



Canonisation as Innovation. Anchoring Cultural Formation in the First Millennium BCE

Damien Agut-Labordere, Miguel John Versluys

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Canonisation as Innovation

*Anchoring Cultural Formation
in the First Millennium BCE*

Edited by

Damien Agut-Labordère
Miguel John Versluys



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Cover illustration: Establishing a canon for Cycladic marble figurines: the planning of a three-figure group, now in Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum (drawing by Tina Ross). With permission.

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Contents

Foreword	vii
Preface	viii
List of Figures	xi
Notes on Contributors	xiii

PART 1

Introduction

- 1 Canon Creation/Destruction and Cultural Formation: Authority, Reception, Canonicity, Marginality 3
John K. Papadopoulos
- 2 *Mémoire volontaire?* Canonisation as Cultural Innovation in Antiquity 34
Miguel John Versluys

PART 2

Case Studies

- 3 “*The Tablets I Spoke about Are Good to Preserve until Far-off Days*”: An Overview on the Creation and Evolution of Canons in Babylonia and Assyria from the Middle Babylonian Period until the End of Cuneiform Sources 83
Marie Young
- 4 Inserting or Ruminating: How Demotic Became Canonic 130
Damien Agut-Labordère
- 5 Creation or Confirmation of the Canon? The Measures of Lycurgus and the Selection of Athenian Tragedy in Antiquity 152
André Lardinois
- 6 How Canonization Transformed Greek Tragedy 164
William Marx

- 7 Fixer une mémoire : observations méthodologiques, philologiques et historiques sur la clôture du canon de la Bible hébraïque 178
Hervé Gonzalez
- 8 Challenging the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators: From *kanôn* to Canon 218
Casper C. de Jonge
- 9 L'Arétalogie d'Isis : biographie d'un texte canonique 243
Laurent Bricault
- 10 Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion 263
Alessandra Rolle

PART 3

Conclusion

- 11 What Becomes of the Uncanonical? 287
Greg Woolf
- Index 297

Foreword

EUHORMOS is an international book series intended for monographs and collective volumes on Greco-Roman antiquity. Specifically, we welcome for publication manuscripts related to the concept of ‘anchoring innovation’ by classical scholars of all disciplines from all over the world. Books in this series will be published as much as possible in Open Access. EUHORMOS is one of the results financed by the Dutch so-called Gravitation Grant (2017), awarded to a consortium of scholars from OIKOS, the National Research School in Classical Studies. See <https://anchoringinnovation.nl/>, where we also list earlier results from this research program.

The ancient world saw many examples of change and innovations. The unique accessibility of materials from and about this period in the ancient Mediterranean frequently makes it possible to analyze successful and unsuccessful ‘anchoring’ of change: the various ways in which ‘the new’ could (or could not) be connected to and embedded in what was already deemed familiar. ‘New’ and ‘old’ are mostly not used as objective labels, but also a matter of the perception, framing, and valuation by relevant social groups and actors. ‘The new’ is not restricted to the technical or scientific domains, but can also include the ‘new information’ imparted by speakers through linguistic anchoring strategies; innovations in literature and the arts; political, social, cultural, legal, military, or economic innovation; and new developments in material culture.

The name ‘Euhormos’ itself is well-anchored. It is the Homeric term for a harbor ‘in which the anchoring is good’, although the careful reader will notice that danger is never far away. This dynamic nature of ‘anchoring’ and the risks involved in it are embraced by our research team as part of this title. For now though we will focus on its auspicious aspect, since we are looking forward to affording ‘good anchorage’ to studies contributing to a better understanding of ‘anchoring innovation’ in Greco-Roman Antiquity.

Ineke Sluiter

Academic Director

Leiden, August 2019

On behalf of the Governing Board of the Anchoring Innovation
Program

Preface

In the summer of 2020, when the editing for this volume was began, the Dutch minister of Education, Culture and Science received the “new” canon of Dutch history. It was compiled by a committee consisting of professional historians who worked on this revision for several years. The new canon was front-page news. Discussions about its content made the headlines of all the national press and resulted in many opinion pieces and reactions, in newspaper articles and via online platforms. The first canon of the Netherlands had been presented in 2006 with the primary goal of serving as a tool in (high school) education. However, it was clearly also meant to serve as a guiding principle for a country that, at the time, was only slowly discovering that it was less confident about its identity than it had always thought it was. “The Dutch canon” consists of 50 windows into the past. These windows are constituted by individuals, objects, movements or important events. Taken together, they are meant to illustrate the essence of what the Netherlands and Dutch identity are about. For this most recent revision, which started only after a decade, 36 windows were rewritten; 4 changed in name and 10 (that is 20% of the total) were replaced. Among the most eye-catching replacements was that of Willem Drees, Dutch prime minister after ww II and founder of the welfare state, famous for his simplicity and thriftiness, by Marga Klompé, the first and very influential female Dutch minister. There was also the addition to the canon of Anton de Kom, an anti-colonial writer and activist from Surinam, son of a former slave, who joined the communist resistance in ww II and died in a concentration camp in 1945. In many important ways, the canon is responding to new values in Dutch society. Most discussions in the press focussed on individual examples, yet ultimately they were about the tension that is inherent in the very process of canonisation itself. On the one hand, a canon is supposed to be stable or even immutable to retain its authority; excluding Drees was considered most inappropriate by the leader of the socialist party and others. On the other hand, a canon constantly needs to change if it wants to remain relevant; the inclusion of more women like Klompé was widely applauded. The committee of historians responsible for the revision was very explicit with its advice to the minister to revise the canon in yet another decade, once again. In a reader’s letter to a newspaper, a high school teacher even suggested to always keep one window of the canon open for people to be able to add their own content. Current opinion, therefore, seems to favour the idea that the ideal canon is a moving canon that is constantly in flux. It is important to realise, however, that this seemingly contradicts what has often been considered as the defining

characteristics of canons, such as they have been functioning throughout history: their stability and coherence. It would be rather difficult to imagine, for instance, a blank Chapter at the end of every New Testament Bible for each reader to add his or her own book to the canon of 27.

This volume is about that intriguing tension and investigates how canonisation is able to work as innovation. Our main hypothesis is that we should understand this innovation as a form of anchoring cultural formation. As the 50 Dutch windows illustrate so well, canonisation takes identity from the past in an attempt to explain the present. As such, it is mostly part of the inward-looking processes of convention and tradition that characterise cultural formation. The other part of how cultures are formed, function, and develop, however, is constituted by outward-looking processes of divergence and innovation. With canonisation, we argue, these two come together. Often, but not always, as a process of creative friction through which convention and divergence, tradition and innovation are mediated through anchoring. Canonisation is therefore fundamental to the sustainability of societies. When the Dutch minister received the new canon, she remarked: “History doesn’t change but the way in which we view our history does”. With this remark, she seriously underestimated the ability of canonisation to change history, as this book will illustrate at length.

This volume, therefore, is meant as a (theoretical) exploration of the concept of canonisation, with Afro-Eurasian societies from roughly the first millennium BCE constituting our case study. It focuses on canonisation as a form of cultural formation, asking why and how canonisation works in this way and explaining the importance of the first millennium BCE for these questions – and vice versa. As a result of this particular focus, notions like anchoring, cultural memory, embedding and innovation play an important role throughout the book. By paying attention to a variety of specific, local contexts – Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, Roman – we have purposefully opted for a “cross-cultural perspective”. It is important to underline, however, that we see all these particular examples of canonisation as being related and part of a more global, Afro-Eurasian development during this first millennium BCE. To test and develop this idea further, it would be commendable to also add examples from Central Asia and East Asia (China) to the *tableau* here presented. This was something we certainly aimed for but did, for practical reasons, not achieve in the two workshops on which this volume is based.

The introduction presents, in two articles, an overview of the various definitions and earlier opinions concerning canon and canonisation, as well as many examples that show how canonisation works as a socio-cultural process – what it did and why. The essays suggest that increasing Afro-Eurasian connectivity

and the development of a cosmopolitan world that stretched from the Atlantic to the Oxus, one of the hallmarks defining the first millennium BCE, necessitated canonisation as cultural formation more than ever before. It is interesting to compare this to Globalisation processes in our own era. The eight specifically commissioned case studies, ranging widely but all consistently focussing on canonisation as a form of anchoring cultural formation, illustrate this in a variety of ways. They converge in a concluding essay that brings the individual case studies together and critically evaluates the aims of the volume as a whole, especially also with regard to the notion of increasing connectivity. Note that we have not standardised the spelling of canonisation versus canonization throughout the volume.

The first expert meeting on which this book is based was held at the University of Nanterre on 21 September, 2018; we would like to thank *ARSCAM* (UMR 7041) for its (financial) support. The second expert meeting was held at Leiden University on 7 June, 2019; with many thanks to the Leiden University Profile Area *Global Interactions* for its generous funding and assistance. The compilation of this volume was supported by the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ocw) through the Dutch Research Council (NWO), as part of the Anchoring Innovation Gravitation Grant research agenda of *οΙΚΟΣ*, the National Research School in Classical Studies, the Netherlands (project number 024.003.012).

We are grateful to the editors of *Euhormos* for accepting this volume as part of their series and to Ineke Sluiter and André Lardinois for their critical feedback on the volume as a whole. Anchoring Innovation PhD candidates Suzan van de Velde and Merlijn Veltman were of great assistance with the editing process and the preparation of the index. Many thanks, lastly, to the contributors of this book for taking up the intellectual challenges we posed them and for two memorable days in Nanterre and Leiden. Let our discussions continue.

Canonisation is a contested issue and canons are always debated, as illustrated by the recent events in the Netherlands briefly described above. We are confident that by providing a “deep history” of canonisation and anchoring cultural formation, this volume can significantly add to those current debates by providing them with chronological depth – and thus placing them into sharper relief.

Damien Agut-Labordère (Nanterre) & Miguel John Versluys (Leiden)
February 2022

Figures

- 1.1 a) Metrological relief from Salamis, Greece, 4th century BCE, limestone, $113.5 \times 79.3 \times 16.2$ cm; b) Diagram comparing Leonardo da Vinci's adaptation of Vitruvian Man (left) with Salamis Man (right). Scale 1:20, overlaid with the principal proportional relationships in terms of a 6-foot arm span and height (H) (= Wilson Jones 2000, 83, fig. 8) 8
- 1.2 Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man (*Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio* or *L'Uomo Vitruviano*), ca. 1490. Drawing accompanied by notes based on the work of the Roman architect, Vitruvius. Now in the Gabinetto dei disegni e stampe of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice 9
- 1.3 The first Egyptian canon. Drawing by Tina Ross, after Iverson 1955, fig. 7 (foldout) 10
- 1.4 The second Egyptian canon. Drawing by Tina Ross, after Iversen 1955, fig. 4 (foldout) 11
- 1.5 Three of the many techniques used to establish a canon for Cycladic marble figurines: (a) the planning of the harp player in Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, 85.AA.103; (b) the planning of the three-figure group in Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, 77/59; (c) the "classical" four-part canon for folded-arm figurines, this one in Stockholm, Medelhavsmuseet, 62.10, attributed to the Fitzwilliam Master. Drawings by Tina Ross after Getz-Preziosi 1987, 42, fig. 21a; 46, fig. 24; 91, fig. 37a 13
- 1.6 a) Sketch of the kouros of Samos, a 6th-century BCE Archaic Greek statue now in the Archaeological Museum of Vathi in Samos. The length of a square of the grid corresponds to a Samian half cubit; b) Johann Gottfried Schadow (German, 1764–1850), drawing of the Venus Medici, 1834. Drawings by Tina Ross, (a) after Kyrieleis 1996, fig. 7; (b) after Schadow 1883, pl. 19 14
- 1.7 An Indian canon. Drawing by Tina Ross after Gopinatha Rao 1998 (1920), pl. 10 (= Borbein 2019, 27, fig. 3) 14
- 1.8 Aztec units of measure referenced primarily by elements of the human body, including hands, arms, feet, steps (indicated by legs), and even bones and the human heart, but also other symbols, like arrows or darts. Drawing by Tina Ross, after Clark 2010, 151, fig. 12.2 15
- 1.9 Inka khipu, Centro Mallqui, Leymebamba, Peru. Photo courtesy of Gary Urton 16
- 1.10 Marble statuette of Euripides (inscribed ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ on the right flank of the base), now in the Louvre, 2nd century CE. found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome in 1704. Photo Sarah Morris and John Papadopoulos 20

- 1.11 The Apotheosis of Homer by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1827 24
- 1.12 The School of Athens by Raphael, painted between 1509 and 1511 25
- 3.1 Map of the Ancient Near East 87
- 4.1 Comparative evolution of the number of Demotic contracts with the number of literary papyrus 133
- 4.2 Cross of Lothair. Front side. 50 cm height, 38.5 cm width, 2.3 cm depth. Aachen Cathedral Treasury. About 1000 AD. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croix_de_Lothaire 136
- 4.3 Textual genres and degree of canonicity in Egyptian culture of the 1st millennium BCE: an oceanic metaphor 146

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PART 1

Introduction



Canon Creation/Destruction and Cultural Formation: Authority, Reception, Canonicity, Marginality

John K. Papadopoulos

I want to begin with a text that is among the most canonical of all canons, the epitome of canonical law: the Christian Bible, especially the New Testament, as it succinctly brings to the fore many issues that I would like to raise. The first of these is well framed by Bruce Metzger:

The recognition of the canonical status of the several books of the New Testament was the result of a long and gradual process, in the course of which certain writings, regarded as authoritative, were separated from a much larger body of early Christian literature. Although this was one of the most important developments in the thought and practice of the early Church, history is virtually silent as to how, when, and by whom this was brought about.¹

The four canonical gospels of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – were probably written between 70 and 100 CE, and, without getting into the details of the order in which they were composed, there are certain things that they share in common.² All four are ostensibly anonymous, as it appears that the modern names by which they are known were added in the 2nd century, if not later, in the early 4th century, and it is likely that none was written by an eyewitness who knew Jesus.³ The very creation of this canon may well have been something of a reaction or response to Marcion (85–160 CE), who rejected the entire Old Testament (and its God), and most of the New Testament, with the exception of the Gospel of Luke, which he redacted and considered the one and only gospel; sometimes cast as a heretic, Marcion

¹ Metzger 1987, 1.

² For the date of the writing, see Burkett 2002, 121, 215–216; some accounts note 65–110 CE.

³ For the anonymity of the gospels, see Burkett 2002, 121; Ehrman 2003, 3. For the names being added in the 2nd century CE, see Gamble 1985, 23–25; for an early 4th century date, see Hahneman 1992, 1–4, 129–131, following Sundberg 1973. For the likelihood that none was written by an eyewitness who knew Jesus, see Reddish 2011, 13, 42.

seems to have accelerated the process of fixing the canon.⁴ In any case, the earliest orthodox canon, which included Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, was the so-called Muratorian Canon, which was followed by a still more comprehensive list prepared by Eusebius.⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–202 CE) went further by insisting that there were only four gospels: in his *Against Heresies* (3.9.8), he states:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are, since there are four directions of the world in which we are, and four principal winds ... The four living creatures symbolize the four Gospels ... and there were four principal covenants with humanity, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ.⁶

The story, as presented thus far, deals only with the early history – the first two centuries – of the New Testament. As for its later transmission, there are numerous cautionary tales. In dealing with what we know and do not know of the New Testament, Bart Ehrman relates that in some instances we do not even know what the words of the original writers were, whereas in other places we can see how the text was changed in interesting ways.⁷ Among other things, Ehrman reveals that the King James Bible, for example, was based on corrupted and inferior manuscripts that in many cases do not represent the meaning of the original text;⁸ that the story of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11) does not belong in the Bible;⁹ and that scribal errors were so common in antiquity that the author of the Book of Revelation threatened damnation to anyone who added or took away words from the text.¹⁰

As with physical matter and anti-matter, there were the canonical gospels and the non-canonical, not least the Gnostic Gospels, together with other writings. The list of these is numerous,¹¹ and I mention only a few: the Gospels of Peter, Mary, Phillip, Thomas, and the Gospel of Truth.¹² The process of the

4 Metzger 1987, 90–99; Burkett 2002, 107; Ehrman 2003, 103–109.

5 Metzger 1987, 191–207; Burkett 2002, 108–109; Ehrman 2003, 240–246.

6 Quoted by Metzger 1987, 154–155; see also Ehrman 2003, 239–240.

7 Ehrman 2005, 15.

8 Ehrman 2005, 208–210.

9 Ehrman 2005, 63–65.

10 Ehrman 2005, 53–56.

11 See Ehrman 2003, xi–xii.

12 For the Gospel of Peter, see Burkett 2002, 239–242, 553–556; for the Gospel of Mary, see Pagels 1989 (1979), 11–13; for the Gospel of Phillip, see Pagels 1989 (1979), 16–17; for the Gospel of Thomas, see Pagels 1989 (1979), 126–132; for the Gospel of Truth, see Pagels 1989 (1979), 125–126.

canonization of the New Testament was a complex story of forgeries – such as the proto-Gospel of James, among many others, whether cast as an ancient discovery of a forgery or the discovery of an ancient forgery – added to which was the falsification of sacred texts, alterations of texts, and lost texts.¹³ On the flip side, there were real discoveries that added both flesh and nuance to the story, but invariably made it both more complex and fascinating, such as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt in 1945.¹⁴ Whether cast as Gnostic or other, “authority” lies at the core of canonization.¹⁵

As Elaine Pagels so nicely put it:

It is the winners who write history – their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity. Ecclesiastical Christians first defined the terms (naming themselves ‘orthodox’ and their opponents ‘heretics’); then they proceeded to demonstrate – at least to their own satisfaction – that their triumph was historically inevitable, or, in religious terms, ‘guided by the Holy Spirit.’¹⁶

I will return to the issue of authority, but it is important to establish first the meaning and parameters of “canon” and “canonicity” looking well beyond the Christian use and understanding of these terms.

1 The Meaning and Measure of Canon

In *The Archaeology of Measurement: Comprehending Heaven, Earth and Time in Ancient Societies*, Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley note:

It was a profoundly significant step when, in the remote past, a human being, in undertaking an act of measurement, formulated the notion of measure. For to measure – whether in the dimensionality of weight, or of distance or of time – is to develop a new kind of material engagement with the world that is at once practical and conceptual. It is an act of cognition – a cognitive act. Such an act has philosophical implications,

13 See Ehrman 2003, 9–89, 215–227.

14 Pagels 1987, xiii–xxxvi; Ehrman 2003, 51–55.

15 For a succinct definition of the term Gnostic, see Burkett 2002, 407; Ehrman 2003, 116–134, 185–188.

16 Pagels 1989 (1979), 142.

for measurement allows us to transcend the limitations of the here and the now. It involves observation, and it facilitates construction. It encapsulates the seeds of mathematics and of science. It makes possible architecture and design. It is the basis for systematic observation and prediction. It leads on towards astronomy and cosmology. It is the basis for any complex economic system. It is one of the foundations of all urban civilizations.¹⁷

For measurement to work there had to be a commonly agreed-upon set of rules or laws, a conceptual framework that permitted the task of measurement to take place. This is where canon comes in.

The word “canon” is a Greek word and it is useful to begin with what the ancient Greeks meant by it. The etymology of the word is well known: the term comes from the ancient Greek word *kanon* (κάνων), which means a reed or a rod used as an instrument for measurement.¹⁸ In later times, *kanon* – or, more accurately, *canon* – developed the secondary sense of “rule or law,” and this sense has become the primary meaning in most modern European languages.¹⁹ In Classical Greek, the word is used in many different contexts. At its most basic level, it can indicate a variety of objects: (1) stave (preserving the shape of a shield); (2) weaver’s rod; (3) ruddled line used by masons or carpenters, ruler; (4) beam or tongue of a balance; (5) curtain rod; (6) reeds of a wind instrument; (7) bedpost; (8) poles from which the *ancilia* (sacred shields) were suspended when carried; and (9) bars of a window. In music, *canon* could refer to (10) a monochord (in Vitruvius 10.8.3, *canon* refers to the sound board of a water organ); and (11) crossbar of a kithara.²⁰ At a broader level, *canon* in Greek refers to a rule or standard. In art, the word had the meaning of “model” or “standard,” as in the famous statue by Polykleitos.²¹ In grammar, the word refers to a general rule or a metrical scheme showing all possible forms of a verb. In astronomy and chronology, *canon* has the general sense of a “table of dates,” or a “system of chronology”; it also refers to a limit or boundary. A further meaning in Greek is as an assessment for taxation or tariff.²²

I have discussed elsewhere that the association in Greek of *canon* as a measuring rod with the process of measurement is evident in several reliefs that are

17 Morley and Renfrew 2010, 1.

18 Liddell, Scott, and Jones 2006, s.v. “κάνων.”

19 See Guillory 1995, 233.

20 See further Papadopoulos 2019.

21 For which see Papadopoulos 2019; see further Kreikenbom 1990, 59–94.

22 Liddell, Scott, and Jones 2006, s.v. “κάνων.”

metrological in nature. As Mark Wilson Jones states: “Ancient art and architecture were steeped in mathematical harmony,” and he goes on to mention measuring instruments and standards recovered from the Egyptian and Roman periods before discussing two Greek metrological reliefs.²³ The first relief, normally dated to the Hellenistic period, has been long known; it was already published in 1874 and is now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.²⁴ The second was discovered in 1985 on the island of Salamis, near Athens (Fig. 1.1a–b).²⁵ The Salamis relief is more complex than the one in Oxford, though both confirm what was already known from our Classical testimonia: that ancient units of measure were derived from the human body.²⁶ Moreover, the units of measure in the Classical period were already international, since they attest to the use or familiarity in Attica of the so-called Attic and Doric feet, the Egyptian royal cubit, and/or the Samian foot, together with other units.²⁷ Wilson Jones’ contextualization of the Salamis relief through Leonardo da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” (Fig. 1.2) is apt, as it unites measure with proportion. The very title of the drawing – “Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio” or, more simply, “L’Uomo Vitruviano” – as is evident in Leonardo’s accompanying notes, is based on the work of the Roman architect Vitruvius, who, in *De Architectura* (3.1.1–5), described the human figure as the principal source of proportion among the Classical orders of architecture.²⁸ For Vitruvius, the ideal human body should be eight heads high, which provides the proportions for Leonardo’s drawing.

The ancient world had no shortage of proportional canons, particularly in architecture and sculpture, some accompanied by literary treatises, perhaps the most famous of which was the Egyptian. The ancient Egyptians had, in fact, two canons, the first dating back to the Old Kingdom (Fig. 1.3), and the second canon, which replaced it (Diodorus Siculus 1.98.5–9); this second canon was in use from the 7th century BCE to the Roman period, and it thus overlapped with the *floruit* of Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman sculpture.²⁹ The second Egyptian canon specified that a sculptor prepare a grid and position

23 Wilson Jones 2000, 73–93; for the Egyptian system of linear measurement and canonicity, first determined by Karl Richard Lepsius, see Iversen 1955, 19–26.

