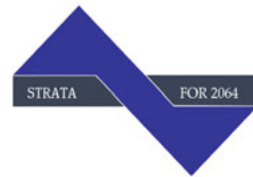


Christian Zgoll

Myths as Polymorphous and Polystratic *Erzählstoffe*



A Theoretical and Methodological Foundation

Abstract: In a critical reckoning with methods and results from the field of literary studies, with functional as well as structural analyses, and with structuralist methods, the present paper aims to bring an innovative theoretical approach to working with myths and their variants as self-contained sequences of minimal action-bearing units (“hylemes”). The method of hyleme analysis will be developed as a tool for extracting *Stoff* variants from their concrete manifestations in a specific medium, such as texts or images, and for reconstructing an individual variant’s underlying *Stoff* sequence. Hyleme analysis, moreover, constitutes an important preliminary part of the process which enables us to conduct objectively verifiable transmedial comparisons of different *Stoffe* and their variants.

Mythical *Stoffe*, because they have a strong claim to relevance in the interpretation of, and in coping with, the human condition, are being fought over and are continually being reworked. Individual variants of a mythical *Stoff* are therefore, as a rule, rarely all of one piece. Rather, as products of these processes, they display the traces of continual reworkings, and indeed, they are comprised of multiple layers. A serious interpretation of myths can only do justice to the many variants of a *Stoff* and to the complexity of its variants if the chosen approach is specifically tailored to accommodate both its variants and their *strata* (method of stratification analysis).

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1 A Glance at the History of Mythological Research

What are myths? And how can they be interpreted? For a long time, and in some instances up into the present, the second question has attracted more interest and more answers than the first. This was already the case in Greek-Roman antiquity. No explicit definition has survived of what constitutes a myth for Euhemeros from Messene (4th/3rd century BC), but we have a very good record of his idea how myths are to be explained: as stories about human rulers who have been retroactively raised above their station and styled into gods. The text *On Incredible Tales*, which has ascribed to one “Palaiphatos” (c. 4th century BC), in a rationalizing manner reduced many peculiarities of myths to unrecognized empirical circumstances and occurrences, or he explained them as misunderstood metaphorical expressions, thereby attempting to discover the actual “truth” of these myths, without ever trying to offer a general definition of the object under scrutiny. The Imperial Roman author Cornutus (1st century AD), in his compendium of the Greek gods, attempts to explain the names associated with the gods as allegorizing encryptions of the natural elements, or of natural processes, while assuming that what is meant by “mythical” needs no further clarification.

Even today, the author of one work titled *On the Gods and the Cosmos*, is sometimes treated as an exception: the following sentence from the treatise by Salustios (c. 2nd half of the 4th century AD) is often quoted as a definition of myth: “(All) these things never happened, but always are. And mind sees all things at once, but narration (or: reason) expresses some first and others after.” But Salustios’ actual purpose is not to define myth. Like the authors mentioned above, he was largely concerned with the various options of interpreting myths as allegorical expressions of divine or natural truths, and it is questionable whether he intended the quoted sentence as a general statement. Several reasons make this highly unlikely: for one thing, Salustios does not derive or justify his “definition,” nor has he placed it at the beginning of his tract to indicate it is meant to apply to all that follows. Instead, he inserted the observation almost in passing at a later location. And finally, Salustios himself does not present it as

1 Salustios, *De diis et mundo* 4: Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ αἰεὶ· καὶ ὁ μὲν νοῦς ἅμα πάντα ὁρᾷ, ὁ δὲ λόγος τὰ μὲν πρῶτα τὰ δὲ δεύτερα λέγει.

universally valid; he coins the phrase with reference to a *particular* myth and its explanation².

The selected examples illustrate, how the history of mythological scholarship since antiquity can be understood not as a history of the *theory* of myth but much more emphatically as a history of *interpretations* of myths. More recent approaches have considerably extended the spectrum of available models for explaining myths. In the psychoanalytical mode, for instance, myths are seen as expressions of deeper mental phenomena or mechanisms of universal human significance; in the eyes of structuralist interpreters they become encoded semantic units with specific cultural attributes. Alternatively, myths are understood as expressions of societal “ideologies,” or as reflecting ritual practices, in the case of the Myth and Ritual School (Cambridge Ritualists)³.

With the growing importance of the sociological and historical fields of research, the central question, “How can myths be interpreted?”, is joined by a second which enquires about the *function* of myths⁴: “who uses myths, and to

² The myth in question is that of Attis and Cybele.

³ It cannot be the aim of this contribution to reproduce a complete history of mythological research, or a more detailed appreciation of older approaches. Aside from the fact that it would have filled an entire publication by itself, there have been several important forays in this direction; cf. the helpful surveys e.g. in Kirk 1974, 13-91; Graf 1985, 15-57 (with emphasis on the older mythological scholarship and its key representatives and positions); Csapo 2005 (with emphasis on the more recent scholarship; different theories of myth are embedded in their respective environments: sociological, historical, and the history of the discipline itself); Segal 2007; Powell 2009, 14-47 (suitable as a first introduction, though necessarily selective and extremely brief it is eminently readable and to-the-point). For highlights on the (more recent) history of scholarship on the subject of “myth” within the discipline of patrology see the contribution by Peter Gemeinhardt in this volume. A useful collection of texts on modern theories of myth can be found in Barner/Detken/Wesche 2003; a compilation of important texts on earlier attempts to decode myths in Kerényi 1967.

⁴ Thus for instance numerous studies in the fields of ancient history and classical literature are primarily concerned with the societal appropriation of specific myths in the context of the memorial cultures of cities and urban élites (cf. Scheer 1993; Gehrke 1994; Kühr 2006); the focus is on the (inter) medial, action-related, ritual, representative or institutional functionalization of myths, adapted to and motivated by specific contemporary conditions and political-societal interests (Hölkeskamp 1999; Calame 2000; Waldner 2000; Walter 2004; Hartmann 2010; Hölkeskamp/Stein-Hölkeskamp 2010). Because myths are largely associated with the memorial culture of the ancient gentes and their correspondingly frequent functionalization as charter myths the works of Assmann/Burkert/Stolz (1982), Jan and Aleida Assmann (1998 and 1999; see also Wodianka 2005) and Malinowski (1926, partially intersecting with the Myth and Ritual School further developed by Geertz 1973) continue to be of use. In the field of Assyriology, a number of individual works have begun to contextualize myths and their layers (strata): Ayali-Darshan 2010; Fleming/Milstein 2010; A. Zgoll 2011 and 2013.

what end?” Whether from the perspective of historical, sociological, or religious and literary studies, the interest in the function of myths has in many cases almost completely superseded the age-old quest for the interpretation of myths, after the impasse created by the plurality of interpretive strategies has left scholars resigned to the impossibility of finding a universally applicable interpretation of myths. A better solution than resignation might be the *realization* that “monolithic” theories are evidently ill-suited to explain complex subjects – and this, after all, is what myths are⁵.

Just as one and the same myth can be functionalized in different ways, there appears to be more than one way of arriving at a fruitful interpretation. How can this be? Are diverging interpretations a matter of course, or do they depend on the approaches chosen in each case, and can contradictory interpretations be explained by an arbitrariness in the choice of approach? To answer these questions and others like it, we need to take a step back to the level of myth theory and ask, “What are myths?” – in the hope that such an inquiry into the nature of myths will yield an answer to help us resolve the other questions regarding their possible interpretations and functions.

This inquiry into the nature of myths has a positivistic ring to it. It seems to be almost a dogma of postmodern scholarship to view the possibility of a “positive” finding on any subject as illusory, and the associated efforts as too narrow-minded. The criticism raised against some all-too optimistic-dogmatic attitudes on the positivists’ side may be justified in isolated cases, but the deliberate indecision, the refusal to commit to a more precise definition of the essential features shared by the central objects under scrutiny inevitably harbours a danger that is at least as great, if not greater: the danger of falsely assuming that we all mean the same thing when in reality we do not. By steering clear of any definitive statements we may be able to circumnavigate the cliffs of an overly one-sided or incomplete assertion, but we must then confront the sandbanks of half-precise terminologies all around us, and the shallows of talking-past-one-another.

Evidently, this danger and the attendant ambiguities will become more urgent with a growing number of scholars, and disciplines, mingling in the field of mythological research. This is not to deny that eminent advances have been made in the area of comparative mythology, above all by (largely) overcoming

5 A position that already finds expression e.g. in Cassirer 1953, 26, and is championed emphatically in particular by Kirk 1974 (summarizing e.g. *ibid.*, 18 f and 40); cf. also Csapo 2005, 290 f; Morford/Lenardon/Sham 2011, 3; with reference to Malinowski’s idea of charter myths see Graf 1985, 46, or to the explanation of myths as derived from rituals *ibid.*, 54.

the distinction between myths of “primitive” and “higher” cultures, by the uncovering of intra- as well as intercultural parallels, references, and dependencies, and through gaining a more sharply contoured sense of specific cultural peculiarities. However, in the field of comparative mythology, we also observe that much is being said about the dangers and benefits of *comparing* myths, but very little about what myths *are*. Thus we see individual studies being undertaken that are of benefit to specific cultural contexts, but as a rule they are not held together by an overarching theoretical approach, with the result that the implicit ideas of what is to be understood by “myth,” and the chosen approaches, turn out to be far more pluralistic than their joint publication within the same collected volume would suggest⁶.

It is a fact that the scholars contributing to collected volumes with an emphasis on mythology are by their stated profession active in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, history, or philology; as a rule they are not mythologists because the subject of mythological studies has (to this day) not been able to establish itself as a discipline in its own right, even though the interest in myths is considerable both in academia and in society at large. From a historical perspective, this may have been due to the long-standing rejection of “heathen” mythologies by the crown discipline of theology, with its protracted dominance over the religious and scholarly landscape. From the academic point of view another factor, and by no means the smallest, may have been the relative neglect that the theory of myth has seen compared to the established structures in the comparative studies, the historical-sociological approach to functional myth analysis, and the available options in the interpretation of myths. The foundation of the discipline – a theory of myth – and, associated with it, the development of a foundational methodology for the analysis of myths, which must come before any further functional determination, interpretation, and comparison, have not yet received ample attention.

Chapter 2 will begin by focusing on the distinction between the “narrative materials,” or *Stoffe*, and their manifestations in different media. We will then consider the *Stoff* concept and contrast it with the ways in which it has been discussed in the literary disciplines, followed by a critical-comparative presentation of various attempts to grasp “the” *Stoff* behind its screen of different medial manifestations. It will become clear that the polymorphy in particular of mythical *Stoffe* is fraught with special challenges. Chapter 3 will set the scene for a new approach, against the backdrop of *Stoff*- and motif-historical, narrato-

⁶ Cf. e.g. Assmann/Burkert/Stolz, 1982; Whiting, 2001; Brandt/Schmidt, 2004; Schmitz-Emans/Lindemann, 2004; Dill/Walde, 2009; and still A. Zgoll/Kratz 2013.

logical, functional and structure-analytical, as well as structuralist methods. Not only variants of mythical *Stoffe*, but all kinds of narrative materials will be defined as sequences of hylemes: minimal action-bearing units. Building on this first introductory step we will turn to hyleme analysis as a new method for the reconstruction of the *Stoff*, which underlies every single variant, and its relevance for a general, transmedial, and comparative new discipline: *Stoffwissenschaft*, for which we propose the English term “hylistics” (derived from the Greek word *hyle* ὕλη, “raw material”). Chapter 4 will deal especially with mythical *Stoffe*, and their particular features: firstly, with their continually self-renewing, intertwining network with and inclusion of other *Stoffe* and semantic cultural elements (4.1), and secondly, with their “explosive potential” (4.3). As a rule, these two attributes are essential as the key reasons for the presence of multiple layers, or strata, in the medial manifestations of mythical *Stoff* variants. Here, we will also attempt to formulate a more precise definition of the primary indicators for identifying these layers, such as inconsistencies on the one hand (4.2), and generating value judgements and hierarchical relationships on the other (4.4). The final chapter (5) will see the conclusions from all the above enquiries made fruitful for the interpretation of myths – which can only do justice to both the polymorphy of the *Stoffe* and the multiple strata of their variants if and when it accounts for the presence of and the distinction among different variants and strata⁷.

2 Myths as *Stoffe*

2.1 Myths are not Texts, Myth is not a Literary Genre

Myths are not texts; they are *Stoffe*⁸. Neither are they stories that are being told orally. For each story that is being told is in itself a concrete realization of a particular *Stoff*.

⁷ For a detailed exposition of these and other aspects see C. Zgoll 2019.

⁸ On the various applications of an expanded and secular concept of myth, which is of no consequence in the present context, and includes notions such as the “political myth”, the “myth of Napoleon”, the “myth of rags to riches”, the idea of myth as a “tall tale”, etc., see for instance the survey in Tepe 2001, 15-68; for literature dedicated to the expanded concept of myth in the modern age see also Scheer 1993, 13, with nn. 1-5; Reinhardt 2011, 19, with n. 20; and Reinhardt 2016, 8. On dealing with the “durchaus schwierigen ‘konstruktiven’ Abgrenzungsversuchen zum Begriffsgebrauch von Mythos in der feuilletonistischen Alltagssprache

If we think of myths as *raw materials* for a multitude of artistic expressions, as narrative materials, or *Stoffe*, that can take all kinds of different medial forms⁹ it becomes clear that a vast array of possible manifestations in different media must exist for the storage of such *Stoffe*. They are preserved not only through the medium of sophisticated literary texts in prose or poetry, which are important for instance when it comes to the myths of classical antiquity, but a broad spectrum of other sources are equally significant; myths can be depicted in paintings, on reliefs, as statues, on coins, sarcophaguses, vases, or cylinder seals, in descriptions of pantomime performances or dances, inscriptions, scholia and commentaries, lists, ritual texts, and others¹⁰.

If “myth” is not to be equated with “text,” indeed not even with an orally performed narrative, then certainly myth cannot be understood as a specific literary genre. Myths are *Stoffe* that can be expressed in many different literary genres. This means that it is impossible to provide a detailed description of what constitutes a “myth” in analogy to an elaborate definition and typology of the kind that can for instance be drawn up for the epic genre in the field of literary studies¹¹. Using precise and culturally specific terms, literary scholars can de-

oder zu sach- und sinnverwandten Begriffen der Kulturwissenschaften und der Philosophie” see Mohn 1998, 58-68 (quotation *ibid.* 68). Pertinent on the history of the concept of myth: Burkert/Horstmann 1984. The concept of myth at play in the present contribution is not that which refers to a mode of thought, or an ideology, in the sense of “mythical thinking” (on the discussion whether or not “mythical thinking” does exist see, among others, Bouvrie 2002, 53-58) or to other uses (for the distinction between “myth” as “technical term of a scientific meta language” and “myths” as concrete phenomena see also Mohn 1998, 55 and 62), but to the concept of *myths* as mythical *Erzählstoffe*. Fundamental on the history of the Greek word μῦθος and its meaning Nesselrath 1999; cf. also Scheer 1993, 22-24; Powell 2009, 1-14; Reinhardt 2011, 13-15 (*ibid.* 13, n. 6 additional literature).

9 The term “medial” (or “medium”) is used in the present paper not primarily to refer to a “technisch-materiell definierten Übertragungskanal von Informationen” – an individual medium such as a concrete, extant book, or a specific film version, etc. (Wolf 2002, 39 n. 38) – but instead the concept is expanded according to the definition offered by Wolf (*ibid.*) as “ein konventionell als distinkt angesehenes Kommunikationsdispositiv” – a form of mediality that is represented e.g. by film or literature – so that the term can be equally applied to individual media and media-specific genres and subgenres (“types of media/mediality”). For the concept of transmediality (as distinct from intermediality) see chapter 3.4.

10 Cf. also Morford/Lenardon/Sham 2011, 3: “A myth also may be told by means of no words at all, for example, through painting, sculpture, music, dance, and mime, or by a combination of various media [...].”

11 This must be emphasized for instance with regard to the conventions in the disciplines of Assyriology and Biblical studies, where “myths” frequently refers to a *group of texts* that is associated with epic texts. Cf. e.g. the title of the recently published eighth volume of the series

scribe the epic genre by its characteristic use of language, style, preferred subjects [*Stoffe*], characters, narrative techniques, narrative elements, among other things. Myth as *Stoff*, however, does not have a particular style, nor does it prescribe the mode of presentation in poetry or prose, and narrative techniques will also be determined by the genre in which the myth will be “adapted.” All of the above characteristics define the respective genres; they do not define the – mythical – *Stoff*¹².

Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments: Weisheitstexte, Mythen und Epen, which appropriately offers the following introductory assessment (Janowski/Schwemer 2015, IX): “Ähnlich komplex wie der Mythos-Begriff ist der Begriff des Epos, der gattungstheoretisch kaum von jenem unterschieden werden kann.” Regarding “das babylonische Welterschöpfungsepos *Enūma eliš*,” Kämmerer/Metzler 2012, 2-4 do place “den Inhalt (‘Mythos’) gegenüber der Form (‘Epos’)” (ibid. 3), but go on to define myth as “eine besondere Form des narrativen Textes,” once again blurring the distinction. On the discussion in the field of Assyriology, as to whether and to what extent we can describe “myth as a literary genre”, cf. Heimpel 1997, 541. In Biblical scholarship, “myth” has still been defined as a “textual category” as recently as 2013: cf. Irsigler 2013, 2.2.1: “Ein in der Bibelwissenschaft operationabler, nach Kriterien anwendbarer und literaturwissenschaftlich begründeter Begriff von ‘Mythos’ versteht Mythos als Textsorte, als im weiteren Sinn ‘Gattung’ literarisch gestalteter Mythentexte, wie sie im vorderalorientalischen Überlieferungsraum und kulturellen Bereich vertreten sind [...]” Cf. also Lux 2014, 196: “Mythos [...] lässt sich als literarische Gattung von anderen Gattungen, der Legende, der Sage, dem Märchen und Hymnus unterscheiden. Und doch bereitet es immer wieder Schwierigkeiten, diese Gattung zu definieren.” Similarly Lüthi 2004, 6-15, who understands “Mythus” (with recourse to André Jolles’ *Einfache Formen*, 1930 [*Simple Forms*, transl. by P. J. Schwartz 2017], among other precursors; see ibid. 14 f) as a literary genre, which he attempts to separate from other genres such as saga, legend, fable, and *Schwank* (a kind of humorous folk tale). On the “genre of myth” as described by narratological studies in the field of cultural anthropology, and the related attempts to distinguish it from other “simple” genres while focusing especially on the external criteria for the culture-specific performativity of such forms (genres) cf. also Bendix 2013, 61 and 68-77. On the distinction, important in this context, between external form (genre) and content (*Stoff*), see in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 2.1.

12 Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1955, 430: “Its substance [i. e. the substance of a myth] does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells.” Cf. also Neuhaus 2005, 4: “Mythus taugt nicht zum Gattungsbegriff und ist verzichtbar, denn Mythen finden sich in vielen Texten.” Cf. by contrast Irsigler 2013, 2.2.1: “Nun können aber ‘Mythen’ als mündliche oder schriftliche Texte jedenfalls prinzipiell gattungskritisch erfasst werden.” The difficulties arising from such a “generic” view of myths become apparent, e. g., in the discussion cited by Baines 1991, 87, as to whether or not texts with statements by deities in the first person can be classified as “myths” – a problem which only presents itself when myths are seen as a textual category, which requires, among other things, that deities are referred to in the third person. Cf. also the inclusion of literary, genre-specific criteria in a definition of “myth” in Rüpke 2013, 47, where it is claimed that myths are narrated “in der Regel nicht aus der Ich-Perspektive”, but that the “allwissende Erzähler weiß, was die unterschiedlichen Handelnden zusammenführt”.

