

The Unburdening of the Earth: The Greek Structure of the *Mahābhārata*

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This paper focuses on the motif of the Unburdening of the Earth by reviewing five relevant passages structured as a form of *Ringkomposition*: *MBh.* 1.58.3 – 59.6 narrated by Vaiśampāyana, *MBh.* 1.189 narrated by Vyāsa, *MBh.* 2.33.10–20 narrated by Nārada, *MBh.* 11.8.20–38 again narrated by Vyāsa, and *MBh.* 18.5.7–25 again narrated by Vaiśampāyana. Then, those texts are compared with five Greek passages dealing with the same motif: *Iliad* 1.1-5, *Iliad* 2.1-6, *Iliad* 12.3-9, *Odyssey* 8.73-82, and *Cypria* fr. 1. Against more accepted explanations like Folk origin or Indo-European origin, and after dealing with the main methodological problems that such proposal would entail, the paper argues for a Greco-Indian origin (understood as a Greek influence in India) of the motif, along the lines of Wulff Alonso (2008, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

1) Introduction

This paper focuses on the motif of the Unburdening of the Earth, first noticed by Dumézil (1968) and then formulated as a ring composition of five relevant passages by Hildebeitel (2018, p. 258). From the so-called “analytic paradigm” of *Mahābhārata* scholarship, this motif has been mostly dismissed.¹ On the other hand, researchers following the “synthetic paradigm” have paid considerably more attention to it,² although perhaps not as much as it

¹ See Hopkins (1915, pp. 78–79), Winternitz (1933/1934, p. 74), van Buitenen (1973, p. xx), Fitzgerald (2004, p. 99), and Hudson (2012, p. 137–138).

² See Scheuer (1982) and Brodbeck (2009).

deserves, particularly when considering its implications for the overall structure of the *Mahābhārata*.

The major contributions to the analysis of the Unburdening of the Earth have come from a comparative perspective considering India and Greece – and sometimes Mesopotamia as well. The proposed solutions can be grouped into three categories: a Folk hypothesis based on universal story-patterns, an Indo-European hypothesis based on a common heritage, and a Greco-Indian (understood as a Greek influence in India) hypothesis based on cultural contacts. Schwarzbaum (1957) and more recently Ballesteros (2023) claim a Folk origin for the parallelisms between different versions of the motif. De Jong (1985), Nagy (1990, p. 16), Vielle (1996, pp. 40-46, 115-123), Allen (2019, pp. 143, 224-225), and Elst (2021) favor an Indo-European origin.³

Lastly, Wulff Alonso (2008; 2014, pp. 128-130, 175-177, 307-310, 313-315) and to a much lesser degree Hildebeitel (2018, pp. 94-131, 246-263) discuss the Greco-Indian explanation, which would entail an influence resulting from the Greek presence in ancient Indian territory, especially during the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom (3rd – 2nd centuries BCE) and the Indo-Greek Kingdom (2nd century BCE – 1st century CE). Ingenious as it is, this last solution has not been well received by the critic, especially by reason of some serious methodological concerns.⁴ Even though the hint to Dumézil and the mention of Greek in the title of this paper might suggest otherwise, what is carried out here is not a defense of the Indo-European hypothesis, but a follow-up on this Greco-Indian hypothesis implying a cultural contact and an influence from the former into the latter.

Greek influence in India has been claimed in broad terms (Jairazbhoy, 1963, Chapter 5), as well as on a case-by-case basis for disciplines such as astronomy and mathematics (Pingree, 1971; Falk, 2002; Plofker, 2011), painting and sculpture (Nehru, 1989, Chapter 1; Boardman, 2015, Chapter 6), and even several literary genres, such as theater (Windisch, 1882), fable (Rodríguez Adrados, 1979), epic (Arora, 1981), and lyric (Morales Harley, 2023).

³ Cf. Pisani's (1953, pp. 127-128), Ruben's (1975, pp. 50-55), and West's (2007, pp. 22-23) critiques of the Indo-European hypothesis.

⁴ Cf. Allen's (2015), Pisano's (2015), Karttunen's (2017), Stoneman's (2019, pp. 416-426), and Elst's (2021) critiques of the Indo-Greek hypothesis.

Nevertheless, there have been very few methodological discussions about how such procedure would have taken place.

In this context, a methodological framework for the Greco-Indian hypothesis is discussed here, building up on Wulff Alonso's (2019a, 2019b, 2020) own reflections that followed his critiques, and putting forward some new ideas, mainly that of a three-hypothesis approach: Folk, Indo-European, and Greco-Indian. Of course, this is by no means presented as a definitive solution nor as any sort of irrefutable "proof" that influence alone accounts for all parallelisms. The aim is, instead, to spark a debate about methods within what, by now and after nearly a couple of centuries of mostly isolated attempts, deserves to be treated as a full-fledged theory: bilateral cultural contacts between Greece and India.

As for the Unburdening of the Earth, it is proposed that the overarching nature of this motif in the *Mahābhārata* is the result of an auctorial decision of structuring this new text in parallel with the Greek texts that would have been known – and recreated – in India at that time. To that end, the following sections review the *Mahābhārata* passages and the Greek passages that are relevant for the study of the motif, as well as the main methodological problems of this three-hypothesis approach and some possible solutions.

2. The Over-Burdened Earth in Five *Mahābhārata* Passages

The *Mahābhārata* passages come from the *Ādiparvan* (two passages), the *Sabhāparvan*, the *Strīparvan*, and the *Svargārohaṇāparvan*.⁵ The presence of the motif at the beginning and at the end of the text highlights both its relevance and its structural function. Moreover, the two appearances in the first book, one as part of the *ākhyāna* and the other as an *upākhyāna*, coincide with the complex narrative techniques that the text deploys throughout. The other

⁵ Other *Mahābhārata* passages could also be considered as references to the Unburdening of the Earth, for instance, *MBh.* 3.42.22 and *MBh.* 3.45.18-21 (Ballesteros, 2023, p. 81), *MBh.* 3.239-240 (Hiltebeitel, 2018, pp. 258-259), *MBh.* 12.49 (Ballesteros, 2023, p. 81), and *MBh.* 12.248-250 (West, 2007, p. 23, n. 56).

occurrences are also located at crucial points in the plot: before the dicing match and after the Kurukṣetra War.