24 Dekoulakou-Sideris 1990, 445–451, esp. 446, note 3; Wilson Jones 2000, 75–77, fig. 4.

25 Dekoulakou-Sideris 1990.

26 For further details, see Papadopoulos 2019.

27 Wilson Jones 2000, 90.

28 For the intellectual, social and ideological context of Vitruvius, see, most recently, Nichols 2017.

29 See Iversen 1955, 29–43; Borbein 2019.

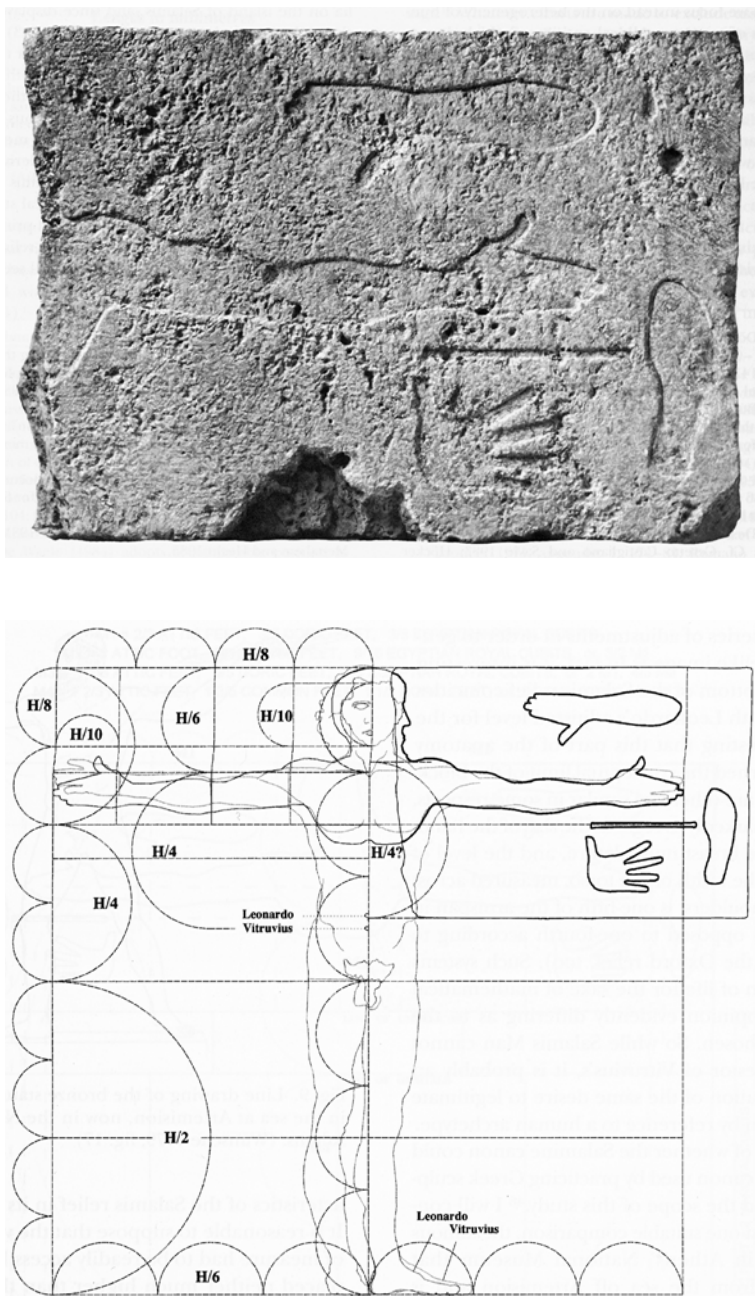


FIGURE 1.1 a) Metrological relief from Salamis, Greece, 4th century BCE, limestone, 113.5 × 79.3 × 16.2 cm; b) Diagram comparing Leonardo da Vinci's adaptation of Vitruvian Man (left) with Salamis Man (right). Scale 1:20, overlaid with the principal proportional relationships in terms of a 6-foot arm span and height (H) (= Wilson Jones 2000, 83, fig. 8)

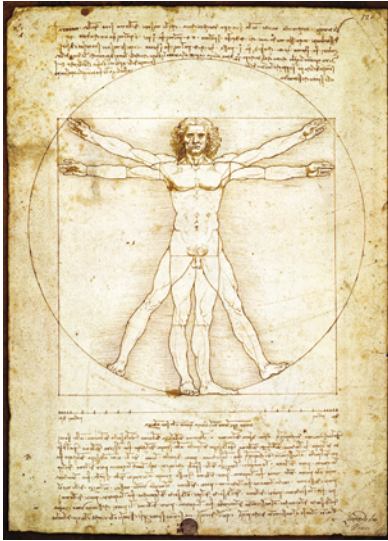


FIGURE 1.2
Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man
(Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo
Vitruvio or L'Uomo Vitruviano), ca. 1490

the figure in it accordingly (Fig. 1.4). The specifications were clear: they indicated a figure height of 19 grid squares to the shoulders and 22.5 squares to the crown of the head. This canon was thus proportional and could be scaled up or down to accommodate anything, at any scale. This Egyptian canon influenced Greek architects – especially, if the testimony of Diodorus is reliable, Theodoros and Telekles of Samos, the sons of Rhoikos.³⁰ But it was not the only canon in Greek sculpture and art, and there appears to have been quite a bit of cross-fertilization between sculptors, and other artists, with architects, philosophers, and mathematicians, especially the Pythagoreans.³¹ The Greek sculptor Polykleitos even wrote a treatise entitled *Canon*.³² Most importantly, both the Egyptian and the Greek canons were, at their very roots, corporeal.³³

The idea of a grid, or an alternative method of planning a sculpture, was too good to pass up – by modern scholars, if not by ancient authors and artists – and it spawned numerous attempts by modern scholars to impose a canon on just about any representation of a human body, from Cycladic figurines of the

30 Pollitt 1995, 19–24; Mark 1995, 25–27.

31 Pollitt 1995; Mark 1995.

32 Borbein 2019; Papadopoulos 2019.

33 The literature on the social, cultural and philosophical aspects of corporeality is extensive. Among many others, see, for example, Gatens 1996; Horner and Keane 2000; Hamilakis, Pluciennik, and Tarlow 2002; Forth and Crozier 2005; Albright 2013; Hamilakis 2014; Ortega 2014; Sellberg, Wänggren, and Aghtan 2015; Avram 2018.

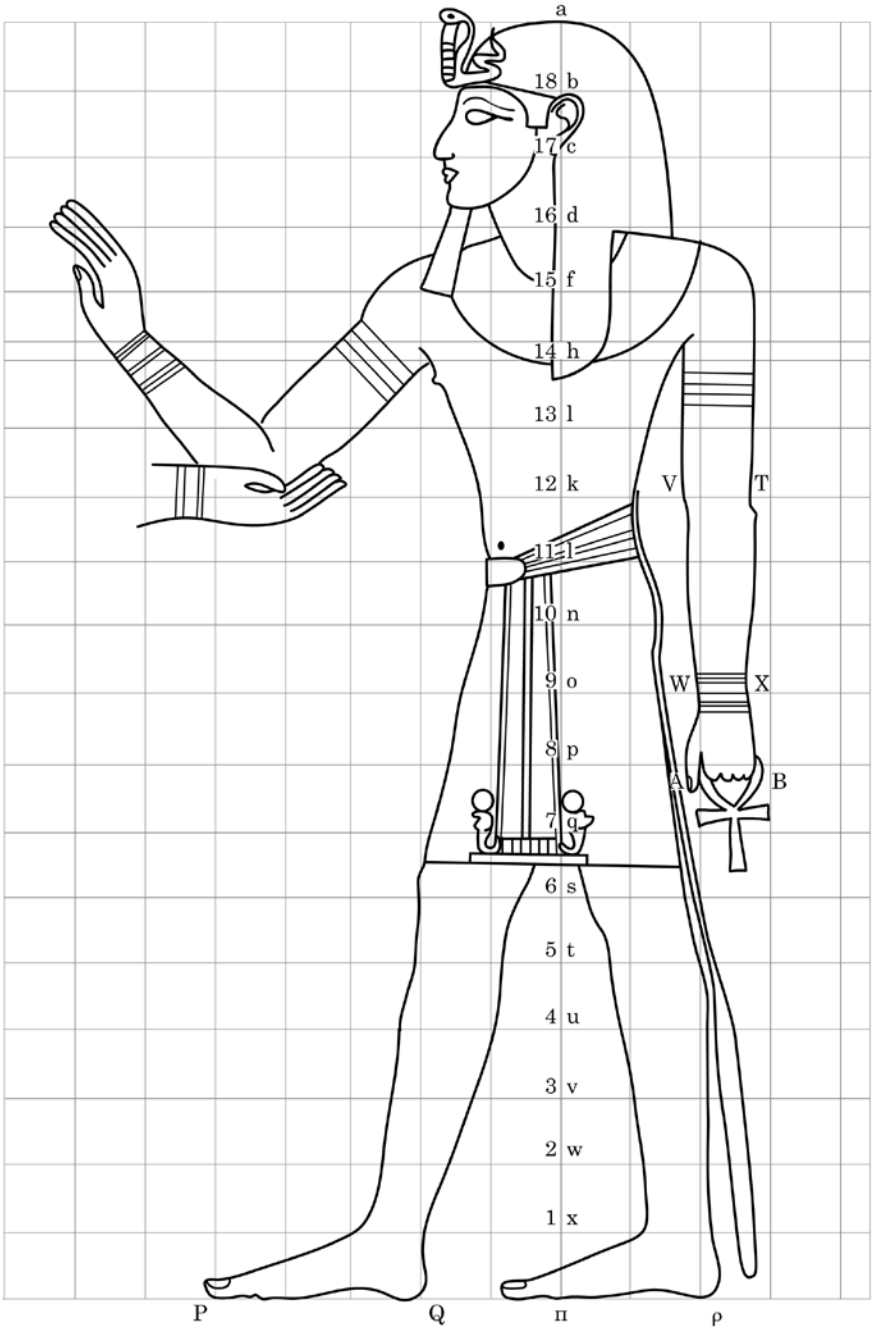


FIGURE 1.3 The first Egyptian canon

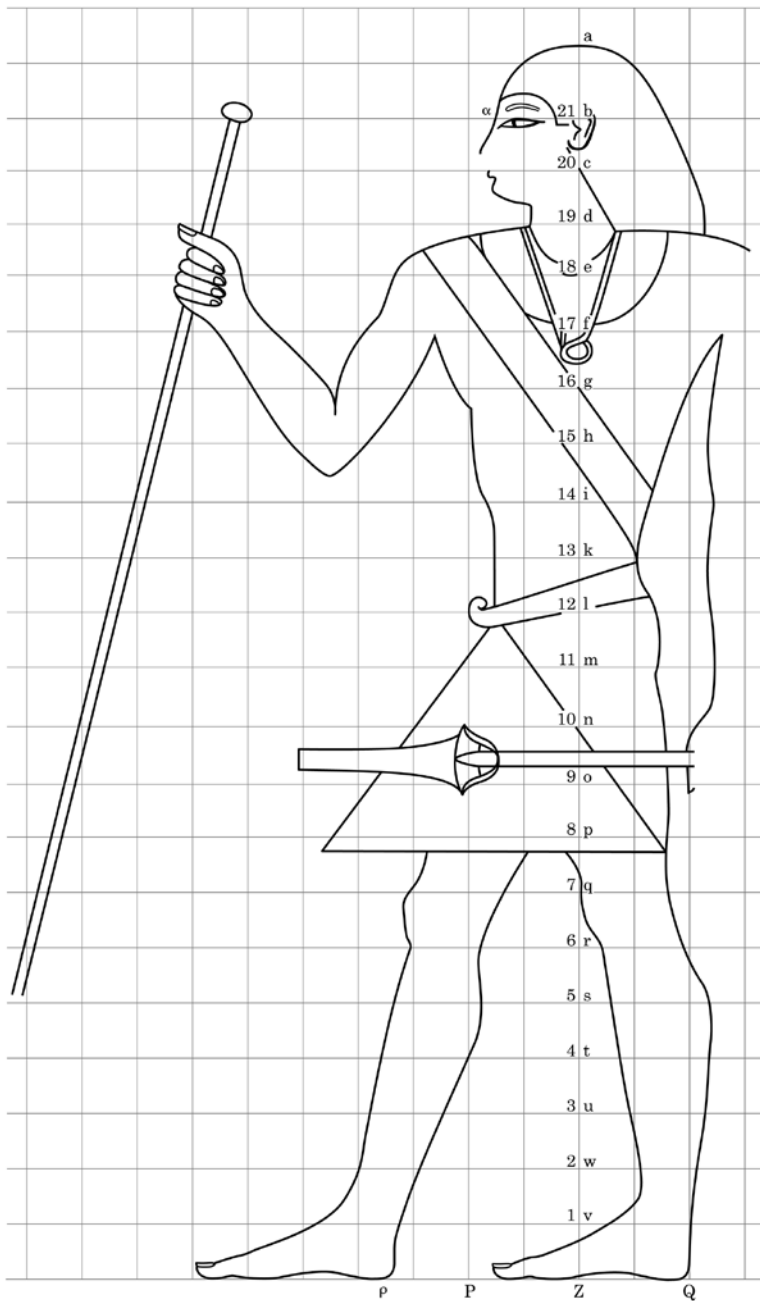


FIGURE 1.4 The second Egyptian canon

3rd millennium BCE (Fig. 1.5), to kouroi of the 6th century BCE (Fig. 1.6a), and to later sculpture (Fig. 1.6b).³⁴

There are, of course, related canons throughout the world. On the Indian subcontinent, for instance, during the first centuries of the common era, there was a very different type of canon, which, unlike Egypt, was not incised or painted. Just about everything we know of it comes from Sanskrit written sources.³⁵ Indian canons, as was the case with other ancient canons, were the result of the accumulated experience of generations of artists. Although there was a certain amount of freedom in India, as in Egypt, artistic activity was curtailed by a rigid code of conventions, which aligned the artist's work with the universal order. The purpose of Indian canons was to codify not the correct representation of the human body itself, but the correct representation of different, mostly divine, and not always anthropomorphic, beings; Indian canons were tightly linked to iconography and Adolf Borbein provides a general impression of the manner in which an Indian artist constructed a human figure (Fig. 1.7).³⁶ As in the case of ancient Greece (Fig. 1.1), the basic units of measurement are articulated by different parts of the human body. The same was true a world away, in 14th century to 1521 CE Mesoamerica, where Aztec units of measure were referenced primarily by elements of the human body, including hands, arms, feet, steps (indicated by legs), and even bones and the human heart, but also other symbols, like arrows or darts (Fig. 1.8).³⁷

What the Egyptian, Greek, Indian, and Mesoamerican figurative canons have in common is their corporeality. These were canons shaped by the human body. As Michael Camille notes:

In recent years the linguistic model, which for at least two decades has been so influential in our field [i.e., art history], has gradually been replaced by one rooted less in language and more in corporeality. Emphasis upon the body will surely have an effect upon how canons are shaped in the future.³⁸

As we have seen, this is not a modern development, but one rooted in many ancient cultures – Egyptian, Greek, Indian, and Mesoamerican – and it is

34 For Fig. 1.5, see Getz-Preziosi 1987, 42, fig. 21a; 46, fig. 24; 91, fig. 37a; for Fig. 1.6a, see Kyrieleis 1996, fig. 7; for Fig. 1.6b, see Schadow 1883, pl. 19; see further Papadopoulos 2019, 59, fig. 6; Borbein 2019, 29, fig. 4; 36, fig. 6.

35 Banerjia 1985, 12–35; Borbein 2019, 25–27.

36 Borbein 2019, 25–27, fig. 3; the drawing of Fig. 1.7 is after Gopinatha Rao 1998 (1920), pl. 10.

37 Clark 2010, 150–151, fig. 12.2.

38 Camille 1996, 201. I owe this reference to Gary Urton.



FIGURE 1.5
Three of the many techniques used to establish a canon for Cycladic marble figurines: (a) the planning of the harp player in Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, 85.AA.103; (b) the planning of the three-figure group in Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, 77/59; (c) the “classical” four-part canon for folded-arm figurines, this one in Stockholm, Medelhavsmuseet, 62.10, attributed to the Fitzwilliam Master

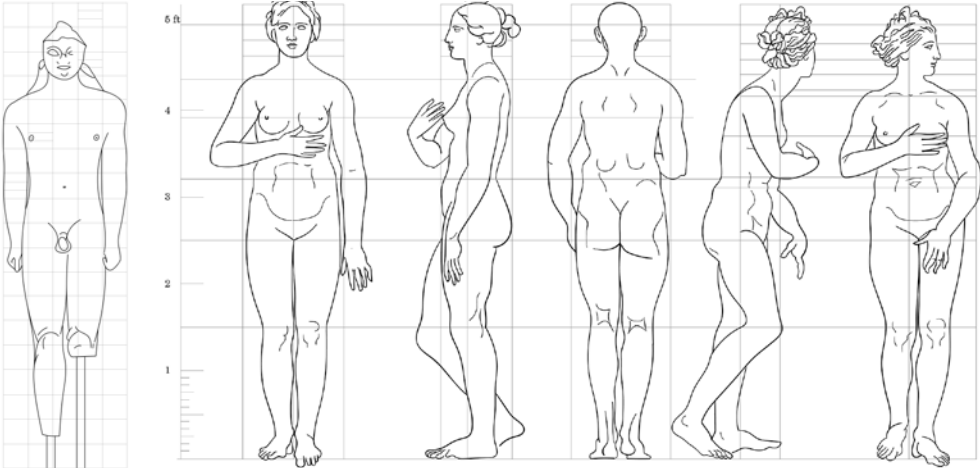


FIGURE 1.6 a) Sketch of the kouros of Samos, a 6th-century BCE Archaic Greek statue now in the Archaeological Museum of Vathi in Samos. The length of a square of the grid corresponds to a Samian half cubit; b) Johann Gottfried Schadow (German, 1764–1850), drawing of the Venus Medici, 1834

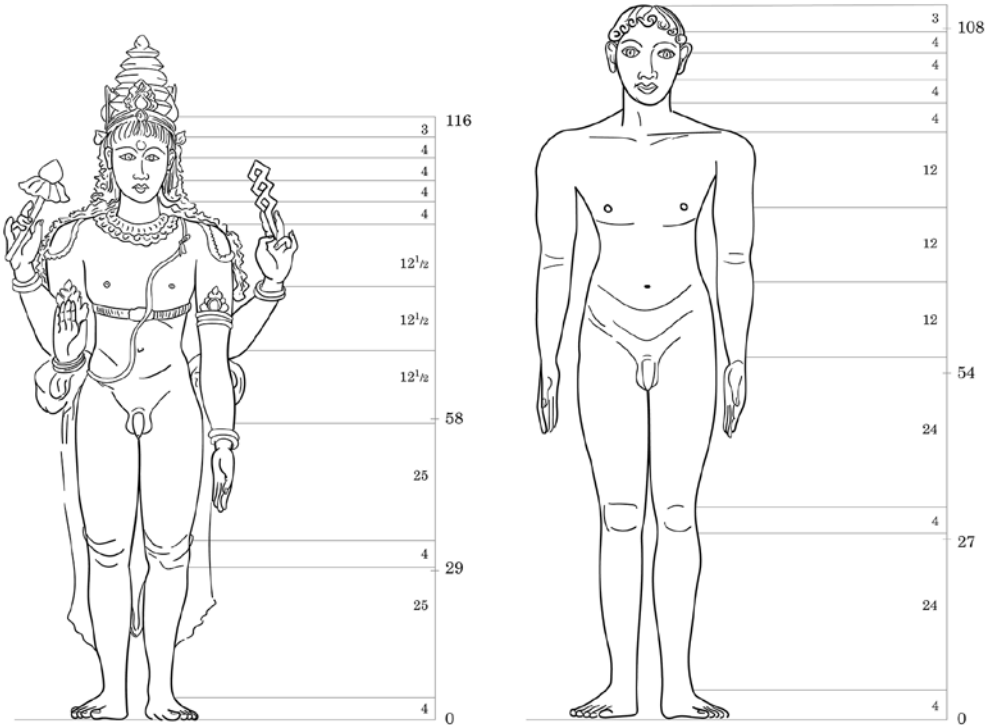


FIGURE 1.7 An Indian canon

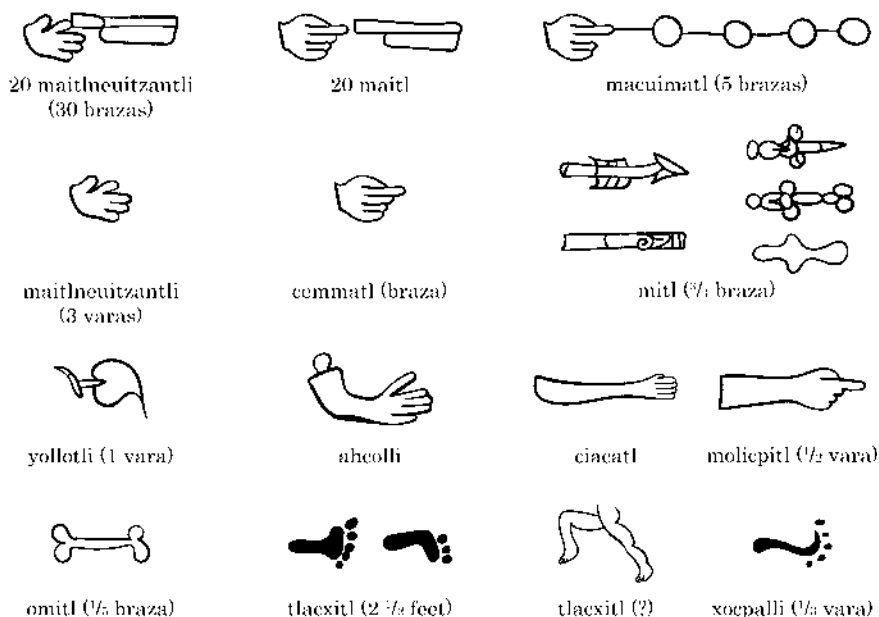


FIGURE 1.8 Aztec units of measure referenced primarily by elements of the human body, including hands, arms, feet, steps (indicated by legs), and even bones and the human heart, but also other symbols, like arrows or darts

probably something that holds true for many prehistoric cultures in different parts of the world.

Farther south, and a conceptual world away, in the Andes of South America, a good case in point are the Inka, a culture that never developed formal writing. Here, one method of recording measure and measurements was done by means of Inka *kipu*, knotted cords of various color (Fig. 1.9). All manner of information could be conveyed, and in this instance it was done so by a culture without writing. As a number of scholars have shown, the different cords and knots – primary cord, end knot, top cord, loop pendant, pendant cords, subsidiary cords³⁹ – conveyed, at the very minimum, basic arithmetic and mathematical operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division); also division into unequal fractional and proportional parts; multiplication of integers by fractions.⁴⁰ The full meaning of the Inka *kipu* have yet to be deciphered, but what is known to date allows one to posit complex mathematical and, more importantly, proportional operations that could record vast distances across the Inka empire. This does not establish the existence of an Inka

39 Urton 2010, 55, fig. 6.1.

40 Ascher and Ascher 1997; Urton 1997, 2003, 2010.

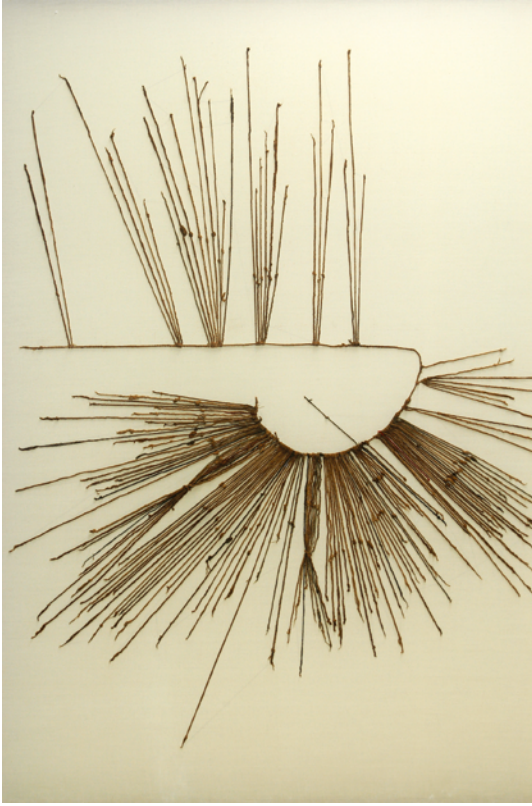


FIGURE 1.9
Inka khipu, Centro Mallqui,
Leymebamba, Peru

canon, but the ingredients of such a canon were certainly there. To paraphrase Jean-François Billeter, what the Inka *khipu* effectively did was to “instrumentalize” Inka space and, in this way, to reshape the very perception of the Inka universe.⁴¹ What the Inka also show us is that one does not need literature to create a canon. Canons are thus not just literary constructs. Considerably earlier human, well before the advent of writing, (and, I dare say, even earlier hominids) had established their own canons of how things were done, as the pioneering work of Marcel Mauss has shown so eloquently.⁴²

But I want to return to the word itself, since *Canon* has almost as many meanings in English as it does in Greek. At its most basic level, *canon* can mean: (1) any rule or law; (2) a fundamental principle; (3) a standard or

⁴¹ Billeter 2014, 16–19; cf. Versluys this volume.