2.2 The *Stoff* Concept

Defining myths as *Stoffe*, materials – a view that only now, and only gradually, appears to be gaining more traction – does not resolve the problem; it merely delays the discovery of a viable solution. For even if we take it as a given, and without further explanation, that myths are not identical with certain texts, and that instead they are *Stoffe*, the real work still has not been done. On the contrary, this is where the problems begin, because one of the things still missing is a definition of “Stoff,” what elements it is made up of, how we can extract these elements from the various medial manifestations (e.g. textual or visual), how we can reconstruct and depict the underlying sequence of events, whether there are different kinds of *Stoffe* and if yes what distinguishes them, and what the conclusions are that we can draw from the answers to these questions, so that we can form an idea of the make-up, the interpretation and finally for the comparison of mythical *Stoff* variants. At least some of these questions will be answered in the following.

One thing that will become apparent very quickly is the fact that the familiar terms from literary scholarship, story and plot, will not get us very far: as a rule, these concepts are aimed at the narrative framework of *one particular text*, or in some cases, multiple texts; they are defined through *textual criteria*¹³. Sometimes the plot, or story, of a concrete text are roughly congruent with *one*

13 In the field of narratology, the term “plot” usually denotes the action in the sequence of events not in their natural order but as they occur in a given text (cf. French *discours*, Russian *sjužet*). In German-speaking scholarship a variety of terms are used side by side; cf. Martínez 2003, 92, who proposes the use of *Fabel* instead; however this is problematic not least because *fabula* is the term established in Russian formalism for the *Stoff* in its chronological sequence; Schmid 2010, 190, prefers narrative (*Erzählung*). On the history of research and the various terminologies see the concise summary in Schmid 2007, 104-107. For the underlying action of a text *in the sequence of the natural chronology*, literary scholarship has again developed a variety of expressions; the most widely-used term in English-language publications is story (cf. French *histoire*, German *Geschichte*, and *fabula* in Russian formalism), but sometimes plot is used as well, so that there is no clear distinction between plot (1) as *Stoff* in *ordo artificialis* and plot (2) as *Stoff* in *ordo naturalis*. A different approach to defining plot and story forms the basis of E. M. Forster’s work, which in its conceptual distinction does not prioritize the chronological arrangement of the material (*ordo naturalis* vs. *ordo artificialis*), but relies instead on the presence or absence of causality; cf. Forster 1927. In literary narratology an even more intricate model has been developed which distinguishes further between story (*Geschichte*) and happenings (*Geschehen*; Schmid 1982; he is on the whole followed by Martínez 2003, 92; see also the summarizing overview in Schmid 2007, 104-107, and Schmid 2010, 192 f, with diagram). “Happenings” are understood as the totality of actions, situations, and characters, without spatial or temporal limitations, from which the story in turn presents a selection.

mythical *Stoff*, as for instance in Claudian's epyllion *De raptu Proserpinae*¹⁴. In many cases, however, *one* concrete text contains *multiple* mythical *Stoffe*. An extreme example are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. From the perspective of literary scholarship, the *Stoff* in the sense of the story that is being told in the *Metamorphoses* is a depiction of world history from the days of the creation to the author's own Augustan age, but the one "story" makes use of vastly more than 250 mythical *Stoffe*¹⁵. A distinction must be drawn, therefore, between the plot structure of a concrete text and that of a mythical *Stoff*, as the two are not always congruent, or interchangeable.

Another problem arises from the realization that the concept of *Stoff*, as it is understood in literary scholarship (usually referred to either as story or plot), when applied to a particular text will refer to the one particular concrete *variant* of the *Stoff* – exactly not what is meant when scholars of mythology refer to "the Myth 'Innana Brings the Netherworld's Instruments of Power to the Earth'": the focus should not be on one *individual* depiction but on the *totality of possible variants*¹⁶ of the same *Stoff*, which can manifest themselves in all manner of texts, or in completely different medial representations¹⁷. The totality of all narrative steps in a concrete text, in their natural sequence (*ordo naturalis*), as a literary scholar would describe the story of a text, does not correspond to the

14 A list of examples from Greek poetry where the entire poem narrates a specific myth can be found in Syndikus 2001, vol. 1, 169, n. 1.

15 The number of mythical *Stoffe* on metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses* alone amount to some 250 (see Irving 1990, 19). The actual number can only be approximated because Ovid himself in his work dilutes the concept of what constitutes a metamorphosis and also includes genuinely un-related material (see on this, e.g. C. Zgoll 2004, 233-235). Beyond *Stoffe* dealing with metamorphosis (in a broad sense), the work of the *Metamorphoses* also touches upon a host of other mythical *Stoffe*.

16 Cf. Burkert 1982, 63, with one-sided focus on texts: "Ein einzelner Mythos ist [...] nicht identisch mit einem einzigen, bestimmten Text, er ist durch einen solchen nicht vollständig repräsentiert; es gibt Varianten."

17 For this reason terms borrowed from literary studies, such as "subplot" or "episode" (Martinez/Scheffel 2012, 113 f), are not particularly helpful as they describe a self-contained plot element – once again as a content-related sub-structure of an individual text, by definition a constituent part of the overall plot, not as any one of a set of different *Stoff* variants. Studies which attempt to define *Stoff* as something separable from the text tend to be the exception; cf. from the older scholarship Kayser 1960, 56: "Was außerhalb eines literarischen Werkes in eigener Überlieferung lebt und nun auf seinen Inhalt gewirkt hat, heißt *Stoff*. [...] Der *Stoff* kann in der verschiedensten Art existieren, das heißt: es gibt die verschiedenartigsten *Stoffquellen*". The *Stoff* can exist in all kinds of shapes, meaning: there is a vast variety of *Stoff* sources. Because he is primarily interested in the literary work of art, *Stoffe* and their investigation are for Kayser of an "untergeordneten Bedeutung" (ibid. 58).

Stoff of the mythological scholar; even where the text deals exclusively with *one Stoff*, it will still deal only with *one particular, concrete variant* of the mythical *Stoff*. As one can see, no comparable, corresponding term for the mythological concept of *Stoff* exists in the field of narratology. For the moment we can – only inadequately, as a first approximation – describe a (mythical) *Stoff* as the totality of both existing and potential variants of a *Stoff*, which in turn is a self-contained sequence of events with particular protagonists, localities, themes, and actions¹⁸.

2.3 Conventional Paths to “the” (one) *Stoff*

The question as to what we may understand by *Stoff*, given the above considerations, what it is made up of, whether and how “the” *Stoff* can be made concrete and thus an object of research, is of course no longer a simple one when texts have to be given up as the sole points of reference. This is unfortunate, as the interpretation of a mythical *Stoff* already seems complex and difficult enough, and the effort to recover, or define, the actual subject matter then tends to be viewed as a necessary but tedious preliminary chore. In this situation, the – understandable – impatience to finally dig into the material can tempt the eager scholar to move these annoying preliminaries out of the way as quickly as possible, or to settle too hastily on a chosen method, which under closer scrutiny turns out to be problematic.

Indeed it can be observed that the problem of finding a definition for “the” *Stoff* is not addressed directly in many mythological studies, or it is not being addressed at all. Often the *function* of a myth is discussed, which *themes* it presents, or what it *means*, before an adequate explanation is provided of what is meant when mention is made of “the” myth, what it is made up of, in short, what it *is* – and in connection with that, how we can get hold of it in the first place. And this despite the fact that different options of defining “the” *Stoff* do exist and have been used. The method applied in each individual case must often be derived from implicit clues in the study rather than an explicit and substantiated outline of the chosen methodology. The list below can only give a brief overview of some of the options, or paths, scholars have taken in the past to arrive at “the” *Stoff*:

¹⁸ On the question of approximate criteria that would allow to view a *Stoff* variant as “self-contained” see C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 8.1.

- The glamour version: “the” *Stoff* is the most famous variant, which has also had the most profound impact on the transmission of the (mythical) *Stoff* in question¹⁹; for instance an outstanding work of poetry²⁰.
- The *Urversion*: “the” *Stoff* is the most ancient and therefore the “original” version; all later variants can be traced back to this version²¹.
- The minimal version: “the” *Stoff* is the smallest common denominator of *Stoff* elements present in all variants²².
- The standard version: “the” *Stoff* represents the normal course of the proceedings which can be derived from multiple variants and joined together in a kind of composite *Vulgat*²³.
- The maximum version: “the” *Stoff* is the sum of all attested variants²⁴.

19 Cf. Frenzel 1978, 27.

20 On previous ideas of “myth as poetry” see Graf 1985, 11. Ludwig Preller and Karl Simrock, among others, represent such a position, cf. Beth 1935, 721 f.

21 See the summary of these endeavours in the field of fairy-tale scholarship, with consideration of the suggested criteria for the determination of an *Urversion*, and the critical responses, in Lüthi 2004, 70-79. Scholars in the field of literary *Stoff* and motif studies also operate with the concept of “archetypes” (see Frenzel 1993, 101 f, with examples). On more recent attempts to reconstruct the *Urform* of an individual or the “one” Indo-European or Indo-Iranian creation myth, see Janda 2010, and Kreyenbroek 2013. We will return to the problem inherent in the attempt to reconstruct an *Urversion* in more detail below (see Chapter 3.6).

22 Thus in the definition of Keim (1998, 101, n. 1), “Mythologem” serves as “Bezeichnung der kleinsten, semantisch und historisch invariablen, konstitutiven Einheit des Mythos”; this he claims was e.g. “beim Medea-Mythos der Kindermord”.

23 The idea of the “mythical core” as a prerequisite for poetic or other *Stoff* adaptations which then leave it largely unchanged, already occurs in Müller 1825, 103. Cf. also Albert Henrichs’ programme of “applied mythography, which is instrumental in establishing the essential elements of a given myth” (Henrichs 1987, 267), which he demonstrates by conducting an analysis of “the” Kallisto myth (ibid. 254-267). Cf. also Blumenberg 1985, 34: “Myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation”. Cf. also ibid. 149, where he refers to the “iconic constancy” of the “core contents” of mythical *Stoffe*. Such an idea of what would in essence be an invariable “narrative core” also seems to be at the heart of Jan Assmann’s reflections on mythology. With reference to Egyptian myths, Assmann distinguishes between “the” mythical *Stoff*, which he calls the “geno-text”, and the individual manifestations of the mythical *Stoff*, which he describes as “mythical statements” or “pheno-texts” (Assmann 1977, 37-39). Assmann apparently assumes that the mythical *Stoff*, the “geno-text”, is something homogenous and uniform that can be reduced to a specific “narrative core”: “Jedenfalls handelt es sich bei mythischen Aussagen um konkrete Realisierungen (Vergegenwärtigungen) eines Mythos. ‘Mythos’ dagegen ist etwas Abstraktes: der Kern von Handlungen und Ereignissen, Helden und Schicksalen, der einer gegebenen Menge mythischer Aussagen als thematisch Gemeinsames zugrunde liegt.” Burkert 1982, 63, also supports this view.

It is impossible within the remit of this contribution to discuss the inherent problems of each method in detail²⁵, but when myths are imagined as *Stoffe* rather than as texts there is no valid reason why one polished presentation in textual form should be given preference over another variant when the object under discussion is the variant itself, not the *presentation*. As seductive as the idea of an *Urversion* appears to be, efforts to reconstruct such a version from the transmitted myths will always be troubled by the fact that the reconstruction criteria are controversial, which means the results will remain hypothetical and thus forever questionable. The search for an original *Urversion* becomes even more futile if a complex *Stoff* concept is used which introduces an additional distinction between a concrete *Stoff* and an abstract *Stoff pattern* underlying the concrete *Stoff* (see below, Chapter 3.6). The reconstruction of a “smallest common denominator” is often hampered by “exceptional cases” where it becomes necessary to justify the fallibility, or a certain alteration, of the denominator, and also by the question exactly what the criteria are for defining one particular *Stoff* feature as such a common denominator, while ignoring others. Similar problems emerge with the solution preferred in several other cases, where a *Stoff* “Vulgate” is compiled, but the questions by what standards individual *Stoff* sequences are declared “normal”, and within the parameters for a particular *Stoff*, or why they fail to meet those standards, cannot be answered objectively and according to general principles.

2.4 Polymorphous Mythical *Stoffe*: A *Stoff* in Different Variants

Even the concept of a “maximum version” to define “the” *Stoff* is still lacking in scope. To claim that a maximum version has been compiled is to suggest that the totality of all extant versions constitutes the maximum of possible variants, and that the *Stoff* has thus been defined because its “limits” have been reached. This is not really the case: “the” *Stoff* is not limited by the totality of all known variants displayed in such a synopsis, because numerous other variants have

²⁴ Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1955, 435: “Thus, our method eliminates a problem which has been so far one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the *true* version or the *earlier* one. On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; [...] If a myth is made up of all its variants, structural analysis should take all of them into account”. Cf. e.g. also Powell 2009, 16: “the Oedipus myth is the collection of all the extant variations, however many there may be.”

²⁵ See in detail C. Zgoll 2019, chapter 4.

existed that were never written down, and because many variants that were recorded in writing have not survived and because contained in every *Stoff* are endless possibilities for further manifestations in the future.

One possible strategy, in view of the less than optimal efforts outlined above, could be a more open understanding of “Stoff” as a generally open field of possibilities; in analogy to the terms discussed above, an appropriate suggestion for this potentially infinite set of variants could be a newly-coined “approximal” version. The shape of a *Stoff* is open, both with a view to the past as well as into the future. To put it another way: the potential in a particular *Stoff* is inexhaustible²⁶. The actual maximum of the complete spectrum of possible *Stoff* variants is infinite; a *Stoff* imagined in this way *cannot be defined*; any description of it can only be an approximation²⁷.

For the study of (mythical) *Stoffe* we must take leave of the notion that “the” *Stoff* can be reduced to a *single shape*, an entity which by and large still retains a relatively rigid, singular shape – a shape which can be extracted from the corpus of all possible variants with pinpoint precision and then be used to determine deviations and exceptions. “The” *Stoff* is not a singular entity, something uniquely distinguishable; it must instead be understood as a “polymorphous” phenomenon, as uncomfortable as this may seem for now. Every change in individual or societal interests, ideas, interpretations, conditions, preferences, etc. can lead to modifications in a mythical *Stoff*. These modifications can range from the tiniest interventions to substitution, new insertion, or deletion of individual elements, also fundamental revisions of certain narrative units, or in the structure of a narrative sequence overall. Each *Stoff* variant adds a new variation to those already in existence and in doing so contributes to the fundamental *polymorphy* of a *Stoff*.

Aside from bidding farewell to the idea of “the” myth as a “uniform” entity, we also must distance ourselves from the traditional text-driven approaches of literary scholarship and literary history. If we intend to be serious about the concept of myths as *Stoffe*, and make the study of these *Stoffe* the focal point of our efforts, we must give up the exclusive dependence on textual material and a

26 Inexhaustible in fact with regard to the future, inexhaustible only in principle with regard to the past: among the factors limiting *Stoff* variation in the past are the respective cultural horizon, the artistic freedom that a society does or does not grant to individual authors, generally the degree to which a society is tied to its traditions, and many more; on these “centripetal” factors that keep a *Stoff* intact see C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 12.1.

27 Cf. also Kühr 2006, 17: “Deshalb gibt es keine ursprüngliche oder einzig ‘wahre’ Variante eines Mythos, vielmehr konstituiert er sich aus allen Varianten, die je existierten und noch existieren werden [...]”

text-based terminology, because (mythical) *Stoffe* do not solely manifest themselves in texts but in countless other medial forms as well.

3 Reconstruction and Comparison of *Stoffe*

3.1 *Stoffe* as Hyleme Sequences

If we define “Stoff”, for the time being, as the totality of different actually existing or potential *Stoff* variants, and if we moreover make a distinction between each individual manifestation of a particular *Stoff* variant in a specific medium (e.g. in textual or visual form) and the *Stoff* substratum of this variant, we are again faced with the question, and perhaps even more urgently, how or in what form this *Stoff* variant can be made concrete for further analysis.

An essential feature not only of mythical but of all kinds of narrative materials (*Stoffe*, or *Erzählstoffe*) is the representation of status changes²⁸. This is to say that in narrative materials, on principle, “things are happening”. At least one narrative unit will cause a state A to be subjected to change toward a state B. As a rule, narrative materials – *Erzählstoffe* – consist of a coherent sequence of several individual action-bearing units, that is units which describe particular deeds, events, occurrences (and states in-between), with a beginning and an end: first one thing happens, then another, then something else, etc., and this at the end happens. *Erzählstoffe* must therefore be separable into a sequence of individual narrative units²⁹. These minimal *Stoff* units exist independently of

²⁸ See Schmid 2007, 98: “Repräsentation von Zustandsveränderungen”. See on this in more detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 5.

²⁹ Cf. Wolf 2002, 45: “An prototypisch Narrativem ist [...] vor allem die Konzentration auf von den Figuren intendierte, äußere Handlungen hervorzuheben”; on the rejection of concepts that disregard such a dimension of intentional agency, see *ibid.* 46 (when Wolf *ibid.* 51 declares, among other things, the focus of “mindestens zwei verschiedene[n] Handlungen oder Zustände[n] auf dieselben anthropomorphen Gestalten” to be the “Kern des Narrativen”, he is – completely unnecessarily – excluding stories that have other, non-anthropomorphic protagonists. Cf. also Schmid 2007, 98: “Die Repräsentation von Zustandsveränderungen gilt in der neueren Narratologie [...] als das grundlegende Merkmal der Narrativität”. Tomashevsky 1985, 215, does not refer to state changes, he prefers “situation”: “Die Fabel setzt sich zusammen aus Übergängen von einer Situation in die andere”. From a radical point of view, a single status change can be sufficient, cf. Schmid 2010, 2 (with the well-known example from E. M. Forster “The king died and then the queen died”, undercut by Gérard Genette with “The king died”): The minimal condition of narrativity is that at least one change of state must be represented.

their respective concrete (e.g. textual) form, and consequently we should be able to extract them from their respective manifestation in a specific medium.

In the present attempt to divide *Stoffe* into their minimal narrative units the intention is not to dissect the *Stoff* or, specifically, a variant of it, into minimal constituting elements such as figures (“Zeus”, “Erechtheus”), actions or occurrences (“slay”), and appositions or characterizations further describing these elements (“mighty”, “king”), or temporal, locational or instrumental information (“in the morning”, “in Athens”, “with a thunderbolt”), but the plane on which individual minimal *Stoff* constituting elements and their descriptions are combined into minimal action-bearing units (“in the morning mighty Zeus in Athens slays the King Erechtheus with a thunderbolt”).

Often in a concrete case, the *Stoff* is not simply made up of individual narrative units describing *status changes*; sometimes the continual change is interrupted by stopping points or “islands” that *describe a state*. While the minimal definition of an *Erzählstoff* may necessarily focus on the description of at least one status change, in the concrete case we will often have to expect descriptions of states as well³⁰. To conclude: as a rule, an *Erzählstoff* consists of statements about things that change, and statements about things that do not. The one group of statements moves the action forward, the other supports it; for this reason both the former and the latter will be counted among the action-bearing units under scrutiny in this contribution.

If instead of the medial manifestations of the *Stoff* variants, such as texts or images, we aim to analyse the *Stoff* variants underlying these manifestations, it must be established which individual narrative units have “manifestly” been worked into the respective medial manifestations. Gaining clarity in this respect may be more difficult with an image than with a text, but even in written form information about the narrative units of the *Stoff* variant at stake can be so widely scattered, out of sequence, or hidden that the task of reconstructing the narrative sequence as a sequence of the minimal action-bearing units can at close range present a formidable challenge. Nevertheless, the reconstitution of the sequence of events (in the *ordo naturalis*) from the medial manifestation is an indispensable precondition for any *Stoff*-centred or “hylistic” approach that

³⁰ Cf. Schmid 2010, 5, who from a narratological perspective reaches the same conclusion: “The difference between change of state and story is not a quantitative one, the difference between them lies in their extensions – the changes of state form a subset of the story. As well as represented changes of state, which are *dynamic* elements, a story includes *static* elements, which are the states or situations themselves, the settings and the agents or patients within them. Thus, by necessity, the presentation of a story combines *narrative* and *descriptive* modes.”

aims to examine the *Stoff* variant itself, and not any arbitrary *representation* of it in a specific medium. Such an impetus to divide a *Stoff*, or more precisely: a concrete *Stoff* variant, into its minimal action-bearing units has points of contact on the one hand with literary motif studies (cf. Jurij Lotman, Boris Tomashevsky) and with functional, structural, and structuralist analyses of fairy tales and myths on the other. Here in particular it touches on the theories of Vladimir Propp, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, because their methods are aiming at a relatively detailed dissection of certain elements in fairy tales and myths, and narratives in general. There are however numerous and, in some cases, substantial differences between these methods and the *Stoff*-centred approach presented here. It is impossible to fully debate the above schools and their representatives within the framework of this contribution; brief references will have to suffice³¹.

