αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος *and the Etymology* of ὄλλυμι*

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A consideration of the Homeric formula αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος 'steep destruction' leads to the reconstruction of an earlier sense *'(kill by) throw(ing) down a precipice' for the verb ὄλλυμι. The latter represents a factitive verbal derivative formed by infixing -*n*- into an IE *u*-stem adjective continued by Hitt. *hallu*- 'deep'. An appendix presents evidence for the practice of killing people by throwing them from precipices which is presupposed by the semantics of ὄλλυμι.

Gk. ὄλλυμι 'destroy', mid. 'perish' has as yet no satisfactory etymology (Frisk II 379). The traditional equation of ὄλλυμι with Lat. *aboleō* 'destroy' (Boisacq⁴ 696) is rendered implausible by the fact that the latter was probably created within Latin itself, in relation to *adoleō* (Ernout, *Philologica* I 53ff.; cf. Ernout-Meillet⁴ 4, Walde-Hofmann 4–5).

Another suggestion, which we owe to Couvreur (*De Hettitische H* [Louvain, 1937] 143) relates ὄλλυμι to Hittite *hullāi*- 'smash', 'defeat'. This etymology is accepted by Pokorny (*IEW* I 777) and approved by Cowgill (*Evidence for Laryngeals* 146, 158). The Hittite form, however, requires the presence of *u*, or *w* in the root and is therefore difficult to reconcile with the root of ὄλλυμι (Bergsland, *RHA* 4, fasc. 31 [1938] 274–5; Lindeman, *NTS* 25 [1971] 40 with fn. 22).

L. Deroy has recently connected ὄλλυμι, analyzed as *ὀλ-ν-υ-, with infixed *n*, to a pre-Greek stem *ὀλυ-/*ὀλϝ- 'cut', which he sets up to account for words as diverse as ὀλαί (Ion. οὐλαί) and ὄλυραι 'grain', οὖλος 'sheaf' (i.e. 'cut grain'), οὐλή 'wound', ὄλυνος 'rubbish' and Ὄλυμπος '(la montagne) située de manière à couper le pays ou le passage'.¹) Not only are the semantic relations required by this etymology unconvincing (especially the metaphorical interpretation of Ὄλυμπος), but the formal analysis imposed on ὄλλυμι is also scarcely justified. The only support for a root *ὀλϝ- in this verb is the Homeric adjective οὖλος 'destructive' < *ὀλϝος, which however is plausibly analyzed as containing a suffix -ϝο- added to a root ὀλ- (Strunk, *Nasalpräsentien und Aoriste* [Heidelberg, 1967] 121f. with fn. 348).

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*) I am grateful to Françoise Bader, Jay Jasanoff, Gregory Nagy, and Calvert Watkins for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

¹) *Disputationes ad montium vocabula ... pertinentes*: *Proceedings of the 10th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences* (v. 1; Vienna, 1969) 359–61.

The task of finding an etymology for ὄλλυμι would be greatly
facilitated if we could more precisely delimit the original meaning
of the verb. It is common for languages to contain a number of
words having the general meaning 'destroy', and Greek is no ex-
ception (cf. φθείρω). This general sense has often evolved from a
more specific concept.[2]) Now there is one hitherto neglected piece
of evidence that can aid us in our reconstruction of the earlier
semantic value of ὄλλυμι. The Homeric phrase αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος is by all
appearances an old poetic formula. It occurs twenty-five times in
Homer, fourteen times in the Iliad and eleven times in the Odyssey.
All but two occurrences are verse-final, that is, in the favored position
for the preservation of archaisms. The remaining two occurrences
are in the metrically equivalent slot, before the trochaic caesura. Some
typical passages are as follows (the translations are from Lattimore):

ἐνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες, ὅσοι φύγον αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον,

οἴκοι ἔσαν, πόλεμόν τε πεφευγότες ἠδὲ θάλασσαν (α 11–12)

'Then all the others, as many as fled sheer destruction,

were at home now, having escaped the sea and the fighting';

πάπτηνεν δὲ ἕκαστος ὅπῃ φύγοι αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον (Ξ 507)

'and each man looked about him for a way to escape the sheer death';

ἥμῖν δ' αὖτ' ἀναφαίνεται αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος (Ρ 244)

'while for you and me sheer death is emerging'.