⁴² See, especially, Mauss 1990 (1925), 2006. On the Australian continent, Aborigines were not introduced to writing until 1770 or 1788; to say that they did not have canons would be jejune.

criterion; (4) an ecclesiastical rule or law enacted by a council or other authority; (5) the body of ecclesiastical law; (6) the books of the Bible recognized by the Christian church as genuine or inspired; (7) any officially recognized set of sacred books; (8) the body of works of a writer – or artist – generally accepted as genuine; and (9) a catalog or list (as of the saints acknowledged by the church), or any similar catalog or list. In terms of liturgy, *canon* refers to (10) that part of the mass between the Sanctus and the Communion, while in music it is (11) a kind of composition in which the same melody is played or sung through two or more voice parts at the same or at a different pitch overlapping each other. *Canonical* refers to anything conforming to canon law, or included in the canon (for example, the Christian Bible); something that is authorized – I stress the term “authorized” – or recognized by canon law, or accepted, as in “canonical criticism.”⁴³ What always lurks behind these definitions is authority – who determines the canon, and how?

2 Authority, Reception and the Creation – and Destruction – of Canons

Authority is central to the creation of canons. As John Guillory notes:

In recent years many literary critics have become convinced that the selection of literary texts for ‘canonization’ ... operates in a way very like the formation of the biblical canon. These critics detect beneath the supposed objectivity of value judgments a political agenda: the exclusion of many groups of people from representation in the literary canon ... The critics of canon-formation have based their case upon a disturbing and indisputable fact: If one were to glance at the entire list of ‘great’ Western European authors – the canon – one would find very few women, even fewer writers who are non-white, and very few writers of lower-class origin. This is simply a fact. What are we to make of it?⁴⁴

Hand-in-hand with authority is the reception of any given text or work of art: its cultural biography. Reception studies, one of the most important and influential fields in the study of the Classics, examine the ways in which the Classical world has been appropriated, on the one hand, or, on the other, responded

43 My definitions are based on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

44 Guillory 1995, 233–234.

to in later ages and in non-western cultures. As we shall see, this led to tensions within the discipline of Classics, that went far beyond those inspired by post-colonial scholars such as Edward Said or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among many others.⁴⁵ The Classical canon – however we define it – and the processes by which it came into being and by which it is continuously shaped, is the result of its reception in various different academic and cultural environments through time and across space. Reception, of course, is multi-faceted and, as we shall see, it can sometimes be convoluted.⁴⁶

It has long been known that the reputations of many writers and artists have risen or fallen through the ages.⁴⁷ Moreover, the process of canon formation – to take just the example of Greco-Roman literature – first appeared in ancient schools, perhaps as early as the establishment of the Academy and the Lyceum by Plato and Aristotle, respectively, in the 4th century BCE.⁴⁸ As Patricia Easterling notes:

Out of the ancient works that were known or rediscovered during the Renaissance, markedly different ‘canonical’ selections have been made in different periods, and the changing process of reception continues, with new theoretical and political implications as western culture itself is held up to scrutiny.⁴⁹

Authority is always an issue in the reception of any genre – whether in literature or the visual arts. A good example is the work of the three great Athenian tragedians, who helped establish the western theater, itself a canonical construct.⁵⁰ Out of a variously stated output of between seventy and ninety works, only seven plays by Aeschylus (525/4–456/5 BCE) survive; Sophocles (497/6–406/5 BCE), the most successful of the three great 5th-century playwrights in Athens, wrote more than 120 plays, of which only seven survive in complete form; in contrast, Euripides (480–406 BCE), who was far less popular in Athens than Sophocles, though he was immensely popular in southern Italy and Sicily in his later life and after his death, wrote some ninety plays, of which eighteen or nineteen survive (depending on whether the *Rhesos* is his). I want to focus for a moment on Euripides, not only because he was the least popular

45 For which, see Mukherjee 2014.

46 See Settis 2006; Settis, Anguissola, and Gasparotto 2015; Greenblatt 2012.

47 Guillory 1995, 234.

48 Cf. Lardinois and de Jonge this volume.

49 Easterling 1996, 286.

50 For this compelling example see the extensive discussion by Lardinois and Marx this volume.

in Athens and the most popular beyond Athens, but on account of an important, and often overlooked, statuette of the playwright – his name inscribed on the base: ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ – now in the Louvre, dating to the 2nd century CE and found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome in 1704 (Fig. 1.10). Inscribed on either side of Euripides are the titles of 36 of his works. The list is as follows (plays marked with an asterisk [*] are those which survive today):

Left column

1.	ΑΛΚΗΣΤΙΣ	<i>Alkestis*</i>
2.	ΑΡΧΕΛΑΟΣ	<i>Archelaos</i>
3.	ΑΙΓΕΥΣ	<i>Aigeus</i>
4.	ΑΙΟΧΟΣ	<i>Aiochos</i>
5.	ΑΛΟΠΗ	<i>Alope</i>
6.	ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ	<i>Antigone</i>
7.	ΑΛΚΜΑΙΩΝ	<i>Alkmaion</i>
8.	ΑΝΔΡΟΜΕΔΑ	<i>Andromeda</i>
9.	ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ	<i>Alexandros</i>
10.	ΑΥΓΗ	<i>Auge</i>
11.	ΑΝΔΡΟΜΑΧΗ	<i>Andromache*</i>
12.	ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ	<i>Antigone</i>
13.	ΑΥΤΟΛΥΚΟΣ	<i>Autolykos</i>
14.	ΒΑΚΧΑΙ	<i>Bakchai (Bacchae)*</i>
15.	ΒΕΛΛΕΡΟΦΟΝΤΗΣ	<i>Bellerophon</i>
16.	ΒΟΥΣΕΙΡΙΣ	<i>Bouseiris</i>
17.	ΔΙΚΤΥΣ	<i>Diktys</i>
18.	ΔΑΝΑΗ	<i>Danae</i>
19.	ΕΙΦΙΓΕΝΕΙΑ	<i>Iphigeneia*</i>
20.	ΕΛΕΝΗ	<i>Helen*</i>
21.	ΕΙΝΩ	<i>Ino</i>
22.	ΕΚΑΒΗ	<i>Hekabe*</i>
23.	ΕΡΕΧΘΕΥΣ	<i>Erechtheus</i>
24.	ΕΠΕΟΣ	<i>Epeos</i>
25.	ΚΑΔ[ΜΟΣ]	<i>Kadmos</i>

Right column

1.	ΚΡΗΤΕΣ	<i>Cretans</i>
2.	ΚΡΗΣΣΑ[Ι]	<i>Kryssai</i>
3.	ΚΡΕΣΦΟΝΤΥΕΣ	<i>Kresphontyes</i>
4.	ΚΥΚΛΩΨ	<i>Cyclops (Kyklops)*</i>
5.	ΛΙΚΥΜΝΙΟΣ	<i>Likymnios</i>



FIGURE 1.10 Marble statuette of Euripides (inscribed ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗΣ on the right flank of the base), now in the Louvre, 2nd century CE. found on the Esquiline Hill in Rome in 1704

6.	ΜΕΛΑΝΙΠΠΟΣ	<i>Melanippos</i>
7.	ΜΗΔΕΙΑ	<i>Medeia</i> *
8.	ΜΕΛΕΑΓΡΟΣ	<i>Meleager</i>
9.	ΟΙΝΕΥΣ	<i>Oineus</i>
10.	ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ	<i>Oidipous (Oedipus)</i>
11.	ΟΡΕΣΤΗΣ	<i>Orestes</i> *

What is interesting is that the plays are listed systematically, that is, not randomly, but alphabetically, more or less. Mysteriously, however, they end with names beginning with the letter “O”; what about the plays that Euripides wrote that begin with letters later in the alphabet, like *Palamedes*, *Philoktetes*, *Phoinissai*, *Sisyphos*, *Trojan Women*, *Chrysippos*, among others? What was this [partial] list copied from (if it was copied)? For whom were the plays listed and why? In what context was the statue displayed? Perhaps more interesting is the appearance, in the left column, of the play *Antigone* twice, once in the sixth line, and again in the twelfth. Did Euripides write two plays entitled *Antigone*? Or was this a slip, so to say, of the inscriber’s chisel? And what about the plays of Euripides that survive, or that we know of, beginning with letters alphabetically before “O” that did not make it on the list, such as *Hippolytos* or *Oinomaïos*? Fortunately, this statuette with its accompanying inscription is not the only source for Euripides’ artistic output; the *Suda* states that he wrote some 90 plays, and there is a robust tradition of scholia on his work that provides all sorts of detail on the plays, and oftentimes how they fared in the annual contests at the City Dionysia.⁵¹

As John Gould explains, the later transmission of Euripides’ plays fall into two categories: the first consists of ten plays (*Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Hippolytos*, *Andromache*, *Hekabe*, *Trojan Women*, *Phoinissai*, *Orestes*, *Bacchae*, and *Rhesos*) transmitted through medieval manuscripts complete with scholia (though *Bacchae* lost its notes and comments), and it is likely that their presentation is in the chronological order that the plays were written. They represent the same kind of volume of “selected plays” that we also have for Aeschylus and Sophokles. The other nine plays (*Helen*, *Elektra*, *Heraklidai*, *Herakles*, *Suppliant Women*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Ion*, *Cyclops*) have been

transmitted in only a pair of closely related 14th-century manuscripts (known as L and P); they have no scholia and they are in a rough (Greek) alphabetical order. There is little doubt that they represent the chance

⁵¹ Gould 1996, with references.

survival of one volume (perhaps two) of the 'complete plays' of Euripides, which circulated in alphabetical order, as we know from ancient lists of plays and collections of '*hypotheses*' (prefaces).⁵²

For Gould, what survives of Euripides' work is a random sample. Consequently, we may simply have to admit that the survival of any text was left to the vagaries of chance. But, as we have seen, the transmission of the New Testament was never left to chance and I do not believe that the survival of Euripides' work was totally random. So the question remains: why have so many of Euripides' plays survived over the much more popular and numerous oeuvre of Sophokles? Surely the answer lies, at least in part, with the reception of his work in Sicily and southern Italy. This was not just a consequence of later tastes, especially in the 4th century BCE when the plays of Euripides were extremely popular among the western Greeks, but something that had already taken root in the later 5th century, if we are to believe the testimony of Plutarch. In describing the circumstances of the Athenians captured by the Syracusans in the ill-fated Sicilian expedition, not least those in the quarries, Plutarch (*Nikias* 29.2–3) writes:

Some also were saved for the sake of Euripides. For the Sicilians, it would seem, more than any other Hellenes outside the home land, had a yearning fondness for his poetry. They were forever learning by heart the little specimens and morsels of it which visitors brought them from time to time, and imparting them to one another with fond delight. In the present case, at any rate, they say that many Athenians who reached home in safety greeted Euripides with affectionate hearts, and recounted to him, some that they had been set free from slavery for rehearsing what they remembered of his works; and some that when they were roaming about after the final battle they had received food and drink for singing some of his choral hymns.

The fate of Euripides in the *longue durée* of posterity is a precept that was repeated many times. Some authors and artists fared well, others did not. What became of their work was subject to the vicissitudes of survival and preservation, as well as the efficacy or potency or relevance or reception of their work in later generations. The same holds true for Latin texts. A classic case in point being the discovery, in the winter of 1417, in a remote monastery, of a copy of Lucretius' (Titus Lucretius Carus) poem *De rerum natura*. This was in no small

52 Gould 1996, 571.

measure the result of the efforts, erudition, and serendipity – good fortune – of humanists, like Poggio Bracciolini, who, in this particular case, saw the relevance of the work and appreciated the beauty of Lucretius' poem.⁵³

Texts and objects can enter a canon, but they can also fall out of it. Canons can be created, but they can also be destroyed. The processes by which this occurs are not always clear, and they are many. What is noteworthy in the case of Euripides is that the popularity of his work in Sicily and southern Italy was a "bottom up" phenomenon, unlike the canonization of the Biblical Gospels, which was "top down." So, what about the totality of the canon of Greek literature that is preserved today? Why did certain texts survive – or were preserved – while others faded into obscurity? Umberto Eco dramatized the story of the fate of one ancient text – the second part of Aristotle's *Poetics* – in his 1980 novel *Il nome della rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*), set in 1327 in a Benedictine monastery in northern Italy. Only the first part of Aristotle's *Poetics* survives, which deals with tragedy and epic; the second part, on comedy – and hence laughter that was at the core of Eco's novel – was lost, although Richard Janko has gone a long way in reconstructing what can be reconstructed of the text.⁵⁴ In Eco's novel, the fate of Aristotle's text is a convoluted one that sparked numerous murders. The fate of most ancient texts was perhaps not as intricate or tangled or labyrinthine, but the process of canonization and motivations behind it – if not the basic survival of a text – was often a top down phenomenon that was never very clear.

The compilation of lists in antiquity of the "best" writers in a particular genre was a process that the Romans attributed to scholars – yes, scholars! – active in Hellenistic Alexandria, particularly Aristarchos of Samothrace (ca. 216–144 BCE) and Aristophanes of Byzantium (probably 257–180 BCE). Patricia Easterling elaborates that much of the scholarship of the time was devoted "to the rescue, classification, and exegesis of earlier literature, and the Alexandrians could use the books of their library," together with the *Pinakes* of Kallimachos of Kyrene as the primary work of reference, which was used as something of a guide to which authors "had stood the test of time."⁵⁵ Moreover, the Alexandrians appear to have used the term οἱ ἐγκριθέντες to refer to the texts that were "included"; as Easterling elaborates, "in Latin the favoured term was *classici*, and Quintilian used *ordo* and *numerus* to designate a selective

53 The story of Poggio Bracciolini, and his discovery of a copy of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, and the impact of this discovery is well outlined in Greenblatt 2012.

54 Janko 1984.

55 Easterling 1996, 286.

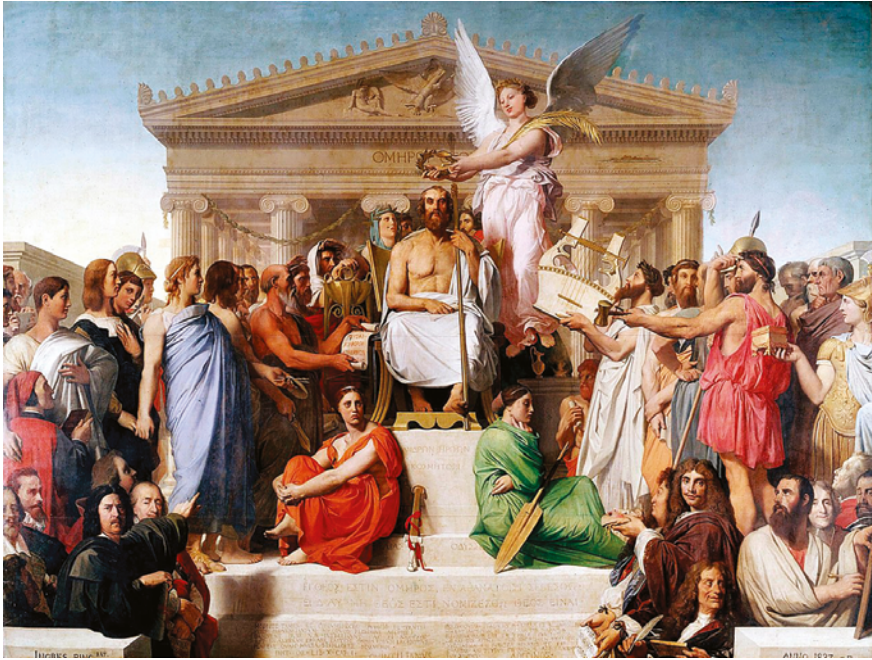


FIGURE 1.11 The Apotheosis of Homer by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1827

list.”⁵⁶ It goes without saying that the authors thus “included” had a much better chance of survival than those not listed.⁵⁷

The names of Aristarchos and Aristophanes of Byzantium are hardly household names today; Kallimachos and Quintilian might fare a little better, but not by much and they would only be known to a small and select group of scholars. We know practically nothing about the character, tastes, or predilections of these four scholars, yet our canon of Classical authors was, in no small measure, determined and defined by them. I therefore ask a question that I have asked before: how much do we know about the people who determine and define the canon of modern writers or painters or whatever today?⁵⁸ Ironically, of these four ancient scholars only one made it on Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ 1827 celebrated painting, *The Apotheosis of Homer* (Fig. 1.11): Aristarchos of Samothrace, who stands between Aristotle and Alexander the Great, no less, and immediately behind Pheidias! Ingres not only painted those he deemed worthy from antiquity – among many others, Pindar, Hesiod, Sokrates, Plato, Perikles, Sappho, Virgil, Apelles – but also modern poets, artists, and

⁵⁶ Easterling 1996, 286.

⁵⁷ For further reading, see Pfeiffer 1968, 1976; Assmann and Assmann 1987.

⁵⁸ Papadopoulos 2019, 58.



FIGURE 1.12 The School of Athens by Raphael, painted between 1509 and 1511

philosophers, including Dante, Shakespeare, Mozart, Molière, Racine, and many others, most of which are confined to the lower register of the painting. Only Raphael and Michelangelo were deemed worthy enough to stand alongside the ancients, and on the left side of the painting, Virgil has his arm appropriately around Dante, who stands a little lower down. The only female author or artist that made it on the painting is Sappho, tucked away and barely visible in the upper left, standing between Raphael and Alkibiades. The only other women are personifications. Two are seated at Homer's feet: the *Iliad*, wearing a red dress and the *Odyssey*, draped in green with an oar across her lap; the only other female is Victory – or the Universe – crowning Homer. But what was it about Aristarchos that inspired Ingres to paint him in such illustrious company? The important point here is that, although the painting is only some 200 years old – not 2,000 – we have no idea why and how Ingres settled upon these luminaries and not others, just as we have little knowledge as to who chose the various elements of the canonical Bible, and how this process played out, whether in the 2nd century CE or later. The same may be argued for other representations of the canon, such as Raphael's *School of Athens*, painted between 1509 and 1511 (Fig. 1.12). As with Raphael, Ingres' painting is a self-contained canon that reflects, to a large degree, the normative concepts

of those authors, artists, philosophers, and even political figures (like Perikles or Alkibiades or Alexander) deemed worthy enough in the earlier 19th century to be so canonized, and, to a lesser degree, some of Ingres' personal favorites (or those of the person who commissioned the painting?). Ingres' own predilections may not have determined who made it onto the painting, but more how each figure was depicted, where they stood in relation to others, and their prominence, or lack thereof, in the overall composition. Who would you include in your canon?

3 Canonicity, Marginality, and the *Achsenzeit*

I want to end by addressing the challenge posed by this volume as a whole namely, what has canonization to do with cultural formation? And I begin with a reference to an often cited passage by Jan Assmann: "In Zeiten verschärfter innerkultureller Polarisierung, Zeiten zerbrochener Traditionen, in denen man sich entscheiden muß, welcher Ordnung man folgen will, kommt es zu Kanonbildungen."⁵⁹ I am not sure that times of intensified cultural polarization or times of broken traditions, are the *sine qua non* of canon formation. As I have tried to show, canon formation can occur at any given time, and it does not require a particular set of circumstances in order to form.

Consequently, if a canon can be brought into being at any given time, what is so important about the *Achsenzeit* or "Axial Age," particularly if the focus is on the importance of canonization in the 1st millennium BCE? Conceived by Karl Jaspers in his 1949 *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*,⁶⁰ and taken to great heights in a number of more recent publications, but also criticized to its core, the *Achsenzeit* as a concept has promoted not only cross-cultural, but also interdisciplinary discourse, which is a good thing.⁶¹

But there is one point on which I must insist: the Axial Age, however we define it, produced *classics*, not *canons*. Canons came later, during the closing stages of the *Achsenzeit* and later, sometimes, much later, as the ongoing discoveries at sites like Oxyrhynchos (modern el-Behnasa) show.⁶² The reason I insist on this is straightforward, and here I focus only on that part of the Axial Age I know best, the ancient Greek. In its production of classics, the period

59 Assmann 1992, 125, see also Versluys this volume.

60 Jaspers 1953.

61 Among the many, see, in particular, the various papers in Eisenstadt 1986; Bellah and Joas 2012; for the opposing view, see, especially, Provan 2013.

62 For a lucid and edifying overview of the number of papyri of the more frequently identified Greek authors, which Homer heads by far, see Netz 2019, 203–208.

often equated from the Archaic into the Hellenistic age, produced not only texts that became canons, but also texts that were/are “marginal,” a euphemism for non-canonical. Indeed, the implicit adoption of canonicity involves the marginalization of other texts. As we shall see, even Homer was not universally praised by all in the Axial Age, and the canonization of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may well have only begun with the establishment of schools like the Academy and the Lyceum in the 4th century BCE, several centuries after his death, if an individual known as Homer ever existed. As we saw in the case of Euripides, the processes by which some of his plays were canonized and others were not certainly did not happen in his own day, and they may only have been canonized in later Hellenistic Alexandria. As for Lucretius (99–55 BCE), had Poggio Bracciolini not stumbled across *De rerum natura* in the early 15th century of the Common Era, the manuscript may well have been a victim of the ravages of time. All this is to say that not all texts – or works of art – of the Classical period entered the canon, and the processes and motivations by which those that did enter did not play out until later periods.