Passage 1: MBh. 1.58.3 – 59.6, narrated by Vaiśampāyana

During Vaiśampāyana and Janamejaya’s dialogue about the descent of the first generations, the latter asks the former to dig deeper into the genealogy. Vaiśampāyana then introduces a story that, it is said, is a “secret of the gods” (*rahasyaṃ... devānām*, MBh. 1.58.3a-b).⁶ Once upon a time, Rāma Jāmadagnya wiped out the Kshatriya men, and the Kshatriya women had to turn to Brahmans to ensure the continuity of their lineage. Brahmans secured their position atop the social structure and those newborn Kshatriyas ruled the Earth (*gām*, MBh. 1.58.11b; *vasumdhāram*, MBh. 1.58.12b). Under their rule, child mortality and deadly diseases fell to an all-time low: “not a single child dies” (*na bāla eva mriyate*, MBh. 1.58.15a). With the protection coming from earthly rulers and the rain provided by the heavenly ruler, deaths in war and deaths caused by famine also declined.

At first, the Earth (*medinī*, MBh. 1.58.16d; *mahī*, MBh. 1.58.24c) was “filled” (*samāpūryata*, MBh. 1.58.16d; *āpūryata*, MBh. 1.58.24c) with people. Even though individuals and society were thriving, with each class dedicated to their tasks in agreeance with their own dharma, from the points of view of nature and world order, everything had reached a breaking point. It was as if the *kr̥tayuga* was too good to be true. Just as the gods had been born here on Earth, so too were the demons. From that point on, the Earth (*dharā*, MBh. 1.58.29d), that is, “the supporter” was no longer capable “to support” (*dhārayitum*, MBh. 1.58.29d), thus affecting the entire balance of existence. Particularly problematic was the fact that some of those demonic beings were born as kings.

Then, the Earth (*mahī(m)*, MBh. 1.58.33d, MBh. 1.58.36b, MBh. 1.58.37a, and MBh. 1.58.45a; *bhūr*, MBh. 1.58.35b) was “oppressed” (*pīḍyamānā*, MBh. 1.58.35c; *pīḍitā*, MBh. 1.58.37b) by the demons and pained by the “burden” (*bhāra-*, MBh. 1.58.37b). What was to

⁶ I follow the Sanskrit text by Sukthankar, Belvalkar, Vaidya et al. (1933/1971). The translations are my own.

be supported had become a burden and the supporter had become overburdened. The Earth (*bhūmis*, *MBh.* 1.58.40b; *bhūmeḥ*, *MBh.* 1.58.41b) then turned to Brahmā, who knew beforehand what the problem was. So, Brahmā ordered the gods “to cast out the burden of the Earth” (*bhūmer nirasituṃ bhāraṃ*, *MBh.* 1.58.46a-b) by being themselves partially incarnated to fight off the demons. Following up on this request, Indra asked Viṣṇu to be incarnated as well “for the cleansing of the Earth” (*bhuvah śodhanāya*, *MBh.* 1.58.51a).

The story comes to an end with the gods in agreement, determined to come down “for the destruction of the demons and the welfare of all the worlds” (*marārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya ca*, *MBh.* 1.59.3a-b), a statement that clearly resonates with the famous “for the protection of the good and the destruction of the bad” (*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām*, *MBh.* 6.28.8a-b) from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In a nutshell, this first version of the Unburdening of the Earth motif relates to secrecy, death, gods, and implicitly, war. The same four themes will recur in other versions of the motif.

Passage 2: MBh. 1.189, narrated by Vyāsa

The *Pañcendropākhyāna* is a substory narrated to Drupada by Vyāsa and intended to justify Draupadī’s marriage to the five Pāṇḍava brothers. According to the story, during a certain sacrifice of the gods at the Naimiṣa Forest, Yama was consecrated as the *śamitṛ* priest. Occupied with killing the sacrificial victims, he stopped taking the lives of human beings. The gods feared this newfound immortality and went to Brahmā, who calmed them down by pointing out that the situation was only temporary. Although it does not explicitly mention the burden of the Earth, this second version of the motif is introduced by the phrase “then the creatures became numerous” (*tataḥ prajāś tā bahulā babhūvuh*, *MBh.* 1.189.2c), which clearly resonates with the overpopulation problem from the first version: “Then the creatures grew in number because of their duty, living for hundreds and thousands of years” (*tato vardhanta dharmeṇa sahasraśatajīvinaḥ | tāḥ prajāḥ*, *MBh.* 1.58.10a-c). Human beings were free “from death” (*maraṇāt*, *MBh.* 1.189.2d).

Back at the sacrifice, the gods saw a golden lotus floating downstream of the Ganges. Indra decided to go exploring and followed an entire trail of golden lotuses upstream, where he finally found a woman crying. The crying woman was Śrī, the golden lotuses were her tears, and the reason for her crying was a curse by Śiva, condemning her four former husbands to stay underneath a mountain on account of their arrogance. These four husbands were in fact four former Indras, who together with the newcomer, added up to five. The only way out for them was to be born as the five Pāṇḍava brothers, who would then contribute to the Unburdening of the Earth: “there [sc. on Earth], having performed unbearable karma...” (*tatra... karma kṛtvāviśahyaṃ*, *MBh.* 1.189.25c). The adverb and the adjective both signal the motif.

Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, both coming from Viṣṇu’s hairs, would accompany them. And more importantly, the five of them would have to marry their former wife Śrī, who had by then been born as Draupadī. Just as she was born “from Earth” (*mahī-*, *MBh.* 1.189.34a), so too, they would have to be born “on Earth” (*dharanyām*, *MBh.* 1.189.30d). The secret nature of this revelation is emphasized by mentioning that Drupada had to be given “divine eyesight” (*divyaṃ cakṣuḥ*, *MBh.* 1.189.35c) to witness it. Lastly, Vyāsa complements this explanation with one from the point of view of Draupadī, who had asked Śiva for a husband five times and thus had ended up with five husbands. Once again, the key themes of the story are gods, death, secrecy, and war, which is now explicit in this second version: “having led many others to their death” (*bahūn anyān nidhanaṃ prāpayitvā*, *MBh.* 1.189.25d).

Passage 3: MBh. 2.33.10–20, narrated by Nārada

In the context of Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya*, Nārada offers the third version of the Unburdening of the Earth motif. The passage comes from a section dealing with Kṛṣṇa’s “hospitable reception” (*argha*). In this case the cross-referencing is evident, since the first version is now referred to as the story told “during the partial incarnations” (*aṃśāvatarāṇe*, *MBh.* 2.33.12c), that is, in the minor book of *The Descent of the First Generations*. The great Ṛṣis had come for the consecration and Nārada was leading them. Unlike the previous two versions of the

motif, this one is not part of a dialogue, for Nārada has no interlocutor. He simply “remembered” (*sasmāra*, *MBh.* 2.33.12a) the secret that he already knew: Brahmā had ordered the gods, “killing one another you will gain back your worlds” (*anyonyam abhinighnantaḥ punar lokān avāpsyatha*, *MBh.* 2.33.15c-d).