αἰπύς itself is a word found only in poetry. Its chief meaning is
'high and steep'. In Homer it is used of mountains, especially
Mt. Olympus, and of cities on rocky heights, principally Troy.
A number of times it describes the walls of a citadel. The emphasis
seems to be on 'steep' rather than 'high' in γ 293: λισσὴ αἰπεῖά τε
εἰς ἅλα πέτρη 'a smooth rock running sheer into the sea' (LSJ s.
λισσός). The sense 'difficult' is required in the phrase αἰπὺς πόνος
which occurs three times in the Iliad, as well as in the absolute usage
in N 317: αἰπύ οἱ ἐσσεῖται "+ will be hard work for him' (LSJ). This
usage represents a metaphorical extension of 'steep (of ascent)';
cf. Lat. arduus 'steep', 'difficult'. A sense 'steep (of descent)' is
required in the phrase αἰπὰ ῥέεθρα 'steep streams' or 'headlong
streams' (Θ 369, Φ 9).[3])

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[2]) For examples see C. D. Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the
Principal Indo-European Languages* (Chicago, 1949), pp. 758–59.

[3]) αἰπά and the verse-final αἰπήν (N 625, γ 130, λ 533, ν 316, ϑ 516) do not
indicate a thematic stem. Rather they are artificial but metrically convenient
replacements for αἰπέα and αἰπεῖαν respectively. Other variants of αἰπεῖαν are
αἰπεινήν (Z 35, O 558, P 328, B 573) and αἰπήεσσαν (Φ 87) (Humbach, *MSS* 24
[1968] 52).

The phrase αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος apparently means 'headlong destruction', 'steep destruction', or 'steep death'.[4]) The arguments of J. Verdenius (*Mnemosyne* 6 [1953] 115) for a sense 'irresistible death' are not convincing. The translation 'sheer destruction' (e.g. Lattimore) is ambiguous in English and is more naturally understood as 'complete, utter destruction' than as 'steep, precipitous destruction'. The expression αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος has been interpreted by *LSJ* (s. αἰπύς) as containing a metaphor, "death being regarded as 'the plunge from a high precipice'." But why should such a metaphor be used so mechanically? Bearing in mind the archaic nature of the formula, we can surmise that the otherwise unmotivated epithet αἰπύς preserves an element of the earlier meaning of ὄλεθρος. The latter would then have signified *'(death by) falling from a precipice, ῥιπτὸς μόρος'. This sense can be seen in Ω 734–35, where Andromache addresses her infant son thus:

$$\mathring{\eta} \ \tau\iota\varsigma \ \mathring{A}\chi\alpha\iota\tilde{\omega}\nu$$

ῥίψει χειρὸς ἑλὼν ἀπὸ πύργου, λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον

'or else one of the Achaeans will take you by the hand
and hurl you from the tower, a horrible death'.

The verb ὄλλυμι, of which ὄλεθρος is the verbal noun, would then have meant *'(kill by) throw(ing) down a precipice', with active inflection, and, with middle desinences, *'(die by) fall(ing) from a precipice'. This is as far back as we can reconstruct from Greek, but we now know in what general semantic area we might expect to find cognates.