The narratological terms “event” (*Ereignis*) and “motif” used by literary scholars and in motif and fairy tale studies are, on closer inspection, unsuitable for a description of minimal action-bearing units in the above mentioned sense because the broad terminological spectrum of motif is too diffuse and includes, for instance, something like constellations (“relationship triangle”) or character types (“evil stepmother”)³²; the “event” term is too narrowly confined to *signifi-*

31 See on this in more detail C. Zgoll 2019, 5.1 and 5.2.

32 Cf. e.g. the definition of motif offered by the Göttingen Commission on Literary Motif and Theme Studies as “die schematisierte Vorstellung (ein- oder mehrgliedriger Art) von Ereignissen, Situationen, Figuren, Gegenständen oder Räumen” (Wolpers 1982, 8). Actually quite a helpful description, rather than a definition, of all that is understood by the term “motif” in literary scholarship can be found in Kayser 1960, 59-64, which is basically the inspiration for Gero von Wilpert’s definition (2001, 533 f): “strukturelle Einheit als typische, bedeutungsvolle Situation, die allgemeine thematische Vorstellungen umfaßt [...] und Ansatzpunkt menschlicher Erlebnis- und Erfahrungsgehalte in symbolischer Form werden kann: unabhängig von einer Idee bewußt geformtes Stoffelement.” The textual affiliation of the motif concept is particularly evident in Drux 1997, 638: “Kleinste selbständige Inhalts-Einheit oder tradierbares intertextuelles Element eines literarischen Werks.” An extremely condensed overview of motif studies is suggested by Graf 2000, 421 f, for whom a motif is, very succinctly, the “kleinste stoffliche Einheit einer traditionellen Erzählung”, which can be an action or a characteristic person. Cf. most recently Lubkoll 2013, 542, who defines a motif as “im weitesten Sinne kleinste strukturbildende und bedeutungsvolle Einheit innerhalb eines Textganzen”; for the editors of the *Wörterbuch alttestamentlicher Motive* a motif is “ein kleiner, selbständiger und charakteristischer Baustein in einem alttestamentlichen Text, dessen Gehalt durch seine Verwendung in verschiedenen Zusammenhängen jeweils transformiert wird”; see Krispenz 2013, 10 f. It is impossible and quite unnecessary at this juncture to look in more detail at the musicological concept of the motif, which offers certain parallels, or points of contact.

cant events³³. Aside from these restrictions it would cause an even greater terminological confusion if we took an already diffuse concept and added *another* meaning on top of everything else³⁴. The functional and structural analyses of Propp and Barthes are problematic inasmuch as their definitions of “functions” are in some instances selective, and in others they group several narrative units into one, thus blending a *Stoff* analysis with a functional analysis. Even more prone to criticism is Claude Lévi-Strauss’ mytheme analysis, where the isolation of “significant” elements presupposes the not entirely unproblematic interpretation of individual elements as “significant”, and it only follows from the interplay of different signifiers; the criteria for such assignments moreover remain vague. The tracing of dialectic, mutually cancelling references between different “bundles” of significant elements (Lévi-Strauss defined only such combined bundles as “mythemes”) is equally fraught with preconditions and thus not the formal division of an ensemble of *Stoff* variants into interdependent structures but a process of interpretation that has already been framed by certain assumptions and can hardly be generalized in this form.

The *Stoff* analysis envisioned here is first and foremost intended as an aid to approaching the *Stoff* variants behind various medial manifestations and to extracting these from their manifestations, so that we can arrive at a reconstruction of the sequence of *Stoff* units in their natural order – no more than that, but nothing less either. It becomes an indispensable tool when the objective is to penetrate to the *Stoff* substratum and to analyse and interpret the actual *Stoff* (in its respective variants) instead of texts or images. The search is not for selected or for all *functional* units of a *Stoff* as in Propp or Barthes, not for selected and bundled *significant* units or elements of a *Stoff* as in Lévi-Strauss, and not for selected *exceptional* motifs or events, as in literary motif studies. We are looking for the minimal action-bearing units of a *Stoff* variant, and not only for selected units or elements but the totality all of narrative units, irrespective of their function or significance. In the following, we hope to offer a more specific definition of what we mean by minimal action-bearing *Stoff* units.

33 See, e.g. Kayser 1960, 60: “Das Motiv ist eine sich wiederholende, typische und das heißt also menschlich bedeutungsvolle Situation”. In the influential conception of J. M. Lotman, for instance, “an event in a text is the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field” (Lotman 1977, 233; original in italics) – which denotes an extraordinary crossing, or transgression, of boundaries or norms.

34 See Anz 2007, 130; Martínez/Scheffel 2012, 111, with n. 1; summarizing Drux 1997, 639: “Eine konsensfähige Definition des Motiv-Begriffs konnte sich bis heute nicht durchsetzen”. On the many applications of the motif concept even outside of the literary context see Krispenz 2013, 9.

The minimal action-bearing units of a *Stoff* variant are for instance realized in texts through a particular language. However, we are not interested in any one particular realization; the focus of our attention is on the *content* of the minimal action-bearing units which lie behind the textual plane, and even behind the plane of an individual language³⁵. This content must be made concrete in some format or be kept in storage, e.g. written on a suitable medium, expressed in the phonetic format of an oral statement, in images, in the shape of neuronal networks in the brain or in some other way, but they are not defined by or limited to any one specific medial manifestation or form of storage³⁶. In locating the content of a minimal action-bearing unit as “lying behind the plane of an individual language”, the idea is not to suggest that it is completely detached from language in a pre-conceptual sense. Human thought is impossible without conceptual notions, but these do not *solely* depend on language, and moreover they do not depend on *any particular language*. Thus for instance the content which comprises a narrative unit, “Zeus kills Erechtheus with a thunderbolt”, can be realized linguistically (and in textual form) in precisely this way or in another way; alternatively, it could be said that “the father of the gods slays Erechtheus with a thunderbolt”, or the same content could be expressed in a phrase from a different language, as for example in “Erechtheus ab Iove fulmine est ictus”, or in the form of a painting, a pantomimic dance, a silent film, etc. The content expressed through different medial and individual linguistic manifestations does not coincide with those manifestations, nor is it tied exclusively to any one of them³⁷.

35 Cf. Wolf 2002, 38, who in the same context describes the nature of this content as “mental-abstract”. This is somewhat problematic because abstraction is not an absolute necessity; the content can be very concrete indeed. Presumably Wolf is here using the term in the sense of “detached from visible or tangible manifestations.”

36 Cf. already cautiously pointing in this direction Burkert 1982, 64, with reference to mythological *Stoffe*: “Es handelt sich offenbar um Bedeutungsstrukturen noch jenseits der einzelsprachlichen Zeichen und ihrer Syntax.” Cf. also the guarded phrasing of the insight in Martínez/Scheffel 2012, 167: “Die Handlungsebene narrativer Texte wäre insofern gegenüber der Art und Weise ihrer Erzählung in einer wichtigen Hinsicht autonom.” Cf. *ibid.* 166 f the excursus on the concept in cognitive psychology of the mental storage of action sequences in the form of diffuse “scripts”.

37 Cf. Graf 1985, 9, according to whom “der Mythos ohne Verlust von einer Sprache in die andere übersetzt werden kann”, but not a work of poetry. Cf. with more general reference to narrative *Stoffe* similarly Barthes 1988, 132: “In other words, the narrative is *translatable*, without fundamental damage [...]” Barthes is correct in being more cautious than Graf, and he raises a minor objection here: it is true that, in individual cases, translations between languages can come up against insurmountable obstacles; in principle, however, any content can

On the basis of these reflections, and considering that various other terms such as motif, event, function, mytheme, or mythologeme³⁸ – even though they have been recruited to help define smaller *Stoff* units in general or regarding myths in particular – do not express and do not contain what is being sought and meant here, it seems logical and necessary at this point to introduce a new terminology – if we want to eliminate the danger of constant confusion and the need for long-winded explanations and demarcations:

For the minimal action-bearing unit of an *Erzählstoff*, which is not exclusively associated with a particular manifestation in a specific medium or in an individual language, we propose the term hyleme, derived from the Greek word hyle (ύλη, “stuff”, “raw material”; German: *Stoff*, plural: *Stoffe*).

In analogy to coinages such as phoneme and morpheme, which describe a minimal phonetic unit with the potential for semantic discrimination and the minimal semantic unit of speech utterances, respectively, the term “hyleme” denotes a minimal action-bearing unit not only of mythical but of any kind of narrative *Stoff*.

Adoption of the hyleme concept brings several advantages, including the unambiguousness of usage, precision of the term, comprehensive applicability, and freedom from anticipatory interpretive processes. For instance, we no longer need to determine the exact extent of a hyleme as we would with a literary “motif”, which is defined with a certain degree of quantitative vagueness as “textual unit of smaller size”. Even in qualitative terms, “hyleme” offers a greater precision because only action-bearing units will be considered, not locations, constellations, or individual figures, as for instance in motif studies, or other

be translated into different languages, even if sometimes we must accept limitations or opt for paraphrasing the content.

38 The term “mythologeme” is also used very inconsistently, e.g. in the sense of a minimal semantically constitutive unit that is present in all *Stoff* variants (see Keim 1998, 101, n. 1), then as the summary version of multiple semantically constitutive units that are present in all *Stoff* variants to form a basic frame work that remains basically unchanged (thus in Blumenberg or Assmann, see on this Chapter 2.3), while “mythologeme” in a different application, according to Zimmerman 1993, 24 (who rightly rejects the term as of little help), very generally “mit einem einzelnen ‘mythischen Stoffmotiv’ gleichzusetzen ist” (in this somewhat diffuse and broadly defined sense also used, e.g. by Heldmann 2016, 199 f with notes 73-77). Reinhardt 2011, 364, by contrast, wants mythologemes (or myth novellas) to be understood as “in sich abgeschlossene Einzelerzählungen begrenzten Umfangs” that are “kaum oder überhaupt nicht mit anderen Mythen vernetzt” – which would additionally confound the *Stoff* substratum (to which the other “mythologeme” concepts refer) with the literary fashioning of the text, because Reinhardt’s “limited scope” describes the length of the text.

aspects such as names and their significance, as in the structuralist analysis of Lévi-Strauss. Hylemes moreover need not possess the “aesthetic rank” of a motif prescribed by literary history or the culturally determined status of a “significant” event in Lotman’s sense; the hyleme concept can be applied comprehensively to *all* minimal action-bearing units. Also excluded are two interpretive procedures that play a crucial role in Propp, Barthes, and Lévi-Strauss: the functional interpretation of selected *Stoff* units (Propp, Barthes) and the semantic interpretation of bundled *Stoff* units (Lévi-Strauss). In this regard, the proposed new hyleme analysis also differs fundamentally from a mytheme analysis according to Lévi-Strauss. Other advantages are derived from the fact that no pre-defined terms, such as “motif” or “mytheme,” are being further obscured by yet another new re-definition, and that we will never be obliged to explain the specific “mythical” quality of a particular “mytheme” or “mythologeme”.³⁹ Hylemes are the basic building blocks of any type of narrative *Stoff*. Whether or not a particular hyleme in a concrete *Stoff* variant is for instance to be seen as a “mythical hyleme” is a separate question which leads to even more detailed analytical possibilities (e.g. with mixed or borderline cases in the presentation of the *Stoff*). Hylemes represent key pieces of content that are moreover not defined by or limited to any specific medial manifestation such as a text or an image.

In keeping with the colourful variety of narrative *Stoffe*, different hylemes can aim at entirely different types of content. Nevertheless all hylemes are characterized by a *basic logical structure* which must be separated from the specific content in each case. If we want to define *minimal* action-bearing units, such a unit must describe a narrative building block in the most common sense, and precisely *one* such building block. Since each action-bearing unit, by definition, requires the designation of an actor or an agency (*Handlungsträger*)⁴⁰, we can

39 On the advantages of the hyleme concept compared to the mytheme concept, and on the question as to when a hyleme can be described as “mythical” or better, with more caution, “myth-oriented” (*mythosaffin*) see in more detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 11.3. On the advantages of a hyleme concept that distinguishes even further between *hyleme* and *hyleme pattern*, see *ibid.* Chapter 7.2 and Chapter 7.3.

40 Or multiple protagonists: the plural alternative (non-singular numbers such as dual or plural) is included here but for reasons of readability it is not stated explicitly. In textual manifestations of mythical *Stoffe* the protagonist can also be obscured, e.g. in a passive construction (“Prometheus was punished”), or in other phrases (e.g. “there is thunder”). Because hylemes are concerned not with grammatical, but with the logical subjects of the action, the (acting) protagonists can in many such cases very well be identified (e.g. from the context or through knowledge of cultural specifics): “Zeus punishes Prometheus”, or “Zeus sends thunder”.

describe the basic logical structure of a hyleme as the connection between the portrayal of an action, a process, a quality, or a state and an agent or an agency⁴¹; where an action is being described, the hyleme may include the object of the action⁴².

Defined in this way, the basic logical structure of a hyleme has a propositional structure and in simplified terms corresponds to the grammatical relation between a (logical) subject and the associated (logical) predicate⁴³, which can take one or more (logical) objects (or additional arguments as required by the predicate); in the above example: “Zeus slays Erechtheus”. It can be realized in phonetic, textual (or other) manifestations, and there again in various forms, such as for instance in a grammatical variation of the original English phrase, “Erechtheus is slain by Zeus”, or as a visual representation, etc. Because it can occur in many variations, it must first be extracted from the various medial manifestations, and from individual languages, before it can be translated into the basic logical structure, which then allows it to be depicted as a grammatical relation: (logical) subject – (logical) predicate (– object, where applicable).

If hylemes represent content that is *not tethered* to any specific medial manifestation, it must nevertheless be stressed that this content does not exist, in a quasi-Platonic manner as a form or an idea, *independent* of medial manifestations or, as it were, antecedent to these. Hylemes cannot be deduced and postulated; they can only be extracted from individual medial manifestations in a

Where in exceptional cases the identity of a protagonist cannot be clearly ascertained (e.g. “there is thunder” in non-mythical material, cf. also “it is growing dark”, “it rains”), the basic logical structure remains unaffected (protagonist + predicate). Linguistically speaking, in these examples the unfilled argument position of the verb is replaced with an expletive, seemingly obscuring the protagonist. From a logical perspective, nevertheless, and to put it simply, the expression in such cases can be interpreted as implying the presence of the subject in the process that is being described by the verb, even where the subject is not explicitly mentioned. This becomes evident when the above examples are rephrased: “thunder is happening”, or “darkness falls”, “rain is falling”.

41 For the distinction between the description of a “state” (status, condition) and a “property” cf. the linguistic distinction between stage-level predicates (“X is cold”) and individual-level predicates (“X is tall”).

42 Or, more general and linguistically speaking: apart from the subject, the predicate can take additional arguments. Cf. as a simple case the combination of direct and indirect object, e.g. as in “Thetis gives to Achilles the shield of Hephaistos”. Again, the non-singular numbers (such as the dual or plural) are included and do not make an explicit appearance for reasons of readability.

43 Also, the function of the predicate in the textual manifestation of a hyleme need not be performed by a verb.

process of induction. In much the same way phonemes and morphemes only become tangible in the shape of specific, individual phones and morphs, abstract hylemes are realized in their various medial manifestations.

Hylemes not only refer to actions in the *stricter* sense (i.e. the deeds of individual characters), but comprehensively to *all* minimal “action-bearing” units of a *Stoff* variant, thus for instance they apply to processes as well as explicit or implicit *statements about conditions or qualities* (but not to the quality or the condition itself). We can therefore establish a general distinction between *dynamic* and *static* hylemes. “Zeus kills Erechtheus” aims at a dynamic, and “Zeus is the king of the Gods” at a static hyleme⁴⁴.

A hyleme consists of one (and *only one*) *hyleme predicate* and one or more *hyleme elements* associated with the hyleme predicate. Both the hyleme predicate and the hyleme elements can have dependent *determinations*. The depiction or description of an action, a status, or a property through a (logical) predicate constitutes, in effect, the core of a hyleme. In a different category and on a separate plane, the hyleme elements are characters, objects, locations, natural phenomena, and other things that are associated with the predicate in a (logical) subject or object function: from a linguistic perspective, the hyleme elements correspond to the various potential arguments of the predicate. Both the hyleme elements and the hyleme predicate can take qualifiers (determinations⁴⁵), for example in the shape of local, temporal, or other modifiers, in the shape of epithets, the attribution of qualities, etc. (expressed verbally e.g. through appositions, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, morphological casus; determinations can of course also be expressed iconographically by other means).

While hylemes generally replicate the propositional structure of a statement, they are not identical to propositions in the formal-logical sense, or to the propositions studied by philosophers of language. It cannot be our goal to extract *Stoff* building blocks from textual or other medial manifestations in the form of pure propositions, without any regard for negations and modalities. Sentences such as “Dionysus did not cheer”, or “Dionysus should have cheered”, produce the proposition “Dionysus” (reference) + “to cheer” (predication), but of course keep their negating sense in a hyleme analysis, which at-

⁴⁴ Cf. the analogous distinction in literary studies between “dynamic” and “static” motifs, e.g. in Martínez/Scheffel 2012, 112, which can already be found in Tomashevsky 1985, 220.

⁴⁵ The term “determination” is not used in any particular philosophical or linguistic sense; it represents, in a more general sense, the different types of descriptions which can be attached to a hyleme element or hyleme predicate.

tempts to reconstruct the sequence of events. In both cases, the former directly, the later indirectly, we can for the sequence of events reconstruct the hyleme, “Dionysus did/does not cheer”.

Even though hylemes can be rendered in the form of sentences on account of their overall propositional structure, hylemes are ultimately not *identical* to sentences in texts. We are not concerned with syntactic-textual building blocks, but with their contents⁴⁶. A hyleme cannot be rendered in a sentence with *multiple* statements, or it would no longer be a *minimal* action-bearing unit. That said, an iconographic unit, such as a painting, or a sentence from a textual source, can certainly contain more than one hyleme. Below is a (textual) example⁴⁷:

When Chryse, the daughter of Pallas, was married to Dardanos, she brought along gifts from Athena as her dowry, namely sacred items of the Great Gods.

Initially, we can identify four hylemes (one static and three dynamic), and arranged as far as possible in chronological order they can be rendered as follows:

- Chryse is the daughter of Pallas
- Athena gives sacred items of the Great Gods to Chryse
- Dardanos marries Chryse
- Chryse brings sacred items of the Great Gods into the marriage as her dowry

Upon closer inspection, even more hylemes can be discovered. They are heavily compressed and thus only implicitly contained in this sentence but they can be extracted from the information given and are thus available for our reconstruction of the *Stoff* substratum, and we arrive at a total of at least seven hylemes (three static and four dynamic):

- There is a group of “Great Gods”
- The “Great Gods” possess sacred items
- Pallas sired a daughter named Chryse⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cf. similarly, Barthes 1988, 105, in the section detailing the “functions” of narratives; according to him the “narrative units will be substantially independent of the linguistic units: they may of course coincide, but occasionally, not systematically [...]” The same hyleme *may* therefore be “hidden” behind a finding that appears inconsistent in text-critical terms, because even when the sentences differ between transmissions, as long as these differences are not content-related (where e.g. one manuscript reads “to climb down”, another has preserved “to descend”).

⁴⁷ Paraphrasing and abbreviated translation of Dion. Hal. *ant.* 1,68,3.

⁴⁸ Or, possibly, but less likely: “Pallas adopts a daughter named Chryse.”

