epic poetry will survive him and last forever³:

(IX 412-416) *εἰ μὲν κ' αὖθι μένων Τρώων πόλιν ἀμφιμάχωμαι,
ὦλετο μὲν μοι νόστος, ἀτὰρ κλέος ἄφθιτον ἔσται·
εἰ δέ κεν οἴκαδ' ἵκωμαι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
ὦλετό μοι κλέος ἐσθλόν, ἐπὶ δηρὸν δέ μοι αἰὼν
ἔσσεται, οὐδέ κέ μ' ὤκα τέλος θανάτωι κιχείη.*

„If I stay here and fight in the siege of the city of the Trojans, my *nóstos* is destroyed, but I will have *kléos aphtiton*. But if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers, then my genuine *kléos* is destroyed, but I will have a lengthy *aión*, and my end in death will not overtake me quickly.”

By contrast, it seems at first glance that the *śrávas* 'fame' for which the priests are praying in stanza 7 of *Hymn* 1.9 of the *Rig-Veda*⁴ is to be *áksitam* 'imperishable' only in the sense that it should last for a lifetime. In this instance, as Floyd contends, the 'fame' is contemporary, manifested in „secure material possessions, festive celebrations, long life.”⁵ The same can be said of the related Indic expression *áksiti śrávas* at *RV* 1.40.4, 8.103.5, 9.66.7.⁶ Since Greek *kléos aphtiton* and Indic *śrávas ... áksitam* are reflexes of a common Indo-European poetic expression⁷, these apparent semantic divergences between them require an explanation.

One aspect of Floyd's proposed explanation is to argue that „the Vedic pattern may actually be closer to the original meaning of the formula.”⁸ In other words, the emphasis on material security in the context of Indic *śrávas ... áksitam* follows an Indo-European model, whereas the context of Greek *kléos aphtiton* in the *Iliad* supposedly represents something of a Homeric innovation: Achilles is deliberately rejecting the material security of a *nóstos* 'homecoming' (the word is used at IX 413) in favor of a transcendent 'fame', a poetic tradition that will survive him and will sing his glory forever.

¹ E.D. Floyd, „*Kléos aphtiton*: An Indo-European Perspective on Early Greek Poetry”, *Glotta* 58 (1980) 133-157.

² Books of the *Iliad*/*Odyssey* will be cited in upper/lower-case roman numerals.

³ See G. Nagy, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge, Mass. 1974) 244-255.

⁴ Henceforth abbreviated as *RV*. — ⁵ Floyd p. 135. — ⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ For a thorough exposé, see R. Schmitt, *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden 1967) 61-71; cf. also Nagy pp. 140-149, 244 ff. On the metrical factors that may be involved in the tmesis of *śrávas* and *áksitam*, see G. Nagy, „On the Origins of the Greek Hexameter”, *Festschrift for Oswald Szemerényi* (ed. B. Brogyanyi; Amsterdam 1979) 630n6.

⁸ Floyd p. 139.

This view is in disagreement with the one that had been advanced in my monograph on Greek and Indic meter, where I take the position that not only *kléos áphthiton* but also *śrávas ... áksitam* convey the notion of a poetic tradition that will last forever, and that this notion is in fact an inherited Indo-European poetic theme⁹. The disagreement can best be summed up by observing two different interpretations of *visváṅyur*, one of the three epithets -- besides: *áksitam* -- that qualify *śrávas* 'fame' at lines b and c of RV 1.9.7. Whereas I translate *visváṅyur* as 'everlasting'¹⁰, Floyd suggests that the more appropriate rendering would be 'lasting our life-time'¹¹. In support of his interpretation, Floyd can point to two other epithets: at line a of the same stanza, RV 1.9.7, *śrávas* is also qualified as *vájavat* 'rich in booty' and *gómád* 'rich in cattle'. It seems pertinent that Achilles himself, speaking of booty in general and mentioning cattle in particular at IX 406-407, goes on to say that all the booty that could be seized from Troy or Delphi is not worth as much as his own life (IX 401-405, 406-409), but that he will nevertheless lose his life in order to get something else that is indeed worth it, namely, *kléos áphthiton* (IX 413). By contrast, the *śrávas ... áksitam* of RV 1.9.7 is manifested precisely in the material security of booty in general and cattle in particular.

This disagreement over interpreting the Indic word *visváṅyur* as epithet of *śrávas* 'fame' could be resolved by considering the etymology of the element *-āyur*, derived from *āyu-/āyus-*, a noun meaning 'vital force' on two levels, the human and the cosmic. In an important article, not cited by Floyd, Emile Benveniste establishes the formal relationship of this Indic noun, along with its Greek cognate *aiōn*, also meaning 'vital force', with such other words as Greek *aiei* 'forever, always', Latin *aeternus* 'eternal', Avestan *yauuaētāt-* 'eternity', etc.¹². It is not without interest that Greek *aiōn* 'vital force' occurs at *Iliad* IX 415, in the context of contrasting on the one hand the *kléos* that will outlast Achilles (IX 413) and, on the other, the material security that would be his if he went home (IX 414; the theme of material security here is made explicit at IX 400). The *nóstos* 'homecoming' of Achilles (IX 413) is associated with material security as expressed by *aiōn* (IX 415), and yet, to repeat, this same word *aiōn* is related to another word *aiei* which actually means 'forever'! Moreover, the formulaic combination *áphthiton aiei* is attested in Homeric diction (II 46, 186; XIV 238), and there is even an instance of the combination *kléos áphthiton aiei* in an archaic piece of poetry inscribed in the seventh century B.C. (*κλεφος αθητιου αιφει*)¹³.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that from the standpoint of the Indo-European language-family the notion of material security is not incompatible with the notion of eternity. To put it another way: the notion of eternity is actually visualized in terms of material security. Thus for example the word *aiōn*, which is to be realized for Achilles in his possession of material wealth after a safe homecoming, has a built-in temporal sense by virtue of designating the vital force that keeps one alive

⁹ Again, n 3.