I propose that such a cognate is to be found in the Hittite adjective *hallu-* 'deep'. This word occurs twice in a prayer of Hattusili III as an epithet of *wid-* 'water' : *hal-lu]-u-wa-as wi-ta-as*, *KUB* XXI 19 III 15 + 338/v, and *hal-lu-wa-az wi-ta-az*, ibid. III 17.[5]) More important is the fact that it is used in mythological texts as an epithet of *hari-* 'valley' in a formulaic phrase 'high mountains . . . deep valleys'.[6]) Here the sense 'precipitous' may be appropriate (cf. Sturtevant, *Hittite Glossary*[2] [Philadelphia, 1936] 39). The adjective is also used substantivally in the sense 'Höhlung' (Friedrich, *Hethitisches Wörterbuch* [Heidelberg, 1952] 339).

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[4]) Cf. the seventeenth century English expression *steep ruin* (*OED* s. *steep* A.4.c.), which is probably an imitation of the Homeric phrase.

[5]) Volkert Haas, *Der Kult von Nerik* (*Studia Pohl*, 4; Rome; Biblical Inst. Press, 1970) 7, fn. 5.

[6]) Examples can be found in Laroche, *RHA* 23, fasc. 77 (1965), pp. 91, 105, 113f., 169f.

Formally *hallu-* is ambiguous. The initial *h* can represent either the Indo-European *a*-coloring laryngeal H_2 or the *o*-coloring laryngeal H_3. I consider the latter more likely, since this would avoid homophony with *halluwāi-* 'to quarrel', which Benveniste has plausibly related to Gk. ἀλύομαι 'be distraught', indicating an original H_2 (*Athenaeum* 47 [1969] 30–31). Thus *hallu-* probably continues an IE $*H_3olu$-. Here the *o*-vocalism may represent the *o*-grade of the root, as in Hitt. *assu-* 'good', Luv. *wasu-* and OIr. *fó* 'good' < $*wosu$-, and perhaps Gk. πολύς 'much'. Alternatively, the *o* may result from the phonetic change of *e* to *o* after H_3. The adjective would then manifest the *e*-grade of the root; cf. Hitt. *tepu-* 'little', *huisu-* 'alive', Go. *filu* and OIr. *il* 'much' < $*pel(H)u$-.

The significance of the spelling *ll* in *hallu-* is not clear. The doubling possibly indicates the assimilation of a laryngeal to the preceding *l*; cf. *mallāi-* 'grind' where the gemination may reflect the earlier presence of the laryngeal attested by Lat. *molitum* and Skt. *mūrṇá-* (Calvert Watkins, oral communication). On the other hand, no assimilation has taken place in *walh-* 'to strike' or in *palhi-* 'broad'. This may, however, simply indicate a different phonetic treatment for different laryngeals. If the IE adjective corresponding to *hallu-* contained a second laryngeal, it is possible that the root was in the zero grade, since Hitt. *al* can also continue IE $\underline{l}$. This $*H_3\underline{l}Hu$- would be structurally parallel to the $*g^w\underline{r}Hu$- that is attested by Gk. βαρύς and Skt. *gurú-* 'heavy'.

I propose that ὄλλυμι is formed by infixing *n* into the adjectival stem ($*H_3olu$-, H_3olHu-, or $H_3\underline{l}Hu$-) represented by Hitt. *hallu-*, according to an ancient Indo-European derivational process. In this process, which is best represented in Hittite (*tepu-* 'little' → *tepnu-* 'diminish', etc.), factitive verbs in *-nu-* are formed from *u*-stem adjectives.[7]) The postulated derivation of a verb meaning *'throw down a precipice' from an adjective with the sense 'deep' has a parallel in Classical Greek, where κατακρημνίζω 'throw down a precipice', 'throw headlong down' (Xenophon, Demosthenes, etc.) is derived from κατακρήμνος 'steep and rugged', which is attested already in the Batrachomyomachia.

The semantics of the derived verb presupposes the existence of a practice of killing people by throwing them down precipices or into

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[7]) Other evidence for the Indo-European nature of this relationship is presented in my dissertation, *Indo-European Denominative Verbs in -nu-* (Harvard University, 1973) and will be published in a series of forthcoming articles.