- Chryse is the daughter of Pallas
- Athena gives sacred items of the “Great Gods” to Chryse
- Dardanos marries Chryse
- Chryse brings sacred items of the Great Gods into the marriage as her dowry

As the example shows, a hyleme analysis goes far beyond a mere textual paraphrase. At what point it becomes important or useful for the reconstruction of a *Stoff* variant to extract *all* the implicit information contained in individual determinations, and to make them explicit in the form of static or dynamic hylemes, must be decided on a case-by-case basis and according to their relevance, either for the reconstruction of a *Stoff* variant or a comparison of individual variants. Thus, for instance, whether or not to extract from the descriptive phrase “sacred items of the ‘Great Gods’” the hyleme “the ‘Great Gods’ possess sacred items,” or from the information in the sentence cited above the hyleme “Athena takes hold of sacred items of the ‘Great Gods’” must be decided with regard to the anticipated benefit for the reconstruction and analysis, or the comparison, of *Stoff* variants; it would be counterproductive to stipulate a general rule. The definition of hylemes, i.e. *what* they are (minimal action-bearing units of a *Stoff* variant) and their logical structure remains unaffected by the degree of detail to which they are being analysed; *how many* such hylemes could or should, for instance, be extracted from the textual manifestation of a *Stoff* variant depends on the ingenuity of the analyst and where the amount of detail becomes a nuisance rather than a source of information: it cannot be in anyone’s interest to drive the analysis to an exaggerated level of detail where perhaps the statements are no longer meaningful or have been degraded to self-evident “facts” that are of no value for a reconstruction of the *Stoff* variant (e.g. if we were to generate the hyleme “Chryse is a woman”)⁴⁹.

With regard to the hyleme analysis of *visual* depictions, we could generate – even more easily than with texts – a potentially almost uncountable number of static hylemes if, for instance, we were to describe iconographically every detail in the image as a static hyleme. However it must be understood that in a hyleme analysis of images the primary concern cannot not be a description of the “how” but above all a reconstruction of the “what”. For this reconstruction of the narrative sequence, which is the focus of our attention, we often find that only a few (especially dynamic, but also static) hylemes are of central importance, but

⁴⁹ Comparable already Dundes 2007 (1962), 91: “A minimal unit may thus be defined as the smallest unit useful for a given analysis with the implicit understanding that although a minimal unit could be subdivided, it would serve no useful purpose to do so.”

not the numerous (especially static) hylemes which contain detail of *how* events are depicted and embellished⁵⁰.

Especially when *comparing* individual *Stoff* variants it can be very helpful to focus on static hylemes and to combine them in a list (a kind of “wanted poster”) characterizing the hyleme elements they describe (by definition, in their capacity as determinations). For comparative *Stoff* studies it is also necessary to render hylemes in a standardized linguistic form; we will return to this aspect in greater detail at a later stage⁵¹.

3.2 Definition and Further Specification of the *Stoff* Concept

Building upon the hyleme concept defined above and specified more closely below, and the fundamental polymorphy of *Stoffe*⁵², the newly developed terms underlying this contribution, “hyleme” (“*Stoff* building block”), “*Stoff* variant”, and “*Stoff*” (more narrowly: *Erzählstoff*, “narrative *Stoff*”⁵³), can be summarized and defined as follows:

A *hyleme* is a minimal action-bearing unit of a *Stoff* variant; it is logically and linguistically standardized and can be reconstructed from a manifestation in a specific medium or a specific wording in a particular language, but is not exclusive to any one such manifestation.

A *Stoff* variant is a self-contained sequence of multiple interdependent hylemes of a specific *Stoff*; a *Stoff* variant is determined in its details.

A *Stoff* comprises a non-finite quantity of variants of a polymorphic hyleme sequence, which can be circumscribed only approximately with regard to specific protagonists, places, objects, and events.

To put it in another way: a *Stoff* variant is a hyleme sequence; this hyleme sequence is a segment from among the vast volume of hyleme sequences, the number of which can only be approximated. These hyleme sequences can be realized in a variety of medial manifestations, and as a field of potential options they constitute a particular *Stoff*.

⁵⁰ Less frequent, but also relevant, are for example resultative static hylemes, which can depict the completed final stage of a *Stoff* sequence.

⁵¹ See Chapter 3.5.

⁵² See Chapter 2.4.

⁵³ To distinguish the (German) *terminus technicus* from the (same) German term for textile fabrics.

The description of the hylemes of a *Stoff* variant as “interdependent” deliberately avoids the criterion of a causal-logical link, as used by E. M. Forster in his definition of plot as opposed to story⁵⁴, since the connection can already be given through chronological references alone, and causal-logical connections at any rate do not need to be explicit⁵⁵.

A *Stoff*, concrete only in the form of medial manifestations of a particular *Stoff* variant, can be said to be “self-contained”⁵⁶ when the *Stoff* variant in question displays a uniformity with reference to

- the action/sequence of occurrences, events, and activities (*Handlung*)
- the themes/problems inherent in this sequence⁵⁷
- the participating protagonists
- the location(s) and
- the time frame of the narrated occurrences, events, and activities

Any observation of one or more of these factors diverging simultaneously may help us decide where one *Stoff* ends and another begins.

All mythical cycles or collections of narratives thus can be viewed as *Stoff* conglomerates. Any discussion of “the” Oedipus myth, or “the” myth of the Twelve Labours of Hercules, “the” Innana myth, or “the” Gilgamesh myth, from an analytical point of view, is neither expedient nor helpful; each episode of the Twelve Labours, or every self-contained narrative of the deeds of the goddess Innana, of an Oedipus or a Gilgamesh must each be treated as a *single* mythical *Stoff*. The example of the Gilgamesh transmission makes the difference apparent even on the textual level: while the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* artfully combines multiple mythical *Stoffe* in a great epic cycle, older epics about Gilgamesh

54 See n. 13; cf. also Tomashevsky 1985, 215: “Es ist zu unterstreichen, daß die Fabel nicht nur ein temporäres, sondern auch ein kausales Merkmal verlangt. [...] Je schwächer diese kausale Verknüpfung ist, desto stärker rückt eine rein temporale Verknüpfung in den Vordergrund.”

55 A similar definition is offered by Echterhoff 2002, 268, from the perspective of cognitive psychology: “Als Hauptfunktion und zugleich psychologisch zentrales Merkmal des Narrativen ist also bislang die Stiftung eines Zusammenhangs zwischen einzelnen, aufeinander folgenden Ereignissen festzuhalten.”

56 Such self-containment is of course predicated on the *Stoff* variant not being abbreviated or incomplete.

57 The thematic unity as “wichtiges syntaktisches Narrem” in Wolf 2002, 30. Cf. with reference to literary works already Tomashevsky 1985, 211: “Damit eine verbale Konstruktion ein einheitliches Werk darstellen kann, muß es ein Thema enthalten, das die Einheit herstellt und sich im Verlauf des Werkes entfaltet.” On the linguistic “topic (theme) and comment (rheme, or focus)” analysis cf. in summary Brinker 2019, esp. 40 f, 44 (definition and distinction of the terms “theme” and “rheme”) and 50 f.

that have been transmitted in Sumerian have worked with short, self-contained *Stoffe* that were transmitted separately⁵⁸.

By understanding *Stoff* variants as sequences of hylemes with the basic logical structure described in the preceding chapter, we will be able in principle to reduce the *most diverse manifestations* of a *Stoff* variant, such as for instance a pantomime, film scenes, comic book panels, texts in different languages, groups of statues and others, to *one and the same* hyleme sequence. This means that an essential fundament has been laid for a transmedial and comparative *Stoffwissenschaft*⁵⁹.

In conclusion, it only remains for us to ask whether or in what way the newly-established definitions of “*Stoff*” and “*Stoff* variant” can be shown to be compatible with the literary terms such as plot, story, or *Geschehen* (“happenings”)⁶⁰. Wolf Schmid (2008) has developed an “ideal genetic model of narrative tiers”, which distinguishes four tiers, or levels: “happenings” (*Geschehen*), “story” (*Geschichte*), “narrative” (*Erzählung*), and “presentation of the narrative” (*Präsentation der Erzählung*)⁶¹. It has already been remarked that as a rule this narratological terminology is defined and used with *reference to textual material* and therefore of limited use for a *Stoffwissenschaft* that is not confined to one particular medial manifestation (such as e.g. texts). Nevertheless we can either adopt these narratological terms or employ them as analogies when distinguishing among multiple planes from the perspective of *Stoffwissenschaft* – with one proviso: we need to add another term.

According to Schmid’s ideal genetic model, a certain, still unformed “story” is extracted from a number of “happenings”. It is then moulded into the artificial, or artistic, form of a “narrative” (cf. plot) before it is “presented” (in textual form). Against the background of our reflections on the fundamental poly-

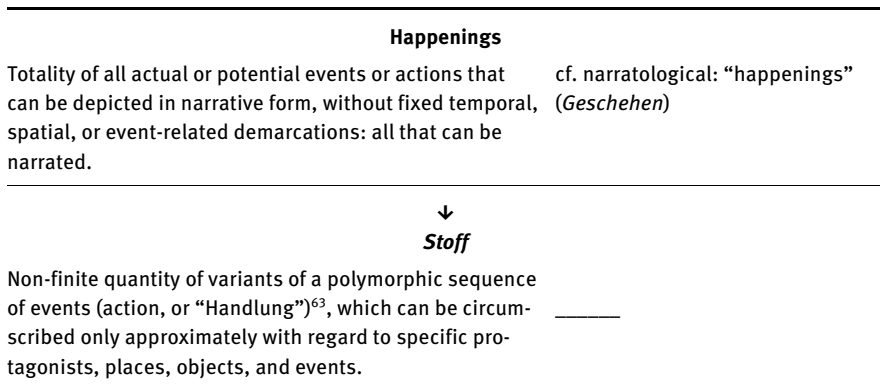
58 Cf. e.g. on the independent *Stoff* of the slaying of Huwawa by Gilgamesh exemplarily the study by Fleming/Milstein 2010, who also postulate older Akkadian stages in the transmission; more general on the joining of multiple “stand-alone” *Stoffe* in the epic of *Gilgamesh* see George 2003, 3-70. Gilgamesh *Stoffe* which have been transmitted individually can for instance be found in the Sumerian epics *Gilgamesh and Akka* (not worked into the Akkadian epic), *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Netherworld*, *The Death of Gilgamesh* (with stark modifications the latter has left its mark on the Akkadian epic, where it deals with the death of Enkidu). Generally on the combination of multiple mythical *Stoffe* in a conglomerate as a phenomenon occurring in Sumerian myths see Rodin 2014, 34, with bibliographical notes on relevant analyses.

59 For a detailed discussion of the concept of transmediality and the relevance of the hyleme concept for a comparative approach see in particular Chapter 3.4 and Chapter 3.5.

60 Cf. the observations in Chapter 2.2.

61 See Schmid 2010, 193; cf. also the diagram *ibid.* 210.

morphy of *Stoffe*, and from the perspective of *Stoffwissenschaft*, it is not four but five narrative tiers we need to consider, and “*Stoff*” constitutes an important fifth category (a further distinction of some significance, between “*Stoff*” and “*Stoff* pattern”, will be discussed in Chapter 3.6 below). A concrete, straightforward example: from the totality of all that can be narrated (*Geschehen* / “happenings”) or, to limit the range somewhat, from the totality of all Greek myths, an author such as Ovid, for instance, extracts the *Stoff* of the rivalry between the Theban queen Niobe and the goddess Leto, which exists in a wide variety of variants and carries within it the potential for countless more. From these variants he then generates a specific, still unformed, *Stoff* variant (e.g. one where all of Niobe’s children are killed by Artemis and Apollo, and none are spared). Through artistic intervention, e.g. the introduction of proleptic allusions to the dreadful ending, this unformed *Stoff* variant becomes a “well” formed variant, which is eventually presented in a particular medial manifestation. In our case it takes textual form, namely in lines 146-312 in Book 6 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*⁶². And finally, in the diagram below we have prepared an overview of the ideas developed thus far.



⁶² Proleptic allusions to the outcome in Ov. *Met.* 6,150-156. As the phrase “ideal genetic” suggests, this theoretical model does not necessarily reflect the *actual* process of production. An inductive analysis will moreover reverse the direction and, departing from the medial presentation, will reconstruct first the formed and in the next step the unformed *Stoff* variant contained within it, and it will then determine its affiliation with a concrete *Stoff*.

⁶³ On the concept of “action” in this context see the beginning of Chapter 3.1.

↓	
Unformed <i>Stoff</i> Variant	
A particular variant, with specific details, of a specific, self-contained sequence of events in its natural chronological order (in <i>ordo naturalis</i>) ⁶⁴	cf. narratological: <i>story</i> , French: <i>histoire</i> , Russian Formalism: <i>fabula</i> , German: <i>Geschichte</i> ⁶⁵
↓	
(Well-) Formed <i>Stoff</i> Variant	
A particular variant, with specific details, of a specific, self-contained sequence of events in an artificial, or artistic order (in <i>ordo artificialis</i>)	cf. narratological: plot, French: <i>discours</i> , Russian: <i>sjuzet</i> , German e.g. <i>Erzählung</i>
↓	
Medial Manifestation of the (Well-) Formed <i>Stoff</i> Variant	
Depiction of the (well-) formed <i>Stoff</i> variant through a text, an image, or other media	cf. narratological: “presentation of the narrative”

3.3 Relevance of Hyleme Analysis for the Study of *Stoffe*

The fact that the extraction of hylemes from the medial manifestation of a *Stoff* variant, and the reconstruction of a more precise sequence for the hyleme structure, are a precondition for approaching the *Stoff* substrate of a medial manifestation must not distract from the other fact that such a preliminary task is an absolutely fundamental, but beyond that also a highly complex and in isolated cases a difficult, undertaking. In practice, trying to retrace individual *Stoff* units has often proved more difficult than it may have seemed initially.

First of all, it must be noted that several concrete variants of different *Stoffe* can intermingle and be interconnected with others in a textual manifestation without it being an obvious feature of such a textual entity, so that the question of separating one *Stoff* variant from another already poses a challenge. The next difficulty comes with the realization that a *Stoff* variant consists of a sequence of hylemes, which can be rearranged almost *ad libidinem* and thus can at times differ very little, but also quite substantially, from the textual manifestation of

⁶⁴ For the difference between *ordo naturalis* and *ordo artificialis* see Chapter 2.2 and 3.3.

⁶⁵ On the terms borrowed from literary scholarship, such as story and plot, etc. see n. 13. The narratological terminologies are only referenced here as approximate analogies for clarification purposes; as has been noted above, they are usually defined and employed exclusively in relation to texts and therefore of little value to the study of *Stoffe*, which encompasses all kinds of medial manifestations and is not limited to one particular type (such as texts).

the *Stoff* variant under scrutiny. A crucial step in analysing hylemes, therefore, is the reconstruction of the natural chronological sequence of the hylemes (the *ordo naturalis*), which must be distinguished from the order in which the individual hylemes are narrated, for example, in a concrete text (the *ordo artificialis*). Such a reconstruction of the chronological order for individual hylemes belonging to the same *Stoff* can be complicated because a) they can be woven into the text at various locations⁶⁶, b) some hylemes are not narrated explicitly, others are concealed in attributes from which they have to be reconstructed⁶⁷, c) narrative techniques such as prolepses and analepses trigger rearrangements in the natural order of events, or d) because details that are relevant for the reconstruction of the sequence of events are being narrated from different perspectives⁶⁸. These and other challenges in the analysis of hylemes can be summarized as follows:

- Reduce expansion, compression, and other narrative distortions (e.g. metaphorical language), also found in non-verbal medial manifestations of minimal action-bearing units, to the basic structure of hylemes
- Reveal hidden hylemes, e.g. in attributes or nominal phrases
- Make apparent hylemes that are essential but invisible, i.e. that are merely implied without explicit medial manifestation
- Deal with allusions and/or largely indeterminate, abstract, and incomplete hylemes
- Deal with conflicting hylemes
- Restore the *ordo naturalis* of a hyleme sequence
- Identify *Stoff* variants (this includes the separation of *Stoff* variants, recognizing insertions, asides, and “*Stoff* within *Stoff*” constructions [*Rahmenstoffe*])
- Determine whether a *Stoff* variant has to be considered a variant of *Stoff* A or a variant of *another Stoff* B

66 Cf. examples in A. Zgoll / C. Zgoll 2019.

67 See e.g. the epithet “python slayer” in Orph. *h.* 34,4 for a central hyleme of a mythical *Stoff* associated with Apollo(n).

68 In principle, the *Stoff* substrate can be reconstructed independently, “outside of” the perspective dictated by the (in Genette’s terminology homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, autodiegetic, etc.) narrator (cf. Tomashevsky 1985, 218: “Für die Fabel ist es unwichtig, in welchem Teil des Werkes der Leser von einem Ereignis erfährt, auch ob es ihm unmittelbar durch den Autor mitgeteilt wird, in der Erzählung einer Person oder durch ein System von Andeutungen, die nebenbei fallen”), but only in principle; in individual cases (esp. in modern literature), different perspectives can also obstruct the view of “what really happened” (“unreliable narration”, cf. Booth 1961).

A hyleme analysis is a complex process involving a number of steps. Individual building blocks of a *Stoff* variant first have to be identified as such in a medial manifestation, that is, they must be identified as belonging to a particular *Stoff*; these building blocks must be extracted from the medial manifestation and depicted in the form of hylemes; moreover these hylemes must be arranged in the correct chronological order that reflects the natural sequence of events, possible gaps must be indicated, obviously incomplete hylemes must be completed, hylemes that are implied unequivocally but not stated explicitly must be made explicit, and the beginning and end of a *Stoff* sequence must be determined. In short: hylemes must be identified, extracted, sorted, made precise, and completed. Associated units must be firmly grouped together. All of these procedures of a hyleme analysis can be summarized under the heading “Reconstruction of the narrative sequence of a *Stoff* variant”, which serves to recover the *Stoff* substrate embedded in the manifestation of that *Stoff* variant in a specific medium.

The reconstruction of a hyleme sequence in its natural order may be difficult in individual cases, but it is worth the effort because it is much more than a mere textual paraphrase, as noted above. A hyleme analysis often alerts us to problems, gaps, or contradictions in the structure of a given *Stoff* variant that might otherwise be easily overlooked. Not only does it help us recognize what is being said in a given text, but also what is *not*. It helps us add missing pieces, with all due diligence, or where appropriate, to identify gaps in the *Stoff* that we cannot fill, and those that must be regarded as inconsistencies in the depicted sequence of events. The latter will be of some significance for the stratification analysis of mythical *Stoffe* (see Chapter 4.2 below).

A special case must be mentioned here as well: hylemes which represent longer episodes or even an entire *Stoff* (“hyper-hylemes”), either by summarizing these episodes or the *Stoff* in the style of a chapter heading, or by evoking them through their succinctness and specific detail. Thus for instance a hyleme such as “Innana descends into the Netherworld” summarizes an entire *Stoff*, in which the goddess abandons her place in heaven and on the earth to face the dangers of descending into the Netherworld – a *Stoff* that is unfolded over numerous hylemes in the Sumerian epic of *angalta*, but which is proleptically summarized, headline-style, several times at the beginning of the epic poem. The same cannot be said for the hyleme “Innana Brings the House of Heaven to Earth”, which is also contained in *angalta*: while the hyleme does not conform to the all-encompassing headline type – its focus on a single *Stoff* unit is too specific for that – it is nevertheless succinct enough to evoke an entire *Stoff* that is not itself part of the epic *angalta* but is only alluded to by means of this hy-

leme: the *Stoff* of Innana, who after her act of will and appropriate planning, brings down the first temple from the heavens to the people on earth⁶⁹.

Hyper-hyemes differ from hylemes not in their nature or in their structure, but only with regard to their *function* – which is never absolute, but always *relative*. In theory, almost any hyleme can be extended or enriched with additional details to function as a hyper-hyleme, or it can be considered as characteristic enough of the *Stoff* it represents so as to take on the function of a hyper-hyleme in an otherwise unrelated environment, where it alludes to its own external *Stoff*. Whether a certain hyleme in a certain *Stoff* context functions as a hyper-hyleme or not can only be ascertained or made plausible on the basis of additional information from within the same *Stoff* context, or in comparison with other *Stoff* contexts.