In fact, what Brahmā had ordered the gods was to be partially incarnated “to cast out the burden of the Earth” (*bhūmer nirasituṃ bhāraṃ*, *MBh.* 1.58.46a-b), and what the gods had done was descend to Earth “for the destruction of the demons and the welfare of all the worlds” (*‘marārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya ca*, *MBh.* 1.59.3a-b). In other words, Brahmā gave the general directions, and the gods undertook the specific actions. Even Viṣṇu’s phrasing, “for the cleansing of the Earth” (*bhuvah śodhanāya*, *MBh.* 1.58.51a), was leaning more towards the euphemism. In contrast with the first one, this third version of the motif conflates directions and actions, and it openly speaks of the impending deaths, in a way very much like that employed by Śiva during the second version: “having led many others to their death” (*bahūn anyān nidhanaṃ prāpayitvā*, *MBh.* 1.189.25d).

The main difference so far is the nuance involved in the *anyonyam* (one another). The destruction is not only aimed at the demons, but also at the gods. Secrecy, gods, death: It all keeps coming back. By this point, the thematic bond is so clear that the Earth herself remains absent from the narrative. Nonetheless, as Hildebeitel (2018, p. 249) points out, the Earth is the direct beneficiary of Brahmā’s orders, as well as of Viṣṇu’s execution thereof. Finally, war as a Leitmotif has become increasingly more explicit, and by now, it is even thought of as a mutual destruction.

Passage 4: MBh. 11.8.20–38, again narrated by Vyāsa

In the aftermath of the war, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is devastated and Vyāsa comforts him. Vyāsa explains that he himself had witnessed some events that took place at Indra’s assembly hall when the Earth (*pṛthivī(m)*, *MBh.* 11.8.21b and *MBh.* 11.8.23d) came there asking for help. The Earth’s demand at Indra’s assembly hall is presented as a follow-up on her demand at

Brahmā's house, that is, of the events from the first quoted passage. This time, Viṣṇu steps in voluntarily and his answer to the Earth includes some additional information: Duryodhana was destined to fulfill the promise of the gods and relieve the burden of the Earth. Such destiny would be brought about through a war involving the earthly kings, who eventually “will kill each other” (*anyonyam ghātayiṣyanti*, *MBh.* 11.8.25c). As discussed, this adverb changes the perspective from a punitive destruction of the wrongdoers to that of an indiscriminate destruction of an entire generation of heroes.

If Vyāsa's version of the motif in the second quoted passage was told from a Pāṇḍava point of view, now Vyāsa is focusing on the Kaurava side. Just as the former were said to have been born “on Earth” (*dharanyām*, *MBh.* 1.189.30d) as the formerly five Indras, so too, the latter are said to have been born “on Earth” (*pṛthivyām*, *MBh.* 11.8.29d) for the upcoming war. An interesting addendum is that “this Earth was hurt by them [sc. the Kauravas]” (*vairiṣyaṁ ghātītā mahī*, *MBh.* 11.8.31d). Moreover, if the mentions to Brahmā's house and to earthly births respectively point towards the first two quoted passages, this iteration of the motif also emphasizes the fact that this “secret of the gods” (*devaguhyam*, *MBh.* 11.8.34d) had already been revealed at Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*, which was precisely the context of the third quoted passage. It makes one wonder if what the text calls “Fate” (*daiva-*, *MBh.* 11.8.28c and *MBh.* 11.8.35d) is not in fact an auctorial hand pulling the strings behind the scenes and bringing together, once again, the themes of gods, death, war, and secrecy.

Passage 5: MBh. 18.5.7–25, again narrated by Vaiśampāyana

By the end of the *Mahābhārata*, the motif that has been present since the very beginning makes one last appearance. Janamejaya wants Vaiśampāyana to elaborate on the fact that even those siding with the Kauravas were able to attain heaven once they died. Vaiśampāyana then proceeds to comment on this “secret of the gods” (*guhyam... devānām*, *MBh.* 18.5.7c-d): Bhīṣma went back to Dyaus, Droṇa to Bṛhaspati, and even Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, who were partial incarnations of demons, went back to heaven after being “purified by weapons” (*śastrapūtā*, *MBh.* 18.5.19d).

Viṣṇu himself followed Brahmā's orders "to cast out the burden of the Earth" (*bhūmer nirasitum bhāram*, *MBh.* 1.58.46a-b), as stated since the motif's very first iteration. Now, Vaiśampāyana says that Viṣṇu "supported the Earth" (*gām adhārayat*, *MBh.* 18.5.20d), with an extra reference to the play on words that he himself as a narrator had included in that first iteration, when claiming that "the supporter" (*dharā*, *MBh.* 1.58.29d), was no longer capable "to support" (*dhārayitum*, *MBh.* 1.58.29d). Death, secrecy, gods, and war: No matter the order, these four themes characterize the motif each time.

3. The Over-Burdened Earth in Five Greek Epic Passages

The Greek passages come from the Homeric Epics, that is, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as from the Epic Cycle, specifically the *Cypria*.⁷ The motif is predominant within the *Iliad*, where much like in the *Mahābhārata*, it appears in the first two books and at about two thirds of the entire narrative. Without a doubt, the presence of the motif in the proem signals its relevance to the plot. The one occurrence in the *Odyssey* is framed in an emphatic matter for it is part of the epic-within-the-epic presented by the singer Demodocus just when Homer is about to make room for Odysseus himself as the narrator of his own adventures. Lastly, the first fragment of the *Cypria*, a scholium to *Iliad* 1.5, offers both the best-known Greek account of the motif and the most parallelisms with the *Mahābhārata* passages.

*Passage 1: Iliad 1.1-5*⁸

mēnin aeide, thea, pēlēiadeō achilēos

⁷ Other Greek passages could also be considered as references to the Unburdening of the Earth, for instance, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 157-173 and *Catalogue of Women* fr. 204.94-106 (Ballesteros, 2023, p. 78), as well as Euripides' *Orestes* 1639-1642 (Wulff-Alonso, 2008, pp. 110-115).

⁸ For the *Iliad*, I follow the Greek text by Murray & Wyatt (Homer, 1999); for the *Odyssey*, the Greek text by Murray & Dimock (Homer, 1995); and for the *Cypria*, the Greek text by West (2003). All the translations are my own.

*oulomenēn, hē myri' achaios alge' ethēke,
pollas d' iphthimous psychas aidi proiapsen
ērōōn, autous de helōria teuche kynessin
oiōnoisi te pasi, dios d' eteleieto boulē.*

O goddess, sing the damnable wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus, which brought multiple sufferings to the Achaeans, sent many strong souls of heroes to Hades, and made them into spoils for the dogs and all the birds of prey – for the plan of Zeus was being fulfilled.