In a recent essay dealing with marginality and the classics, Marco Formisano lays bare one of the unintended side effects of the process of canonization, namely

... an increased level of canonicity of those texts from the corpus of Greek and Roman literature that are the subject of inquiry. Reception studies has focused almost exclusively on the most canonical Greek and Latin texts, not only because they are appreciated per se but also because they have been received, rewritten, adapted, discussed, and alluded to on such a scale as to discourage discussion of other ancient texts, which were rarely or never the objects of significant reception.⁶³

There is thus a conceptual tension between canonical and marginal texts that leads to anxieties in the very dichotomy between canon and margins in the Classics. Formisano goes on to note “Another important factor consists of expectations of the job market, especially in Anglo-American academia, where classicists must show competence primarily, if not exclusively, in canonical texts from the classical periods.”⁶⁴ And he also points to a related phenomenon:

... but among scholars of other fields there is a widespread expectation that classics *should* deal with canonical authors and texts, because

63 Formisano 2018, 2.

64 Formisano 2018, 4.

classical antiquity is the canon par excellence and the discipline devoted to classical antiquity has the task of preserving what constitutes this canon.⁶⁵

Anxieties do not stop there, for there is yet another tension, one that pits literary scholars against cultural historians. As Formisano articulates:

If you want to study *literature*, the implicit logic goes, you must study those texts that are *literary* (according to today's standards); otherwise you are a historian of knowledge, science, technology, culture, religion, philosophy, mentality, textual transmission, and even literature; or you are a philologist. But you are not primarily a *literary* scholar ... [M]ost classicists have a tendency to conceive of the tension between central and marginal texts almost as an ontological difference between two fields: the study of literature, which implicitly justifies the canon, and the study of culture, which needs all sorts of texts and documents (and indeed, the more aesthetically or literarily mediocre a text is thought to be, the better suited it seems to the goals of historical reconstruction).⁶⁶

This last statement comes as something of a surprise for those of us that think material remains – the very stuff of the archaeological record – are just as important as anything written in antiquity. Archaeologists have often, if not always, read, whether consciously or unconsciously, ancient texts – the canonical and the marginal – not for what their authors said or wished to say, but for all the unarticulated assumptions, or cultural baggage, that any given text carries. But I want to return, albeit briefly, to those issues on which I have focused, the murky processes that lie at the core of canonization and canon formation, and to ask the same simple question that I have asked before: who or what makes a text canonical? In order to frame the question, I return to the Classical author that antiquity, both in the Axial Age and beyond – and well into modernity – placed at the very pinnacle of the pyramid of all Classical texts: Homer (the same author whom Ingres canonized through apotheosis, with a worthy cast of onlookers, Fig. 1.11). But was – is – Homer marginal or canonical? This is precisely the question posed by James Porter, who writes: “Few authors have the experience of having been dragged in the mud, made fools of by children, unfairly defeated in competition, accused of immortality, gluttony, or cultural primitivism, ostracized, labelled plagiarists or liars (indeed,

65 Formisano 2018, 5; see also Settis 2006.

66 Formisano 2018, 8.

of having seen their name made into a synonym for lying) – and generally of having been maligned, pilfered, plagiarized, corrected, rewritten, divested of their titles, deracinated at birth, and made to wander homeless and destitute, then to serve the whims of their own protagonists, (whether out of infatuation or as their dupe), and finally to die covered in ignominy. I am of course speaking of Homer, who had to suffer all of this and more, almost uniquely among the poets from antiquity.”⁶⁷ If Homer can blur the dichotomy between canon and margin, or as Porter has it, “margicanonical tradition,” then we can clearly see how critical the processes of authority and reception are in the creation/destruction of any canon.⁶⁸

4 Coda

In many ways a canon is, or can be, to paraphrase Versluys (this volume), an authoritative set of ideas grounded in the past that functions as something of a guiding principle in the present or, as Assmann put it: “Kanon ist die *mémoire volontaire* einer Gesellschaft.”⁶⁹ But it is more than just that. A canon can be determined or imposed by the same people who write history, the winners, as Pagels put it so well. In this scenario, it is imposed from above, a top down process that lies at the core of most canon formations. In this way, a canon becomes a tool exploited by the powerful: canon, after all, is defined as a rule or law or set of rules/laws. Occasionally, as the example of Euripides’ popularity among the western Greeks showed, some works can enter a canon through a process that is more bottom up. But whether top down or bottom up, the process of canon creation and canon destruction is based on values that are socially and discursively constructed, subjectively perceived and negotiated. Moreover, in order to survive or persist, a canon, though linked to a particular place and time, must be resilient. In order to achieve resilience, a canon must endure over different temporalities, and often across vast expanses of human space. In this way, a canon, which on the surface seems the very epitome of stability, is neither static nor monolithic, but dynamic and fluid. In contrast, some canons can be fleeting, highly personal, or catering to a smaller social group, as the examples of Raphael’s “School of Athens” and Ingres’ “Apotheosis of Homer” suggest. I would venture that the canon of 19th and 20th-century pre-1950 literature and art was different in the 1960s from what it was in the

67 Porter 2018, 231; see now Porter 2021.

68 Porter 2018, 261.

69 Assmann 1992, 18.

1990s or 2010s. Like many social phenomena, the creation, perpetuation and ultimate destruction of a canon involves legal, economic, moral, religious, aesthetic, and other social dimensions. A canon is determined by its relevance and value at any given time, that is, what people are willing to sacrifice or pay for it. In this way, the past and the present not only collide, they converge. As Assmann put it: “The present is ‘haunted’ by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present” – and canons are part and parcel of this process.⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ Assmann 1997, 9.

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Mémoire volontaire? Canonisation as Cultural Innovation in Antiquity

Miguel John Versluys

1 Introduction: Canonisation as Cultural Innovation

In essence, this Chapter argues, canonisation is about interacting with the past in an attempt to shape the present and thus to determine the future.¹ As a socio-cultural process resulting in the *Umwandlung* of cultural memory, establishing a canon is one of the most important acts in defining a cultural identity.² In the famous words of Jan Assmann: “Kanon ist die *mémoire volontaire* einer Gesellschaft”.³ Once a canon has been established, it functions as a normative tool: “Ein Kanon antwortet auf die Frage: Wonach sollen wir uns richten”.⁴ It thus becomes “an instrument for measurement”, which is the full meaning of the word in ancient Greek.⁵ Assmann has argued that the creation of a canon is often a response to what we could call an identity crisis for societies.⁶ Indeed,

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- 1 As this Chapter will illustrate, exploring canons and canonisation is something of a ‘meta-type’ activity (Sluiter 1998), especially when the ambition is to relate it to concepts like cultural innovation, anchoring and Globalisation. I am therefore much indebted to colleagues who read drafts of this paper and did their best to keep me focused: Damien Agut-Labordère, André Lardinois, Werner Pieterse and Ineke Sluiter. I also would like to thank the participants to the two expert meetings for our inspiring debates. This study was supported by the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ocw) through the Dutch Research Council (NWO), as part of the Anchoring Innovation Gravitation Grant research agenda of OIKOS, the National Research School in Classical Studies, the Netherlands (project number 024.003.012).
 - 2 Psychologists call the distinctly human ability to recognize oneself in the past and project that onto the future *autonoësis*, see Tulving 2002.
 - 3 Assmann 1992, 18. A canon is thus understood as the point where a tradition reaches its “höchste inhaltliche Verbindlichkeit und äußerste formale Festlegung”, Assmann 1992, 103.
 - 4 Assmann 1992, 123.
 - 5 For ancient and modern definitions and conceptions of canon and canonisation see extensively Silver and Terraciano 2019 and Papadopoulos 2019, as well as the contributions by Papadopoulos, De Jonge and Gonzalez to this volume.
 - 6 Assmann 1992, 125: “In Zeiten verschärfter innerkultureller Polarisierung, Zeiten zerbrochener Traditionen, in denen man sich entscheiden muß, welcher Ordnung man folgen will, kommt es zu Kanonbildungen.” For ancient canonisations with a focus on identity formation in “Zeiten des Umbruchs” see recently Friesen and Hesse 2019.

a canon is often developed as an instrument that should provide society with a different cultural coherence – based on a (new or reaffirmed) reading of the past, to create a different present for a novel future. As such, canons often seem to function as *anchors* for the societies in which they function, connecting the new with the familiar while mediating change in relation to continuity. As such canonisation frequently leads to new forms of cultural formation – and is thus an important instrument of innovation.

In his book *Contre François Jullien*, the sinologist Jean-François Billeter even argues that it is the main and most innovative instrument of cultural formation.⁷ He maintains that the real secret of the success of the Han Empire (206 BCE–220 CE) did not, or not mainly, rely on military, administrative, institutional or ritual domains, but rather on canonisation as innovation. It is worthwhile to quote his conclusion in full:

Rappelons que l'empire chinois a été fondé par Ts'in Cheu-Houang, le « Premier empereur de Ts'in », en 221 avant notre ère, à la suite de terribles guerres, et que la violence dont est né ce nouveau pouvoir s'est retournée contre lui puisqu'il a sombré dans le désordre quinze ans plus tard, en 206. (–) Après quelques hésitations, les vainqueurs de cette nouvelle guerre ont repris à leur compte l'idée d'empire et fondé, en 202, la dynastie impériale des Han, qui est devenu la deuxième. Leur principal souci était de ne pas subir le sort de la première, c'est-à-dire de durer. Ils y ont réussi au-delà de tout espoir puisque leur dynastie a subsisté pendant quatre siècles (les Han forment la période romaine de la Chine). Mais les empereurs Han et leurs conseillers ont fait plus que cela puisque l'empire a duré plus de deux millénaires et que, grâce à eux, la folie, la démesure du Premier Empereur, qui aurait pu rester une aberration sans lendemain, sont devenues le moment fondateur de toute cette histoire impériale. Ce fait capital doit être médité. Les historiens voient la raison de cette réussite extraordinaire dans l'ordre militaire, administratif, institutionnel et rituel qu'ils ont su créer et qui a, en effet, perduré dans ses traits essentiels jusqu'à la fin de l'empire, au début du xx^e siècle. Le véritable secret de cette réussite, cependant, que les historiens ne voient pas ou ne comprennent pas suffisamment, c'est que ces empereurs, leurs conseillers et leurs agents ont instrumentalisé la culture au point de la

7 Billeter 2014, 18–19 for the quote below; the dates mentioned are BCE. I thank Damien Agut-Labordère for bringing this book to my attention. Note that using this important observation by Billeter here has no relation whatsoever to the Jullien-Billeter debate and my own opinion on that matter.

refondre entièrement et d'en faire la base d'un ordre nouveau. Pour faire oublier la violence et l'arbitraire dont l'empire était né, et par lesquels il se soutenait, il devait paraître conforme à l'ordre des choses. Tout fut recentré sur l'idée que l'ordre impérial était conforme aux lois de l'univers, depuis l'origine et pour tous les temps. Tous les domaines du savoir, toute la pensée, le langage, les représentations devaient concourir à persuader les esprits que cet ordre était, dans l'ensemble, naturel. C'était le moyen le plus efficace d'assurer la pérennité du régime impérial, de ses hiérarchies, des formes de domination qu'il imposait, de la soumission qu'elles exigeaient. De cette refonte générale est née ce que les Chinois eux-mêmes ont considéré depuis lors, et que l'on considère aujourd'hui encore, en Chine et ailleurs, comme la civilisation chinoise. Le passé pré-impérial a été si bien réinterprété qu'il est lui-même devenu une partie intégrante du nouvel ordre des choses. On peut admirer cette synthèse, qui a duré plus de deux millénaires en dépit des crises que l'ordre impérial a traversées, des défis qu'il a dû relever des transformations sociales profondes auxquelles il a dû s'adapter. Mais il faut bien voir qu'elle a été sécrétée par le pouvoir impérial, qu'elle a eu pour fonction principale d'occulter la nature de ce pouvoir et de rendre impensable toute alternative au despotisme. Et il faut être conscient du fait que tout ce qui passe aujourd'hui pour spécifiquement chinois, en particulier dans le domaine de la pensée, fait partie de ce système.

When such an “instrumental reshaping” is successful – that is: becomes canonised – it can subsequently develop into a cultural tradition; a tradition that might continue to exert its influence over millennia. For classicists, the Augustan era, with its reshaping of an Italo-Hellenistic Republic as the Roman Empire by Octavian Augustus, probably springs to mind at once as example *par excellence*.⁸ It is important to realise that many of the cultural traditions that we distinguish today, as being present in our modern world or as the most important cultural foundations of that world – think of what we now call Chinese, Buddhist, Indian/Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Greco-Roman, et cetera – are “instrumental re-shapings” and their successful canonisation that go back to Antiquity and often the 1st millennium BCE in particular; a point to which I will return below.

From the moment that a canon is in place, it often immediately does away entirely with the complex historical process behind its formation – the

⁸ It has therefore been rightly characterized as a cultural revolution, see Wallace-Hadrill 2008. Note how also Billeter compares Han China to the Roman Empire.

period of crises and the choices then made.⁹ Instead of a *mémoire volontaire*, the canon is represented and even mythologised as divinely established and “natural”. The idea is created that the canon simply imposed itself through its own authority.¹⁰ Although this is what a canon needs, as a technology to arrive at a novel cultural coherence, nothing could be further from the truth. Focussing on canonisation therefore allows us to understand the cultural formation of societies as complex and contested historical processes. It enables us to go beyond the convenient truths that societies tell about their own past and identity, as in reality canons are never as pure or uncontested as one would wish.¹¹ This is important, in itself, to arrive at a better understanding of how the ancient societies that called themselves “Assyrian”, “Persian”, “Greek”, “Egyptian” or “Roman” (et cetera) came about – what kind of work they had to do to arrive at this self-definition of cultural coherence and what kind of competing definitions they had to obliterate.¹² The observation also prompts us to investigate processes of canonisation themselves from a comparative perspective: How do canons operate as anchors for the societies in which they function? Does canonisation indeed result in cultural formation and how? How were canons able to innovate? Why did particular canonisations do so well as cultural traditions – in the historical context in which they were created as well as beyond? And why are so many canonisations from Antiquity still with us today?

This essay suggests some initial ideas to answer these big questions, with the additional intention of serving as a framework for the case studies that follow in the subsequent part of this book. I will first elaborate on how canonisation works by focussing on (overlapping) questions of *ideology*, *documentation*, *history*, and *transmission*, with the attempt to connect all these concepts with canonisation in a somewhat different light than is usually done, that is: through the lens of cultural innovation. By drawing in the concept of *anchoring*, I will subsequently discuss the impact of canonisation with the aim to understand why some canonisations were so successful. Lastly, we will turn to the historical context of the 1st millennium BCE. A much-debated theory

9 For how, in Antiquity, crises were dealt with in these terms of remembrance, recovery and innovation see now Klooster and Kuin 2020.

10 This rephrases one of the succinct remarks on canonisation by O’Leary 1999 and is illustrated in the quote from Billeter. Additional examples in the important volume by Silver and Terraciano 2019.

11 As eloquently expressed by Roman 2016, 9 concerning the *Imperium Romanum*: “Un empire, romain certes, mais constitué par qui, avec quoi, comment, évoluant en fonction de quelles idéaux, de quelles contraintes”.

12 As stressed in the contribution of Woolf to this volume, the *uncanonical* is an essential part of the cultural landscape created by canonisation processes.

on canonisation in this period has been around for more than half a century already: the notion of *Achsenzeit* (Axial Age), as formulated by Karl Jaspers in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* from 1949. The original idea, as formulated by Jaspers, has been strongly criticised for various reasons. As a historical theory, it is indeed lacking in many aspects, as will be discussed below, but it certainly does not lack the insight that canonisation is fundamental to understand cultural formation in this period of Antiquity, in particular. To this I will add the concept of *Globalisation* and suggest that increasing connectivity throughout the 1st millennium BCE necessitated the major canonisations that gave us the cultures of the ancient world we still live with today.

2 Canonisation and Ideology

The first important issue concerning canonisation is the power and authority that are linked to it.¹³ Canonisation is about selection and that is never an innocent or random process. With canonisation, it is therefore always important to ask the question of ideology: who selects what, for what reasons and with what kind of intended outcome in mind?¹⁴ From this perspective, canonisation is essentially a political procedure that enforces internal coherence and unity at the expense of diversity – and thus results in the marginalization of competing narratives about past, present and future.¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu has illustrated how canonisation, as an ideological instrument, revolves around the accumulation of symbolic capital, often from materials from the past.¹⁶

His observation immediately reveals a central and most interesting paradox concerning canonisation. On the one hand, a canon necessitates seclusion and inscrutability: “Nichts darf hinzugefügt, nichts weggenommen, nichts verändert werden”, as Assmann put it.¹⁷ On the other hand, a canon transcends

13 As underlined and illustrated by the contribution of Papadopoulos to this volume.

14 As Robinson 1997, 11 put it: “After all, when we turn from the construction of pantheons, which have no prescribed number of places, to the construction of course syllabi, then something has to be eliminated each time something else is added, and here ideologies, aesthetic and extra-aesthetic, necessarily come into play”, cf. also McCusker 2013, 77. For the concept of ideology see still the illuminating discussion in Moore 1990 and further below.

15 Ofek 2010; Woolf, this volume and see in particular the important collection Brzyski 2007 for what are called partisan canons. On the (productive) interplay between canonicity and marginality, for the discipline of Classics, now Formisano and Shuttleworth Kraus 2018.

16 Bourdieu 1998.

17 Assmann 1992, 103.

time, needs constant maintenance and thus develops, as all cultural products do. *Although it should look stable and immutable, therefore, a canon is in fact constantly in the making.* This renewal, however, cannot be achieved simply through more accumulation, as this violates the main principle of seclusion and inscrutability – and precisely that is the paradox. Societies have found many different ways to evade this dilemma. For instance, they made canons extremely self-referential in order to maintain their authority. Possible additions, moreover, needed to be negotiated extremely carefully and almost in a ritual way – and we will encounter many more (improvised) solutions in the case studies discussed in this book. *A canon, in other words, needs to constantly mediate continuity and change and does so by disguising the latter in order to present it as the former.* Anchoring is an important tool, perhaps even the instrument *par excellence*, to make that work.

How canonisation functions and succeeds as an ideological process has been well investigated for what is one of its most important case studies: the canonisation of saints by Church authorities, a process that started in the 12th century CE. Contrary to common understanding, these studies illustrate that canonisation is never merely a top-down process, but rather a form of negotiation and compromise between different societal groups and their interests.¹⁸ Moreover, these canonisations often stretched out over a long period of time, as a slow and, in fact, never finalized project. Long after the canonisation process of the Reformation, for instance, many (now) Protestant communities were still very much interested in relics and saints – which the new cultural coherence no longer allowed them to be. In turn, Catholic Church authorities needed much time and debate to arrive at proper Counter Reformation canonisation policies. These included decrees against an all too swift canonisation of popular saints, like the “50-year wait” issued in 1627. This was an attempt to keep the authority of the canon intact and to present change in terms of continuity, as described above.¹⁹ To underline the importance of negotiation and compromise with canonisation – thus nuancing a simplistic and singular understanding of power as a top-down process – Didier Lett uses the notion of “saint-making”.²⁰ He shows how the canonisation of saints was a long procedure also in juridical terms, which allowed for the evidence to be structured and framed.²¹ His analysis of the elevation of Nicolas de Tolentino

18 Klaniczay 2004; Lett 2008; Copeland 2012.

19 Copeland 2012. See Klaniczay 2004 for legal aspects.

20 Lett 2008.

21 A similar view in Klaniczay 2004 and Copeland 2012, 261 who qualifies the official recognition of a saint as “(–) the result of both the development of a cult and a juridical process

to the level of saint, in the first half of the 14th century, even shows that the figure of De Tolentino was, in fact, more created than revealed throughout the process. This complex historical development, however, was forgotten as soon as Saint Nicolas de Tolentino was functioning as a canon saint. Change and innovation, which thus sometimes even reached the point of invention, had been successfully disguised as continuity.²²

Another important insight arising from the study of the canonisation of saints, is the fact that canonisation processes often work both internally and externally simultaneously and often not as originally planned. Canonisation, in other words, has many “unintended consequences”.²³ The canonisation of saints after the Reformation in the 16th century provides an illustrative example of this. The Catholic cults of saints had been strongly criticised by the Protestant reformers and were at the heart of their quest for a new religious and cultural coherence. The council of Trent (1545–1563) assertively defended saints and their (spiritual) role within the church, as a result. The subsequent Catholic canonisation of saints, then, served two goals. It was, of course, a militant response of the Catholic church towards Protestantism and therefore externally aimed. At the same time, it shows that it had an important innovative role to play internally, as well; namely, serving almost as “a Catholic Reformation in which Church authorities focused on removing corrupt practices”.²⁴ The latter, internal part of this complex historical process was covered up and meant to be forgotten, as it was not in line with what canonisation is supposed to do: produce coherence internally, against those outside the canon. But it certainly happened, and not only during the Counter-Reformation.

If we study canonisation, we should always pay attention to issues of power and ideology. This has been done extensively in literature from the past decades, probably influenced by the “culture wars” that characterised academia in the final part of the 20th century, if not until today.²⁵ This (exclusive) focus on canonisation as a vehicle for institutional intent, however, has pushed the

investigating an existing reputation for holiness amongst a substantial body of devotees spanning various states of life.”

22 For “the invention of tradition” as an anchoring device to suggest continuity in order to innovate in the period of Antiquity, see Boschung, Busch and Versluys 2015.

23 After Merton’s famous article from 1936 and the studies in its wake, like recently Van der Leeuw 2020.

24 Copeland 2012, 260.

25 For the (shifting) relations between culture and power within cultural-historical studies, see Gibson 2007. For how the concepts of canon and canonisation became a focus of the “culture wars”, see Gorak 1991 and Robinson 1997; Hurley 2020 for Art History specifically. For a recent example one can think about current debates on cultural appropriation and its discontents.

analysis of how canonisation works as a process of cultural formation or innovation to the background.²⁶ To arrive at more complete and nuanced understandings, therefore, we can probably analyse power and ideology best as influenced by all manner of socio-cultural factors and players; functioning both top-down and bottom-up, internally and externally at the very same time; and with a lot of “unintended consequences”. Moreover, a canon is distinctly part of the long-term, almost to the point where we could call it “the formalisation of a tradition-in-the-making”. The examples mentioned so far, at least, strongly suggest that canonisation is more a process evolving over time than a single conscious decision made through the agency of a person or group of persons at a specific point in time. I will argue that it is essentially a combination of both; but that conclusion indeed poses problems for the definition of canonisation in relation to concepts like formalisation or standardization; a point to which I will return further below. Be that as it may, the concept of canonisation is crucial to any theory of tradition, its constitution and its transmission.²⁷

3 Canonisation and Documentation

Documentation is central to the functioning of a canon, as it needs to be made crystal clear what the new normative tool exactly entails; what is allowed and what is forbidden; what is inside the canon and what is outside. Therefore, only documentation allows the canon to serve as an instrument of measurement and to have a profound impact. The idea of making a *list* is probably usually the start of what canonisation is about, as selection in order to change society.

26 As already argued and illustrated by Gorak 1991 as well as Silver and Terraciano 2019.

27 Boyer 1990. For canonisation and transmission see Rigney 2005; Silver and Terraciano 2019 and further below. The relation between power and canonisation is therefore well encapsulated, I think, in the compelling definition Fernand Braudel (1989 [2019], 60, for the issue see also Moore 1990) gave of ideology: “To call it an ideology is to identify it as a loose system of ideas, beliefs, declarations, prejudices, connected by a sometimes less than perfect logic, but connected all the same. An ideology cannot but be all-enveloping; its nature is to take over the individual and oblige him to submit to constraint, as he is generally only too pleased to do. In short it is a kind of replacement civilisation, designed to repair the holes and fill the gaps in an existing civilisation, now perceived as damaged or deficient. Logically it calls for enthusiasm, conviction, the certainty that one is right, and the lure of success. That it should consist of a bit of everything is logical too: the plaster used to patch up the cracks blends with what was already there.” Braudel talks about European “humanism” and the Renaissance here. Note how the final sentence of this quote (“the plaster used to patch up the cracks blends with what was already there”) in fact describes the mediation of continuity and change discussed above. Further below I will explore the concept of anchoring from this perspective.