In analysing hylemes, the distinction between a (regular) hyleme and a hyper-hyleme is already of fundamental importance because textual manifestations of *Stoff* variants can sometimes contain statements that look exactly like hylemes but are merely summarizing, either proleptically, what is about to happen or, retrospectively, what has just been narrated. But the distinction is relevant also for the interpretation of individual *Stoff* manifestations as it can for instance be used to show what is the focus at any one point in the manifestation compared to other units of the narrative: with individual texts, it is often the case that the amount of narrative elaboration varies within the text itself, and “regular” hylemes can alternate with hylemes that function as hyper-hyemes.

The concurrence of hylemes and hyper-hyemes within the same variant is of vital importance for the *comparison* of multiple variants as well, for example when contrasting the structure (*Handlungssequenz*) of a *Stoff* variant with other variants of the same *Stoff* or with variants of other *Stoffe*, both within the same culture and across cultures. A comparison can present us with different *Stoff* variants that appear to run parallel in terms of their broader structure while they differ greatly on the level of the finer details and their degree of elaboration. For example, variant A can feature a series of three hylemes, variant B can have 27 – a considerable difference in strictly quantitative terms. Upon closer inspection of the content, however, we might find not only two hylemes from A and B in agreement, but also an equivalent for hyleme number three if and *only* if we realize that the other 25 hylemes of specimen B merely expand the compressed information from the *single* hyper-hyleme of variant A. In this case, the hyleme sequences would in the overall structure of their *Stoff* treatment present

69 On both examples see the first contribution by A. Zgoll in the present volume.

a much more uniform picture than a casual glance at the purely quantitative differences would reveal.

3.4 Relevance of Hyleme Analysis for Intermedial Research

An ever-present problem of mythological research, both in the comparative and single-focus fields, is the disparity of the source materials: ritual texts, hymns, prayers, epics, tragedies, satires, and many other textual genres, in addition to iconographic and other medial manifestations such as film versions or a dance, can be sources of mythical *Stoffe*. The task is then further complicated by the disparity of both intra- and intercultural environments. A common basis for meaningful comparisons appears to the naked eye difficult to come by. For the study of mythical *Stoffe* within a single culture, and equally for the comparative analysis of myths across cultures, a common standard is however indispensable if the work is to bear fruit, and the disparate sources are at all to be subjected to any meaningful examination. The question in what way *Stoffe* or, more precisely: concrete *Stoff* variants, can be extracted from the various medial manifestations, and how the extracted and subsequently reconstructed material can then be treated so that it forms a common and consistent basis for an analysis proves to be a fundamental prerequisite for the endeavour of a transmedial⁷⁰ and comparative study of myths.

Both visual and literary studies, in their specific ways of approaching a (narrative) *Stoff*, will benefit from the more precise definition of the relationship between the *Stoff* itself and its respective medial manifestations – the *Stoff* substratum of a “manifested” *Stoff* variant and its medial manifestation that the hyleme analysis makes accessible. By representing the *Stoff* plane in the form of hylemes we are moreover making a new set of universal and standardized descriptive tools available to the study of myths and their variants. The definition of *Stoff* variants as linked hylemes with the basic logical structure outlined above enables us, in principle, to render *even the most disparate manifestations* of one particular *Stoff* variant – be they in the shape of a pantomime, film scenes, comic book panels, texts in different languages, reliefs, groups of stat-

⁷⁰ The study of intermediality is as a discipline and therefore in terms of its own terminology still in the formation phase; see on this fundamentally Rajewsky 2002. The term “transmediality” is most often used to describe the non-compulsory affiliation of any type of content (*Erzählstoffe*, political programmes, religious messages, etc.) with any particular medium (such as a book, a picture, or a pamphlet, etc.) or media type (such as literature, film, painting, etc.). See on this Rajewsky 2002, 12 f; Fraas/Barczok 2006, 136 f.

ues, etc. – in *exactly the same, single sequence of hylemes*. A crucial foundation has thus been laid for the transmedial and comparative study of (mythical) *Stoffe*⁷¹.

3.5 Relevance of Hyleme Analysis for a New Comparative Discipline: Hylistics

Transmedial *Stoff* analyses already have a comparative component in that they facilitate the juxtaposition of different *media* in the analytical process. Comparative *Stoff* analyses take us one step further: no longer are we dealing with the hyleme sequence of a *single Stoff* variant, but the objective is now to extract the hyleme sequences of different variants of the same *Stoff*, or of different *Stoffe*, either within a single culture or across multiple cultures, from their respective (and possibly diverse) medial manifestations, reconstruct the *Stoff* chronology and finally to compare them.

A comparative approach is one of the most productive methods for any scholar of the humanities to adopt. Whether or not we are conscious of the fact, comparisons are being used all the time. No linguistic phenomenon, no literary work, and certainly no mythical *Stoff* exists in isolation so that it can be examined, described, and understood in its singularity and peculiarity without reference to other linguistic phenomena, other literary creations, or other myths. Every instance of something being-in-one-way can only adequately be carved out in profile against the backdrop of something being-in-another-way⁷². Even if we consider the comparative approach too problematic, largely ineffective, or even nonsensical, we can only make that claim *in comparison to* other approaches we have deemed more effective and more meaningful and promising. Contrary to postmodern verdicts⁷³, therefore, we must preserve the general availability, the meaningfulness, and the productivity of comparative ap-

71 On transmediality (without explicit use of the term) of *Erzählstoffe* see also Wolf 2002, 38 f, but there no in-depth description is provided of the nature of the minimal action-bearing units which make up an *Erzählstoff*.

72 Cf. Heubeck 1974, 680: “Vergleichen heißt nicht Gleichsetzen, Vergleichen intendiert ein Verdeutlichen und Veranschaulichen, ein Vertiefen des Verstehens und ein Verlebendigen des Anschauens.”

73 Cf. in summary Segal 2010.

proaches, which highlight both commonalities and differences in equal measure⁷⁴.

At the same time, however, we must make the process more precise and give the criteria a sharper edge. It is a legitimate concern of New Comparativism that comparisons must be specific to each case while being based on systematic and standardized formal procedures, to prevent apparent similarities from being oversimplified as identical and differences being played down, and conversely to ensure that differences are not exaggerated and divergence declared prematurely⁷⁵.

If this is to be more than a lip service, if our goal is to heed the call for better differentiation and more precision, and if we want to meet the inherent challenges of the task, we must accept that everything will become considerably more complicated, and that in comparing we must exercise much more caution than ever before. This is true in particular for a comparison of such polymorphous entities as mythical *Stoffe*.

Intercultural comparisons are traditionally located within the field of comparative studies, but the discipline sees itself primarily as a comparative study of *literature*, which establishes and compares *textual* relationships; it is not a discipline that is specifically concerned with *Stoff* comparisons as such. Accordingly, the instruments developed in the comparative field are aimed at *textual* comparisons. The methodology for comparing *Stoffe* or, more precisely: *Stoff* variants, therefore, poses a question that although not entirely different is different enough in some key aspects. The methods of a comparative *Stoffwissenschaft*, and its results, are not congruent with the methods and results of comparative literary studies; conversely, this means that comparative *Stoff* studies have an intrinsic additional value which cannot be easily matched by a text-centric philology or the textual comparisons of comparative literary studies. Building on these advantages, the goal must be to pursue, and in large parts

74 See Corbineau-Hoffmann 2004, 89. The difficulty with comparisons is not so much the act of comparing itself but primarily the premises and intentions that motivate the comparison. This is aptly expressed by Mohn 1998, 204 f when he states that the problems reside “nicht im methodischen Vorgang des expliziten Vergleichsaktes, der zur Identifizierung bzw. Differenzierung der Untersuchungsgegenstände führt, sondern besonders in seinen vorgängigen Prämissen und kulturellen Interessen und das hieße: in den kulturellen Vorgaben, die sich hinter der Absicht und dem Vorgang des Vergleichens verbergen [...]”. For additional literature on the meaning and problematic nature of comparisons in cultural studies see Mohn 1998, 204, n. 1.

75 Cf. fundamentally Colpe 1988.

first to develop, a methodology for a comparative *Stoffwissenschaft* – the study of *Stoffe* (“hylistics”). A brief outline is offered below⁷⁶.

A first and crucial step, indeed a fundamental one for everything that follows, on the way to a comparative study of myths, is the recognition that an *Erzählstoff*, and therefore a mythical *Stoff* as it is manifested in a concrete *Stoff* variant, must be understood as a sequence of different, minimal, interrelated, action-bearing units (hylemes; see above Chapter 3.1). Such a hyleme sequence only takes concrete, tangible shape when expressed through a medium; however it is not confined to this one particular medial manifestation, and not to particular phrases in individual languages.

Hyleme analysis is a fundamental working tool for the reconstruction of *Stoff* variants. When it comes to the comparison of *Stoffe*, however, a further important step must be added. In order to achieve a consistency on which to build our comparisons of different hyleme sequences, it is necessary to *standardize* both the logical basic structure of hylemes and the formal language in which it is to be clothed: only standardized structures and forms will provide an adequately consistent, uniform fundament for comparisons.

Following from the above observations on the basic logical structure of hylemes, any minimal action-bearing unit of a concrete, palpable *Stoff* variant of a myth, in any kind of medial manifestation, and from any language or culture, can be depicted in the standardized form as follows⁷⁷:

(respective logical) subject + predicate (+ object, where applicable)

Another new aspect now that must be taken into account when conducting our comparisons is that both hyleme elements and hyleme predicates are usually further defined by additional determinations. The basic structure of hylemes must therefore be expanded as follows:

logical subject (+ determinations, where applicable)
 + logical predicate (+ determinations, where applicable)
 (+ logical object [+ determinations, where applicable])

⁷⁶ See on this in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 9.

⁷⁷ Non-singular numbers (such as dual or plural) are meant to be included here and in the following.

Individual hyleme elements and hyleme predicates in an *Erzählstoff* normally take one or more of such additional determinations.⁷⁸ The extent to which hyleme elements or hyleme predicates are “charged” with determinations will henceforth be their degree of determination.

While the methodical steps thus far allow for an adequate comparability of hylemes, or hyleme sequences and their associated determinations in formal-structural terms, the semantic component is still missing. *Stoffe* in general, and mythical *Stoffe* in particular, are so full of colour and detail, so different and concrete in their locations and protagonists, in most cases the only way for us to conduct meaningful *Stoff* comparisons will involve certain semantic modifications. Only those modifications will enable us to discover commonalities or parallel structures between *Stoff* variants underneath their differences and specifics. Such semantic interventions will have to refer to an abstraction of existing concretions and specifications. Therefore, in addition to the degree of determination assigned to individual hyleme elements, we must also consider their degree of concreteness (and that of their determinations). Thus for instance the characterization of a subject as “king” is more concrete than him being just “human”, and the further distinction that he is “wearing a purple gown” is more concrete than a description of him “wearing princely attire”.

It goes without saying that the inclusion of different degrees of concreteness and determination in hyleme elements, hyleme predicates, and in their determinations will make comparisons more complex but also more precise and therefore more relevant. This is particularly the case when comparisons are used to resolve questions of genetic kinship among *Stoffe*, or *Stoff* variants: the more numerous and specific the parallel “details”, the more determinations for specific hyleme elements or hyleme predicates we can find, that display a similar or even the same degree of concreteness, and the higher this degree of concreteness, the higher will be the probability of a genetic dependence⁷⁹.

A fundamental conclusion to draw from the above remarks might be to postulate the existence of a reciprocity between the number and the relevance of discovered parallels, and that this reciprocity depends on the degree of indeterminateness and abstraction: the higher the degree of indetermination and abstraction, the higher the number of hylemes or hyleme sequences will be that are likely to have parallels, but the lower will then be the relevance, or signifi-

⁷⁸ That is, additional information which is not an integral part of the semantic range expressed by the elements or predicates themselves.

⁷⁹ Cf. also Kirk 1974, 257: “specific influence can only be demonstrated by complex and specific similarity.”

cance, of these parallels. To put it another way: the degree of meaningfulness and fruitfulness of any comparison depends whether we can achieve an appropriate balance between difference, derived from the degree of determination and concreteness, and commonality, based on indetermination and abstraction, between the hylemes or hyleme sequences that are being compared. Comparisons are fruitful above all if the material is prepared in such a way as to register in the vicinity of a *medium degree of determination and concreteness*, between the extremes of total abstraction and indetermination on the one hand and an exaggerated concreteness and over-determination on the other – even though such an approach can never aim for any kind of arithmetic mean that would be the result of statistical calculations. The exact location of the fruitful mean value in each case depends not only on the individual point of departure and the nature of the material but also for instance on the central question(s) that are guiding the comparison.

When comparing entire hyleme sequences, even more additional points must be considered which have repercussions for the assessment, or “diagnosis”, of a similarity or dependency among the hyleme sequences; and these points concern the number as well as the arrangement of the hylemes in question. Naturally, in a comparison the similarity gradually decreases to the extent in which additional hylemes are present or absent in a hyleme sequence, or identical or at least similar hylemes are arranged in a different logical or chronological order. The total number of hylemes also plays a role; the higher the total number of parallel hylemes, the higher we must rate their typological similarity, and the higher will be the probability of a genetic dependency. Finally, for a meaningful *Stoff* comparison the degree of “compression” in individual hylemes or hyleme sequences must also be considered; this has already been discussed above in the context of a distinction between (regular) hylemes and hylemes in hyper-hyleme function (see Chapter 3.3).

3.6 *Stoff* and *Stoff* Pattern – Hyleme and Hyleme Pattern

The need for different levels of abstraction notwithstanding, a simple and uniformly applicable procedure can lift concrete hylemes to a relatively high level of abstraction in an instant, and this procedure involves the removal of proper names (of characters and locations), for example by replacing “Kadmos” with “protagonist”. The level of abstraction we choose (“king”, “man”, or “protagonist”, etc.) depends on the target of the comparison, and it can and must be recalibrated for each new comparison. All other determinations, which perhaps serve to enhance the concreteness of a specific character, such as “mighty”,

“devout”, “strong”, etc., remain paradoxically unspecific, while “Kadmos” and “Boeothia” create a very close, and thus concrete, connection linking a hyleme (sequence) to a *particular* person and a *particular* landscape.

To simplify the terminology, we will in the following refer to a hyleme sequence without proper names for characters or locations, as hyleme sequence pattern, or even shorter, as a *Stoff* pattern; this in contrast to a concrete *Stoff*, which derives its specificity from the very presence of such determinations⁸⁰.

For example, the hyleme “Kadmos kills the dragon of Ares in Boeothia” is a concrete hyleme on account of the proper names; it can be generalized to “protagonist X kills a dragon Z in a landscape Y”, and the concrete hyleme sequence (heavily compressed for demonstration purposes):

- Kadmos consults the Delphic Oracle regarding the founding of a city
- Kadmos follows a cow as instructed by the Oracle
- Kadmos kills the dragon of Ares in Boeothia
- Kadmos founds the city of Thebes

can be reformatted as a *Stoff* pattern:

- Protagonist consults oracle regarding the founding of a city
- Protagonists follows instructions of the oracle
- Protagonist kills a dragon
- Protagonist founds a city

If we try to trace a concrete mythical *Stoff* down to its origins, any footprints will be lost in the sands of time, and this occurs in a dual sense: it is not only the possibility, and in many cases the likelihood, of an oral tradition which severely hampers the search for an *Urversion*. In distinguishing between a concrete and a schematic, or abstract, *Stoff* sequence it becomes clear that each concrete *Stoff* sequence can be abstracted to an anonymous *Stoff* pattern even if the assumption is that we are dealing with a – hypothetical – *Urversion*. The origin of the anonymous *Stoff* pattern will then be even more difficult to ascertain. The

80 When Graf 1985, 111, sees in “erzählerischen Schemata” elements that combine to make up myths and can travel from myth to myth (“von Mythos zu Mythos wandern”), he is not concerned with the *Stoff* as a whole, and this is demonstrated subsequently by the examples he cites; what Graf has in mind are individual “Motive” (ibid. 112) as they are understood in *literary* scholarship. A similar distinction between a concrete *Stoff* and a *Stoff* pattern also in Frog 2013, 37, who points to the difference “between the ‘myth’ of an abstract paradigm, like the monster-slayer’s victory over the monster, and ‘myths’ that are distinct instantiations of that paradigm.” However, Frog also fails to provide a clear distinction between a *Stoff* in its entirety and an individual motif.

search for the *Urversion* of a concrete *Stoff* therefore appears to be utterly hopeless in a much more radical sense than we could have thought, and it basically renders meaningless questions concerning, for instance, the possibility of reconstructing oral precursors, or the primacy of oral over written sources. Even an intact or at least reliably re-constructed *Urversion* of a concrete *Stoff*, be it oral, written, or iconographic, while it may be the *Urversion* of the concrete *Stoff*, is still not the *Urversion* of an anonymous *Stoff pattern* that shares the same or at least in large parts similar sequence of events.

At this point in the proceedings we make an interesting discovery: in the literary branch of *Stoff* and motif studies – the first port of call for any kind of *Stoff* research – there is no *Stoff* concept that would allow for a decoupling of proper names. In literary studies, *Stoff* is defined as a “konkrete, in bestimmten Figurenkonstellationen und Handlungszügen geprägte Materialgrundlage für die Handlung erzählender und dramatischer Literatur” (“concrete material basis for the plot of narrative and dramatic literature that is pre-determined in the shape of particular character constellations and plot units”); they are expressly not to be understood as “bloß strukturell-abstrakte, in ihrer inhaltlichen und situativen Ausgestaltung nicht festgelegte bzw. ‘offene’ Vorgaben” (“mere structural-abstract patterns that have no pre-defined content or situational detail and remain ‘open’”).⁸¹ In literary scholarship, a *Stoff* (the term *story* would be more appropriate) is generally associated with named characters or locations (or a combination of both)⁸². If the objective is to further describe a particular hyleme sequence *without* attaching concrete names and locations, we lack the appropriate vocabulary – and in connection with that, an entire field of research: the study of *Stoff* patterns is not a branch of literary studies.

This “missing” field of research – the study of *Stoff* patterns – could be reminiscent of literary *motif* studies; in contrast to the literary *Stoff* (or: story) concept, a literary motif is an “inhaltsbezogenes Schema, das nicht an einen konkreten historischen Kontext gebunden und damit für die Gestaltung von Ort,

⁸¹ Schulz 1997, 521.

⁸² Anz 2007, 130: “Stoffe sind Ereigniszusammenhänge, die zum größten Teil mit namentlich genannten Figuren wie Faust, Don Juan oder Romeo und Julia, selten nur mit Schauplätzen wie Falun und zuweilen mit Figuren *und* Schauplätzen wie Iphigenie auf Tauris assoziiert sind”. Anz’ limitation (“zum größten Teil”) could be a reference to fairy tales, where the characters and locations can definitely remain nameless. With his last example Anz presumably refers to the title of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, which reflects a misunderstanding of the title of Euripides’ tragedy Ἰφιγένεια ἡ ἐν Ταύροις (“among the Taurians”, not “in Taurica”, as suggested by Goethe). Iphigenia was not removed to Taurica (an Island off the Dalmatian coast) but to the Taurians (a Crimean people).

Zeit und Figuren frei verfügbar ist” (a “content-related pattern that is independent of any concrete historical context and thus freely available for the individual configuration of place, time, and characters”)⁸³. However, the study of motifs that are decoupled from such specifications is *not* an equivalent for the study of *Stoff* patterns, where multiple *Stoff* building blocks are forged together to form a complex entity. What we encounter is a dual gap: on the macro level there is no concept for a *Stoff* pattern opposite the concrete *Stoff* that is made specific through proper names. On the micro level of the motif we need a term for a concrete motif that is in fact determined, made specific through the proper names it carries, as opposed to the abstract motif which does not take proper names⁸⁴.

	determined	undetermined
micro level	?	motif (<i>Motiv</i>)
macro level	<i>Stoff</i>	?