This passage, corresponding to the proem of the *Iliad*, allows for some structural comparisons between the *Mahābhārata* and the Homeric Epic. First, the references to souls (*psychas*), Hades (*aidi*), and spoils (*helōria*) point towards the death theme. In Greek, the term used for the spoils refers predominantly to unburied corpses, and in Greek culture, Hades is thought of as an underworld where the souls of the dead spend their afterlife in generally unfavorable conditions, such as lack of corporeity, lack of memory, and lack of rewards or punishments that are suitable for their past actions.

Second, since heroes (*ērōōn*) are those who were born during the fourth age and who fought at Thebes and Troy, their sole presence serves to place the events within a war context. Third, even though Greek heroes are not partial incarnations of the gods, they are demigods, which means that they were born either from an immortal father and a mortal mother, or from a mortal father and an immortal mother, as is the case with Achilles, the son of king Peleus from the goddess Thetis. Together with the explicit mention of Zeus, the gods theme is also relevant here. In fact, looking at them as sons of goddesses, Wulff Alonso (2008, Chapter 4; 2014, Chapter 4) links Achilles to Bhīṣma.⁹

Finally, the plan of Zeus (*dios... boulē*) not only is introduced as something unknown to the heroes taking part in the actual fighting – thus relating to the secrecy theme, but also, according to Greek tradition, it is a direct response to the problem of an overburdened Earth – thus also relating to the Unburdening of the Earth motif.

⁹ Cf. Allen's (2019, Chapter 10) proposal of linking Bhīṣma and Sarpedon, for their relations, respectively, to Dyaus and to Zeus.

Passage 2: Iliad 2.1-6

*alloi men rha theoi te kai aneres hippokorystai
heudon pannychioi, dia d' ouk eche nēdymos hypnos,
all' ho ge mermērizē kata phrena hōs achilēa
timēsē, olesē de poleas epi nēusin achaiōn.
hēde de hoi kata thymon aristē phaineto boulē,
pempasai ep' atreidē agamemnoni houlon oneiron·*

Then the other gods and chariot-fighting men slept all night long, but sweet sleep did not overtake Zeus, who was debating in his mind how he would honor Achilles and kill many beside the ships of the Achaeans. And in his spirit, this plan seemed to be the best: to send a destructive dream to Agamemnon, the son of Atreus.

If the *Mahābhārata* presents Earth herself as the suppliant and emphasizes her direct request of being relieved from overburdening, the Homeric Epic offers a similar but not entirely identical version of the motif. Although the addressee is Zeus, the god in charge – and a role successively distributed between Brahmā, Indra and Viṣṇu in the *Mahābhārata*'s versions, the supplicant, on the other hand, is the goddess Thetis, Achilles' mother – and Gangā's counterpart if we continue to draw parallelisms. Also, Thetis' request is directly intended to help Achilles regain his honor, and only indirectly does it cause the Earth to be relieved from overburdening. Nevertheless, both sets comprising a supplication made by a goddess and a plan established by a god result in a mutual destruction of an entire generation of heroes.

This second reference to the plan of Zeus (*boulē*) also includes gods (*theoi*), war and death (*olesē*), and secrecy, since the way of communicating the plan to the Greek king was through a dream (*oneiron*), which, within the Greek tradition, has a roughly fifty-fifty chance of being truthful. In his dream, Agamemnon is told that the gods have finally come to an understanding, that they are supporting the Greeks, and that he should lead them to battle right away. However, the gods are still rooting for different sides, even Zeus is currently

planning on favoring the Trojans, and going to battle is only going to secure the mutual destruction.

Passage 3: Iliad 12.3-9

(...) *oud' ar' emelle*
taphros eti schēsein danaōn kai teichos hyperthen
eury, to poiēsanto neōn hyper, amphī de taphron
ēlasan, oude theoisi dosan kleitas hekatombas,
ophra sphin nēas te thoas kai lēida pollen
entos echon rhyoito. theōn de aekēti tetykto
athanatōn· to kai ou ti polyn chronon empedon ēen.

Neither the trench of the Danaans nor the wide wall above it, which they had built for the sake of their ships and around which they had drawn said trench, was going to protect them for long, for they had not given splendid hecatombs to the gods, so that keeping everything within, it would guard their swift ships and ample booty. It was built against the will of the immortal gods, and it was not firm for a long time.

The *boulē* of Zeus can be translated as either the “plan” or the “will”. This passage speaks more broadly of the will of the gods, which has been transgressed, since the Greek wall had been built “against the will of the gods” (*theōn... aekēti*). Poseidon, Apollo, and Zeus are mentioned by name. The motif remains the same: A divine plan connected to the destruction of a generation of heroes and to the relieve of an overburdened Earth. A little after the quoted verses, comes the sole reference in the Homeric Epic to the “demigods” (*hēmītheōn*, *Iliad* 12.23), which taken within the Greek Epic Cycle, clearly points to this motif. Moreover, the annihilation on both sides is signaled by this image of the Greek wall, which mirrors the Trojan wall.

The missing hecatombs (*hekatombas*) recall the death theme. The omniscient narrator, through a flashback to the moment when the wall “was built” (*tetykto*) and a flash forward to when it “was” (*ēen*) no longer standing, evinces the secrecy of the situation, at least from a

human point of view. Also, after the quoted verses, the text mentions the deaths of all the best Trojans and of nearly all the best Greeks, as well as the fact that the city of Troy “was sacked” (*pertheto*, *Iliad* 12.15), as a culmination of the war. Unlike the *Mahābhārata*, the *Iliad* does not tell the whole sequence of events before, during, and after the war; therefore, this occurrence of the motif, halfway through the plot, can be interpreted as an emphasis.

Passage 4: Odyssey 8.73-82

*mous' ar' aoidon anēken aeidemenai klea andrōn,
oimēs tēs tot' ara kleos ouranon euryn hikane,
neikos odysseōs kai pēleideō achilēos,
hōs pote dērisanto theōn en daiti thaleiē
ekpalgois epeessin, anax d' andrōn agamemnōn
chaire noō, ho t' aristoi achaiōn dērioōnto.
hōs gar hoi chreiōn mythēsato phoibos apollōn
pythoi en ēgatheē, hoth' hyperbē lainon oudon
chrēsomenos· tote gar rha kylindeto pēmatos archē
trōsi te kai danaoisi dios megalou dia boulas.*

The Muse allowed the singer to sing the glories of men, a tune whose glory had by then reached the wide heaven, the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, the son of Peleus, how they once contended with violent words at a plentiful banquet of the gods, and Agamemnon, the king of men, was glad at heart that those best of the Achaeans were quarreling. Indeed, Phoebus Apollo had told him this while answering him in the most holy Pytho when he had stepped over the threshold of stone to ask. By then, the beginning of misery was rolling upon the Trojans and the Danaans thanks to the plan of the great Zeus.