As such, canonisation is *Listenwissenschaft* with the invention of writing representing a crucial step forward in this respect as well.²⁸ Strongly related to the list, is its formalization as a *catalogue*. Without these forms of documentation, it would probably be impossible for canons to persist over time. One other element that is crucial to the life of a canon, is the *exegete*; a person with special knowledge of the canon. With religious canons, this person is most often called a priest. The exegete distributes the prescriptions of the canon to its members and monitors their obedience. This is why this person, as interpreter of the canon, has authority and is deemed essential for the survival of the group or society in question.²⁹ Above we have already encountered a central paradox that characterizes canonisation: although a canon should look immutable and unchanging it is, in fact, always in the making. It takes much effort to keep that tension at bay. Exegetes play a crucial role also in that respect. Their explanations and interpretations are usually strongly self-referential, and thus strengthen the authority of the canon.³⁰ Moreover, the work of the exegete also serves to update the canon, making it relevant for new generations, while hiding this innovation as tradition through careful anchoring. As such, the interpreter almost *is* the canon, as mediator between continuity and change.

The functioning of the list, catalogue and exegete in relation to the notion of canon has been demonstrated by Jonathan Z. Smith, in a brilliant article on persistence, that I will therefore briefly summarise here.³¹ The existence of a list implies that a selection has been made; a selection that has been documented. Most lists are open-ended: “they have neither a necessary beginning nor end save that provided by the duration of the attention of the compiler or the use to which the list is to be put. There is no necessary order. Everything may appear to be quite arbitrary”.³² In this way, it is *discontinuity* that characterises the list. For the list to really function in terms of canonisation, therefore, other things are needed as well. When lists show relatively clear principles of order and are aimed at information retrieval, we usually call them catalogues. “The items in a catalogue remain heterogeneous (–) but an account of why

28 For the concept of *Listenwissenschaft* and a proper understanding of it see Hilgert 2009. For the crucial importance of writing as an instrument of canonisation see Assmann 1992; Raaflaub 2014 and below.

29 That the Roman emperor, as the highest authority in society, also was the *pontifex maximus* is an illustration of this principle.

30 For self-referentiality as the inevitable result of the relationship between original (canon) and translator (exegete) in more general terms, see Sluiter 1998.

31 Smith 1982. I thank PhD candidate Suzan van de Velde for bringing this text to my attention.

32 Smith 1982, 44.

the items have been brought together can be given, transmitted and learned”, as Smith formulates it.³³ Codes of classification now matter in a strong way. When the catalogue is seen as a list that is (fundamentally) complete, Smith argues, we talk about a canon. For a canon, there must be an element of closure and one of the most important steps in the process of canonisation is the closing of the canon. At that moment, a distinction is created between the canonical and the apocryphal. With the creation of that distinction, however, the tension between continuity and change becomes immediately acute. Because how are canons kept alive, how can they develop, when they cannot be changed? Here the exegete, or hermeneut as Smith also calls this person, comes into play: “an interpreter whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists without altering the canon in the process”.³⁴

The exegete has a crucially important function. Not only does he or she have to mediate the tension between continuity and change, as explained above. *The exegete also has to deal with the tension that exists between the arbitrary and the specific.* From a limitless horizon of possibilities, only a very small and, in fact, arbitrary selection makes it into the list or catalogue. Theoretically, therefore, everything can become canonised – and be used for cultural formation with the intent of becoming a tradition with its cultural identity. This arbitrary selection, however, is consequently treated as being very specific and therefore called “chosen”, “holy”, “sublime” or “ultimate” once it has developed into a canon. Therefore, the canon constantly has to be explained *as the canon* by these specialised exegetes. Canons can therefore only function through time because they are studied and interpreted; something that is called *Auslegung*. They need constant interpretation and discussion to mediate the relation between a changing tradition and an the unchanging canon. Documentation is crucially important in this respect and canonisation thus results in the formation of *Auslegungskulturen* through instruments like libraries, school curricula, museums, et cetera.³⁵ Canons may look stable and unchanging – but making them look that way thus requires a lot of work through lists, catalogues and exegetes.³⁶ We could ask ourselves whether the success of certain

33 Smith 1982, 45.

34 Smith 1982, 48, adding: “It is with the canon and its hermeneut that we encounter the necessary obsession with exegetical totalization”. Cf. Assmann and Assmann 1987.

35 Assmann 2000, 56; Assmann 2018, 292. These instruments, therefore, will play an important role in the analyses of all case studies in the subsequent part of this book.

36 To better understand how the symmetrical relationship between the exegete and the canon works, it is useful to compare it with (the debate on) ancient commentaries, where there is a similar mutual dependence between the commentator and his textual model in

canonisations as enduring cultural traditions is, perhaps, due to their ability to productively mediate this tension; a point to which I will return below.

4 Canonisation and History

We have seen above that questions of authority and political power loom behind many interpretations of canonisation not without reason, also in relation to documentation and the ordering of knowledge.³⁷ It has likewise become clear, however, that canonisations are to be equally understood as part of much wider, long-term developments in culture and society.³⁸ Canonisation is therefore about both the immediacy of political history and the long durations of cultural evolutions, simultaneously – and I would argue that we can only properly understand canonisation as cultural formation and innovation when we integrate both perspectives.³⁹ How then, does canonisation write history, in the short term *and* in the long term? To explore this question, I will briefly elaborate on two fundamental canonisation case studies: the coming into being of Jewish culture and religion in the 1st millennium BCE and the making of Christianity. I will do so with brutal brevity, and only on the basis of the research of two important thinkers about canonisation: Jan Assmann and Guy Stroumsa.⁴⁰

which both profit from one another: the commentator from the text by the social significance attached to tradition; and the text from the commentator because of its survival; see Sluiter 1998 and 1999.

37 For the relations between ordering knowledge and cultural formation in the Roman Empire from this perspective see König and Whitmarsh 2007.

38 Although it is not dealt with in this essay, the notion of antiquarianism is therefore very much related to canonisation. For antiquarianism see Schnapp et al. 2013 and the two recent important volumes Anderson and Rojas 2017 as well as Baines et al. 2019.

39 Cf. the contribution by Lardinois to this volume, on the measures that Lycurgus took around 330 BCE to promote Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the great Athenian tragedians, a status the three still enjoy today. He argues that, in doing so, Lycurgus strengthened the canonical status that they enjoyed already rather than inventing it. A comparable line of reasoning can be found in the contribution by Gonzalez to this volume when he suggests that the 2nd century BCE “canonisation” of the Hebrew Bible was the result of the authority these texts already had; something that the Maccabees and Hasmoneans capitalised upon and strengthened rather than invented.

40 For the first see Assmann 1992 Chapter 5; Assmann 2000, Chapter 3, now with Assmann 2015; for the latter see Stroumsa 1999 and Stroumsa 2005. Note that I am not so much concerned here with their historical interpretation and reconstruction *per se* but with their method in terms of canonisation. For both canonisation case studies the essays in Van der Kooij and Van der Toorn 1998 still have a lot to offer.

Assmann's analysis of the canonisation of Jewish cultural and religious traditions during the 1st millennium BCE provides a good example to illustrate the above-mentioned interplay.⁴¹ He sees this process developing as follows. First there would be a codification of law and kingship, in the homeland, at the end of the 7th century BCE. This was followed by the Babylonian exile from the 6th century BCE. The lived tradition of Jewish culture and religion was no longer a given, in these new circumstances. What "being Jewish" exactly meant, therefore, now needed to be described and defined, thus marking a next important step in the canonisation process. The third step was also triggered by an interaction with the foreign: the power of the new Achaemenid Empire over the Levant. The coming of the Persians, Assmann argues, triggered a top-down codification of what Jewish culture and religion entailed. The Persians organised knowledge because they needed to know what cultures and religions they were dealing with in their Empire. This brought Jewish self-definition, such as it had developed in the Babylonian exile, one important step further. The fourth step would be the creation of textual communities around these codifications, as they had developed throughout the ages. Libraries like those from Qumran and Nag Hammadi as well as exegetes dealing with the interpretation of what now had become an established canon testify to this. Assmann regards the Jewish condemnation of idolatry as the fifth and final step. This was a much older feature of Jewish religion for sure, but it was only in the Hellenistic period that it started to play a defining role in terms of canonisation. If you do not allow people to make images, Assmann argues, all symbolic capital that constitutes the canon must end up in a text, as it did. In terms of textual canonisation, therefore, this is a clever move, as the text now definitively becomes *the* text. How central this text subsequently became for Jewish identity formation is encapsulated by the expression "the people of the book".⁴² With this example, as analysed by Assmann, the immediacy of political history plays an important and constant role but probably not in the way we traditionally imagine political power and authority to play out. It was not the intention of the Babylonians to help the Jews to arrive at a form of cultural self-definition, nor was it the goal of the Achaemenids to codify Jewish culture for the Jews. Still, this is what seems to have happened. Jewish culture and identity, in Assmann's view, were created through a long process

41 I summarise Assmann 2000, Chapter 3, entitled "Fünf Stufen auf dem Wege zum Kanon. Tradition und Schriftkultur im alten Israel und frühen Judentum". This is a contested and much debated issue in which I do not claim any expertise. For more background, recent bibliography and alternative views see the rich essay by Gonzalez in this volume.

42 See Halbertal 1997.

of canonisation. It is important to underline that some of the key moments within that process were determined by agency from outside the own culture and its “unintended consequences”; a confrontation with the Other and the impact of that encounter.

This also is the case, and perhaps to an even more extreme degree, with the formation of Christianity; another major canonisation process from Antiquity. Following the analysis by Stroumsa, the translation of the Hebrew *torah* into Greek as the Septuagint was of crucial importance in this respect.⁴³ This translation took place in Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE and was probably initiated by Jews and for Jews because knowledge of Hebrew was dwindling. That initiative, of course, strengthened the status of the *torah* as canonical book for Jewish culture and religion at the time.⁴⁴ The Septuagint, however, is *also* the text that Christianity would later take as point of departure for building its own canon. This strategy was not only quite unprecedented but also extremely high-risk as the start of a canonisation project. Why? In the first place, because by selecting the Septuagint as its canonic book, it made Christianity base itself on another, foreign, already existing, Jewish canon. In the second place because it made Christianity part and parcel of Hellenistic civilisation by taking a Greek text compiled in the cosmopolis of Alexandria as its foundation. Thus, the birth of Christian culture simultaneously becomes a process of the canonisation of both Jewish culture as well as the Hellenistic tradition. Stroumsa calls this “the Christian hermeneutical revolution” and underlines that it had a double helix: Jerusalem and Athens.⁴⁵ This particular choice for what we could call a double anchoring – a canonisation of the Jewish *torah*, on the one hand, and Hellenistic legacy, on the other – would come to define what we call European culture: the fact that we talk about the Judeo-Christian and Classical fundamentals of Western civilization today still relies on a particular and remarkable choice of canonisation from two millennia ago.⁴⁶ Through this particular form of anchoring, the tension between continuity and change,

43 I summarize Stroumsa 1999. Again, this is a much contested and debated issue in which I do not claim any expertise; my interest lies in a better understanding of how (scholars think) canonisation works as a process. For a version of his essay as published in English: The Christian hermeneutical revolution and its double helix. In: L.V. Rutgers et al. (eds.), 1998. *The use of sacred books in the ancient world*. Leiden. 11–28.

44 The picture is, of course, much more complicated, see Gonzalez this volume.

45 With the first he means Jewish culture; with the latter he refers to Graeco-Roman (Hellenistic) civilization in general.

46 It seems that for Jews, Christians and Romans alike the final steps in their defining canonisation processes (regarding, respectively, the Mishna, the New Testament and the Greek world) only seem to be taken towards the end of the 2nd century CE; an important point to which I will return in the conclusion.

and between the arbitrary and the specific, was probably more acute than with other canonisation processes, as the Christian canon openly made other traditions its own, being ostentatiously secondary. A comparable example of such a double anchoring process might be visible in the 3rd century BCE Roman decision to build their own literature, identity and culture on Greek models while that was a very Hellenistic thing to do. Thus, the birth of Roman culture simultaneously becomes a process of the canonisation of both Greek culture as well as the Hellenistic traditions of the eastern Mediterranean in particular: Rome's double helix consisted of Athens and Alexandria.⁴⁷

The notion of standing into a secondary relation to the original is characterized as belatedness or *Epigonalität*. The fact that this secondary relation is often considered to be a major problem is probably best encapsulated in the famous observation by Karl Marx, who adds to the idea of Hegel that all important events or persons in world history happen twice: "Er hat vergessen hinzuzufügen: das eine Mal als große Tragödie, das andre Mal als lumpige Farce".⁴⁸ Christianity was apparently able to overcome this idea of belatedness and to work against the feeling that the cultural constellation it was creating would only be a "lumpige Farce". Its revolutionary character was located in the fact that it turned the question of belatedness on its head by presenting it as a defining strength instead of a failure. Christian culture understood itself as the perfection of its predecessors; by means of repeating, yes, but by doing so in a superior way and therefore casting aside its predecessors.⁴⁹ This is how the Christians were able to present themselves as the *verus Israel* as opposed to the Jews.⁵⁰ The Romans positioned themselves towards (contemporary) Greeks in a comparable way by stating that Roman civilisation would be the only real successor to Classical Greece.⁵¹ Cartsen Colpe has proposed to char-

47 For a pertaining analysis of "the Roman hermeneutical revolution" in these terms see Feeney 2016.

48 Marx, K. 1852. *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, here quoted after the 2007 edition edited by H. Brunkhorst, 9. He adds: "Caussidiere für Danton, Louis Blanc für Robespierre, die Montagne von 1848–51 für die Montagne von 1793–95, und der Londoner Konstabler mit dem ersten besten Dutzend Schulden beladener Lieutenants für den kleinen Korporal mit seiner Tafelrunde von Marschällen! Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Idioten für den achzehnte Brümair des Genies!"

49 In religious terms, Christianity would be the *Endoffenbarung*, as Stroumsa 1999, 15.

50 Stroumsa 1999, 17. Note that Islam used the same strategy to present itself as the perfection of its Jewish and Christian predecessors; again a form of double anchoring (A. Lardinois, personal comment).

51 This process of antagonistic differentiation *with* the past is already in Antiquity known as *aemulatio*, cf. Sluiter 1998, 12. It would therefore be most worthwhile to draw Hellenistic and Romans discussions on the relation between copy and original into the debate.

acterize this particular way of canon development as secondary canonisation or “filiation”.⁵² Its essence is that the relationship towards predecessors, the earlier canons, is not denied but made explicit, yet as “prefiguration”.⁵³ Such secondary canons thus produce cultural dependency, and with that conscious parallels. Yet they produce counter-formations at the same time. The new depends on and is legitimated by the old, while at the same time the new is presented as innovating and overtaking the old. This interplay enables the canon to become even more self-referential, as the older *exemplum* is framed as already presupposing its successor. This is how the Christians conceptualised the Septuagint. Although it was not an original and even not originally a translation for or by Christians, the Septuagint indeed functioned as good and efficacious for them, as the original in Hebrew did for the Jews. Moreover, this remarkable innovation, by others, allowed Christianity to spread the faith in Greek; a language spoken by many in the Mediterranean and therefore an important factor in the rise of the Christian church at the expense of Judaism.⁵⁴ Did its secondary character perhaps provide Christianity with more or better affordances to develop in the long run?

5 Canonisation and Transmission

Looking at canonisation as history maker puts the question of transmission centre stage.⁵⁵ The two examples briefly discussed above clearly show that transmission of the canon is of key importance for its functioning over time. How to account for successful transmission? Or, to put the question more

There is a similar attitude there to understand eclecticism though models from the past as something positive or even superior, as summarized by Perry 2005, 149 for works of art: “Far from being symptomatic of creative failure, then, eclecticism provided the artist with a strategy for balancing the familiar with the innovative, with the intended result a work of art uniquely suited to a specific social, cultural or physical context. Eclecticism allowed the artist both to link with tradition and to carry it further”. In this formulation eclecticism is a form of anchoring innovation.

⁵² Colpe 1987.

⁵³ For Christians it was thus *not* necessary to go back to the Jewish original. On the contrary: what they appropriated as “their” translation (the Septuagint) was made into a *conditio sine qua non* for the *Endoffenbarung*. For how this tension played out and was made fruitful in the relation between ancient texts and their commentators, a comparable case, see Sluiter 1998 and 1999.

⁵⁴ Stroumsa 1999, 19–23. Thus far in the ancient world language had been defining for the sacred character of texts as with religious texts the divine was thought to be in the language itself. Christianity changed that.

⁵⁵ Cf. the important remarks by Woolf, this volume as well as well as Currie and Rutherford 2019.

concretely, why are some canonisations from Antiquity still with us today as cultural traditions and many others not?⁵⁶ There appear to be two (extreme) positions in this debate. On the one hand, one could argue that it is all about the content of the canon. This is, for instance, how the canonisation of Greek culture by the Romans has often been interpreted. The content of the canon – that is: Greek literature, philosophy, art, et cetera – would simply be so superior that it could not but be appropriated and canonised by those coming into contact with it. The canonisation of the New Testament was often described and understood in similar terms of inherent quality – although the exact 27 canonical books were only decided upon around 367 AD. On the basis of what we have learned about canonisation so far, however, we can probably conclude at this point already that this was most likely the image those canons wanted to convey from the moment they were established – not reality. One could also take up the opposite position, and argue that canonisation is not so much about content, but rather about transference through time. As radically formulated by Guillory: “Canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission”.⁵⁷ This would imply that, in fact, everything could potentially be canonised, and that canonisation is about the medium, not the message.

In order to approach this question, the consideration of texts, and the fact that canonisation often takes place through texts, play an important role. Texts are an ideal instrument for canonisation, perhaps even a necessary precondition in terms of documentation, as we have seen above. Assmann understands this as follows:⁵⁸

Da sich das kulturelle Gedächtnis nicht biologisch vererbt, muss es kulturell über die Generationenfolge hinweg in Gang gehalten werden. Das ist eine Frage der Objektivierung, Speicherung, Reaktivierung und Zirkulation von Sinn. Es liegt auf der Hand, dass in der Geschichte dieser Funktionen die Erfindung der Schrift als eines aussergewöhnlich leistungsfähigen Mediums symbolischer Objektivierung den tiefsten Einschnitt bedeutet.

Through texts, the possibilities of canonisation processes became much more extended and refined, at the same time.⁵⁹ Canonisation, therefore, very much

56 Cf. Boyer 1990 who speaks about tradition as truth and communication and shows from a cognitive perspective that having a cultural tradition implies complex processes of acquisition, memorization and social interaction that must be described and explained.

57 Guillory 1993, 494.

58 Assmann 1992, 89.

59 See Raaflaub 2014 but note that Assmann 2000, 53–54 specifies the interplay between texts and canonisation as follows: “Nicht schon die Verschriftung, sondern erst die

revolves around *technologies* of canonisation. Texts are not the only important instrument however; objects play a similar role. Illustrative of this, for instance, is the cultural definition of great “masterpieces”: from the Parthenon and the Venus de Milo, to the paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Vermeer, et cetera.⁶⁰ Those are the objects considered to express where “we” come from and who “we” are. It is through canonisation, that such objects change from being commodities into objects that are maintained, cherished, and institutionalised as heritage.⁶¹ Where institutions like libraries are therefore of crucial importance as canon-makers for texts; museums fulfil the same function for objects.⁶² As a result, such institutions are peopled with canonical exegetes. Both texts and objects thus play key roles in the successful transmission of the canon and its persistence over time. As lists and catalogues and together with the exegete, they mediate the arbitrary – all that is available in the world – and the specific – that what is in the canon. In doing so, they closely monitor change and continuity in a balanced relation with each other.

6 Anchoring Innovation

Underlining the immediacy of political history, traditionally canonisation has been studied in terms of *ideology* and *documentation*, as has been described and illustrated above. This essay argues for the importance of the long duration of cultural evolutions as an additional perspective to that and has therefore equally analysed canonisation in terms of *history* and *transmission*. Focussing on canonisation as a long-term process of cultural innovation underlines the importance of the practice of *anchoring*. Already mentioned several times above, we will now turn to this concept more in depth.

In the 27 years he was in office, from 1978 to 2005, Pope John Paul II created more saints than all other popes created together (!) since Urbanus VIII

Kanonisierung der kulturellen Texte bewirkt eine grundsätzliche Veränderung kultureller Kontinuität”.

60 For the discipline of Classics in these terms, see now Formisano and Shuttleworth Kraus 2018. Within the field of Art History canonisation has been intensively studied, see Camille et al. 1996; Brzyski 2007; Recht et al. 2008; Locher 2012. This important (theoretical) debate on how canonisation works, unfortunately only seldomly taken into account by scholars working on canonisation and texts, has not only underlined the “constructedness” of canonisation but also its fundamental nature, see Halbertsma 2007. This is probably true for every discipline, and certainly Classics, see now Formisano and Shuttleworth Kraus 2018.

61 As put by Recht 2008, 12: “Au cœur de la théorie de la réception se trouve la notion plus ou moins explicite de ‘canon’ à partir duquel toute œuvre d’art est ‘reçue’, jugée et étudiée”.

62 Analysed in these terms by, for instance, Hein 1993; Goldstein 2011 and Hurley forthcoming.

centralised control over “saint-making” in 1634.⁶³ Oliver Bennett has analysed this process in terms of what he calls “strategic canonisation”.⁶⁴ In his view, the Catholic church wanted to tie in with changes in society, particularly concerning popular culture, in order to retain its dominant position. In a historical period of secularization, in which the role of the Catholic church became much less self-evident than it had been before, innovation was urgently needed. But how to present it as continuity? The Catholic church authorities solved this dilemma through a careful anchoring of the new. First of all, it started producing more saints than it had ever done before, in order to legitimize and strengthen its own authority through the self-referentiality of the canon. Subsequently it began to include what are called “celebrity saints”, like Padre Pio or Mother Theresa, in an attempt to modernise. This would be, in Bennett’s words: “(–) a clear illustration of the Catholic Church’s unique capacity to reinvent very old forms of cultural policy for changing times”.⁶⁵ How was canonisation so successfully, in this example, as a form of cultural innovation? The concept of anchoring is part of the answer to that question. We have seen above that canonisation as cultural innovation has to mediate a tension between the arbitrary and the specific. In other words, what is new and wants to move from the list via the catalogue towards the canon, has to be explained *in terms of the canon* to become part of that cultural tradition. Anchoring is one of the mechanisms through which this is achieved. In doing so, it simultaneously mediates the other recurring tension with canonisation, that between continuity and change, by presenting the latter in terms of the former.

Anchoring can be defined as the dynamic process by which individuals or relevant social groups connect what they perceive as new to what they consider to be familiar.⁶⁶ Anchoring is dynamic: once something has become part of the canon or cultural tradition, it no longer needs anchoring, but can even be appropriated for anchoring purposes itself. The examples of “saint-making” discussed in this essay are a clear illustration of that process. They first need to be anchored and when this has successfully been achieved, when they are established as part of the canon, they can start serving as anchors themselves. Sometimes, agents can be identified; individuals playing an active role in attempting to anchor a new phenomenon. At other times, no specific agency can be defined in the process and often the two are entangled. Anchoring is

63 For “saint-making” see Lett 2008 and above.

64 Bennett 2011.

65 Bennett 2011, 452.

66 Definitions after Sluiter 2017. For the concept of anchoring in relation to innovation specifically see Versluys and Sluiter 2022.

relevant for individuals to maintain their sense of orientation, identification and continuity in the world but plays an equally important role at the level of social groups. It is on purpose that I repeat some of the main elements of the definition of anchoring as given by Ineke Sluiter, to highlight the convergences between the concept of canonisation and the concept of anchoring. Both seem to be functioning in similar ways; with anchoring being an important instrument for successful canonisation. We should therefore understand the importance of the exegete that mediates the tension between the arbitrariness of the new and the specificity of the tradition in terms of anchoring, as well. It has been described above how the exegete constantly accounts for the choices that have been made. Exegesis not only explains what the original anchoring was about, but also, in doing so across generations, anchors the canon ever more firmly into its own socio-historical context. Anchoring is thus an important mechanism for understanding how canons are made to work as cultural traditions.⁶⁷ Canonisation needs the exegete as *anchorer*.