The terminology used in *Stoff* and motif studies within the field of literary history is problematic anyway for a general (and comparative) field of *Stoff* studies, as “motif” applies too narrowly to motifs that are significant in a literary-aesthetic sense and can refer to vastly disparate categories, as it is not strictly limited to activities and occurrences, but can also include typical characters, character constellations, and other things⁸⁵, and because “Stoff” is too narrowly focused on a story that is inherent in a literary text, whose development is traced primarily from a perspective of literary history⁸⁶. The approach proposed

83 Drux 1997, 638. Cf. also Frenzel 2008, VIII (“das Motiv mit seinen anonymen Personen und Gegebenheiten”). Cf. also the newly-coined phrase of the “typisierte Ereignissequenz” in Nünlist/Jong 2002, 170, as an attempt to render adequately, in German, the somewhat diffuse concept of the “theme,” which is often used interchangeably with “motif” in the Anglophone literature.

84 The concept of the “event” in literary scholarship, as a rule, seems to refer to a concrete event in a concrete *Stoff* or text; it is therefore associated with proper names and could serve as a “concrete” counter concept for the motif, which expressly avoids such specificities. However, no mutual exclusivity of the two terms appears to emerge or be intended anywhere (on the contrary: Martínez/Scheffel 2012, 111, for instance, treat both terms as having the same meaning), and it is complicated by the constriction of “eventfulness” to the crossing of boundaries, as described by Lotman (see on this above, Chapter 3.1).

85 See on this above, Chapter 3.1.

86 See on this above, Chapter 2.2.

here is not aimed at specific textual motifs or stories but at hylemes and *Stoff* variants that are understood as hyleme sequences⁸⁷. The challenge now is to avoid, from the get-go, the conceptual gaps outlined above. On the micro level as well as on the macro level we need a terminology for *both*, that is for the specific form of a hyleme or hyleme sequence featuring proper names, *and* for the name-less counterpart:

	determined	undetermined
micro level	(concrete) hyleme	hyleme pattern
macro level	(concrete) <i>Stoff</i>	<i>Stoff</i> pattern

The importance of a sophisticated tool bag for the analysis and then for the comparison of hylemes and hyleme sequences is self-evident. A comparison presupposes a certain degree of abstraction, but alongside the abstraction enough concrete information must be retained, or the results of the comparison will be meaningless. Meaningfulness and fruitfulness of comparisons, as we have seen, are measured by the balance of the conflict between difference based on concreteness and commonality based on abstraction in the items that are being compared.

The challenges (and hazards) arising from these observations can be demonstrated on the hyleme level. For instance, the hylemes “mighty king sacrifices enemy hostage” and “man sacrifices youngest daughter” contain hyleme elements with different degrees of determination and abstraction. If a comparison of the two hylemes neglects the differences in determination and concreteness, or elevates them too swiftly to a level of commonality that goes too far in evening out the disparities and relies too heavily on an exaggerated degree of abstraction, the result will be that the hylemes are very similar indeed (“human sacrifices human”); while they differ considerably in their “details”. The disparity of the possible results of the comparison (“very similar” – “very dissimilar”), however, does not prove that comparisons are generally subject to a certain arbitrariness and therefore non-binding; rather it is a consequence of the complexity and disparity of the items under scrutiny. A significant, meaningful

⁸⁷ See on this above, Chapter 3.2.

result does not flow from a subjective perspective⁸⁸, but from the well-considered selection of an appropriate, medium level of concreteness and determination in the hylemes (or hyleme sequences) and their building blocks. This procedure may in individual cases require difficult decisions and may lead to controversies; but on the one hand such controversies can now be conducted with the help of advanced methodical tools, and on the other we should not allow ourselves to be discouraged in the face of the seemingly impenetrable complexity of the task and the attendant possibility of controversial views. We should not allow ourselves to dismiss out of hand the progress that has been made, which consists in the fundamental realization that the value of a comparison depends for the most part on the degree of determination and concreteness at which the *Stoff* elements are being compared.

4 Myths As Polystratic Instruments of Power

4.1 Polystratic Mythical *Stoff* Variants: a *Stoff* Variant with Multiple Layers (Strata)

The creation and constant reworking of a mythical *Stoff* depends on many factors, all of which contribute to each specific *Stoff* manifestation. These factors include social customs, religious rites, theological concepts, literary traditions, political conditions, the topographical “lie of the land”, historical records, and many others. Their influence is noticeable in particular when they change, which will be further explored below (Chapter 4.3). In this way, a *Stoff* incorporates many elements from a wide variety of origins, not only from other *Stoffe* or *Stoff* patterns but also from different significant elements of its own culture or neighbouring cultures. It is quite simply impossible for a concrete *Stoff* to have been created, and transmitted, and not to have come into contact with other cultural influences, *Erzählstoffe*, and ideas, etc.

One result is that a mythical *Stoff*, as a rule, does not exist in a “singular form”, but only as a “multiform” entity in the shape of numerous more or less distinct variants. Above and beyond that, the prolonged transmission of mythical *Stoffe* also affects every single one of the medial manifestations of a *Stoff*

⁸⁸ Thus Kirk 1974, 255: “The chief danger lies in one’s necessarily subjective assessment of the degree of specific resemblance needed to demonstrate a dependent relationship between the myths of separate peoples.”

variant in that these *Stoff* variants are usually not made all of one piece but rather resemble a patchwork of elements which still carry the traces of their various revisions and reworkings. In other words: a single, individual medial manifestation of a *Stoff* variant, such as for instance a text, will typically display multiple layers – or strata – of the processes of transmission and revision to which it has been subjected.

In addition to its *essential overall polymorphy*, a mythical *Stoff* is therefore also characterized by the *polystratic nature of each individual Stoff variant*. A *Stoff* exists as a multiform entity; it is polymorphous, but each individual *Stoff* variant is normally interspersed with one or more hylemes, hyleme elements, hyleme predicates, or determinations of hyleme elements or predicates from other variants of the same *Stoff*, or from variants of other *Stoffe*, and finally from many other kinds of cultural signifiers or significant elements⁸⁹. A fundamental distinction must therefore be made between the *polymorphy* of a mythical *Stoff*, with regard to the totality of all its realized and potential variants, and the *polystratic* nature of an individual, concrete manifestation of a *Stoff* variant⁹⁰.

From the polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* and from the polystratic nature of its individual *Stoff* variants we can draw an important conclusion which applies to all types of medial manifestations of mythical *Stoff* variants. With each concrete illustration of a mythical *Stoff*, the illustrator – be she or he a painter, sculptor, author, or a travelling bard, etc. – not only faces the challenge, in view of a polymorphous, multi-variant formation, of having to settle for *one particular variant* of the *Stoff* in question, but also the problem that no matter which variant she or he chooses it will never be purely her or his own creation and her or his sole responsibility; she or he will instead be working with material that has been *pre-shaped* by others. By itself, this situation would not raise any concerns; it becomes a challenge largely because the *polystratic* nature of mythical *Stoff* variants will see to it that even the *one* variant selected by the artist from the vast pool of possible alternatives will as a rule be a mixture of *disparate* elements.

With mythical *Stoff* variants, the basic situation is similar to the problem often encountered in architecture: What to do with an uneven *patchwork* of old “stock”? The two available options are the same for both: either leave the build-

⁸⁹ On the terms used here see above, Chapter 3.1.

⁹⁰ The Greek-Latin *mixtum compositum* “polystratic” (cf. a similar linguistic amalgamation e.g. in “polyvalent”) has been chosen for its consonance with “polymorphic” or “polymorphous” and because the Greek terms for layer/*stratum* (ἐπιβολή, also πτύξι) are virtually unknown.

ing – or the chosen mythical *Stoff* variant – essentially as it is, or take action. If the chosen option is to act, more possibilities become available, at least with regard to buildings: from complete demolition and new construction via less drastic measures, such as remodelling and expansion, to smallish, rather cosmetic modifications. In working with mythical *Stoff* variants, the range of possible interventions is somewhat limited. The objective is precisely not to invent an entirely new *Stoff* variant⁹¹, but to adopt and adapt a tradition, and this tradition must be recounted in such a way as to allow the mass of recipients to recognize it as referring to something that is older and already known.

The result is that in numerous cases an already *uneven* formation becomes *even more uneven*; to the multitude of layers (strata) already present another one is added, and the traces of the older layers are not always completely erased in the process.

From these observations we can come to an important conclusion about the nature of all medial manifestations of mythical *Stoff* variants. Because of the recipients' expectation that the old stock of a mythical *Stoff* must be retained to the extent that a certain recognisability is guaranteed, it is not only likely but almost inevitable that the incongruity and unevenness of the older material will leave traces even in a newly updated version⁹². To put it another way: since every "realization" of a mythical *Stoff* in the form of a specific variant already involves precursors that are complex, multi-layered entities, the concrete result as a rule reflects the unevenness of the precursor material, indeed, the incongruity and inconsistency is often reinforced.

The degree to which the "new" manifestation will be affected by the inconsistencies of the pre-existing material is different for each concrete case. It can surface in minor idiosyncrasies or peculiarities, or it can take the form of obvious tensions and inconsistencies. Of course the homogeneity or inhomogeneity of a *Stoff* presentation also depends on the extent of the presentation: if an entire *Stoff* is boiled down to a single sentence, such as "Kadmos establishes Thebes" (iconographic "narration" can be equally terse), no trace remains of contradictions or diverging versions. This absence, however, is not due to any lack of inconsistency in the *Stoff* that has been "reworked" but to the abbreviation in the concrete manifestation, which has allowed the inconsistencies to

⁹¹ Deliberate "myth correction" is concerned only with particular aspects or *Stoff* elements. Cf. on this subject the volume edited by Vöhler/Seidensticker 2005.

⁹² Cf. with reference to the Homeric epics Seeck 2004, 51: "Es ist sehr unwahrscheinlich, daß die bei der Motivarbeit gesammelten Motive und Untermotive und sonstigen Materialien [...] ohne weiteres nahtlos zusammenpassen."

disappear. However much a text, an image, or any other manifestation of a mythical *Stoff* may be made “of one piece” *artistically or in terms of its presentation* – the *Stoff* substratum can hardly be described as “uniform”. Because of the polymorphous nature of mythical *Stoffe* and the polystratic nature of their variants no *Stoff* is ever “of one piece”. All that an interpreter, artist, or narrator can do is to cover the “cracks” in their new manifestation of a mythical *Stoff* with a smooth coat of paint.

4.2 Formal Evidence for Stratification: Inconsistencies

Where peculiarities in medial manifestations of mythical *Stoff* variants are not obviously the result of misunderstandings or an author’s insufficient information or education, or clearly a problem in the transmission, such as a corruption of the text or errors on the part of the scribe, and where they cannot be explained as a play with tradition perhaps intended by the author, or as a deliberate distortion, such peculiarities and instances of inhomogeneity can primarily be put down to two distinct causes: the polymorphy of the mythical *Stoff* overall, and the polystratic (multi-layered) nature of individual *Stoff* variants. In the first case, the inhomogeneity merely derives for instance from an insufficient harmonization of disparate, partially conflicting *Stoff* variants; in the other case it is caused by the incorporation of “foreign material” – various significant elements plucked out of the same or neighbouring cultures, primarily from other *Stoffe* (most often these are structurally or thematically similar to the core material)⁹³.

Often the fault lines among the different *Stoff* components merely consist in minor inhomogeneities, such as formal or logical tensions, peculiarities, or abnormalities that can be overlooked or marked down to causes other than

⁹³ Cf. on this Kirk 1974, 254 f, who already expressed the findings stated here in the form of conjectures. Some of the findings in the study by Suter 2002, on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the *Stoffe* it incorporates, are based on the observation of “interesting inconsistencies” (ibid. 43); cf. on this n. 52: “Thanks to the poet’s incomplete transformation of his materials, the older story shows through.” Cf. also ibid. 73: “A myth can absorb new cultural influences while retaining the old, becoming a new version of itself with inconsistencies and contradictions.” Of an entirely different nature are the “inconsistencies” observed by Reinhardt 2011, 249, which arise when individual mythical *Stoffe* or *Stoff* conglomerates can only be matched incompletely with others to form a complete mythological system (*Gesamtsystem*), even though Reinhardt in the same context then also discusses *Stoff*-specific inconsistencies, among other things (249-253).

interferences among different variants of the same *Stoff* or among elements from different *Stoffe* or *Stoff* patterns. Sometimes, however, such interferences do result in inconsistencies that are difficult to ignore or difficult to resolve in a way that does not appear forced. In the following, to avoid any awkward references to “inhomogeneities and inconsistencies”, both the minor and the blatantly obvious anomalies caused by such interferences will be subsumed under the term *inconsistencies*.

At this juncture we need to insert a critical remark on the distinction between *coherence* and *consistency*. In concrete, physically existing variants of narrative *Stoffe*, individual hylemes must demonstrably refer to each other⁹⁴. Narratologists have compiled a set of criteria by which recipients can recognize and evaluate this kind of coherence, for instance through chronological, causal, or teleological connections⁹⁵. Such a coherence is therefore an indispensable precondition for our ability to recognize a *Stoff* variant as a unit. Coherence, however, does not automatically equal consistency. Multiple hylemes can still be shown to refer to each other despite the presence of inconsistencies; the fact that they are *connected* does not always and not automatically entail that they also form a *harmonious* whole.

Using the term “inconsistencies” in the context of narrative *Stoffe* does raise the question: how could ancient audiences tolerate such inconsistencies? Is it not more likely that recipients in the past were equally as dissatisfied with inconsistencies in a narrative *Stoff* as we are today?

Naturally, the concrete manifestation of a narrative *Stoff* variant had to have a certain degree of consistency beyond its fundamental coherence. But not only do we have an *individual* difference here, there is also a *cultural* difference regarding the extent to which we are willing to tolerate or even to appreciate such inconsistencies. Where readers today would react with criticism or irritation, recipients in the past obviously did not react in the same way. If a modern novelist were to include, *by accident*, an inconsistency such as for instance the

⁹⁴ See on this the definition of “*Stoff* variant” as a sequence of several *interrelated* hylemes that are not tied to any particular medial manifestation, or any particular language, in Chapter 3.2.

⁹⁵ See Wolf 2002, 46-51. An “inner connection” of the happenings, and a coherence of the narrated content as general but authoritative criteria also in Meuter 2004, 140, who develops a concept of narrativity which, he suggests, will be useful for all disciplines within cultural studies, on the basis of reflections in and concepts borrowed from systems theory (ibid. 152): “Mit den Differenzen Aktualität/Potentialität, Reversibilität/Irreversibilität, Prozess/Struktur und Anfang/Ende lässt sich aufzeigen, was Geschichten sind: *sich selbstorganisierende systemische Zusammenhänge von Sinn und Zeit.*”

appearance of a – living – character at a point in the novel at which that character should have been long dead, according to an earlier passage, it would be spotted by an eagle-eyed editorial team. And even if it did pass editorial inspection, the mistake would attract critical responses from the reading audience and be expunged by the time of the second print run went to press, at the very latest. But can we assume the same impulse also existed at other times and in other cultures?

For instance, Homer's *Iliad* contains a number of similar contradictions, such as the case of the obviously inadvertent “resurrection” of a deceased character: Pylaimenes, the leader of the Paphlagonians, dies at the hands of Menelaos in Book 5 of the *Iliad*, but later we hear how Pylaimenes is forced to watch his son Harpalion being killed in combat by Meriones⁹⁶. Centuries went by before ancient philologists and literary critics began to point out errors and other less grievous inconsistencies committed by an author of Homer's stature in the treatment of his material. Over these centuries, the “irritants” were apparently tolerated or not noticed at all⁹⁷, and even critical voices like that of Horace assume a comparatively mild-mannered stance toward the otherwise brilliant Homer: clearly, the great master must have been “asleep at the wheel” sometimes, but considering the length of his works this cannot be held against him⁹⁸. Much later, Cervantes still ridiculed the over-zealous critics of his *Don Quixote*

⁹⁶ See Hom. *Il.* 5,576-579 and 13,643-659. Cf. also the clearly conflicting versions of Hephaistos' fall from the heavens in Hom. *Il.* 1,590-593 and 18,394-397. The version narrated in Book 1 apparently associates the limp of the god of blacksmiths with Zeus' grasp on Hephaistos' foot before flinging him down from the heavens onto the island of Lemnos – an account that does not agree with the version told in Book 18, which describes how Hera threw him down from the heavens above and into the ocean immediately after giving birth because she was ashamed of her son's congenital (!) deformity. The nymphs Euronyme and Thetis then took care of him. In both cases the events are narrated in the first person by Hephaistos himself.

⁹⁷ See on this also, to the point, Seeck 2004, 51 f: “[...] da zeigt sich ein auffallender Unterschied zwischen Homer und unseren Romanschriftstellern. Ein moderner Autor wird dafür sorgen, daß sich eine möglichst glatte Oberfläche ergibt und der Leser sich nicht an Diskrepanzen und Widersprüchen stößt. [...] Bei Homer ist aus moderner Sicht diese Glättung sehr unvollkommen durchgeführt, und es macht daher wenig Mühe, allerlei Brüche und Widersprüche bei ihm zu entdecken.”

⁹⁸ Hor. *ars* 359f.: *indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus; / verum operi longo fas est obrepere somnum*. Cf. also on this Longin. Περὶ ὑψους 33,2-4: he who aims high (like Homer) will also make mistakes; only small minds remain flawless.

who had complained about discrepancies involving Sancho Panza's donkey in Book 1⁹⁹.

What were the positive aspects that motivated the acceptance of inconsistencies? Upon closer inspection, several such motivational features come to the fore, which can only be briefly highlighted here¹⁰⁰. Inconsistencies were left undisturbed because in return they offered, among other things

- agreement with a beloved custom or practice
- loyalty to a tradition viewed as sacrosanct
- simultaneous recognition of multiple traditions

We can also take one step further and view inconsistencies not only as a trade-off for something else that is more desirable, but as something that bears certain advantages of its own. Thus, being able to approach a *Stoff* and its themes not just from a single perspective but from multiple angles can be seen as a benefit. The polyphony of different voices is not a deficiency in this case, it is a bonus. As an example, the inclusion of two different versions of the creation of man in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis not only serves two different traditions and two different audiences, it also allows us to take our cue from the theme of the creation of man and a) focus on the variety of its themes, or we can b) examine a chosen subject from multiple perspectives. To name just a few central aspects, the concept that human beings are created in the image of God and have been granted dominion over “every living thing that creepeth upon the earth” can be our focal point as much as the call to preserve the Creation, or human fallibility. It would be an oversimplification to assume that ancient audiences had a less refined feeling for logic and consistency than their modern counterparts that would have caused a lack of awareness for certain inconsistencies and contradictions. Instead, something else was more important than

99 Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part II, Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 then contains (from the mouth of Carrasco), not quite by accident, the above-mentioned reference to Horace (trans. J. Ormsby 1885): “All that is true, Señor Don Quixote,” said Carrasco; “but I wish such fault-finders were more lenient and less exacting, and did not pay so much attention to the spots on the bright sun of the work they grumble at; for if *aliquando bonus dormitat Homerus*, they should remember how long he remained awake to shed the light of his work with as little shade as possible ...”. In the first edition of the novel, Sancho is missing his donkey in 1,25 without any explanation as to how the animal came to be absent, just as Sancho is riding atop the donkey again in 1,46 without any explanation for its sudden reappearance; an addendum in the second edition creates more confusion than it eliminates, having been inserted at the wrong location in the book. On the complicated “donkey problem” see in detail Lange 2008, 651 f.

100 Cf. on this in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 16.2.

consistency: the wealth of additional meaning, which can be gained from engaging with a particular topic through a multi-perspective and therefore multi-functional approach.

If our intention is not simply to equate other modes of aesthetic reception with our own modern ones, we will have to acknowledge that consistency in the treatment of a *Stoff* was not a top priority for ancient cultures, otherwise the author, the recipients, and those preserving the tradition would not have tolerated inconsistencies or even created them actively (e.g. through editorial re-workings). The real, central question therefore is not: how could ancient people tolerate such inconsistencies, it must be: how do we deal with such unfamiliar inconsistencies, how can they be explained, and to what extent is their appreciation vital for the interpretation of texts or other medial manifestations of mythical *Stoffe*?