If the *Iliad* tells only part of the story that is included in the *Mahābhārata*, the Greek Epic Cycle – including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – constitutes a better frame of reference for the

comparisons. The *Odyssey* offers a scene which is relevant in terms of the transformation of the Unburdening of the Earth from a motif within an epic text, that is, the *Iliad*, to a motif within an epic tradition, that is, the Greek Epic Cycle. The passage dabbles in the metapoetic, since the impersonal narrator which we have come to identify with the “singer” (*aidos*) Homer is lending the stage to his fictional colleague, the “singer” (*aidos*) Demodocus, who is going to share with the audience some “glories of men” (*klea andrōn*), which is the most common Greek phrase to refer to Greek epic. The recourse to the Muse and the subject-matter of a quarrel both also resound with the proem of the *Iliad*.

The theme of the gods is clear, for the quarrel is set during a banquet of the “gods” (*theōn*). Likewise, the secrecy is signaled through Apollo, the Greek god of divination, whose oracle situated in Delphi – formerly known as Pytho – was central to the activities related to prophesying. The forms “answering” (*chreiōn*) and “to ask” (*chrēsomenos*) both correspond to the verb *chraō*, which refers to the questions and answers posed to and given by such oracles. The secrecy of this kind of exchange is obvious from the fact that those quarreling know nothing about the divine causes of their enmity, whereas the earthly ruler, who is the only one aware of the secret, is even able to enjoy it when the divine ruler sets the wheels in motion, which is precisely the conveyed by the verb “was rolling” (*kyлиндeto*).

It is all effected by “the plan of Zeus” (*dios... boulas*), who intended to pit the Greeks and the Trojans against each other, thus ensuring their destruction, for a reason that so far has not become all that clear. For such clarification, one must turn again to other Greek epic sources.

Passage 5: Cypria fr. 1

*alloi de apo historias tinos eipon eirēkenai ton homēron. fasi gar tēn gēn baroumenēn
hypo anthrōpōn polyplēthias, mēdemias anthrōpōn ousēs eusebeias, aitēsai ton dia
kouphisthēnai tou achthous ton de dia prōton men euthys poiēsai ton thēbaikon
polemon, di' hou pollous pany apōlesen, hysteron de palin ton iliakon, sumboulōi tōi
mōmōi chrēsamenos, hēn dios boulēn homēros phēsin, epeidē hoios te ēn keraunois*

*ē kataklysmois hapantas diaphtheirein· hoper tou mōmou kōlyasantos, hypothemenou
de autōi gnōmas dyo, tēn thetidos thnētogamian kai thygatros kalēs gennan, ex hōn
amphoterōn polemos hellēsi te kai barbarois egeneto, aph' hou synebē kouphisthēnai
tēn gēn pollōn anairethentōn. hē de historia para stasinōi tōi ta kypria pepoiēkoti,
eiponti houtōs·*

*ēn hote myria phyla kata chthona plazomena <aiei
anthrōpōn e>bary<ne bathy>sternou platos aiēs.
zeus de idōn eleēse, kai en pykinais prapidessin
kouphisai anthrōpōn pambōtora syntheto gaian,
rhipissas polemou megalēn erin iliakoio,
ophra kenōseien thanatōi baros. hoi d' eni troiēi
hērōes kteinonto, dios d' eteleieto boulē.*

Others said that Homer was speaking about a story. Indeed, they say that the Earth, being weighed down by the multitude of humans and there being no piety among humans, asked Zeus to be relieved of her burden, and that at once, Zeus first produced the Theban War, through which he destroyed so many, and then the Trojan one, asking Momus to be his advisor – which is what Homer calls the plan of Zeus – for he was capable of killing everyone with thunderbolts or floods. But Momus dissuaded him and suggested two ideas to him, the marriage of Thetis to a mortal and the birth of a beautiful daughter, and from those two resulted the war between the Greeks and the barbarians, from which in turn came about that the Earth was relieved after many were annihilated. The story is found in Stasinus, the author of the *Cypria*, who says:

There was a time when multiple tribes <of men always> wandering through the Earth <weighed down> the surface of the Earth of <ample> bosom. Seeing it, Zeus took pity and decided in his wise mind to relieve the all-nurturing Earth of men, after stirring up the great struggle of the Trojan War, to void her burden with death. The heroes at Troy were being killed and the plan of Zeus was being fulfilled.

The prose passage speaks of an Earth (*gēn*) that was “being weighed down” (*baroumenēn*) by humans – like in the first *Mahābhārata* passage, where the Earth was “filled” (*samāpūryata*, *MBh.* 1.58.16d; *āpūryata*, *MBh.* 1.58.24c) with people and “oppressed” (*pīḍyamānā*, *MBh.* 1.58.35c; *pīḍitā*, *MBh.* 1.58.37b) by demons. Thus, the Earth demanded of Zeus “to be relieved” (*kouphisthēnai*) of her “burden” (*achthous*) – like in the first *Mahābhārata* passage, where Brahmā asks the gods “to cast out” (*nirasitum*, *MBh.* 1.58.46a) her “burden” (*bhāraṃ*, *MBh.* 1.58.46b). The overpopulation is emphasized by calling humans a “multitude” (*polyplēthias*) – like in the second *Mahābhārata* passage, where the creatures are said to have become “numerous” (*bahulā*, *MBh.* 1.189.2c). And the relieve came about only “after many were annihilated” (*pollōn anairethentōn*) – like in the second *Mahābhārata* passage, where the five Indras are told that their liberation will come only by “having led many others to their death” (*bahūn anyān nidhanaṃ prāpayitvā*, *MBh.* 1.189.25d).

Zeus in turn produced two wars: the Theban War and the Trojan War. For the second one, he sought the advice of Momus, the personification sarcasm, who recommended him two complementary courses of action: a wedding (between the goddess Thetis and king Peleus, resulting in the birth of Achilles) and a birth (of Helen, from Zeus himself and princes Leda). Helen would cause the war (*polemos*) and Achilles, the mutual destruction (*pollōn anairethentōn*) – which also resonates with the third *Mahābhārata* passage, when the gods are told that “killing one another you will gain back your worlds” (*anyonyam abhinighnantaḥ punar lokān avāpsyatha*, *MBh.* 2.33.15c-d), and with the fourth *Mahābhārata* passage, when the Earth is told that humans “will kill each other” (*anyonyam ghātayiṣyanti*, *MBh.* 11.8.25c).