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gorges. There is ample evidence for this practice in the ancient Indo-European world (see Appendix). Of course the verb evolved semantically in Greek, a process no doubt accelerated by the loss of the founding adjective. The emphasis shifted from the nature of the place where death was administered to the fact of death itself. By Homer's time ὄλλυμι has come to mean simply 'to kill' and is used mostly of death in battle. The idea that this death originally involved a deep plunge is preserved only in the archaic formula αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος.

If ὄλλυμι has a denominative origin, the present stem in -νν-, which has sometimes been considered a Greek innovation (Strunk, *op.cit.* 121–22; Beekes, *The Development of the PIE Laryngeals in Greek* [The Hague, 1969] 236), must be inherited. Indeed this stem is the original member of its conjugation, since it is only here that the verbal sense, which results from a combination of the meaning of the founding adjective with that of the transitivizing infix -*n*-, is motivated. The creation of the other verbal stems presupposes an analysis of the originally derived stem *$H_3(o)l(H)nu$- as consisting of a suffix -*nu*- added to a root which now carries the verbal meaning in itself.

The derivation of ὄλλυμι from a *u*-stem adjective contradicts the view that the -νν- inflection of the present replaces an earlier inflection in -nē-[8]) or in -nō- (Cowgill, *Evidence for Laryngeals* 146; Lindeman, *NTS* 25 [1971] 41). This theory tries to relate the nasal present systematically to the disyllabic root found in other verb forms. In objection to the -nē- theory we note that there are no other examples of a -nē- present being replaced by a -nu- present. In the -nō- theory the verbal root is reconstructed as *H_1elH_3- (Lindeman, *loc.cit.* 40) and the forms in ὀλε- are the result of metathesis from *ἐλο- (Cowgill, p.157–58; Lindeman, p. 41). The vocalism of the aorist ὀλέσαι thus receives the same explanation as that of στορέσαι and other verbs. The comparison with Hitt. *hallu*- however establishes the first laryngeal as the *o*-coloring H_3 and obviates the necessity of relying on metathesis.

The disyllabic root ὀλε- is found in a large number of forms, including the aorist ὤλεσα, the future ὀλέσω, the present ὀλέκω, the derived nouns ὄλεθρος 'destruction' and ὀλετήρ 'destroyer', and the adjective ὀλοός 'destructive' < *ὀλεϝός (Frisk II 380). The simple

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[8]) E.D. Francis, *Greek Disyllabic Roots: The Aorist Formations* (Yale University dissertation, 1970) 150–51; Helmut Rix, *MSS* 27 (1970), p. 94 fn. 64.

root ὀλ- occurs in οὖλος 'destructive' < *ὀλ-Ƒο- (Schwyzer, *Gr.Gram.* I 121; Chantraine, *Gram.hom.* I 160; Frisk II 445). Some verb forms, including the present ὄλλυμι, aorist ὠλόμην, future middle ὀλεῖται and perfect ὄλωλα, are consistent either with a prehistoric root with final laryngeal or with one which lacks it. Now we saw above that Hitt. *hallu-* may have contained a root-final laryngeal, which can then be the source of the ε of Gk. ὀλε-. The IE adjective should then be reconstructed as *$H_3(o)lH_1u$-. The root ὀλ- of Greek *ὀλ-Ƒο- is then secondary. If on the other hand no root-final laryngeal was present, we are left with the problem of ascertaining the source of the disyllabic root ὀλε- in Greek. One might surmise, for example, that ὤλεσα was formed on the model of other verbs that had disyllabic aorists beside -νυ- presents, such as στόρνυμι, ἐστόρεσα; ἄνυμι, ἤνεσα.

Although not all of the formal details of ὄλλυμι are as clear as we might wish,[9]) we can be reasonably certain that the root began with H_3 and that the present in -νυ- was inherited. Furthermore we have a possible explanation of the disyllabic forms of the root.[10]) This etymology is based primarily on the semantic evidence supplied by the Homeric phrase αἰπὺς ὄλεθρος, coupled with the derivational process which relates verbs in -*nu*- to *u*-stem adjectives in Indo-European. Conversely, ὄλλυμι supports the reconstruction of this derivational relationship, thanks to Homer's fossilized formula.