The decision to refer to both the lesser inhomogeneities and the more disruptive inconsistencies found in manifestations of mythical *Stoffe* as “inconsistencies” was a deliberate choice; the more serious term will help raise awareness of the issue among modern interpreters and remind them not to approach a mythical *Stoff* or the medial manifestations of individual *Stoff* variants with the conscious or subconscious assumption that they must be consistent. Expecting inconsistencies when examining mythical *Stoff* variants in their medial manifestations should not be the *exception*, it should be the *rule*. With regard to textual manifestations this demand not only addresses the conventional expectation that any “normal” text must be internally consistent, but also the related attitude which, for the sake of a consistent reception, will accept questionable or superficial explanations for inconsistencies if only they lead to a passable understanding of the text, or will make corrections to “improve” it.

Our recognition of the essential polymorphy of mythical *Stoffe*, and the expected likelihood of a polystratic nature of individual existing or potential variants, requires that we assume a certain attitude toward the reception and interpretation of mythical *Stoff* variants in their medial (e.g. textual) manifestations: from the get-go we must expect a predominance of inconsistencies rather than a general consistency, and we must therefore not attempt to smooth over inconsistencies, or to play down their significance, to explain them away, to declare them incomprehensible or inexplicable on principle, as errors in the transmission or as artefacts created by interpolation¹⁰¹. We must instead learn to take them seriously and to read them as evidence of the stratification which defines the particular *Stoff* variant before us. If in interpreting manifestations of mythi-

101 Cf. on these and further suppositions in more detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 16.3.

cal *Stoff* variants we can free ourselves from the automatic desire for harmonization which seeks to establish consistency, and if instead we can be guided by the knowledge that we must, on principle, expect inconsistencies, we will moreover be able to recognize weaker evidence such as inhomogeneities or formal deviations as further and therefore helpful indicators of stratification.

A stratification analysis of mythical *Stoffe* is not concerned with criticizing narrative peculiarities or obvious “mistakes”; rather it is a kind of forensic endeavour which seeks to point out inconsistencies beneath the sometimes deceptively “smooth” *Stoff* surface, and in the process to uncover traces which allow insights into the multilayered, polystratic composition and, with that, the historical dimension of a *Stoff* in its various stages of growth and maturation. The insight that such inconsistencies can in fact have as their basis a positive motivation should prompt a heightened awareness in our own perception for the distinctly ancient ways of selecting and reworking a mythical *Stoff* in textual (or pictorial) form, as they differ from our modern production attitudes and audience expectations.

In numerous cases, inconsistencies caused by older fragments within a mythical *Stoff* were never completely erased because they testified to a struggle of opposing ideas, and served to propagate a victory of the new over the old. In these cases, inconsistencies were not tolerated *willy-nilly*; they were left in place, deliberately, as it were, on display like the spoils of war in a triumphal procession. We will return to this aspect in more detail below, when we will be looking specifically at *semantic* indicators for stratification processes.

4.3 Myths and Power: Myths as Battle Grounds for Competing World Views

The preceding sections have been concerned with, among other things, the way in which inconsistencies can serve as formal and logical indicators for the different variants and strata behind the polystratic, multilayered entity that is the manifestation of a mythical *Stoff* variant in textual form. Aside from inconsistencies as indicators, there are certain narrative mechanisms in mythical *Stoffe* that can point to instances of stratification from a *semantic point of view*¹⁰². In

102 On additional indicators for the stratification of a *Stoff* or *Stoff* variant(s) than those mentioned here, i.e. typical patterns of *Stoff-Stoff* interferences such as e.g. mutual influencing or attraction through structural similarities, identical (or similar) names, or the pull exerted by prominent mythical characters, see C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 14.

order to be able to get a better grip on the specificities of these narrative mechanisms and to correctly assess their significance for a stratification analysis, we first need to take a closer look at a particular quality of mythical *Stoffe* which is at risk of being underestimated: their explosive potential.

This explosive quality derives from the fact that mythical *Stoffe* refer to *concrete objects of human experience* that are thought to be *significant* because the process of dealing with these objects of human experience involves a *transcending* component. The transcending treatment of objects of human experience that are thought to be significant implies that their *significance for the interpretation and the mastering of human existence* is generally recognized, and that myths are therefore valuable tools for dealing with reality – which is why they are themselves fiercely contested and capable of being weaponized in *conflicts of interpretative authority*¹⁰³.

4.3.1 Mythical *Stoffe* Refer to Concrete Objects of Human Experience

Mythical *Stoffe* provide a space for dealing with real-life experiences¹⁰⁴. Mythical *Stoffe* are never concerned with purely fantastic inventions; being anchored in our experiences of the real world they differ substantially from the kind of *Stoffe* often used in science fiction literature or in fantasy novels, or from the imaginary worlds of many board, card- or computer games¹⁰⁵.

103 See on this in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 18.

104 On the phenomenological and anthropological understanding of “world” and “reality,” as it applies here, see Coreth 1986, 46 f.

105 Analogous findings and observations are old; cf. already Müller 1825, 226-234, or Eliade 1988, 16 and elsewhere; Blumenberg 1985, 97: “Myth by its nature is not capable of an abstract system of dogma that would leave local and temporal peculiarities behind it. On the contrary, it is oriented specifically toward these.” On concrete topographical “groundings” see also Reinhardt 2011, 88-101. Cf. also Burkert 1982, 65: Mythical *Stoffe* are narrated “um ihrer Beziehung auf die Realität willen, Realität im diesseitigen, handfesten Sinn.” Somewhat unfortunate is Burkert’s decision to describe the real-world connections of mythical *Stoffe* as their “denotative” dimension, while he labels the “structure of meaning” inherent in the *Stoff* itself as “connotative” (a more appropriate terminology, or at least one that is equally plausible, would be one with the adjectives reversed); as far as I am aware, however, this terminological distinction has not found any following.

The term “objects of human experience” is used here to describe the totality of all that can be experienced by human beings¹⁰⁶. Among other things, mythical *Stoffe* are characterized by the fact that they do not, on principle, exclude any area of human experience. The association of subjectivity emanating from “objects of human experience” is intentional because it serves as a reminder that the experiences individual human beings have or can have will never be exactly identical. Even though they may refer to similar “objects,” and regardless of whether we compare them intra- or interculturally, synchronically or diachronically, no two experiences are one and the same.

If we do assert that a fundamental connection exists between mythical *Stoffe* and the real world in which we live, it follows that the mythical protagonists of the past are not fantasy figures¹⁰⁷, but that they are equally “real”, and that their associated *Stoffe* represent something that these protagonists have or could have experienced. Potential objects of such experiences are therefore not only objects in the here and now but also everything that happened in the past. The audience are not personally sharing the experience, but it is being brought to their attention as something experienced by others, and the process in turn ensures that it becomes – for the audience – a shared human experience, with repercussions for their own present¹⁰⁸.

106 On the concept of “experience” in an expanded sense that is not limited to sensory impressions but also relates to the experiences of the mind and the way they are being processed, as it informs the above deliberations, cf. Coreth 1986, 48.

107 Cf. the reference by Burkert 1982, 65, to “realitätsbezogene, hic et nunc gültige Eigennamen” in mythical *Stoffe*, which include the names of gods and heroes, “insofern Götter und Heroen auch ausserhalb der Erzählung durch das Faktum des Kultes, der Opferstätten, Altäre, Grabmäler, Tempel gegeben sind.” The “personale Fixierung” and the “mehr oder weniger genau bestimmte Identität und Individualität der Akteure” are also highlighted by Reinhardt 2011, 114.

108 Cf. Blumenberg 1985, 68: “Status of reality does not mean empirical demonstrability; the place of the latter can be filled by taken-for-grantedness, familiarity, having been part of the world from the beginning.” Cf. also Kühn 2006, 23 f; Reinhardt 2011, 115. Cf. also in this context the concept developed by the philosopher Wilhelm Schapp (1884-1965), of our being “entangled” (*verstrickt*) in multiple (hi)stories: according to Schapp, the subject’s own histories are inextricably interconnected with external histories as well as the “we” history of a collective, and the repetition of the “we” histories results in those histories becoming part of the horizon of our own (personal, individual, private) histories, see Schapp 1953, repr. 2012, passim, e.g. 85-87, 124, and 142 f, on myth *ibid.* 205: “Diese Wirverstrickung in der Richtung einer Weltgeschichte scheint uns in jedem Mythos aufzutauchen.” See also on this the succinct account in Mohn 1998, 141-143. On the presence of past histories concisely Schapp repr. 2012, 142: “Im strengen Sinne vergangene Geschichten gibt es nicht. Jede Geschichte kann noch wieder aus ihrem Platz im Horizont hervorbrechen.”

4.3.2 Transcending Interpretations of Human Experience

The efforts to deal with reality through mythical *Stoffe* are characterized by one quality in particular: they are all *transcending* interpretations of what can be experienced. The term “transcending” is not used here in the philosophical or ontological sense as referring to properties of being (transcendentals); neither is it used in the theological sense of exceeding that which by definition is beyond human experience (transcendence), but rather in a hermeneutical sense to refer to interpretive acts by which humans explain what they see or what happens to them. The key feature of any transcending interpretation of reality is the assumption that certain occurrences are possible only because of the involvement of beings who exceed human capabilities, as well as natural phenomena and their normal and observable processes. Translated into certain action and communication strategies, such an interpretation of reality is a fundamental aspect of religion, in the definition of Jörg Rüpke, who views religion “als das situative Einbeziehen von Akteuren (ob sie nun als Göttliches oder Götter, Dämonen oder Engel, Tote oder Unsterbliche bezeichnet werden), die in bestimmter Hinsicht überlegen sind” (“as the situational involvement of actors [whether they are described as divine or as deities, demons or angels, dead or immortal], who are in a certain capacity superior”).¹⁰⁹

From this point we can draw a direct line to myths, because such a transcending interpretation of reality also has concrete consequences for the treatment of mythical *Stoffe*: here too the respective objects of our experience are presented as being crucially linked to the active involvement of divine beings in a way that determines the overall *Stoff*¹¹⁰. The participle used in this context –

109 Rüpke 2016, 19; *ibid.* cont.: “Kurzum, religiöses Handeln ist dann und dort gegeben, wo in einer Situation mindestens ein einzelner Mensch solche Akteure in seine Kommunikation mit anderen Menschen einbezieht, ob er nun bloß auf sie verweist oder sie direkt anruft.” A discussion of this concept of religion and its separation from other attempts *ibid.* 17-22. What can also be seen emerging here is a closeness to the way in which religious communication is characterized via the concept of transcendence in Luhmann 2013, 53, who asserts that “a communication is always religious whenever it observes immanence from the standpoint of transcendence. [...] Events in this world do not receive a religious meaning until they are seen from the perspective of transcendence. But producing meaning is also the specific function of transcendence, and it does not exist in and of itself.” Cf. *ibid.* 55: “Transcendence is for now the provision of a direction, and it refers to a crossing of boundaries. But from the outset, territorial boundaries are not what are meant [...]”

110 Or just *one* divine being; on the pros and cons of applying the concept of myth to certain narrative *Stoffe* from the Old Testament see Spieckermann 2013, 163 f; cf. also Lux 2014, 193-218. On the central role of the “numinous” or “numinous beings” as they appear in mythical

“transcending” –does not describe the *divine characters* who appear in mythical *Stoffe* (in the sense of “transcendent deities”); instead, it refers to the *way of interpreting reality* with the help of mythical *Stoffe*¹¹¹; the active involvement of divine beings in the *Stoff* is a feature arising from this specific transcending way of interpreting reality.

In his definition of religion, Rüpke also provides a list of various “superior” actors. And indeed for mythical *Stoffe* as well, the defining feature of divine intervention is valid not only where the actor in question is imagined as a clearly defined deity, whether that implies an anthropomorphic appearance, a theriomorphic one, a mixture of man and animal, or any other shape; they can also be powers or forces viewed as numinous in a wider and, as it were, more diffuse conception¹¹² – “supernatural actors”¹¹³ who are, either permanently or temporarily, at work in or “inhabit” certain phenomena or living creatures, such as humans or animals¹¹⁴.

It is well-nigh impossible to make a universal statement, covering all cultures and all periods, about which properties constitute “divineness”, and which do not, which beings can be classified as “divine”, “numinous”, or be described in similar terms, which of them are only partially eligible, and which of them do not match the criteria at all. These questions must ultimately be examined and decided with respect to each specific culture, which is why a

Stoffe, in relation to the various aspects of human experience, see already emphatically Beth 1935, 720: “immer läßt sich als der Grundzug erkennen, daß Mythus *die Bezogenheit des Menschlichen auf ein Unsinnlich-Göttliches in Form einer Erzählung* auszudrücken bemüht ist” (*unsinnlich*, however, is problematic). Cf. also Hübner 1985, 129-134; Lüthi 2004, 11. Günther 2013, 273: myths “erzählen von einer übernatürlichen Kraft oder Macht, die auf die Natur und die Menschen einwirkt.” Cf. also Diakonoff 1995, 125, “[...] myths are plot units, each of which is connected with a certain moving force – i.e. a deity [...]”; Reinhard 2001, 20 (bold type and italics in the original): myths are about events “aus einer mythischen Vorzeit [...], zu deren Voraussetzungen durchweg eine Handlungsbeteiligung von göttlichen Wesen gehört”; cf. also *ibid.* 161.

111 Cf. exactly in this sense Kühr 2006, 18: myths “transzendieren [...] die alltäglichen Wahrnehmungen von Zeit und Raum [...]”.

112 Cf. Beth 1935, 720: “Nicht um persönliche Gottwesen muß es sich dabei handeln, sondern um die Gegründetheit menschlichen Seins in Außersinnlichem, wie immer das Letztere näher bestimmt werden möge.” The one problematic term chosen by Beth is *außersinnlich*, if we consider that divine entities may very well have been imagined as being capable of creating sensory impressions.

113 See on this term from the perspective of a Cognitive Science of Religion Pyysiäinen 2009.

114 On the ancient belief that humans can be inhabited by positive as well as negative powers of divine origin, see in detail A. Zgoll 2012a and 2012b, where the concept of the “homo oikomorphus” is developed.

certain diffusion is unavoidable in discussing, here and below, the concepts of “divineness” and “divine beings”. In view of these difficulties, referring to “divine” or “numinous” beings is of course not without its pitfalls¹¹⁵; but the solution cannot be to declare it a scholarly duty to exclude everything from scrutiny that in its handling proves to be multifaceted, complex, or polymorphous: we would be buying the benefit of unassailability at the cost of excluding a central phenomenon in the human endeavour to interpret our world. Dirk Johannsen has moreover taken a remarkable step from the perspective of religious studies to justify the category of “the numinous,” in the definition of Rudolf Otto (as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), and to demonstrate its valency for an analysis of traditional *Erzählstoffe* from the perspective of cultural studies, “ohne damit – wie von Ottos Kritikern befürchtet – quasi in einem Automatismus theologische Implikationen einfließen zu lassen oder die Überlieferung zu entkontextualisieren” (“without, as had been feared by Otto’s critics, allowing his argument in a quasi-automatism to be coloured by theological implications, and without decontextualizing the [mythological] tradition”)¹¹⁶.

4.3.3 Indicators for the Significance of Mythical *Stoffe*

The general assumption is that myths deal with important matters, that the real life experiences, to which mythical *Stoffe* refer, do exceed a certain significance threshold¹¹⁷, that they therefore do not serve to process experiences made, for instance, as a part of everyday routine activities such as oral hygiene or shopping for necessities. The idea of a “social” or “collective importance” of myths has been discussed in this context¹¹⁸.

115 Mohn 1998, 109 f is without a doubt correct in pointing out the problem posed by the category of the “numinous” (or “the sacred”) *per se*; however, a different question is that of the assumed existence of concrete *beings* with this property, and separate from this again is the issue of the related conceptions of such beings and their role in narrative *Stoffe*/materials.

116 Johannsen 2008 (quotation *ibid.* 254).

117 Cf. Blumenberg 1985, 149, on myth as a “story that is ... ‘significant’ [bedeutsam] in itself.”

118 An approach championed especially by Burkert cf. Burkert, 1979a, 23: “*myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance*” (italics in the original); cf. *id.* 1979b, 29: myths describe a “bedeutsame, überindividuelle, kollektiv wichtige Wirklichkeit”. Cf. also Bremmer 1987, 4-6, who at least stresses the frequent changes in the importance of myths, the implication being that the importance of a *Stoff* does not remain constant (*ibid.* 5 f: “Myth, then, meant rather different things to the Greeks at different stages of their history”); the collective importance of myths means they are “relevant to society” (*ibid.* 7); cf. also Csapo 2005, 9, who defines myth as “a narrative which is considered socially im-

Clearly, what is considered “important” differs from culture to culture, and this poses the question: how can we retain importance as an essential feature of myths without becoming dependent on an external and moreover imprecise criterion unrelated to the *Stoff* itself, such as the association with various collectives and their behaviour, or a concentration on theme and content?

To solve the problem, a definition of “myth” must be found that requires no affiliation with a particular collective, and does not lay claim to any diffuse idea of “importance”. We must look for universal features which can *demonstrate*, without reference to the treatment of myths or to themes explored in mythical *Stoffe*, that these themes were *considered important*¹¹⁹. We must then be careful not to re-attach this sense of importance to yet another collective and its shifting behavioural norms. More critical than the claim of importance, its further definition and association with various collectives and their behaviour patterns, therefore, is the identification of importance *indicators*. These are features which indicate that the mythical *Stoff* addresses a subject whose assumed importance has caused it to leave traces on the respective variants. These traces can be described objectively, regardless of whether or not, or in what way and for which collective, the further transmission of this *Stoff* was considered important.

In my estimation, three such importance indicators can be identified, one content-based, and two relating to formal criteria. An important content-based indicator has already been discussed above: it can simultaneously help us determine whether or not certain experiences and their re-working in a particular culture were at one point considered to be of importance by a particular collective, independent of their further treatment. The indicator, or criterion, in question is the presence, or absence, of factors in the initial encounter with the respective objects of experience and subsequently in the processing of these

portant” (cf. also *ibid.* 278, expanded even further: “broader concept of myth [...] as anything which is told, received, and transmitted in the conviction of its social importance”). Cf. Rüpke 2013, 39; also still C. Zgoll 2014, 184 (herewith superseded).

119 Cf. also Csapo 2005, 278 f, on the important question whether the content transmitted through myths is true or whether it is *thought* to be true, even though to define “myth” solely by reference to this one criterion is problematic (cf. *ibid.*: “If it spreads because it is *thought* true, [...] then it is a myth”), as it can also be applied to the transmission of historical events, views, values, dogmatic teachings, etc. (Csapo himself correctly predicts the consequence: “Admittedly, just about anything can become myth”). If we widen the concept of myth to this extent, not only do we move away from narrative *Stoffe*, but this concept of myth can no longer be distinguished from a concept of ideology that is defined in fairly general terms, and Csapo himself concedes as much (see on this in more detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 18.4.4).

encounters in the form of mythical *Stoffe* that *transcend* these objects of experience. The labelling as “important” of objects of experience, and therefore of the mythical *Stoffe* in which these experiences are processed, cannot be exemplified in absolute terms or in relation to the behaviour of the groups dealing with these *Stoffe*. It can only be based on the criterion that the experience, or that which has been transmitted as experience is processed in such a way, i.e. the *Stoff* variant is designed in such a way as to associate the experience with the actions of divine or numinous beings in a context that is essential for the development of the *Stoff* sequence as a whole¹²⁰.

In formal terms, the polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* and the polystratic nature of the *Stoff* variants can be cited as indicators for the importance of the *Stoff*. Irrespective of individual themes and types of content, both the polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* and the polystratic nature of its variants point to an elevated degree of importance: as a rule, only something that is considered worthy of variation and reworking will have multiple variants and layers of reworkings. Even though the humans involved shaping and reshaping a *Stoff*, and also the collectives they represent, can not always be identified, the very existence of different variants and of different strata (layers) within a particular variant of a mythical *Stoff* proves that people at some point felt it was important to work with and to work on this one particular *Stoff*.