The verse after the prose passage corresponds to the *Cypria* proper. Here the parallelisms are also striking: “multiple tribes of men” (*myria phyla... anthrōpōn*) ~ “then the creatures became numerous” (*tataḥ prajāś tā bahulā babhūvuḥ*, *MBh.* 1.189.2c), “weighed down” (*ebaryne*) ~ “filled” (*samāpūryata*, *MBh.* 1.58.16d; *āpūryata*, *MBh.* 1.58.24c) and “oppressed” (*pīḍyamānā*, *MBh.* 1.58.35c; *pīḍitā*, *MBh.* 1.58.37b), “to relieve” (*kouphisai*) ~ “to cast out” (*nirasitum*, *MBh.* 1.58.46a), “burden” (*baros*) ~ “burden” (*bhāraṃ*, *MBh.* 1.58.46b), “were being killed” (*kteinonto*) ~ “having led many others to their death” (*bahūn anyān nidhanaṃ prāpayitvā*, *MBh.* 1.189.25d). And all this was part of “the plan of Zeus” (*dios... boulē*), which clearly recalls all *Mahābhārata* instances of “the secret of the gods”

(*rahasyaṃ... devānām*, *MBh.* 1.58.3a-b, *devaguhyam*, *MBh.* 11.8.34d, and *guhyam... devānām*, *MBh.* 18.5.7c-d). Now, how to interpret all these parallelisms?

3. Methodological Discussion

Accepting Greek influence in India is not easy. Allen (2015), Pisano (2015), Karttunen (2017), Stoneman (2019, pp. 416-426), and Elst (2021) point out some methodological problems with Wulff Alonso's (2014) interpretation of parallelisms between Greece and India as tokens of the influence from the former into the latter. Wulff Alonso (2019a, 2019b, 2020) himself addressed some of those concerns in later publications. In this section, I look at both the pros and cons of this view, and then I draw some conclusions of my own.

If Fernando Wulff Alonso is the main proponent of the Greco-Indian (understood as a Greek influence in India) hypothesis, Nick Allen is the chief advocate of the Indo-European hypothesis. Even though Allen (2015) "found the book [sc. Wulff Alonso's 2014 book] stimulating and profitable" (p. 247), he also considers that "it is worth glancing at the methodological problem [sc. how to interpret the parallelisms as influences], independent of the narrative content to which it is applied" (p. 243). Allen's (2015) suggestion for tackling such methodological problem would be to go "from recognising similarities to reconstructing the procedures his Indian composers might have used in adapting the Greek" (p. 244), and the results of working under said methodology would presumably be twofold: either Greco-Indian influence or Indo-European origin. In Allen's (2015) opinion, the Folk hypothesis would not appear to be as relevant, since "the more serious rival to west-east transmission [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis] is Indo-European common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]" (p. 242).

It is worth pointing out that this dichotomic view is modified in Allen's (2019, p. 1) later work, where he introduces the subject by considering all three explanations: "universal folklore [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]", "borrowing [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]", and

“common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]”.¹⁰ However, Allen (2019) still emphasizes the duality: “In historical reality diffusion [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis] and common origin [i.e. the Indoe-European hypothesis] interact” (p. 102). As for the Unburdening of the Earth, even though it is central to Wulff Alonso’s (2014) argument, Allen’s (2015) review only acknowledges that the motif is “a long-recognised similarity” (p. 243), with accompanying references to Vielle’s (1996) view of an Indo-European origin and to West’s (2007) view of a Mesopotamian origin.

Likewise, Pisano’s (2015) review of Wulff Alonso’s (2014) book also warns about the need for “careful evaluation of the use of the methodological forms and models the author [sc. Wulff Alonso] has employed, as well as of his relationship with the main comparative ‘schools’ and trends identified in modern and contemporary historiography” (p. 219). By “schools”, Pisano (2015, pp. 217–219) is referring to “historical comparison”, “linguistic comparison”, “differential comparison”, “comparison *d’équipe*”, “comparison of Phillippe Borgeaud’s Geneva school”, and “analogical comparison”, such as that undertaken by Burkert and West to study Near Eastern influences in Greece, and such as Pisano himself sees in Wulff Alonso’s project.

Pisano (2015) sees “the most important merit” (p. 221) in Wulff Alonso’s (2014) work, not only in critiquing the “isolationist” model that has so far pervaded in Indological studies, but also in dating of the *Māhābhārata* “in the period following the Greek conquest, as already hypothesized by some Indianists [e.g. Hildebeitel]” (p. 221). Nevertheless, Pisano (2015) considers the parallelisms to be “shared cultural schemata” (p. 223), not from a common Indo-European origin, but from a common Indo-Mediterranean contact. This perspective would include not only bilateral cultural exchanges between Greece and India, but also other possible sources of inspiration, such as Mesopotamia.

¹⁰ Cf. Allen (2019, p. 67) differentiating between “chance”, which will always remain a possibility, “Jungian archetypes [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]”, “diffusion of the Homeric epics from Greece to India [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]”, and “common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]”; and Allen (2019, p. 102) contrasting “independent parallel inventions in societies of similar technology and socio-political structure”, which would offer a deeper explanation to those instances of seemingly mere chance, to “some sort of psychological universal [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]”, “diffusion (from Greece to India or vice versa) [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]”, and “common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]”.

In a similar manner, Karttunen (2017) opines that Wulff Alonso's (2014) book is "a very carefully argued and earnest attempt" at advancing the idea of Greek influence in India. In terms of methodology, Karttunen (2017) points out, on one hand, that "common folklore motifs [i.e. the Folk hypothesis] and even common psychological patterns are all presented as testimonies of relationship [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]" (p. 196), and on the other, that "one general defect [sc. of Wulff Alonso's (2014) book] is restricting the comparison to Greek and Indian texts, while there are other early epics offering important parallels [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]".

Stoneman (2019, p. 419) even lists what he considers to be alternative explanations for what Wulff Alonso (2014) interprets as Greek influences: 1) "folktales [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]" and "elements of Indo-European traditional narratives [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis]", 2) resemblances in "characters and story-patterns [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]", 3) "direct literary borrowing [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]", and 4) "Jungian archetypes [i.e. the Folk hypothesis]". However in Stoneman's (2019) opinion, borrowing is the least likely explanation, for "the social and political circumstances of north-west India around the turn of the era were inimical to acceptance of Greek models by the authors of the great epics" (p. 426).

Lastly, Elst (2021) claims that the parallelisms "can often better be explained as due to a common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis] much older than the Indo-Greeks, and logically even older than the authors of the epics" (p. 39). Elst (2021) does admit that "a Hindu epic can, in principle, very well contain some elements traceable to distant cultures [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis]. Fernando Wulff-Alonso [sc. Wulff Alonso's (2014) book] may indeed have hit upon a few, viz., elements of the *Iliad*, or more broadly, of Greek mythology" (p. 60). Nonetheless, Elst (2021) considers that "he [sc. Wulff Alonso] has not managed to prove the counterintuitive idea that the *Mahābhārata* is more than peripherally indebted to the *Iliad*" (pp. 60-61).