Appendix: The Practice of „Steep Destruction"

The practice of putting people to death by throwing them from cliffs is well attested in the Greek world (Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie*, s. κατακρημνισμός). This method of execution seems to have been very old, for it was institutionalized at some of the chief centres of the country. At Delphi temple violators were punished by being hurled from the Hyampeia, one of the twin peaks of Mt. Parnassus. In Athens one of the means of capital punishment was to throw the offender into the βάραθρον. In Sparta prisoners of war and criminals were thrown into the Καιάδας.

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[9]) The *o*-vocalism of the present stem remains open to various interpretations. It has been suggested that this stem was influenced by the vocalism of other parts of the verb (Cowgill, *Evidence for Laryngeals* 157; Lindeman, *loc.cit.* 41). If on the other hand ὄλλυμι directly continues an IE *$H_3l(H_1)nu$- the o must be the result of a phonetic change, whether ḷ > ol before a preconsonantal laryngeal (Ruipérez, *Emerita* 17 [1949] 107ff.) or the vocalization of H_3 before syllabic l (Rix, *loc.cit.* 94).

[10]) An inherited disyllabic root makes possible a comparison of ὄλλυμι with Lat. *lētum* 'death' (Ernout-Meillet⁴ p. 4). This equation should however be justified on independent grounds.

Outside of Greece, we find that in Rome this form of execution was administered from the Tarpeian Rock. There is also extensive evidence for this practice among the Germanic peoples. One of the gruesome means that King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway (10th century A.D.) used to dispose of his foes was to have them thrown from high mountains (*Heimskringla*, "History of Olaf Tryggvason" ch. 85). The later king Harald Gilli executed an enemy by throwing him into a waterfall (*Heimskringla*, "History of Magnus Blinda and Harald Gilli" ch. 4). In 1000 A.D. in Iceland at the meeting of the Allthing, or national assembly, where the official adoption of Christianity was being considered, the pagans proposed to sacrifice to their gods two men from each of the four districts in order to prevent the new religion from spreading over the whole island. The representative of the Christians described such human sacrifice in these terms: "Pagans sacrifice the worst men and throw them from mountains and cliffs" (*Kristnisaga* 12. 17–18). It appears that, as in Greece,[11] the execution of a criminal was considered a sacrifice to the gods.

In a humorous fictitious tale, which must however have some basis in real life, a backwoods family has a special precipice which they call "Family Cliff" (*ætternisstapi*), which is used for the disposal of the old folks when they become a burden on the family resources or for the suicide of any member of the family who finds himself overtaken with some misfortune which renders life intolerable (*Gautrekssaga*, ch. 1–2). Another source states that during a famine in Iceland around 970 A.D. some people put to death the old and disabled by having them thrown down from cliffs.[12]

Elsewhere in the Germanic world, we read in Bede's history of the English, in the account of Bishop Wilfrid's conversion of the South Saxons (4.13), that "no rain had fallen in the province for three years prior to his arrival, and a terrible famine ensued which reduced many to an awful death. It is said that frequently forty or fifty emaciated and starving people would go to a precipice, or to the sea shore, where they would join hands and leap in, to die by the fall or by drowning".[13]

The practice of throwing people to their death thus appears to have been widespread in the Indo-European-speaking world. This suggests that the custom is very old, and probably existed in Proto-Indo-European times.

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[11]) Cf. *Der kleine Pauly*, s. *Katakremnismos*: "Die Verbrecher wurden durch ϰ. geopfert".

[12]) Wilhelm Ranisch, ed., *Gautrekssaga* (Berlin, 1900), p. lxxvii.

[13]) Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, translated by Leo Shirley-Price (Penguin, 1955) 223.