¹⁰ Nagy (n 3) 110. — ¹¹ Floyd p. 136 n 6.

¹² E. Benveniste, „Expression indo-européenne de l'éternité”, *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 38 (1937) 103-112.

¹³ E. Schwyzer and P. Cauer, edd., *Dialectorum Graecarum exempla epigraphica potiora* (Leipzig 1923; repr. Hildesheim 1960) p. 160 no. 316.

and without which one would not be alive¹⁴. The notion of 'duration' extends to 'age', 'generation', with an open-ended perspective on the future: the cosmic vital force maintains an unending succession of generations, as we see clearly from the semantics of the Latin cognate *aetas/aeternus*¹⁵. The Greek adverb *aiei* corresponding to the noun *aiōn* is 'forever' in the original sense of a perpetual starting-over (e.g. I 52)¹⁶, an eternal return¹⁷.

Moreover, the theme of personal immortalization is conventionally expressed in archaic Greek poetry by images of material wealth: witness the epithet *ólbioi* 'blessed' (from *ólbos* 'wealth') as applied to the immortalized heroes of the fourth generation of mankind (Hesiod *WD* 172)¹⁸. To cite another example: when the mortal Ino becomes immortalized as the White Goddess after death, she gets a *biotos* 'life' that is *áphthitos* 'imperishable' (Pindar *O.* 2.29)¹⁹. Similarly, whenever one's *aiōn* is threatened by destruction, this threat can be expressed by verbs with root *phthi-* 'perish' (v 160, xviii 204). Further, just as *á-phthi-to-* 'imperishable' can express personal immortalization, it can combine with *kléos* 'fame' to express the perpetuity of the poetic tradition that glorifies the one who is immortalized. Thus for example Ino not only gets a *biotos* that is *áphthitos*: she also gets a *kléos* that is *áphthiton* (Hesiod *fr.* 70.7 MW).

By contrast, Achilles must give up his *aiōn* 'vital force' (IX 415), dependent on his *nóstos* 'return, homecoming' (IX 413), if he is to achieve a *kléos áphthiton* (IX 413). And yet *aiōn*, to repeat the conclusions of Benveniste, conveys the theme of an 'eternal return'²⁰. This theme is also pertinent to the word *nóstos* 'return, homecoming', as the work of Douglas Frame has shown²¹. Here, then, is the basic

¹⁴ Benveniste p. 109.

¹⁵ Benveniste pp. 105, 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Benveniste p. 110.

¹⁸ See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979) 169-170 § 30n2; compare the discussion of cyclical regeneration there at pp. 168-172 with Benveniste's notion (p. 112) that *aiōn* is visualized as the synthesis of the finite and the infinite in the form of a circle.

¹⁹ See Nagy (n18) 175 § 1n4, 203 § 41n2.

²⁰ Benveniste p. 110.

²¹ D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven 1978). See also G. Nagy, „Patroklos, Concepts of Afterlife, and the Indic Triple Fire”, *Arethusa* 13 (1980) 161-195; the discussion of the relationship between *nóos/nóstos* and *psūkhē* at pp. 161-166 is pertinent to the expression *ψυχή πάλιν ἐλθεῖν* at IX 408. The observations of Frame pp. 145-152 about the links between the themes of immortality and cattle in Indo-European poetic traditions are pertinent to the discussion supra of the epithet *gómad* 'rich in cattle' at RV 1.9.7.

difference between the *kléos áphthiton* of *Iliad* IX 413 and the *srávas ... áksitam* of *RV* 1.9.7: Homeric poetry has separated not so much the theme of material wealth from the theme of perpetuity but rather the theme of personal immortalization from the theme of immortalization by way of poetry. Achilles is in effect saying that he chooses immortality as conferred by the *Iliad* over immortality as conveyed by the material visualizations of *aión* and *nóstos*²².

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²² For more on the Iliadic theme of Achilles' immortalization by way of epic, see Nagy (n18) 174-210. Note too that the hero Odysseus, unlike Achilles, achieves both a *kléos* and a *nóstos* (see id. pp. 36-41). From this point of view, the epic about Odysseus is closer to the Indo-European pattern. Moreover, in light of the connotations of the epithet *ólbioi* 'blessed' as discussed supra, we may note in passing the expression *lāoi|ólbioi* at xi 136-137, mentioned in the context of Odysseus' ultimate „homecoming”: the setting of Odysseus' future death implies rebirth into an Elysian status parallel to that of the immortalized heroes on the Isles of the Blessed (as at Hesiod *WD* 172, cited supra).