Innovative as it certainly is, Wulff Alonso's proposal has not managed to convince neither the Classicists, such as Pisano and Stoneman, nor the Indologists, such as Karttunen and Elst. Why? What makes the Greco-Indian hypothesis so difficult for scholars to accept?

First, there is the matter of specialty: Classicists tend to know little about India, as do Indologists when it comes to Greece. For example, Stoneman is an expert in Ancient Greece and has even written a book about “The Greek Experience of India”, but how can he affirm that “the social and political circumstances of north-west India around the turn of the era were inimical to acceptance of Greek models by the authors of the great epics” (Stoneman, 2019, p. 426) when there is a considerable acceptance of foreign influence, for instance, in Gandhāran art. In this sense, Pisano’s critique seems more neutral: If there was indeed a sort of network of Indo-Mediterranean cultural exchange, then it is very likely that Greece had at least some degree of influence in India – and that India itself had at least some degree of influence in Greece as well!

Second, and as a corollary to the first one, there is the matter of perspective. If Classicists are presented with a story that is like one that they have been studying all their academic life, they will probably see a little resemblance and a lot of divergence. The same goes for Indologists. And a little resemblance can be easily accounted for from a Folk explanation. For instance, Karttunen accepts the parallelisms, but he rejects the Greek influence when claiming that “common folklore motifs and even common psychological patterns are all presented as testimonies of relationship” (p. 196). I agree with Karttunen’s view that neither the parallelisms nor Wulff Alonso’s interpretation thereof are “testimonies”, in the sense of something that furnishes “proof” of said influence. However, I disagree with Karttunen’s certainty that the parallelisms must therefore be taken as evidence of folk motifs. Both explanations are hypothetical.

Third, there is the key concept of “proof”. Elst appears to be thinking of “proof” as something that compels the acceptance of a fact, especially when writing that “he [sc. Wulff Alonso] has not managed to prove the counterintuitive idea that the *Mahābhārata* is more than peripherally indebted to the *Iliad*” (pp. 60-61). “Proof” can also refer to something that establishes the validity of a statement, and this is the sort of “proof” that Wulff Alonso seems confident to have provided – and he certainly has. But validity differs from factuality just as a hypothesis differs from an event. If one were to apply the scientific method to the Greco-Indian hypothesis, one would need to observe the parallelisms with skepticism – that is, considering that they might be Folk or Indo-European motifs rather than Greco-Indian motifs.

One would have to conduct something resembling experiments – for example, interpretations of parallelisms as Greco-Indian motifs also within other literary genres. One would have to turn to statistics – How many experts have argued in favor of the Folk-, the Indo-European- or the Greco-Indian hypothesis? And most importantly, one would have to ensure that the hypothesis is falsifiable – Does the motif appear in Folk-, Indo-European- or Greco-Indian “indexes”?¹¹

Arguing for the Indo-European hypothesis, Allen (2019) points out this “unscientific” status: “whether it [sc. the Indo-European hypothesis] can ever achieve a ‘scientific’ status comparable to the various branches of linguistics is debatable” (p. 5). Science has a method, so why is it that “linguistic comparison”, such as that undertaken by Allen when defending the Indo-European hypothesis, or “analogical comparison”, such as that carried out by Wulff Alonso when expounding the Greco-Indian hypothesis, seems to not have one? As a matter of fact, there are several publications on such “methodological” issues.¹²

According to the cited proposals, step one is to delimit the “units” of comparison.¹³ For the present study, I propose a literary motif, that of the Unburdening of the Earth, which within itself contains themes such as secrecy, death, gods, and war. Step two is to evaluate the quantity/quality of the parallelisms.¹⁴ Here, the four themes would be quantitatively relevant,

¹¹ Thomson (1955/1958) is an example of a Folk index; Mallory & Adams (1997), West (2007), and Allen (2019) are examples of Indo-European indexes, Arora (1981) and Wulff Alonso (2008, 2014) are examples of Greco-Indian indexes.

¹² See Bernabé (1995) on the “methodology” for studying Near Eastern influences in Greek literature, Allen (2019, Introduction) on the “criteria” for studying the Indo-European origins of Sanskrit and Greek literatures, and Wulff Alonso (2019a; 2019b; 2020, Introduction) on the “criteria” for studying Greco-Roman influences in Sanskrit literature.

¹³ See Bernabé (1995): “Ce qui, à mon avis, voyage, ce sont certaines trames ou même ce que nous pouvons appeler des «segments de trame», des épisodes, des mythes, éléments qui expriment l’idée que quelqu’un fait quelque chose d’une certaine façon et dans un but précis” (p. 15).

¹⁴ See Bernabé (1995): “Nous pouvons avoir recours à certains critères: l’un d’eux, appliqué depuis longtemps déjà, exige qu’il y ait un nombre élevé de coïncidences ou, plus simplement, une identité de détails très précis.” (pp. 17-18); Allen (2019): “A comparison between two stories becomes far more interesting when it reveals both multiple similarities and, even more, similar relations between the similarities” (p. 7), “A convincing case depends on the quality of its argument and the quantity and interconnectedness of individual rapprochements” (p. 91), “The assumption is again that, if similarities between the Sanskrit and the Greek narratives are sufficiently numerous, detailed, and well structured, then they indicate a common origin” (p. 128); and Wulff Alonso: “Accordingly, if we have two stories sufficient [sic] similar in both (1) quality/quantity, and (2) density of congruous textual components, we can conclude that one of the two must be the product of a borrowing, and borrowing from a written text” (2019a, p. 2), “Accordingly, if we find two stories participating in that given quality and quantity of textual components, implying, for instance, main character/s in common, as well as secondary characters, settings and props, actions and their succession, and even the main meaning of the story, the improbability of their other interpretations becomes clear, while direct or indirect borrowing becomes

whereas a detail like war, not present for instance in Mesopotamian versions of the motif,¹⁵ would be qualitatively pertinent. Step three is to consider what appears as odd in one narrative but not in the other.¹⁶ Where something appears as odd, it would have been incorporated later; where it seems to not be odd, it would have been there earlier. A couple of additional difficulties arise at this point. How much earlier? In other words, Indo-European or Greek? And also, how odd? This obviously presupposes a degree of familiarity with both sets of texts and cultures, but in essence, odd is to be understood as not in agreement with the plot. In this sense, the discrepancies in the *Mahābhārata* versions of the Unburdening of the Earth could be seen as resulting from them having come from an earlier source. Lastly, step four is to consider potential borrowings.¹⁷ As seen, the phrasing of the *Mahābhārata* versions and the Greek versions is very close, although it cannot be traced back to Indo-European diction.

