Thieme (1949:36f.) first proposed an etymology of the root *vidh- in which he argued that this root was secondarily abstracted from certain root aorist forms of the preverb + verb collocation vi-dhā- ‘distribute’. Thieme’s ideas were later supported and expanded upon by Hoffmann (1969), and the views of these two scholars on this issue are now widely accepted.

Hoffmann argued that the 1pl. optative form vidhéma should be traced back to a Pre-RVic *ui-d⁹H-iH-ma, a form which—minus the preverb—ultimately stems from a PIE root aorist optative *d⁹h₁-iH₁-me. As shown by Greek root aorist optatives of the type θεῖμεν < PIE *d⁹éh₁-iH₁-me, this reconstruction with full grade root + zero grade optative marker is justified for late PIE (Hoffmann 1969:5, 1968, Jasanoff 1991, 2009:49f.). In Vedic, however, root aorist optatives built to laryngeal final roots were all rebuilt with a sequence -eyā-: ex. stheyāma ‘stand’ [1pl.] ← pre-Vedic *sthēma < PIE *stēh₂-iH₁-me (cf. Greek σταῖμεν). In Hoffmann’s scenario, a Pre-RVic root aorist optative *vidhēma (< *ui-d⁹H-iH-ma) escaped being regularly rebuilt to *vidhēma because it was analyzed synchronically as a thematic aorist optative to a new root *vidh-, i.e., *yidb(H)-á-iH-ma.

Turning now to the aorist participle vidhánt-, we note that Vedic roots in -ā (< PIE laryngeal final roots) typically show a long vowel when forming a root aorist participle: ex. pānt- from the root pā- ‘drink’, sthānt- from the root sthā- ‘stand’. If, as Thieme and Hoffmann argue, vidhánt- derives from vi-dhā-, we would thus expect *vidhánt-. To explain the irregular short vowel in vidhánt-, Hoffmann appeals to the fact that root aorist participles to roots not ending in -ā show zero grade of the root: ex. gm-ánt- (root aorist of gam- ‘go’), kr-ánt- (root aorist of kar- ‘do’). Additional evidence added from root aorist participles such as OAv. dantō (to the root dā- ‘do, place’) and Gk. θείς, θέντος ‘placing’ show that zero grade of the root was also likely the norm for laryngeal final roots in PIE. Hoffmann (1969:4f.) argued that the extraction of *vidh- from vi-dhā- took place at a time before the RV when an old zero grade root aorist participle *vi-dhánt- still existed. Similar to the scenario posited for vidhēma, a pre-Vedic root aorist participle *vi-dhánt- is assumed to have escaped secondary lengthening to *vi-dhánt- because it was analyzed synchronically as a thematic aorist participle to a new root *vidh-.

If Thieme and Hoffmann’s ideas about the origin of vidhēma and vidhánt- are correct, these forms provide important evidence that root aorist optative and participle formations to laryngeal final roots still preserved their archaic vocalism up to a time preceding the attestation of the RV. This has important implications for our understanding of how root aorist optatives and participles formed to laryngeal final roots developed from Proto-Indo-Iranian to Vedic.

In this talk, I draw from multiple lines of evidence to show that Thieme and Hoffmann’s proposal that forms such as vidhēma and vidhánt- reflect archaic root aorist forms of vi-dhā- must be abandoned. Furthermore, I show that Thieme and Hoffmann’s ideas about the origin of the root *vidh- need refinement and modification. I argue that *vidh- was not abstracted from vi-dhā- within Indo-Iranian but that it goes back to an independent root that already existed in PIE, as shown by cognates in Latin and Tocharian. This root is *h₁yid⁹(e)H₁- ‘divide, distribute’, which itself most likely goes back to an original compound *dżyi-d⁹(e)H₁- ‘place in two, divide’ in which the first member of the compound was incorporated into the root (Lubotsky 1994:204). At least in Indo-Iranian, the root *vidh- built only thematic aorists, and the optative form vidhēma and participle vidhánt- are to be interpreted as such both diachronically and synchronically—they are not relics of archaic forms. Finally, I discuss in detail the semantics, syntax, and suppletive relationships of *vidh- in the RV and argue that the apparent meaning ‘distribute’ for *vidh— a meaning which is often used to support an etymological connection with vi-dhā—is difficult to motivate when compared to other semantically and syntactically similar verbs.