Let us now move from the concept of anchoring proper towards cultural innovation and the emergence of new cultural traditions more in general. We have seen that coherence and repetition are of prime importance to the functioning of a canon. These characteristics sit uneasily with the fact that improvisation and change are what keeps societies going in the first place. This is probably the reason why canonisation is often used as a survival strategy for cultural and social identity in times of crisis, when a new form of cultural coherence is needed. From that perspective, canonisation is an attempt to deal with change in a productive manner. For societies to survive, finding a balance between tradition and innovation in how to canonise is therefore crucial. Questions of translation and the copying of both texts and objects are, from this perspective, fundamental and almost evolutionary problems.⁶⁸ For these dramatic innovations to be successful, anchoring was key.⁶⁹

67 As Lardinois, this volume has it: "Canons, either already existing or newly created, are perfect 'anchors' to which to tie new developments and from which to derive authority". Many of the essays in Klooster and Kuin 2020 draw similar conclusions.

68 That what does not become canonical often disappears, see Woolf, this volume. Already Bourdieu 1966, 865 understands the tensions inherent in canonisation processes in evolutionary terms and quotes from Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* to make his point: "Les théories et les écoles, comme les microbes et les globules, s'entre-dévorent et assurent par leur lute la continuité de la vie." I use the term *evolutionary* on purpose in order to underline that canonisation is a distinct part of the story of information processing that some scholars see as fundamental to properly understand human evolution, see, for instance, Van der Leeuw 2020.

69 As aptly concluded by Saint-Gille 2007, 586 in a more general sense: "(–) c'est la capacité de persistance, c'est-à-dire l'aptitude à se recontextualiser ou à être instrumentalisés à

7 *Achsenzeit: The Age of Canonisation?*

It has been argued above that, in essence, a canon is an authoritative set of ideas that is grounded in the past in order to function as a guiding social imaginary in the present and hence to determine the future.⁷⁰ Canonisation, therefore, is a process at the heart of any form of cultural innovation – with anchoring being key to its impact and success.

For the 1st millennium BCE, a strong and compelling, though heavily debated and often criticised, concept regarding canonisation-as-cultural-innovation has already been developed: that of the *Achsenzeit* or Axial Age. It was originally formulated by Karl Jaspers as a philosophical idea in his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* from 1949.⁷¹ Jaspers starts from the surprising conjunction that many of the world's most influential thinkers like Confucius, Buddha, the Jewish prophets and Socrates all emerged around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE.⁷² That "Axial Age", in his view, produced the first "classics" in human history; the early works of philosophy, literature and theology that would be the guiding principles for Eurasian societies in the ages afterwards – and to which we still return. As a historical theory, the *Achsenzeit* has been criticised and nuanced for good reasons: not only is the chronology untenable as far as the main protagonists are concerned, there were also "Axial Societies" long before – think of Egyptian civilisation – and after the period of around 500 BCE.⁷³ This just criticism on the *Achsenzeit* as a historical theory, however, has not prevented the concept from being discussed and brought forward in a most fecund way.⁷⁴ At present the Axial Age is intensively debated again, as a tool to talk about "transcendence" or "reflexivity" within

nouveaux frais, au-delà de la conjoncture originelle, qui ouvre une piste d'étude sur les oeuvres canoniques".

70 For the notion of social imaginary see Castoriades 1975 and Taylor 2004; Stavrianopoulou 2013 for the ancient world.

71 Jaspers 1949, see further below.

72 This was first noted by Anquetil-Duperron in 1771, see further below.

73 As reviewers have noted the *Achsenzeit* critique by Provan 2013 is fundamentally misconceived (see, for instance, *Religious Studies Review* 40(3) 2014, 135). For balanced criticism on the *Achsenzeit* as a historical theory see many of the contributions to Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005 and in particular Bellah and Joas 2012. Overviews of the *Achsenzeit* debate as whole, explaining and illustrating the problems with Jaspers' ideas from a historical perspective include Assmann 2012, Bowersock 2013, Joas 2014 and now Assmann 2018.

74 This is mainly the merit of the important work by Shmuel Eisenstadt who started organising Axial Age conferences in the 1980s in order to critically evaluate and develop the concept; see Eisenstadt et al. 1986 and the analysis of this work by Preyer 2011 and Assmann 2018, 255–266, both with full bibliography.

human evolution, as well as the emergence of new “cultural crystallizations”.⁷⁵ It is remarkable that this discussion mainly takes place amongst philosophers, scholars of religion and sociologists, whereas most historians, archaeologists and classicists remain aloof.⁷⁶ I think this is a missed opportunity; the Axial Age debate has a lot to bring to them as well. For that we should probably not so much try and “re-historicize” the idea of an *Achsenzeit* but rather frame the issue in more general terms, as cultural innovation through canonisation.⁷⁷ The sociologist Hans Joas has argued that the Axial Age debate is “one of the most important developments in the area of comparative-historical social sciences” and an instrument to write what he calls a “contingent history of emergence”.⁷⁸ I argue that the ever-increasing connectivity that characterises the 1st millennium BCE is one of the most important factors in the “history of emergence” that we can write, from this perspective. Instead of an Axial Age, however, it is much better to talk about “axial breakthroughs” then; periods characterised by a high degree of reflexivity, historicity and what is called agentiality.⁷⁹ What do those terms imply? *Reflexivity* is the human ability to step outside the immediate present and imagine different worlds; *historicity* refers to the translation of that imagination in time, by which the present can be separated from the past and Self from Other. *Agentiality*, lastly, is meant to indicate that human action based on that reflexivity and historicity is intended to change the present and determine the future. All these characteristics come together equally in the concept of canonisation as it has been defined and as discussed in this Chapter.⁸⁰ Let us now first briefly review the *Achsenzeit* debate, not in its own right but with the goal to see what important insights it has already generated to understand canonisation as cultural innovation in

75 See, for instance, Eisenstadt 2000; Arnason and Wittrock 2004; Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005; Bellah 2005; Bellah and Joas 2012; Joas 2014; Baumard, Hyafil and Boyer 2015; Hoyer and Reddish 2019.

76 Hoyer and Reddish 2019 (with an illuminating Foreword by Ian Morris) is an important recent exception.

77 Arnason 2012 for a plea to “re-historicize” the Axial Age. Fine examples of what I propose, that is: attempts at world history through the idea of axial civilisations, are already provided by Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005; Morris 2010, 254 ff.; Mullins et al. 2018 and Hoyer and Reddish 2019.

78 Joas 2012, 9. In his understanding the notion of *Achsenzeit* has already developed towards canonisation-as-cultural-innovation in a more general sense – and comparable, I think, to what has been argued above.

79 The shift from an Axial Age to “axial breakthroughs” was already at the core of the work by Eisenstadt, see Preyer 2011. For the notions of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality see Wagner 2005, whom I follow here.

80 Cf. Wagner 2005, 93 and further below.

the 1st millennium BCE, in particular in relation to increasing connectivity or Globalisation.

The idea that there would be something of an Axial Age in world history goes back to the 18th century Iranist Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron and his study of the Avesta.⁸¹ He noted that Zarathustra, Confucius and Pherecydes of Syros (the teacher of Pythagoras) were 6th century BCE contemporaries who would all, in their own way, inaugurate a defining period for the cultures they were living in. Anquetil-Duperron realized that in the three main cultural spheres of the ancient world, around the period of 550 BCE – China (eastern Eurasia); India and Persia (central Eurasia); and the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean (western Eurasia) – men emerged that through their novel ideas would change history. However, it was clear that these Chinese, Indian, Iranian and Near Eastern/Mediterranean cultures were not directly influencing each other, in this respect. What was at stake then? Was the world as a whole going through some kind of “Axial Age”, a term only coined by Jaspers much later, similar to how it had gone through a Stone, Bronze, and Iron Age before? Many scholars took up the question; a trajectory recently analysed by Assmann in his book *Achsenzeit. Eine Archäologie der Moderne*.⁸² He defines three different periods in the reception and *Aufarbeitung* of the idea.⁸³ From the publication by Anquetil-Duperron in 1771 until 1945, many scholars indeed reflected on his *Entdeckung der Gleichzeitigkeit*, but they did so rather individually and not as part of a comprehensive and coherent intellectual discussion. In this period, the debate was either empirical or historical-philosophical. The empirical research elaborated on the *Gleichzeitigkeit*-observation by adding names and cultures to what became a treat list of axial thinkers, like Buddha, Laotse, Jeremia, Parmenides, et cetera. Independently of this, the historical-philosophical discussion tried to account for the *Gleichzeitigkeit*, for instance in terms of (changes to) culture, religion or ethics. For Hegel, for instance, the Axial Age was related to the paring of state-power and writing which, for him, would be the true beginning of history. Without writing, Hegel presumed, there could be no memory and therefore no history.⁸⁴ Ernst von Lasaulx, a 19th century German philosopher of history, explicitly drew on

81 See Metzler 1991.

82 Assmann 2018, on which this section draws heavily.

83 In his useful review of the historiography as presented by Assmann, Klostergard-Petersen 2017 argues that there is, in fact, a fourth and most recent period, inaugurated by Bellah 2005, in which the idea of an Axial Age is used to write world history in evolutionary terms. See Mullins et al. 2018 with bibliography.

84 “Mit den persischen Reich treten wir erst in den Zusammenhang der Geschichte. Die Perser sind das erste geschichtliche Volk, Persien ist das erste Reich, das vergangen ist”

Anquetil-Duperron in the development of his anthropological theory of human evolution.⁸⁵ The cultural-sociologist Alfred Weber, in his *Synchronistische Weltzeitalter* from 1935, used the *Entdeckung der Gleichzeitigkeit* to develop something a global cultural history.⁸⁶

With Jaspers, these only very loosely connected ideas were brought together but into a historical-philosophical theory that was meant to explain the present – and in particular the catastrophe of Nazism and World War II. Assmann hence characterizes *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* as essentially hermeneutical.⁸⁷ Jasper's primary goal was a better understanding of the present, not the 1st millennium BCE, although he considered the two as being strongly related. Jaspers uses the *Entdeckung der Gleichzeitigkeit* to develop a coherent, evolutionary world history that is based on what he calls the *Einheit der Geschichte*.⁸⁸ The Axial Age would be defining in this evolution, be a *Durchbruch* in his terms, because it would have provided *Offenbarung*, that is: the intellectual sophistication through which a new, self-reflexive attitude towards human existence came into being. Characteristics of this *Offenbarung* are the birth of philosophy; the deconstruction of mythical thinking; profound reflexion on the concept of history; and an overall drive for explanation, beyond the ruling paradigms of the time.⁸⁹ The main point of Jasper's theory is that this *Offenbarung* is the beginning of mankind as we understand it. The Axial Age, therefore, is *die Ursprung der Moderne*; “wo geboren wurde, was seitdem der Mensch sein kann”.⁹⁰ This spiritual and intellectual development had a profound impact on society: axial thinking resulted in a new understanding of reality that came forth from a tension between political power and

(Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Geschichte from 1827, section 255); cf. Assmann 2018, 60. For Hegel and the *Achsenzeit* idea in general, see Assmann 2018, 55–76.

85 See Assmann 2018, 96–118.

86 For Antiquity, Weber reasons in terms of “den Kontaktgürtel von China bis Griechenland” (58), see Assmann 2018, 152–164, 155.

87 See Assmann 2018, 165–227 (Chapter 9: Karl Jaspers: Die Achsenzeit als Gründungsmythos der Moderne) with a lot of attention for Jasper's biography and the (post) World War II context in which his ideas were developed.

88 A qualification he uses in a letter to Hannah Arendt in 1948; in an earlier letter to her he qualifies his project as a “*Weltgeschichte der Philosophie*”, see Assmann 2018, 177–178.

89 For these characteristics see the summary in Assmann 2018, 189–197 and Mullins et al. 2018, 600–602.

90 Jaspers 1949, 19. See also Jaspers 1949, 111: “In diesem Zeitalter wurden die Grundkategorien hervorgebracht, in denen wir bis heute denken, und es wurden die Ansätze der Weltreligionen geschaffen, aus denen die Menschen bis heute leben. In diesem Sinne wurde der Schritt ins Universale getan.”

intellectual trends. The Axial Age, which Jaspers defines in rather broad terms as the period between 800 and 200 BCE, is the age of criticism.⁹¹

After a quarter of a century of relative silence, despite the enormous popular success of the book, within academia the idea is only taken up again from the 1970s onwards, first by sinologist Benjamin I. Schwartz – for whom the Axial Age is about “standing back and looking beyond”⁹² – and then by the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt. The focus now shifts towards cultural-historical analysis. With this, according to Assmann, “beginnt das Konzept sich im Grunde aufzulösen” – and indeed it is now more and more realised that the *Achsenzeit* makes little sense as an *Epochenbegriff*.⁹³ Through a series of conferences, however, Eisenstadt was able to develop it as hermeneutical tool.⁹⁴ He did so by moving away from the idea of a specific Axial Age towards axuality and “axial breakthroughs”, in a broader sense. The process of axuality and its resulting in new cultural constellations thus became tools for analysis of potentially *all* periods in world history.⁹⁵ Central to “axial breakthroughs” is the idea that a civilization (*Hochkultur*) starts reflecting on itself by looking back to the past and looking around, in a confrontation with the Other, in the present. This necessitates the formation of a new, or at least different, identity; something that necessarily goes hand in hand with the *Umwandlung* of cultural memory – and results in profound change. The transition made is therefore often described as one from Archaic to Classical.

Based on this understanding as it has developed from the 1970s onwards, I would argue that the *Achsenzeit* debate is a great research tool to understand cultural formation and for approaching global history, in particular for the period of Antiquity.⁹⁶ I think, however, that one could have the same historical

91 An aspect rightly underlined by Morris 2010, 254–256 who concludes that the result of all that self-refashioning was a kind of social revolution in terms of critique on existing power structures.

92 See the important journal issue 104.2 from *Daedalus* (1975) entitled *Wisdom, revelation and doubt. Perspectives on the first millennium BC*, cf. Assmann 2018, 258.

93 Assmann 2018, 258; Assmann 2012 therefore talks about the Axial Age as myth. This conclusion is backed up by the latest archaeological and historical research as presented in Mullins et al. 2018 and Hoyer and Reddish 2019.

94 Published in several volumes edited by Eisenstadt and entitled *Kulturen der Achsenzeit*. See for Eisenstadt, his research program in this respect and a full bibliography: Preyer 2011.

95 Arnason and Wittrock 2004 deals with Eurasian transformations between the 10th and 13th centuries; Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrock 2005, for instance, presents a section on late Antiquity.

96 As underlined by the potential of a spade of recent publications: Baumard, Hyafil, Morris and Boyer 2015; Baumard, Hyafil and Boyer 2015; Mullins et al. 2018; Hoyer and Reddish 2019. Cf. Klostergard-Petersen 2017.

debate in terms of canonisation as cultural formation, and the various concepts related to it as they have been introduced above. “Axial breakthroughs” and the new cultural crystallizations they provide have three main characteristics: they step outside the immediate present and imagine different worlds (*reflexivity*); they translate this new imagination in cultural memory and separate the present from the past as well as Self from Other (*historicity*) while making this new imaginary work in society in order to define the present as well as the future (*agentiality* or cultural innovation).⁹⁷ All these characteristics indeed come together in the concept of canonisation, as discussed and defined in this essay. Wagner has argued that the *Achsenzeit* debate allows us “to assess the possibility of human beings to collectively employ their capacity for reflexivity such that they can critically relate to their history and give themselves new orientations in the present”.⁹⁸ This is exactly how the function of canonisation as cultural innovation has been described above.

The confrontation with the Other is crucial to “axial breakthroughs” and canonisations.⁹⁹ The formation of Jewish culture and Christianity, briefly described above, has illustrated the point. This relation has already frequently been noted in general terms and, in fact, plays an important role, although often implicitly, for many theorists and critics of the *Achsenzeit* idea (see below).¹⁰⁰ In the remainder of this essay I will try to make the link more explicit and use the concept of Globalisation to do so.¹⁰¹ I will argue that increasing connectivity makes the presence of the Other for the Self inescapable and turns reflexivity into a most urgent issue to be dealt with. Moreover, the new historicity thus created – with the help of lists, catalogues, and canons that were

97 See Wagner 2005 and above.

98 Wagner 2005, 93.

99 This can be a chronological Other or a geographical Other. Through its focus on Globalisation this essay mainly deals with the geographical Other, although I am aware that the two are very much related. Confrontation with the chronological Other is studied through the concept of antiquarianism, for which see Schnapp et al. 2013; Anderson and Rojas 2017 as well as Baines et al. 2019.

100 Cf. Wittrock 2004.

101 I use Globalisation here and throughout the Chapter as a shorthand to refer to the many terms and debates about increasing connectivity and its impact currently around in the social sciences and humanities. German scholars often talk about *Kosmopolitismus*; in France the concept of *mondialisation* is popular; et cetera. There are important conceptual differences of course but fundamentally, I think, all these discussions talk about the same thing: the impact of increasing connectivity over time. Globalisation, therefore, is not at all a process exclusively tied up with 20th and 21st century modernity, as the debate from the last decade has made clear. Cf. Pitts and Versluys 2015 and Hodos et al. 2017, both with a large bibliography, or, to take but one example from outside the field, a recent book entitled *The ages of Globalisation. Geography, technology and institutions* (Sachs 2020).

put into action by exegetes and the ideology that they were all part of – now had a global repertoire to choose from. All the resulting agentiality is a crucially important constituent of cultural formation in the 1st millennium BCE. This section therefore concludes that a fruitful continuation of the *Achsenzeit* debate should focus on canonisation as cultural innovation. The next section will argue that the impact of increasing connectivity is central to understanding how that process worked throughout the longue-durée of human history – and that the 1st millennium BCE is a crucial period on that trajectory.

8 Canonisation and Connectivity: Cultural Innovation in the 1st Millennium BCE

An important conclusion of the *Achsenzeit* debate as it has developed over the past 250 years is that canonisation and connectivity are intimately related.¹⁰² From the outset, the Axial Age *Gleichzeitigkeit* implied a transcontinental, universal, global perspective on the development of humankind. Already for Anquetil-Duperron, who wanted to break free from Eurocentrism in his work, all cultures of the ancient (and modern) world were equal; while Hegel talked about “Weltgeist” when dealing with the Axial Age.¹⁰³ In his analysis, Jaspers is drawing on what we would now call ‘the Globalisation debate’ even more explicitly. He does so in two different ways. In the first place by strongly underlining the universal character of the *Durchbruch* around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE. He not only sees this as starting in different regions of Eurasia simultaneously, but he also considers how this intellectual revolution would come to define the *oikumene* as a whole. The interplay between the local and the global, central to Globalisation theory, is also central to Jasper’s *Achsenzeit* and the periods afterwards: “Esgab bisher noch keine Weltgeschichte, nur Lokalgeschichten”, as he phrases it.¹⁰⁴ This idea of the beginning of an *Einheit der Geschichte* represents, moreover, a truly non-Eurocentric theory of global history. As succinctly summarized by Assmann:¹⁰⁵

102 Silver and Terraciano 2019 show this by focusing on how canonisation is about carving something out, as a specific *place*, from a much larger *space*.

103 See Stuurman 2007.

104 Jaspers 1949, 45, cf. Assmann 2018, 208.

105 Assmann 2018, 184.

Wie der Einzele erst durch Kommunikation zu sich findet, so auch die Kulturen der Welt. Die Achsenzeit erschliesst erstmals die Möglichkeit weltumspannender Kommunikation und führt eine Epoche geistlicher Globalisierung herauf. Zwar kommunizierten Konfuzius, Buddha, Zarathustra, Jesaja und Xenophanes nicht miteinander. Sie hätten sich aber verstanden.

Jaspers does so, secondly, by explicitly linking this universal past to his global present in terms of defining characteristics; a relation encapsulated in his idea of the *Achzenzeit* as *die Ursprung der Moderne*.¹⁰⁶ In terms of Axial characteristics, there are no real differences, for Jaspers, between the global past and the global present – this is exactly why he considers the two to have such a strong relation with each other.¹⁰⁷ More than half a century's worth of scholarly research, following the publication of *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, has not only radically changed our ideas about the degree of connectivity in Antiquity, but also our judgement of the functioning of the various cultures in relation to each other. One could say that Jaspers' reconstruction of the existence of a global *oikumene* in Antiquity, between 800 and 200 BCE, has been strongly supported, along with his idea that all these cultures were in communication with each other, directly or indirectly.¹⁰⁸ This is quite remarkable. Nowadays, scholars increasingly use the concept of Globalisation to understand this complex connectivity of Antiquity. This proves to be most fecund for many, but it is important to realize that it is only another tool to investigate the functioning of what Alfred Weber already called "den Kontaktgürtel von China

106 See Assmann 2018, 197–209. Eisenstadt 2000 developed this observation into his theory of multiple modernities. What is at stake here in philosophical terms, Assmann (202) argues, "sind die Grundzüge einer Hermeneutik des Fremden".

107 They are not similar however for Jaspers. The period around 1500 AD would see a radical change in terms of the emerge of science and technology; the 19th and 20th century in terms of an unprecedented increase of intensification of the world wide web. In this respect Jaspers adheres to the classical division of the history of the world into "modern" (19th–21st century), "pre-modern" (15th to 18th centuries) and everything before; the latter (Antiquity, Middle Ages) generally considered to be less interesting as impossible to define in relation to modernity – an idea resolutely countered by Jaspers however. It is following on from this observation of structural similarity between past and present that Eisenstadt and others have developed the idea of multiple modernities. Although an important debate that seeks to historicize the notion of modernity, see Eisenstadt 2000, I will not deal with it here.

108 The bibliography is enormous. See Broodbank 2013; Stavrianopoulou 2013; Sommer 2015 and now Hodos 2020 for general and well annotated overviews on this period and its intense, progressive connectivity.

bis Griechenland".¹⁰⁹ So how do relations between Globalisation, canonisation processes, and cultural innovation play out in Antiquity? When grossly oversimplifying, we can paint the following picture:¹¹⁰

The period around 1500 BCE witnessed a proliferation of networks all over Eurasia.¹¹¹ The direct linkage within and between regions now became so frequent that many scholars consider the middle of the second millennium BCE to be a turning point in terms of increasing connectivity.¹¹² The impact of that increased connectivity makes itself felt with such intensity that it is indeed useful to analyse it in terms of Globalisation.¹¹³ In Egypt, the main political power in this period, the Delta now breaks away from the Nile valley and becomes part of the interplay between the Near East, the Mediterranean and North Africa stronger than ever before. This resulted in more marine contacts and an increased interaction in the eastern part of the Mediterranean and the Near East in particular. Silver and copper were the main commodities in this period and we witness a growing social complexity in exactly those sites and regions that had nodal positions in this network, like Crete and Cyprus. The trade of metals and other raw materials was supplemented by manufactured objects, like metalwork, textiles but also perfumed oil and its containers. The local styles in which these objects were made already soon started influencing each other. As a result, we now not only see, for instance,

109 See Pitts and Versluys 2015. For a recent overview of the use of Globalisation theory within ancient studies see Versluys 2021 and forthcoming.