4.3.4 Myths as Battle Grounds for Competing World Views

The important role played by transcending interpretations of what can be experienced in mythical *Stoffe* has been briefly outlined above. In the following the focus will be on a closely related aspect, but one that has received less attention. The fact that transcending interpretations of what can be experienced find expression in mythical *Stoffe* is fairly obvious; but the investigation of the question what the circumstances are that favour the emergence of such transcending interpretations harbours a certain explosive potential that up to now has been

¹²⁰ Blumenberg 1985, 70-112, tries to describe other indicators for the “significance” of “the myth” (understood as a mind-set), such as, e.g., “simultaneity, latent identity, the closed-circle pattern, the recurrence of the same, the reciprocity between resistance and heightened existence, and the isolation of a thing or action, in the degree of reality ascribed to it, to the point of excluding every competing reality” (ibid. 70). To my mind, however, these indicators appear to be observable only in individual cases while the fundamental factor, unrecognized by Blumenberg, of transcending interpretations of actual or potential human experiences can be generalized.

largely underestimated. A closer inspection of this aspect will have momentous consequences for our understanding and interpretation of myths.

Mythical *Stoffe* arise from and exist in a dense network of innumerable signifiers within a culture (or several cultures), and situated among these cultural elements, they are above all else continually exposed to the influences of other *Erzählstoffe*. Mythical *Stoffe* are not created *ex nihilo*; they build on pre-existing material, and it is impossible for them to be or remain untouched by any other *Stoff* patterns, by concrete *Stoffe*, or by other elements of cultural significance.

This means that mythical *Stoffe*, by definition, bear traces of their encounters with elements to whose influence they have been exposed. Myths must be understood as a giant undertaking to analyse, interpret and process phenomena, events, and objects that are deemed important, on a *backdrop made up of diverse traditions and disparate models of interpretation*. Already within a single culture, for instance in the confrontation between different collectives, but inevitably with every inter-cultural exchange, when viewed from synchronic, diachronic, and diatopic perspectives, a mythical *Stoff* will always collide with other mythical *Stoffe*. Every mythical *Stoff* is locked in a reciprocal relationship with other *Stoffe* or, generally speaking, with other ways of trying to interpret human experiences. In myths we witness the processing not only of original experiences but also and even primarily a *re-processing of earlier such processes and their diversity*.

Attempting to resolve the inevitable emerging tensions does not – and this is just as vital – provide those engaging in the activity with any kind of intellectual entertainment; it is not a task performed for the gratification of what would in effect be a purely educational or academic interest. The opposite is true: the questions and problems confronted in mythical *Stoffe* are of the highest *relevance when it comes to interpreting and managing the human condition*, and this is especially the case where it concerns power relations and responsibilities in the realm of the gods. On the concrete, life-practical level, in order to lead a successful life it is important for humans to know which deities to worship and to invoke, how many sacrifices to make to whom and in what manner, whether and to what extent an “old”, by now disempowered, god must still be considered in religious rituals, who are the newly empowered deities currently in charge of their respective portfolios¹²¹. And it is mythical *Stoffe* which provide a fundamental knowledge base in this regard. The variety and intricacy of the

121 Cf. Blumenberg 1985, 169: “To know on whom one has to depend is always a source of security in one’s conduct, a source that is not without advantage for life, and the systems of which can hardly be less old than man himself [...]”

ways in which mythical *Stoffe* can be functionalized, as well as their closely related relevance for mastering and interpreting virtually all aspects of human life, point to the role of mythical *Stoffe* as immensely valuable “weapons”, so to speak, in dealing with reality.

It is not only the possession of such weapons but also their potency that is of importance: in an environment populated by different groups and cultures, with diverging views and perpetual rivalries, the side with the *more powerful* weapons, that is to say: the group whose myths are more compelling will have the upper hand. Myths are anything but “harmless fairy tales.” Behind mythical *Stoffe* are groups who pass down these *Stoffe* because, for one thing, their basic and their meta functions, as well as the numerous possibilities for further functionalization, make mythical *Stoffe* an extraordinarily powerful instrument in coping with reality¹²², and also because they promote interpretations which, on account of the issues encountered within them, are themselves judged to be of considerable importance. If the interpretation of certain objects of experience changes or is confronted with diverging interpretations of other groups or if for instance the self-identification of a collective changes, what is taking place is in effect a struggle for the authority of interpretation: one interpretation of a particular issue, or a group’s changed attitude towards its own identity, is aiming to replace or at least to modify another.

Conflicts over the power of interpretation have recently begun to attract the attention of scholars. We will proceed with our discussion on the basis of the definition offered by Philipp Stoellger¹²³: “Um *Deutungsmacht* handelt es sich, wenn das Vermögen oder die Ermöglichung oder Verwirklichung (bzw. deren Negationen) in Form von Deutung und nicht (ausschließlich) mit Zwangs-, Herrschafts- oder Gewaltmitteln realisiert wird” (“Power of *interpretation* is the realization, or the facilitation of power, or the ability to exercise it – or to deny it – in the form of interpretation and not (exclusively) by means of force, rulership, or violence”). The struggle for interpretational authority is both an intra-

122 On the important thematic complex addressing the “functions of myth” and the conceptual distinctions undertaken here in basic functions, meta functions and (primary and secondary) functionalizations, see in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 18.4.2.

123 Stoellger 2014, 28. On the difference between an “analysis of interpretational authority” (“*Deutungsmachtanalyse*”, Stoellger) and an analysis of discourse or power in the Foucaultian sense see *ibid.* 28 and 30 f, where he subsequently also deals briefly with the power conceptions of Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Hans Vorländer, and Daniel Schulz (*ibid.* 31-35). Stoellger himself defines “authority” (*ibid.* 27) as “eine Kraft oder ein Vermögen, bestimmtes Unmögliches möglich werden zu lassen und anderes nicht; oder bestimmtes Mögliches wirklich werden zu lassen und anderes nicht”.

and an inter-cultural phenomenon¹²⁴: “*Zwischen* Kulturen und *zwischen* Diskursen *in* einer Kultur bestehen Konflikte um Deutungsmacht” (“Struggles for interpretational authority occur *between* cultures, and *between* discourses *within* the same culture”).

By its very nature, the field of human cognition is limitless, and so is our freedom to interpret the world and our experiences within it: there is never only *one* attribution, or *one* explanation for anything that can be experienced; usually there is a broad spectrum of options, which are determined across and within cultures by different collectives. The transcending explanations and interpretations, which emerge from the engagement with any kind of experience, and which are chosen from this spectrum in each specific case, exist in perpetual competition with other explanations and interpretations. Because of this constant rivalry it is important for those in charge to have powerful instruments which allow them to spread their favoured version of events as effectively and as efficiently as possible. One such valuable tool for the propagation of one’s own ideas and interpretations of the world are myths¹²⁵.

4.4 Semantic Evidence for Stratification: Generating Value Judgements and Hierarchical Relationships

As has been shown above, power, understood as the exercise of the sole authority of interpretation in a specific (contested) context, is a crucial factor in the processes of stratification, to which all myths are subject. Claims to power and interpretational authority usually generate conflicts, which leave their mark on various areas of a culture, for instance in the form of palaces, temples, royal inscriptions, or coins, but also very much through mythical *Stoffe* and their variants in medially diverse manifestations.

124 Stoellger 2014, 3.

125 Cf. Rüpke 2013, 54: “In gewissem Sinne ist jede neue mythische Erzählung Kritik an vorangehenden Versionen, scheidet Wesentliches vom nun als unwesentlich Erachteten, korrigiert, unterdrückt und erfindet.” This, it must be added, is not only true with regard to diverging versions of the *same Stoff* but also in relation to *other Stoffe* and their versions. On the meaning of “stories” in discourses of authority see also Stoellger 2014, 28: authority, according to Stoellger, is “prinzipiell *relativ*, nicht absolut, und damit abhängig von sie konstituierenden, er- oder entmächtigenden Bedingungen (wie Ordnungen, Dispositiven) und ggf. auch Personen, Milieus oder Gruppen und Gemeinschaften (Anerkennung, Einverständnis), Institutionen (Einsetzung, Beamtung, Beauftragung), Geschichten, Traditionen und in summa: Medienprozessen und -praktiken.”

If we go looking for remnants and traces of power struggles in myths, for victors or vanquished opponents, we may even come across other indicators for the presence of layers (strata) in mythical *Stoff* variants than those we have already been able to identify on a more *formal* and *logical* level by the discovery of inconsistencies¹²⁶. In myths, not only are different traditions welded together with their joints still visible in the shape of inconsistencies that keen observers at least will be able to spot, but they also intertwine in ways that connect or cover up these joints *with the aid of Stoff sequences*. Identifying such *Stoff* sequences will allow us on a new *semantic* level to analyze patterns of thinking, and *narrative mechanisms* that employ these patterns in myths, as evidence for stratification – the results of power struggles over the authority of interpretation (*Deutungsmacht*)¹²⁷.

Generally when dealing with conflicts – and of course this also applies to dealing with conflicts of interpretational authority in myths – there are different procedures to resolve the issues arising from such conflicts. Even if at first glance the choice of available solutions appears overwhelming, through abstraction we can reduce the number of strategies at play in conflicts of interpretational power to basically two modes of thinking, and this can be done regardless of the extent to which individual strategies may differ. The two modes are moreover closely related¹²⁸: the creation of *value judgements* and *hierarchical relationships*. One's own interpretations are enhanced and elevated, deviant or contradictory material is devalued and subordinated. Traces of value judgements and hierarchical relationships are the criteria which allow us to detect processes of stratification on a semantic level. Wherever such thought patterns are found, they can be read as traces of and pointers to conflicts of interpreta-

126 On this see above Chapter 4.2.

127 The recognition that conflicts between different *Stoffe*, or between the collectives that generate, transmit, and modify them, do not merely influence the shape of a mythical *Stoff* but, in the process, contribute to the stratification of its variants, has to this date not received any systematic attention, nor have its implications been fully explored or made more accessible within the discipline of mythological research for further interpretation. While some sporadic new approaches in recent scholarship have shown promise in their orientation toward a stratification-specific analysis of ancient myths, with an eye to the resulting tensions in *Stoff-on-Stoff* encounters, they largely lacked a specific methodology and the fixation within a larger, overarching theoretical framework. As a rule, moreover, the studies are focused on texts, not on *Stoffe*. Cf., e.g., Danek 1998; Suter 2002; Ayali-Darshan 2010; Fleming/Milstein 2010; Yasumura 2011 (with predominant focus on texts, not on mythical *Stoffe*, see *ibid.* 6: “my first concern is the texts themselves, not mythology”); more *Stoff*-focused A. Zgoll 2011 and 2013.

128 See on this in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 19.2.

tional power; they function as semantic indicators for the presence of multiple layers (strata).

The study, discussed in previous sections, of inconsistencies, which owe their existence to the polymorphy of the *Stoff* and to interferences between *Stoffe*, should not be seen as an approach superseding other methods. It does not claim a monopoly on the interpretation of medial manifestations, texts for instance, which make use of mythical *Stoffe*; but what it has to offer is a set of instruments to explore new perspectives. It can be applied – and in some cases it must be applied – where traditional approaches reach their limits, and inconsistencies in medial manifestations of mythical *Stoffe* end up being misinterpreted, interpreted away, or declared to be fundamentally inexplicable. Taking note of mechanisms which imply the generation of value judgements and hierarchical relationships is absolutely indispensable for an in-depth understanding of myths, because such mechanisms are always at work in myths even though their traces may have been obliterated beyond recognition.

Of course, in mythical *Stoffe* (or their variants), thought patterns, such as generating value judgements and hierarchical relationships, are not expressed directly or in plain language as they would be, for instance, in a scientific or scholarly treatise; instead they will appear *transformed*. As mythical *Stoff* variants constitute interconnected sequences of minimal action-bearing units (hylemes), such thought patterns do not occur in the form of definitional statements but at their most elaborate form especially in the depiction of concrete actions, which present themselves in single or several interconnected hylemes¹²⁹. The selection of particular hylemes or hyleme sequences, sometimes as small an act as the insertion of a particular determination, can therefore be understood as mechanisms by which value judgements and hierarchical relationships have been encoded (“transformed”) into the narrative form of an *Erzählstoff*.

Examining medial manifestations of mythical *Stoff* variants for the presence of such narrative mechanisms turns out to be a thoroughly fascinating undertaking because once again, as with the exploration of inconsistencies, the smooth surface of the narrative flow is made transparent for diverse traditions to shine through, as well as the layered (stratified) nature of the *Stoff* “substrate,” which is precisely what our stratification analysis aims to lay bare. Most of the time passages that employ such narrative mechanisms are of vital importance for a proper understanding of the *Stoff* in question and its inherent

129 On shorter and more hidden forms of generating value judgements and hierarchical relationships see C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 20.9.

deeper issues, as this is often where crucial points are being disputed and where we are most likely to find traces of conflicts over interpretational authority.

The creation of value judgements and hierarchical relationships we encounter in the context of such conflicts foster the recurrence of particular narrative patterns: fights or the building of relationships between protagonists, changes in the ownership of properties, the “retiring”, expulsion, degradation, or capture of protagonists, among many other. It is impossible within the scope of this contribution to discuss each of these in detail; examples have been discussed *in extenso* elsewhere¹³⁰, and are also featured in the present volume.

5 The Need for a Stratification-Based Interpretation of Myths and a Definition of Myth

These far-reaching suggestions regarding the *theory* of myth, the essential polymorphy of a mythical *Stoff* in general and the polystratic nature of its variants in particular, which are primarily the result of past conflicts over interpretational authority and must be considered in the analysis of any concrete manifestation of a *Stoff* variant, have fundamental consequences for the *interpretation* of myths. They call into question the basic assumption on which hermeneutic, structure-analytical, and even structuralist approaches have still relied: that a mythical *Stoff*, manifested in a concrete variant, or even the *Stoff* in its polymorphous totality constitutes a structural entity whose individual elements are arranged on the same plane and can therefore be made to refer to each other, be it in functional or semantic terms, or both; indeed that they *must* be placed within the same frame of reference in order for us to be able to make sense of a mythical *Stoff*¹³¹.

The fact that this applies even to structure-analytical and structural approaches is not immediately obvious, and we will return to the matter in more detail below. A structure-analytical examination that is oriented in a horizontal

130 See C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 20.1-8.

131 Cf. Henrichs 1987, 255: “In recent decades the foremost analysts of Greek myths have approached each mythical narrative as a cohesive and organised whole composed of constitutive elements which contribute to its overall structure and which are designed to bring out its inherent meaning.” Such an approach is also pursued by Bouvrie 2002, 62, who sees myths as “symbolic tales”, and she explains that “‘symbolic tales’ are disguised as tales with a linear movement, and causal reasoning, behind which there may be hidden an essential structure of (affective cultural) meaning.”

direction, as is the case with Vladimir Propp and partially with Roland Barthes as well, is aimed at syntagmatic *Stoff* units in a functional relationship. Similarly, a structural analysis à la Claude Lévi-Strauss will assume a vertical perspective on a paradigmatic level and attempt to identify combinations of different significant units that are either mutually complementary or mutually exclusive (“mythemes” or “bundles of relations”)¹³². Functional or semantic structures of a mythical *Stoff* are made apparent, or the structures defined in this way are compared across different myths, all under the assumption that the different elements and units of a *Stoff* can be located on the same interpretational plane, indeed that they *must* be placed in a common frame of reference: especially from a structuralist perspective, all elements of a *Stoff* exist in a “system of meanings”, where each element receives its specific significance in relation to other elements with a different meaning¹³³. Lévi-Strauss, for one, does break up the narrative structure of a mythical *Stoff* and rearranges it according to semantic criteria, but in his method the individual significant elements, e.g. of “*the* Oedipus myth”, are still located on a common plane of understanding and interpretation on which the individual “mythemes” can and must be related to each other in order to unfold their respective meanings within the framework of the *Stoff* as a whole¹³⁴. Lévi-Strauss thus aims for a “deeper” semantic dimension that he claims can be located underneath the narrative surface formed by the totality of all variants of the same *Stoff*. But this premise of a uniform whole - in the shape of a single *Stoff* variant - is problematic, to say the least, and even more questionable is the assumption that a conglomerate of multiple *Stoff* variants can be viewed as a single unit (“*the*” Oedipus myth)¹³⁵, which conceals beneath it a semantic substructure with a common plane of reference.

Hermeneutic, structure-analytical, and structuralist methodologies approach the interpretation of a mythical *Stoff* under the premise that the *Stoff* is an entity that allows individual elements to take on different functions or meanings, depending on their connections, but where in principle each significant, functionally important, or action-bearing element can be assigned a meaningful

132 Cf. on the opposition of “syntagmatic” and “paradigmatic” structuralism Csapo 2005, 189-226, and on the problematic nature of these terminologies *ibid.* 234-237.

133 The works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson in theoretical linguistics form the background and the prerequisite for these approaches; see on this the remarks in Csapo 2005, 181-189 and 212-217.

134 On Lévi-Strauss see in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 5.2.

135 On the problematic nature of such an approach, and of such an understanding of *Stoff*, see above, Chapter 3.2.

position in relation to other elements, and that it is possible, in this way, to arrive at an all-encompassing explanation.

The implicit assumption relied upon by conventional approaches, of a meaningful relationship which connects, in principle, all elements of a *Stoff* variant – or even those of a mythical *Stoff* in its entirety – is in this form untenable. It would be as if we tried to explain the modern appearance of the Cathedral of Syracuse as a uniform design by a single architect whose aim it was to fulfil a certain artistic intention or make a specific statement by combining a variety of different architectural styles (Greek Doric columns, Byzantine masonry with oculus windows, Renaissance side portals, baroque frontal facade, and other details). Such an attempt would certainly lead to results but these results would hardly be adequate to the object in question.

The variant of a mythical *Stoff* has a particular structure that can be analytically dissected to reveal its constituent elements. This however does not mean that all elements taken together must form a consistent whole. Quite the reverse is true, and we must instead assume that a mythical *Stoff* variant is not a uniform design made of one piece, quasi *ex nihilo*, but a motley collection of elements whose provenance may exhibit a high degree of diversity. Only when the analysis of the superficial *structure* of a *Stoff* variant is complemented by an additional effort to identify the different *layers (strata)* associated with individual elements, can we expect to do justice to the complexity of the object under investigation.

Recognition of the polystratic nature of mythical *Stoff* variants necessarily leads to the conclusion that we must reckon with multiple layers, or planes of reference, when interpreting the manifestation of a *Stoff* variant, and certainly for the interpretation of a *Stoff* in its entirety. While this conclusion is directed against the hermeneutic type of approach, it does not imply, in a deconstructivist sense, the dissolution of meaningful content in favour of an arbitrary plurality of interpretations that offer infinite possibilities to the recipient who is solely in charge of the process. A mythical *Stoff*, or its variants, comprises multiple layers of meaning but not an infinite number, and these layers exist: they are not continually being *read into* the *Stoff* or its variants by the recipient. An entirely different question and one that can only be answered in individual cases is whether, or to which extent, these multiple layers of meaning can still be identified and decoded.

A myth can be defined as an *Erzählstoff* which is polymorphic through its variants and – depending on the variant – polystratic; an *Erzählstoff* in which transcending interpretations of what can be experienced are combined into a

hyleme sequence with an implicit claim to relevance for the interpretation and mastering of the human condition¹³⁶.

A *Stoff* deconstruction in the form of a stratification analysis that relies on the analysis of individual *Stoff* variants for their hyleme composition, is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental prerequisite for semantic, functional, or historical interpretations and classification efforts. In undertaking these efforts we must consider and examine individual layers as well as the multi-layered (polystratic) final product of the *Stoff* variant. Only a stratification analysis can do justice to the polystratic nature of mythical *Stoff* variants and create the conditions in the first place that allow us to assign to the different individual strata and to the final, composite *Stoff* variant their appropriate historical contexts, meanings, and functions – as far as possible¹³⁷.

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136 On the problem of defining "myth" see in detail C. Zgoll 2019, Chapter 23.6.

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