If Classicists and Indologists alike have been reluctant to accept the Greco-Indian hypothesis for reasons of specialty, perspective, and allegedly, lack of “proof”, what has happened with other Comparatists? Like Wulff Alonso, Allen can be classified as a Comparatist. With a background tilting towards neither culture, Allen does not face the same obstacles of specialty and perspective, and yet, his opinion regarding “proof” might be worth quoting. Just as Wulff Alonso (2020) concludes that, if the Greco-Indian hypothesis is possible, other hypotheses become impossible: “[sc. the Greco-Indian hypothesis] denies the possibility of explaining

apparent” (2019b, pp. 226–227), “The first one [sc. the first criterion] is the already too frequently stated ‘principle of improbability’, which denies the possibility of explaining repetition by chance or other explanations, given a certain quality and quantity of common components between two texts or sections of a text” (2020, p. 18).

¹⁵ See Ballesteros (2023, p. 85, fig. 1).

¹⁶ See Bernabé (1995): “Un autre critère tient compte de la présence d’inconséquences dans le texte. Lorsqu’un auteur essaie d’introduire dans son récit un élément étranger, il arrive que les sutures opérées ne passent pas inaperçues” (p. 18); Allen (2019): “When Poseidon catches sight of the raft, he gathers the clouds, agitates the sea with his trident, and rouses the winds: ‘and darkness (*nux*) rushes down from heaven’ (294). When Arjuna enters the forest at the foot of the mountains, heaven resounds with conches and drums. A rain of flowers falls to earth, and a multitude of clouds, spread across the sky, veils the whole area (*chādayām āsa sarvataḥ* 39.14–15). In the Sanskrit, the meteorological phenomena have no obvious narrative function beyond underlining the cosmic significance of the occasion” (p. 47); and Wulff Alonso: “A third argument refers more specifically to the improbability of mere coincidence of shared bizarre or fanciful elements” (2019a, pp. 2–3), “A second principle is the ‘argument of oddity’ (2). Strange components of stories present in two different texts can have the same probatory value as the first argument” (2019b, p. 227), “I have also pointed out the need to recognize the importance of certain unusual cases, such as the odd, bizarre or fanciful components of a story” (2020, p. 19).

¹⁷ See Wulff Alonso: “literal or textual borrowing – the presence of similar words or expressions” (2019a, p. 3), “when there is evidence of the literal or direct use by V. [sc. Vyāsa] of a given text (‘linguistic plagiarism’), e.g. when he uses similar words, metaphors or expressions” (2020, p. 20).

repetition by chance or other explanations [e.g. the Indo-European hypothesis]” (p. 18), so too, Allen (2019) concludes that, if the Indo-European hypothesis is not impossible, the Greco-Indian hypothesis does not become possible: “if we wish to attribute similar philosophical ideas in Greece and India to diffusion [i.e. the Greco-Indian hypothesis], we need to be sure that the explanation by common origin [i.e. the Indo-European hypothesis] is impossible” (Allen, 2019, p. 148). Both scholars are being extremist. In fact, none of the hypotheses are impossible, but rather more or less probable, depending on each case. Somewhere else, Allen does recognize this, at least in passing: “Unless further evidence can be adduced... one can work only in probabilities” (Allen, 2019, p. 53).

Allen (2019, p. 156) has even summed up the “problems” that he identifies when it comes to the Greco-Indian hypothesis, for every one of which very reasonable solutions can be easily provided: 1) “The difficulty of envisaging a context for the encounters (where, when, in what language)”. Greece and India had strong contacts through the Greeks in Bactria, the Seleucids in Syria, and the Ptolemies in Egypt, from the 4th century BCE onwards, and the Kandahar Greek Edicts of Aśoka were written in both Greek and Prakrit. 2) “The fact that in some respects the *Mahābhārata* parallels closely not only Greek epic but also other IE traditions such as Roman pseudo-history”. If a motif is shared only between Greece and India, then it is more likely to be considered Greco-Indian – although a case can also be made for when the motif is also shared in Rome, since much of Roman culture was heavily influenced by Greek culture as well. However, if a motif is shared with other branches of the linguistic family tree, then it is more likely to be deemed Indo-European.

3) “The deep embedding of each epic within its local religious and cultural traditions (much deeper than is usual with folktales) – neither ‘feels’ like a borrowing”. “Feelings” have nothing to do with the scientific method, and arguments alone must always lead these discussions. 4) “In world-historical perspective, the correlational style of thinking manifested in the IE ideology (a ‘primitive classification’) has been losing ground over the millennia, yet its patterning effect is apparent in both epic traditions”. “Patterns” are nothing but complex parallelisms, and neither the complex nor the simple ones should be interpreted by themselves as pointing towards either one or other hypotheses. All explanations are possible, it is just that some are more likely than others.

4. Conclusions

The Unburdening of the Earth appears in Thomson's (1955/1958, A1335.8) Folk index: "Origin of death because world is overpopulated". The relation between death and overpopulation is already quite compelling, but this alone does not "prove" the Folk hypothesis. One would have to "observe", conduct "experiments", apply "statistics", and if necessary, be able to "falsify" such hypothesis. For example, one could compare the *Mahābhārata* passages with the Eskimo and South American versions that Thomson mentions, to determine whether the concurrent themes of gods, secrecy, and war are featured there too.

The Unburdening of the Earth does not appear in Mallory & Adams's (1997) Indo-European index, which does instead have an entry of "Earth Goddess". As mentioned, Allen (2019, pp. 143, 224-225) pays little attention to the motif, and West (2007, pp. 22-23) even argues against an Indo-European origin. On the other hand, Wulff Alonso (2008; 2014, pp. 128-130, 175-177, 307-310, 313-315) makes it central to his argument, and Hildebeitel considers that, "Wulff [sc. Wulff Alonso] appears to be correct that the Unburdening of the Earth myth has a distinctly Greek background, and as I further insisted, that it is unlikely, at least in India, to have had Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, or Babylonian roots" (p. 247). If one also accepts that the Unburdening of the Earth is the *Mahābhārata*'s "central myth" (Hildebeitel, 2018, p. 258), and that this central myth "seems to have intensified a Greek source" (Hildebeitel, 2018, p. 262), a good case can be made for the Greco-Indian hypothesis in this instance, which is not tantamount to it being "proven" either.

Once again, "observation", "experimentation" – such as this paper, "statistics" – such as the other papers cited here, and a way to "falsify" such hypothesis – such as the proposed Eskimo- and South American comparison – would be needed. And even then, one could hardly speak of "proof" in the sense of something that compels the acceptance of a fact, for it is likely that we will never know what happened back then, but rather of "proof" in the sense of something that establishes the validity of a statement. Hopefully, these isolated

attempts can eventually amount to some form of consensus, albeit one coexisting with the other hypotheses.

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