110 What follows builds on some ideas initially formulated in Versluys 2015; for the perspective itself see already Assmann 2010b. For a *longue durée* sketch of the history of Egypt from the perspective of increasing connectivity and with a focus on interaction with the Mediterranean specifically see Agut-Labordère and Versluys forthcoming. For the period before 1500 BCE in the Mediterranean, see Broodbank 2013; cf. the first Chapters of Cunliffe 2015 for Eurasia in general.

111 Sherratt 2017, 608. This development was dependent, as always, on pre-existing circuits of interaction and exchange.

112 In his history of the Mediterranean up to the emergence of the Classical world around 500 BCE, also Broodbank 2013 considers the period around 1500 BCE to be a tipping point in terms of increasing connectivity; qualifying the eastern Mediterranean in this period as a "theatre of interaction" (373).

113 Illuminatingly formulated by Sherratt 2017, 603: "The effects of 'globalisation' in the Bronze and Iron Age Mediterranean, certainly, did not take the extreme form in which we experience them today. Nevertheless, many of the basic underlying motives and processes, if not the scale and the particular technologies available, were similar. As in our modern globalisation, the driving motor was desire for material possessions well beyond the necessities for simple subsistence, including ones which would bring novelty or would distinguish their owners from others around them, or which would simply make life more comfortable or pleasant; and a corollary to this was the invention and propagation of new products and technologies which nobody previously knew they needed".

painted imitations of multi-coloured woollen textile from the Mediterranean in Egyptian tombs but also the development of an “international style” in luxury goods that playfully brings together a wide variety of stylistic elements, perhaps even in order to boast its cosmopolitanism.¹¹⁴ It seems that the site of Tell el-Dab’a, in the eastern Delta, was amongst the many important centres of this cosmopolitan network. One of its main sanctuaries was the temple for Seth, an Egyptian god who was depicted, however, as the Syrian storm god Baal-Sephon. This *interpretatio* implies a confrontation with the Other which resulted in a reflection and, in this case, recalibration of the own culture. We therefore see reflexivity and agentiality but remain ignorant about processes of historicity. Those might be grasped, however, from Egyptian literature in the period that testifies to the same effect, as it shows that conceptions of the *kosmos* only now begin to move beyond the horizon of the Nile valley.¹¹⁵ Mental maps, in other words, were changing as a result of increasing connectivity. The world of the Late Bronze Age was not only connected by trade but also by the (sometimes overlapping) empires of Egypt, Babylonia, the Hittites and the Mitanni. Interaction between these was so intense that a “global” lingua franca (Akkadian) developed for their communication.¹¹⁶ The collapse of this world towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE shows that interconnection had reached the level that trouble could spread with alarming speed.¹¹⁷ Centralised palace economies made way for more volatile, seaborne trading practices; a process accompanied by a surge of innovation in maritime technology. The frequency, strength, content and directionality of the network changed and there certainly was political fragmentation and economic recession in some regions.¹¹⁸ High mobility continued to be defining as well however: the famous Huelva hoard, found in Andalucia and dating to the 10th century BCE, shows a mixture of (northern) Atlantic swords and spearheads with Iberian weaponry and objects from the eastern Mediterranean.

This circulation of goods characteristic for the Bronze Age is followed by a more intense circulation of people in the Iron Age. Those people now frequently established permanent and culturally distinct settlements in distant regions.

114 For the imitation of a Mediterranean textile in an Egyptian tomb see Broodbank 2013, 377; for the cosmopolitan style of the Bronze Age see Feldman 2006.

115 Assmann 2010a, Chapter 1 for changes in Egyptian conceptions of the world from this perspective.

116 Liverani 2000 for the relations between these Empires and their subject rulers in this period – he coined the term “Great Powers Club” to describe them.

117 Phrasing and analysis after Broodbank 2013, Chapter 9.

118 For these parameters see the important essay on Globalisation and networks in Antiquity by Knappett 2017.

Particularly what scholars call the Phoenician and Greek “colonisations” stand out in this respect.¹¹⁹ First Phoenician and then Greek maritime entrepreneurs and fortune seekers now directly linked up the entire Mediterranean; tapping into comparable Atlantic and Central Asian circuits of exchange with that. They developed new homes away from home to maintain and articulate nodes in the network or safeguard commodities. Not only did this bring the global to a local level – think about the foundation of Carthage on the coast of North Africa by already cosmopolitan Phoenicians from the Levant around 800 BCE – but simultaneously ever more localities were making up the global network as a result.¹²⁰ One of the impacts of this more intense confrontation with other cultures was the coming into being of something like a pan-Mediterranean cosmogony.¹²¹ This implies, as we have already seen with the example of Seth/Baal-Sephon from the Egyptian Delta, a reflexion on the own culture. If you encounter, because of the wider network you are now part of, a figure venerated by others as Heracles that turns out to resemble your own Melqart, this forces you to reflect on precisely those categories of Self and Other – and their relative nature.¹²² Do we see more signs of reflexivity and perhaps even of historicity in this period as result of this increasing connectivity? Do cultures relate to their history in different ways to give themselves new orientations in the present and do they try to canonise those attempts? It seems so. Around 800 BCE, the Bronze Age past of many cultures are made into exempla for their present, with clear signs of antiquarianism and archaism.¹²³ If we focus on canonical texts alone there are the stories about Bronze Age Greece by ‘Homer’ and about the Exodus in Israel; both canonizing events from centuries earlier. There is the continuing popularity of the Gilgamesh epic in the Near East while in Egypt “the book of the Death” is canonised.¹²⁴ Reflexivity of the own *status quo* as a result of looking back is certainly part of these canonisations; think for instance of how, in the Iliad, the Trojan enemy

119 For the many important differences between the ancient phenomenon and our modern understanding of the concept, see Hurst and Owen 2005. Note that also other Mediterranean communities, like the Etruscans, were highly mobile.

120 It is indeed important to underline the interplay, as does Van Dommelen 2017. It is precisely the importance of this process of interplay that should draw our attention to resulting processes of reflexivity and its results like historicity and agentiality.

121 See Bonnet and Bricault 2016, an important analysis of 1st millennium BCE religions from the Mediterranean, the Near East and Egypt from the perspective of interaction and connectivity.

122 For an analysis of Melqart/Heracles in these terms see Bonnet and Bricault 2016, Chapter 1 (Les voyages de Melqart. De rocher sacré de Tyr aux Colonnes d'Hercule).

123 For Antiquarism see Schnapp et al. 2013 and Anderson and Rojas 2017.

124 I follow Assmann 2010b, 126.

is presented as equal to the Greeks in many respects. It seems that in the centuries to follow, this form of reflexivity develops much further and in more profound ways, enhanced by increasing connectivity. The coming into being of universal Empires – perhaps the neo-Assyrian Empire can already be characterised as such, but certainly the Achaemenid commonwealth – plays an important role in this, in three respects.¹²⁵ In a general way, Empires facilitate exchange and increase connectivity. Moreover, imperialism did not only bring the Other definitively to each other's doorstep, but it also forced the imperial authorities themselves to make lists and catalogues to administer their Empire, at the same time. Thus canonisation, internally and externally, became key to contemporary understandings of the world.¹²⁶ Cultures and cultural concepts, the real Other and the constructed Other, hence became fundamentally intertwined.¹²⁷ In terms of canonisation and Globalisation this is a defining breakthrough. Why?

As Arjun Appadurai, one of the most important scholars of Globalisation, has shown, Globalisation is as much about concrete changes in daily life as it is about imagination – and especially about their relation in the form of new social imaginaries.¹²⁸ Increasing connectivity over a millennium had, of course, changed nothing to the physical environment itself but it had

¹²⁵ This has already been illustrated by the example of Jewish cultural formation briefly discussed above. For universal Empire as idea and reality in Eurasian Antiquity and beyond see Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012. See also the discussion by Young, this volume, of a tablet from the Assyrian capital of Assur, dated to the period of 1307–1282 BCE, that already seems to suggest a relation between the bringing together of (older) elements from all over the world and the domination of that world.

¹²⁶ The relation between connectivity and Globalisation is formulated by Broodbank 2013, 506 for the Mediterranean after the period of 600 BCE in these terms as well: "This phase saw the Mediterranean's cultural, social and economic activities intensify and its networks fill out to incorporate most of the basin, and reach well beyond. Simultaneously, rules of engagement between people and places became more codified and rationalized, in ways that would shape some of the most brilliant, as well as the most disturbing, features of the Classical and later Mediterranean."

¹²⁷ Arnason et al. 2005, 2 beautifully phrase this as a "surplus of meaning" that now has to be dealt with. As formulated in Bricault and Versluys 2014, 29: "Increasing connectivity resulted in a shared field of reference wherein the various 'mind-maps' of the (symbolic) cultures were recognized (and reworked) by all. (–) We witness the build-up of this shared field of reference around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE in particular. From that period onwards, cultural relativism begins to be intensively discussed and initiates a debate about the translatability of cultural traits."

¹²⁸ Appadurai 1996, 2006 and 2013; always underlining how Globalisation is marked by a new role for imagination in social life. For social imaginary see Castoriades 1975 and Taylor 2004; Stavrianopoulou 2013 for Antiquity. Adams 2008 for a 20th century case study. On imagination and its fundamental role for human history and its evolution, now Abrahams 2020.

profoundly altered the perception and imagination of that world. This conquest as space, as one could call it, is characterised as time-space compression within Globalisation studies, meaning that the nature and experience of space (and time) is radically restructured as a result of increasing connectivity. I argue that the various canonisation processes of the 1st millennium BCE must be understood as part of this radial restructuring. We saw that with the foundation of Carthage around 800 BCE, a pan Mediterranean trade network came into being that linked up with other networks and included the Black Sea. Knowledge about the Other was still relatively limited at that time and the geography of the Mediterranean and Black Sea therefore became loaded with significance through myth. Homer's *Odyssey* is exemplary of both: the importance of travel and movement outside the own locality or region as well as the colouring of those strange worlds through myth. The adventures of Iason, Herakles or Diomedes tell similar stories. The next step in the conquest of space, from largely mythical to largely factual, is only achieved in the Persian Empire. Through their infrastructure and collecting of geographical data, the Persian court probably had a better overview of what the world looked like than there had ever been before and it seems that a decisive breakthrough in geographical knowledge materialised there. This allowed the Achaemenids to imagine themselves as a truly *universal* Empire; something that (again) changed the nature and experience of space. The impact of what one could call "the invention of humanity" around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE is of crucial importance in terms of canonisation, as it implies a radical rethinking of past, present, and future.¹²⁹ Already through the *idea* of a universal Empire, through that particular imagination of reality, there simply was so much Other now that ideas about the Self and the own culture in relation to the world had no choice but to change. When Remi Brague argues that the Axial Age coincides with the discovery of the world as the world he means, I think, exactly the same thing.¹³⁰ The repertoire for the construction of *mémoire volontaire* is now wider than ever before; the necessity of compiling lists, catalogues, and canons is more urgent than ever before. Only against this background, the emergence of comparative history projects, like those by Herodotos, are clearly understandable.¹³¹ Herodotos' world encompassed Mesopotamia as well as North Africa; Spain as well as the steppes of southern Russia; Egypt and Aethiopia as well as the Danube region and the Celts. As a result, his book is one big exercise in reflexivity and historicity. It is immediately during and after this period, in the 4th

129 I refer to the title of Stuurman 2017.

130 Brague 1999, cf. Arnason 2005, 32.

131 For Herodotos as world historian representing the anthropological turn, see Stuurman 2008 and Moyer 2011, Chapter 1.

and 3rd centuries BCE in particular, that we see responses towards all this canon work in the form of encyclopaedism, epitomes and libraries.¹³² The conquests of Alexander the Great, heir of the Achaemenids, brought nothing new structurally, yet they enhanced and intensified Globalisation processes and their impact even more. The imagination of the world as single world was further refined: Persian documentation provided Alexander with vital information that he added to by means of the *bematisteis* (land surveyors) in his consort. Myth thus slowly gave way to ethnography as well as world history and would, in the Hellenistic period, also develop into something a comparative scientific project, as exemplified by the library of Alexandria and many other centres of knowledge.¹³³ As a result, mapping culture and defining cultural identity through the transformation of cultural memory now becomes an almost worldwide obsession.¹³⁴ It is at the heart of the cultural formation of, for instance, the Seleucid Empire, in which the unique and unprecedented decision is taken to introduce a linear and transcendent concept of (global) time.¹³⁵ Such a strategy can only be understood as the impact of time-space compression brought about by Globalisation processes. The same seems to be true for all the major 3rd century BCE cultural canonisations that were written to define what exactly now is local in this global world. These “national histories” were compiled for Egypt by a priest from Heliopolis called Manetho; for central Asia by the Chaldean astronomer-priest Berossos, and probably also for Phoenicia by the Hellenistic source of Philo of Byblos – while one should add the Hebrew canonisation of the Torah as the canonisation of the history of the land Israel.¹³⁶ Their simultaneousness is most remarkable.¹³⁷ That all

132 Cf. Woolf, this volume. On encyclopaedism see König and Woolf 2013; on ancient libraries see König, Oikonomopolou and Woolf 2013.

133 This was, of course, never a process of replacing but rather of subjoining. Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, written around 270 BCE, is an illustrative example as it brings together myth, ethnography as well as the knowledge of the Alexandrian library and *mouseion*. Its goal, as Thalmann 2011 has convincingly argued, is to create a set of traditions in order to explore the *oikumene* and understand it in terms of Hellenism. Note the cautionary tales on (our modern, scholarly imagination of) ancient libraries in König, Oikonomopolou and Woolf 2013.

134 For relations between globalization and memory in general terms and with modern case studies, see Assmann and Conrad 2010.

135 As demonstrated in Kosmin 2018.

136 For the latter see Gonzalez, this volume. For Manetho, see Moyer 2011 Chapter 2; for Berossos, see Haubold et al. 2013; for the 2nd century BCE author Philo of Byblos and his Hellenistic sources, see now Delalonde 2021.

137 Assmann 2010b, 129. Cf. Quinn 2018, 145 who understands their writings as attempts to impress the new Hellenistic overlords; I see this somewhat broader as attempts to anchor the local into the global.

these anchorers were probably priests is not surprising in view of what has been concluded above, concerning the importance of priests as exegetes to deal with canonisation. Their histories were a form of canonisation as cultural innovation; namely, an attempt to redefine and bring forward the local in what had become a truly global world. Manetho, Berossos, the Phoenician source and the Jewish priests but also contemporary authors like Megasthenes, who wrote a history of India for the Seleucids, and other examples of the ethnographic literature from this period, all were dealing with the same intellectual project: providing what had now become the global present with a global past and map the own local place within that global space.¹³⁸

This profound, global transformation of cultural memory results, towards the period around 200 BCE, into what could be called a global cultural horizon.¹³⁹ It has often been noted that around the period of 200 BCE a distinctly new phase in the history of the ancient worlds begins.¹⁴⁰ This transition has indeed many aspects and profound results.¹⁴¹ However, at the core of it, I would argue, is the impact of Globalisation processes and their handling through canonisation as an engine for cultural innovation. As Ian Morris illuminatingly summarized:

By 200 BCE the East and West had more in common than at any time since the Ice Age. Each was dominated by a single great empire with tens

¹³⁸ For Megasthenes see now Wiesehöfer, Brinkhaus and Bichler 2016. Also the Maurya philosopher Kautilya and his writings fit this picture well (Marika van Aerde, personal comment). For relations between Globalisation and cultural memory see Assmann and Conrad 2010.

¹³⁹ As phrased by Assmann 2018, 291: "(–) seit dem 3. Jahrhundert v. Chr. entstand in der hellenistischen Antike ein Referenzraum und Verstehungshorizont, innerhalb dessen die großen Texte zugänglich, verständlich und verbindlich blieben. Das setzt eine spezifische Organisation des kulturellen Gedächtnisses voraus, die neben Schrift die Verbindung von Kanonisierung und Exegese erfordert". See also Assmann 2010b. For the circulation of such cultural memory see Rigney 2005.

¹⁴⁰ This already starts in Antiquity itself. Writing around 150 BCE, the historian Polybius remarks about this period: "from this point onwards history becomes one organic whole: the affairs of Italy and Africa are connected with those of Asia and of Greece, and all events bear a relationship and contribute to a single end" (*Histories* 1.3). Cf. Pitts and Versluys 2015, 18.

¹⁴¹ Note Purcell's remarks on and qualification of this period in somewhat wider terms (2014, 72): "Meanwhile, with the continuum of the ancient world, the play of intensification of production, mobility and exchange can increasingly, during the Hellenistic period, be seen in a crescendo which produced in the early Roman Empire a paroxysm of integration, whose nature is still a subject of debate, but whose quite exceptional scale, by pre-modern standards, becomes steadily clearer". Cf. Agut-Labordière and Versluys forthcoming.

of millions of subjects. Each had a literate, sophisticated elite schooled in Axial thought, living in great cities fed by highly productive farmers and supplied by elaborate trade networks. And in each core social development was 50 percent higher than it had been in 1000 BCE.¹⁴²

It is against this global cultural horizon that the Roman Republic and the Han Empire had to build their identity. “Schooled in Axial thought”, they had no choice but map and innovate their culture through canonisation and ask the respective questions: “who are we against the past and present of the Mediterranean, the Near East and the rest of the world?” and “who are we against the past and present of East Asia and the rest of the world?” This conclusion brings us back to the observation by Jean-François Billeter – that the real secret of success of the Han Empire has to be ascribed to canonisation as cultural innovation – quoted at the start of this Chapter. Drawing in Globalisation makes clear why the Han and the Romans had no choice but to turn to the past to construct their present and future. In that respect, indeed, specific choices were made to construct a *mémoire volontaire*. But we have seen that those choices were the result of ever-increasing Globalisation processes and the consecutive reactions to their impact that took place in the previous millennium. The past was haunting the Han Empire as much as the Han Empire was instrumentalising world history.¹⁴³ And this was certainly true for the Romans, as well.¹⁴⁴ It seems important, therefore, to distinguish between the establishment of a *canon* in terms of the immediacy of (political) history on the one hand and *canonisation* in terms of the long durations of socio-cultural evolutions on the other. From the latter perspective, canonisation is a form of slowly developing standardization with varying degrees of rigidity and flexibility;¹⁴⁵ the evolutionary development of a new *habitus* with the canon only representing a point in time testifying to its formal anchoring as consensus – and thus not so much the construction of a *mémoire volontaire* after a crisis. Canonisation, so it seems, is an instrument that all human societies developed and constantly use to deal with the continuous change they are going through.

142 Morris 2010, 270. Note in particular his phrasing “schooled in Axial thought”.

143 Important remarks in Stuurman 2008, von Falkenhausen 2013, a long-term overview of antiquarianism in East Asia, as well as Dudbridge 2019.

144 Boschung, Busch and Versluys 2015; Galinsky and Lapatin 2015; Roman 2016 and Versluys 2017b all provide many examples of how Rome was haunted by (some of) the various pasts it encountered in building its Empire.

145 On canonization as standardization and the important difference between hard and soft processes of selection see Woolf, this volume.

9 Conclusion and Outlook

Canonisation in the 1st millennium BCE revolves about the engagement with increasing Globalisation and the impact of the discovery of global unity and diversity. This progressive discovery forces societies to construct a new past, to create a different present for a novel future. Increasing Globalisation presented severe challenges for the re-organisation of cultural memory.¹⁴⁶ The new canonical traditions thus created are a response to Globalisation and an attempt to embed local diversity in the emerging global context.¹⁴⁷ This is what all the extraordinary ethnographic literature of the early Hellenistic period is doing in one way or another.¹⁴⁸ If the tensions necessarily inherent in these canons – between change that has to be presented as continuity and between the arbitrary that has to be presented as the specific – are well-managed, these traditions can develop into successful and long-lasting new cultural constellations. Anchoring is fundamental as a process in this, as it is needed to calibrate past, present, and future in relation to each other in order to arrive at cultural innovation.

As an outlook on that conclusion, it is interesting to return to the question of secondarity and the 200 BCE “threshold”. We have seen above that secondary canons were forced to face their own historicity in a quite unprecedented manner. This made them, one could say, into canonisation specialists *par excellence* and as a result these societies, like Han China and the Roman Empire, developed into cultures with an enormous “mnemische Energie”¹⁴⁹ Did this provide them with the memory-identity they needed to survive in a global *oikumene*? Or should perhaps even the remarkable success and longevity of the Empires that all took off in the period around 200 BCE – the Han Empire, the Maurya

146 A crucial point as already realized Assmann 2010a, 123 and that volume (Assmann and Conrad 2010) as a whole.

147 Assmann 2010b, 130 even talks about the making of a new, “trans-ethical homeland” in this respect. For the notion of embedding and its relation to Globalisation (in Antiquity) see Versluys forthcoming.

148 Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica*, compiled around 270 BCE, is just one illustrative example hereof. Thalmann 2011 has shown how the story of the Argonauts produces a new, global space by putting all kind of places together into a new relation. In this way, the story constructs a new cultural memory that was needed for the global world the 3rd century BCE had become.

149 I borrow the term from Hölkeskamp 2012. Attempts at truly writing world history, two steps further than Herodotos and one step further than Hellenistic ethnographic literature, therefore seem to be a distinctly post 200 BCE development. China received its first universal history, entitled the *Record of the Scribe* and composed by Sima Qian, around 100 BCE. Polybios wrote his one around 150 BCE.

Empire, the Parthian Empire and the Roman Empire¹⁵⁰ – be explained by the fact that the major canonisation processes triggered by increasing connectivity had been finished in their first instalment in the centuries before? The Roman Empire is a case in point.¹⁵¹ In all aspects, the Romans made themselves secondary to the Greek and Hellenistic past of the Mediterranean. But in the end, they were able to turn the question of belatedness around by presenting it as a defining strength: the Greek and Hellenistic past was only a prefiguration of the Roman present. It is Rome that had become the *real Hellas*.¹⁵² To present the canon as something quintessentially novel and unique in relation to the predecessors on which it depended, substantial work was needed.¹⁵³ This is, for instance, what Vergil's *Aeneid* did. It is a brilliant strategy of cultural formation as the old and the new can only be considered as strengthening each other; the one has to be read in the light of the other. In this way, the *Aeneid* is presented not a successor to its Greek originals but rather as their *Endoffenbarung*.

From such a perspective, the 200 BCE threshold should also be explained in terms of a changed relationship between Self and Other: as the result of the impact of Globalisation, 'a new man had now been born'. For their own century, the Enlightenment thinkers of the late 18th century called this person a "homo duplex".¹⁵⁴ They used this term to indicate that, due to the opening of the world in their own era, man had become Self and Other simultaneously. Philosophers like Lessing regarded this "*so wohl als auch*" not as a dichotomy, but as a natural outcome of increasing connectivity. Although historical circumstances were very different, the period after 200 BCE might have seen a similar breakthrough in identity thinking. Roman canonisation, at least, shows the reliance, in terms of identity formation, on sources that stem from outside

150 For a brief historical presentation of these Empires in relation to each other, see now Benjamin 2018.

151 For this and many other canonisation projects of the late Hellenistic period see Versluys 2017a.

152 Contra Stroumsa 1999, 6 who talks about cultural diglossia: "Die Römer konnten nie vergessen, daß sie zeitlich nach den Griechen kamen. Kulturell fühlten sie sich sehr ungleich, verdammt durch ihre Epigonalität, die überlegene Kultur ihrer früheren Feinde zu interpretieren". I believe that such a term underestimates the power of canonisation to form new cultural constellations, as the Romans did. Cf. Versluys 2014 and 2017b.

153 A brilliant analysis of how Roman literature managed to go beyond Greek from this perspective is Feeney 2016.

154 Assmann 2010a, 196–202. They understood this duality in terms of a coming together of a "homo naturalis" characterized by "thick relations" like kinship and an exclusive (we-) identity with a "homo civilis" characterized by "thin relations" like cosmopolitanism and an inclusive identity. For cosmopolitan egalitarianism in the Enlightenment see also Stuurman 2007.

the Self. This is something that Remi Brague, when he talks about the cultural formation of post-Roman Europe, called Europe's secondarity.¹⁵⁵ Apparently, Rome and Europe managed the tensions generated by their belatedness well, by specialising in canonisation and anchoring. We might speculate that such a strategy of including alterity is an important source of cultural innovation throughout world history in more general terms, as well.¹⁵⁶

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155 Brague 1992. For this scholar and his views on culture contact in world history see also the essay by Agut-Labordère, this volume.

156 For the elaboration of such a view from a philosophical perspective see Kristeva 1988, drawing on Levinas; from a religious perspective see Assmann 2010a, 203–212. Cf. Versluys 2017b, 274: "It is only in confrontation with the Other that we begin to understand and investigate ourselves and our own culture."

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PART 2
Case Studies



“The Tablets I Spoke about Are Good to Preserve until Far-off Days”: An Overview on the Creation and Evolution of Canons in Babylonia and Assyria from the Middle Babylonian Period until the End of Cuneiform Sources

Marie Young

Ninurta-aḫa-iddina, a scholar at the Neo-Assyrian court in the 7th century BCE, wrote the following in a letter to king Assurbanipal (668–630/627 BCE):

Let me read the tablets in the presence of the king, my lord, and let me put down on them whatever is acceptable to the king; whatever is not acceptable to the king, I shall remove from them. The tablets I spoke about are good to preserve until far-off days.¹

This passage offers a clear testimony of the royal interventions in the selection of compositions which were included into the library of Nineveh at the time, as well as the participation of the court scholars in this process. The perusal of literary and scientific compositions from Mesopotamia today offers the modern scholar numerous insights into what was read and utilised in ancient scholarly circles, and what was deemed “good to preserve until far-off days”. Since these compositions are mostly the result of sustained efforts over time to conserve one or more oral traditions on clay tablets, it is impossible to know exactly their date of creation. The term “canonisation” in Assyriology refers to this phenomenon with an emphasis on the standardisation of literary and scientific texts over time.²

- 1 Translation: S. Parpola, revisited by M. Young, letter: SAA 10, no. 373, r. 4–11 and r.e.12–13. The verb “*maḥāru*” with “*pan(ū)*” means “to become acceptable, agreeable”, cf. CAD, M/1, 64 (b) 2’. One of the first meanings of “*maḥāru*” is to accept/receive something.
- 2 The debate about the use of this word for the cuneiform sources is still ongoing. W. von Soden was one of the first to introduce this term in Assyriology, see von Soden 1953, 23. For more critical opinions about the use of the word “canonisation”, see Rochberg 1984 (especially against the use of the Biblical model to the Cuneiform sources), Lieberman 1990, and Veldhuis 1998, 79f. F. Rochberg-Halton (2016) actualised her position about her conception of Cuneiform

As evident from the quotation above, royal power could play a role in the selection of canonical texts. The purpose of this article is to investigate the link between political power and the formation of a written culture, and the involvement of political forces in the preservation of various Mesopotamian canons from the Middle Babylonian period until the end of the first millennium. I do not aim to discuss the terminology that describes the phenomenon of standardisation. As the term of “canonisation” itself remains debated, for the sake of clarity I will follow the definition proposed by E. Frahm:

Canonical texts have a binding character, they cannot be changed, and nothing can be added to or subtracted from them. Does this definition apply to first millennium cuneiform texts? If we accept that definitions deal with “ideal types”, and that the concrete objects they are derived from and refer to frequently show certain idiosyncrasies, our answer to this question, it seems, can be affirmative.³

The term “canonisation” does not imply that the texts from Mesopotamia and their contents were sacred like the books of the Bible.⁴ The content of tablets dating from the second millennium was much less fixed as in the first millennium BCE.⁵ This view is also linked to the sources available: far fewer tablets from the late second millennium are known. According to Frahm’s definition, the expression “canonical texts” serves to describe the content of first-millennium compositions that appears to be standardised. In other words, several manuscripts from different archaeological contexts contain more or less the same text in the first millennium. There were, however, at the same time, different degrees of standardisation that must be kept in mind, so in some compositions the form and content were more fixed than in others.⁶

Canonicity. Mention should also be made of W. Lambert’s seminal study (1957) on the notion of authorship in Cuneiform sources. According to W. Hallo (1991), four Mesopotamian canons can be observed: an Old Sumerian canon, a Neo-Sumerian canon, an Old Babylonian canon and one appearing during the second half of the second Millennium. In the present article, I follow Ph. Clancier’s idea about the standardisation of knowledge which “ressemble à un bilan de l’existant conduisant à sa mise en forme”, Clancier 2009a, 291.

3 E. Frahm applies to Mesopotamia the definition of canon proposed by J. Assmann: “a text corpus that represents an immobilized form of the stream of tradition”; see Frahm 2011, 318.

4 See the article of H. Gonzalez in the present volume concerning the canonisation of the Hebrew Bible.

5 Al-Rawi/George 2006, 50–51.

6 For example, the series *Maqlû*, a magical ritual against witchcraft, *Bārûtu* the series of hepatoscopy, the Epic of *Gilgamesh* and the Epic of *Anzu* show a high degree of stability in their content in comparison with the hemerological treatises.

Nevertheless, the second-millennium manuscripts, as well as the tablets from the first millennium suggest that an important work of standardising knowledge appeared in the middle of the second millennium in the Ancient Near East.⁷ Furthermore, the available written evidence underlines the participation of the contemporaneous rulers in this process of standardisation in both the second and first millennia.

Much work remains to be done with regards to the standardisation of literary and scholarly compositions during the Old Babylonian Period.⁸ Here, I will limit myself to the aims of the workshop organised in Leiden and Nanterre, which were to adopt a diachronic approach to the evolution of canons in several regions during the first millennium BCE – a period when large empires brought different geographical areas together.

After an introduction to the appearance of canons in the Middle-Babylonian period, I will present how Neo-Assyrian scholars carried out the massive task of organising and preserving canonical compositions in royal and temple libraries during the 8th and 7th century BCE, an ambitious enterprise with the goal of collecting all the knowledge of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom. The paper will conclude with an analysis of the evolution of Babylonian knowledge during a period when political power was no longer in the hands of a native dynasty, namely under the Achaemenid, Hellenistic and Parthian eras. As this topic spans more than 1200 years of history, I am unable to cover every aspect, but I hope to give an overview of the main issues that the cuneiform sources reveal.

1 The Canonisation of Knowledge during the End of the Second Millennium BCE

The literary and administrative sources unfortunately become scarce after the fall of the first dynasty of Babylon (18th century BCE), moreover, a lot of material remains still unpublished. When one compares the manuscripts from this period, compositions on the same literary topics appear very different. The

⁷ In the field of Assyriology, the secondary literature often refers to the earlier stage of a text which was standardised during the first millennium, as a 'Forerunner'. The term is much discussed and in this article I have decided to use W. Farber's 'earlier versions' instead; see Farber 2014, 9. On the use of earlier versions to form the series of the first millennium, see for example, Koch-Westenholz 2000, 19, Heeßel 2001–2002, George 2003, 3–70, and Zomer 2018, 175–243.

⁸ For an introduction to the question of Old Babylonian canons see Veldhuis 2003, 11–18 and Delnero 2016.

royal inscriptions of Samsu-iluna (1749–1738), the successor of Hammurabi, show that he loses the old country of Sumer as his reign progresses.⁹ The cities of southern Babylonia were partially abandoned after the eleventh year of his reign (c.1736 BCE)¹⁰ and there is no information about the fate of the library collections of the scholars from Uruk, Ur, Larsa or Nippur (Fig. 3.1).¹¹ Thus, the secondary literature tend to suggest that scholars migrated themselves in the North and went on to write down compositions which they had known by heart. The few manuscripts published show that an outpouring of literary creativity in Akkadian also appeared at that time. E. Frahm compared this moment of standardising literature with the creation of the first books of the Bible during the exile.¹² He proposed that the scholars near the end of the Late Old Babylonian period may have written down what they knew in order to protect and preserve it. Nevertheless, many of the literary texts from this time (1749–1595 BCE) were found during illicit excavations, so a certain estimation of the state of literary production and knowledge during this period is impossible.¹³ At any rate, it is sure that something must have happened that had far-reaching consequences for the writing of literary and scholarly works during Late Old Babylonian period. Indeed, the manuscripts from the Middle-Babylonian period testify that new editions of masterworks were composed along the “canonical lines”.¹⁴

Whereas the scholars of the first millennium do not preserve the evidence for canonisation which would have taken place under the last kings of the first dynasty of Babylon, they celebrated their successors. Indeed, after a period of turmoil that ended the first dynasty of Babylon, the arrival of the Kassite dynasty marked a turning point in the history of Mesopotamian literature in the second millennium. With the Kassite kings began a period of political and economic stability, which allowed important editorial work to take place. As N. Heeßel calls this age the ‘Blüte der Gelehrsamkeit’ – the flourishing of scholarship.¹⁵

9 Pientka 1998, 6–21, Charpin 2004, 335–364, Volk 2011, Beaulieu 2018, 97–121.

10 Charpin 2004, 361–362, Beaulieu 2018, 103–104.

11 A map of the region is available in Fig. 3.1. D. Charpin proposes that the migrated scholars took elements of their library with them. However, no well-localized discovery makes it possible to date these manuscripts precisely, see Charpin 2004, 345–46 and fn. 1800.

12 Frahm 2011, 322–323, fn. 1540.

13 Charpin 2004, 345–346.

14 Foster 2005, 209.

15 Heeßel 2011, 175; W. von Soden 1953, 22 was the first to note the importance of this period for the standardisation of literary and scholarly works. He also used the word “canonisation” considering the Kassite period the most creative period in the history of Babylonian



FIGURE 3.1 Map of the Ancient Near East

1.1 *The Development of Culture during the Kassite Dynasty*¹⁶

The Kassite dynasty from the Zagros Mountains came into power in North Babylonia after the Hittite raid against Babylon in 1595 BCE.¹⁷ These kings adopted the political, linguistic and cultural traditions of Babylonia.¹⁸ This policy may be explained by the desire to lend the new dynasty legitimacy by connecting it to the old traditions of Mesopotamia. The Kassite dynasty presented itself as the legitimate successor of the great Mesopotamian kings, and emphasizing in their inscriptions their piety, which enabled them to claim the support of the Babylonian gods.¹⁹ The long period of stability they brought

literature. To refer to Akkadian literature between 1500–1000 BCE, B. Foster 2005, 205, used the expression “mature period”.

16 Culture is here to be understood as art, music, literature, and all written knowledge thought of as a group.

17 The Hittite raid is mentioned succinctly in Chronicle 20B; see Grayson 1975. The fall of the First Sealand dynasty allowed the Kassites to unite Babylonia under their authority at the beginning of the 15th century; see Boivin 2018, especially 121–125.

18 Beaulieu 2018, 122–153 for an overview on the history of the dynasty.

19 For the royal inscriptions and the political history from this period see Bartelmus and Sternitzke 2017.

about proved their strategy a success. Sources attest that the rulers of this dynasty carried out a policy of major building works, benefiting from the good political and economic situation.²⁰ Babylonia was at that time recognized as a powerful state in the Near East and maintained diplomatic contacts with Mitanni, Assyria, Anatolia, Egypt and Iran. The great powers of the region also used Middle Babylonian Akkadian in their diplomatic correspondence. It comes as no surprise, then, that the knowledge of Sumerian and Akkadian literature was exported throughout the Near East to train foreign chanceries.²¹ In fact, most scholarly and literary tablets known from this period come from the 'west', including Emar in the great bend of the Euphrates, Ugarit on the Syrian coast, Megiddo in Palestine, Hattuša in Anatolia, and more rarely, the Egyptian city of El-Amarna. The evidence shows this cultural transmission outside the 'Mesopotamian heartland', i.e. Assyria and Babylonia. In addition to the growing importance of Standard Babylonian Akkadian, Sumerian was still learnt and used by the Kassites in their building inscriptions. In the middle of the second millennium it had already been a dead language, but at the same time, it became the language of cult and scholarship since the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Sources hint at that schools of translation were active in rendering Sumerian literature into Akkadian and creating impressively bilingual versions during the Kassite period.²² For example, the *Ballad of former heroes* was part of this translation efforts. The Sumerian version of this song had been first copied in a school context, and subsequently it was adapted and found new popularity in Akkadian during the Middle-Babylonian period.²³

Furthermore, the Epic of Gilgamesh which bears as its title the first line, *ša nagba imuru*, "The one who saw the Deep", appeared in its Standard Babylonian form during this period. It considerably expanded on the Old Babylonian version and was also transmitted to the West.²⁴ The manuscripts of the Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian periods bear many similarities with the manuscripts of the first millennium, while at the same time also showing considerable variation.²⁵ A Neo-Assyrian catalogue ascribed Sîn-leqi-unninni as the

20 For example, Kurigalzu I created a new capital: Dur-Kurigalzu, the "fortress of Kurigalzu", during the end of the 15th and early 14th centuries BCE.

21 This dialect inherited from the Hymnic Old Babylonian Epic dialect while Middle Babylonian new features enriched it.

22 Maul 1999, 5–6 and Lafont et al. 2017, 524.

23 The manuscripts come from everywhere in Mesopotamia from Assyria to Syria. After an enumeration of the heroes of the past, it recommends enjoying beer and the present day time. See Foster 2005, 894–85.

24 George 2003, 24–27.

25 Ibid.

composition's author.²⁶ He most likely lived at the end of the Kassite period, as did many ancestors of the first millennium's Babylonian scholars, who have names typical for the Kassite period.²⁷ Nothing concrete is known about this author from the Middle-Babylonian period, even though an influential family of lamentation priests in the city of Uruk claimed him as their ancestor down to the Hellenistic period.²⁸

The memory of the Kassite kings was well preserved in the first millennium. They often feature in the role of authority figures and some evidence suggests that this is the result of their involvement in the flourishing of Babylonian written culture. Thus, the calendrical divination literature provides an interesting example of how Kassite kings may have been the patrons of the scholars composing new editorial works. A tablet from the ancient Assyrian capital of Assur (KAR 177) also contains hints that editorial work on texts of this genre was carried out during the reign of the Babylonian king Nazi-maruttaš (1307–1282 BCE). This hemerological compilation has on the obverse an earlier version of the menology series *Iqqur īpuš*, which is followed by a list of auspicious days in each month. This part of tablet ended in a type of colophon known as the "Nazi-maruttaš's rubric":

Auspicious days (according to) the wording of seven tablets, copies from Sippar, Nippur, Babylon, Larsa, Ur, Uruk, and Eridu. The *ummānu*-scholars copied/excerpted (them), selected (the appropriate materials), and gave (them) to Nazi-maruttaš, king of the world.²⁹

This rubric mentions the oldest Mesopotamian cities where the originals came from and chooses the number seven for its symbolic value. The quotation shows clearly that these cities regained their place in the Babylonian intellectual life under the Kassite dynasty. The role of the *ummānu*, the scholars, is emphasized, but the text only names them collectively. Indeed, according to the Sumero-Akkadian tradition, scholars are in charge of transmitting and interpreting knowledge from one generation to another from the time this divine knowledge was revealed to the mythological seven sages (*apkallū*).³⁰ The *ummānu* are the successors of these famous sages and mentioning them

²⁶ See Lambert 1962, 66–67 and 77.

²⁷ Lambert 1957, 2–7.

²⁸ Beaulieu 2000.

²⁹ Translation: Frahm 2011, 322–323. Tukulti-Ninurta I probably brought the tablet in Assur among other tablets that he took as booty from Babylonia. For a new duplicate from Assur, see Heeßel 2011, 172, as well as Jiménez 2016.

³⁰ Reiner 1961.

collectively was enough to give authority to the new serialised work. This text is the oldest proof of a text composed under royal patronage in the 14th or 13th century BCE.³¹ It has long been used in Assyriological literature as a proof of the appearance of the first canonised series under the Kassite kings.³² Nevertheless, as E. Jiménez demonstrates, in his historical study of the genre, this tablet is merely one example of an ephemeral compilation.³³ This combination of *Iqqur īpuš* and *Auspicious days* is only known from two tablets from Assur. According to Jiménez, an important element is missing that would unequivocally affirm its canonicity: the fact of its transmission on several tablets in several regions with identical content.³⁴ The tablet does not bear witness to the beginnings of a canonized series, which would have succeeded in imposing itself in Assyria and Babylonia after being composed under Nazi-maruttaš. It was thus appreciated for its demonstration of compilation activity during his reign, and for its antiquity. The owner of KAR 177 was Aššur-šuma-iškun, chief of the singers (*nargallu*). This Assyrian scholar rediscovered and conserved the tablet during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, presumably because its antiquity interested him.³⁵

The memory of Nazi-maruttaš was also still celebrated in the Late Babylonian period. Nazi-maruttaš continued to be a personal name still in use in Uruk until the Hellenistic period.³⁶ M. Frazer proposed to link the popularity of the king to his patronage of one of the most widespread Mesopotamian literary compositions: *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*.³⁷ Šubši-mešre-šakkan, its author, seems to have been a high official in the court of this Kassite king.³⁸

As the example of the names of Sîn-leqi-unninni and Nazimaruttaš demonstrate, scholars or kings from the Kassite period left their mark on the scholarly elites of the first millennium. References to the past were clearly used as a tool to legitimise their position and privileges in the temple hierarchy. The texts

31 Jiménez 2016, 198–199.

32 Von Soden 1953, 22.

33 Jiménez 2016, 199.

34 Jiménez 2016, 198 and fn. 4.

35 Jiménez 2016, 199, n. 6. R. Pruzsinszky may study the library of the Assyrian singers in a forthcoming monography.

36 Frazer 2013, 204 and fn. 103. As M. Frazer underlined, the name Nazi-maruttaš is not attested before this sovereign, yet it is quite certain that he was the one to influence the onomastic of the first millennium. The same phenomenon appears for the Kassite king Kurigalzu of the 15th and early 14th centuries BCE. In the Neo-Babylonian texts *Nbk.* 283 and 345 the father of Silim-Ištar, bears the name of Kurigalzu.

37 See Foster 2005, 306–323 and Frazer 2013, 205–206.

38 *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* bears the title from its first line *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* in Akkadian, “I will praise the lord of wisdom!” Annus/Lenzi 2010 and Oshima 2015.

concerning the royal patronage of literature and knowledge during the Kassite dynasty suggests that one prominent role of the palace was to encourage canonisation. The Kassite kings wished not only to gain legitimacy using the code of native Babylonian dynasty, but also to make their own name remembered by contributing the transmission of Sumerian-Akkadian culture. An interesting historical parallel with J.-F. Billeter's analysis of the policy of instrumentalizing culture under the Han dynasty in China at the end of the 3rd century BCE emerges here.³⁹ In the manner of the Han dynasty, the Kassites reshaped Babylonian culture:

To make people forget the violence and the arbitrary from which the empire was born, and by which it was supported, it had to appear in compliance with the natural order of things. Everything was redefined following the idea that imperial order complied with the laws of universe since its origins and for all times.⁴⁰

One can imagine that the Kassites used and reshaped the Babylonian culture to pretend that “the arbitrary from which their empire was born” came to be “the natural order of things”. It is then possible that the vitality with which the literary tradition spread in the west can be attributed to the cultural aura of the Kassite dynasty. This is still very hypothetical, but the geographical spread of the sources raises questions, as it does not seem to be linked to a territorial extension of the Kassite kings.

1.2 *The Development of Culture during the Second Dynasty of Isin*

Around 1155 BCE the rising Assyrian kingdom and the Elamites put an end to the Kassite dynasty and a new native dynasty arrived in Babylon: the second dynasty of Isin (c.1153–1022).⁴¹ The sources for this period are disappointingly few in number, with a lot of information coming from literary texts known from later copies.⁴² Written evidence confirms a cultural and institutional continuity between the Kassite rule and the kings of the second dynasty of Isin. Under the second dynasty of Isin, Assyria and Babylonia both had to deal with the arrival of the Arameans and the Suteans as well as with difficult climatic changes.⁴³ It is undoubtedly the turmoil caused by frequent Aramean and

39 See in this volume, the introduction of M.J. Versluys.

40 Billeter 2014, 16–19.

41 Based on Beaulieu 2018, 154–155.

42 The King List A and C are rare contemporary sources on the period, but they are very laconic; see Brinkman 1967, 37–67, 83, and fn. 429, and Grayson 1980–1983, 90–97.

43 Michalowski 2005, 161–162.

Sutean attacks on the Babylonian temples that caused the absence of administrative sources, on the one hand, and the continued efforts to create canonical series, on the other.⁴⁴ This moment of Mesopotamian history exemplifies the liminal period described by J. Assmann: “The construction of canons occurs during times of increased cultural polarisation and broken traditions, when one must decide what order to follow.”⁴⁵

Two figures from the Second dynasty of Isin seem especially important for the history of Akkadian literature. Firstly, the sources of the first millennium commemorated the figure of Nebuchadnezzar I (1121–1100 BCE).⁴⁶ His inscriptions were copied and well used especially by the Neo-Assyrian scribes.⁴⁷ The inscriptions and historical-literary compositions about this sovereign depict his victory against his Elamite enemy and the triumphal return of the statue of the god Marduk to Babylon after it had been robbed from the Esagil temple in Babylon by the Elamites.⁴⁸ This figure had a great impact on Babylonian textual traditions.⁴⁹

The elevation of Marduk in the pantheon had already begun under the reign of Hammurabi and his descendants,⁵⁰ and it continued under the Kassite dynasty, although Enlil was still viewed as the ruler of the gods.⁵¹ However, the religious situation changed under the second dynasty of Isin. It is already obvious in the names of the monarchs of this dynasty, which mainly used Marduk as the theophoric element. The written evidence from the time of Nebuchadnezzar I suggests that Marduk was established at the head of the pantheon after the royal campaign against Elam. W.G. Lambert’s contributions served to popularise this thesis together with his opinion that Nebuchadnezzar I’s reign was “a turning point in the history of ancient Mesopotamian religion”.⁵² According to Lambert, Nebuchadnezzar I commissioned the writing of the *Enūma eliš*, the Babylonian Epic of Creation, to

44 The inscriptions of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (c. 1114–1076) describe the problems caused by the arrival of Arameans and Suteans in Mesopotamia; see Brinkman 1968. Chronicle 15 also seems to link the demise of the king Marduk-nadin-aḥḥe with the turmoil caused by Arameans; see Grayson 1975.

45 Assmann 1992, 125.

46 Based on Beaulieu 2018, 159.

47 About Nebuchadnezzar I in historical memory see Nielsen 2018, 163–188.

48 According to P.-A. Beaulieu 2018, 159, Kuter-naḥḥunte plundered the Esagil temple in the 13th century BCE, bringing to Susa the statue of Marduk.

49 See Reynolds 2019, especially 80–92.

50 See Sommerfeld 1982.

51 Some seals with their inscriptions show that the cult of Marduk was important in the Kassite period. See Kämmerer 2012, 19.

52 It is in fact the title of his famous article published in 1964; see Lambert 1964 and Lambert 2013, 271–274.

justify this theological change.⁵³ The epic subsequently legitimized the political pre-eminence which Babylon had assumed in the land of Sumer and Akkad at the expense of Nippur, the ancient religious capital, which had become largely deserted in this period.⁵⁴ Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar was the first to give himself the title of “scion of Babylon” (*zēr Babilī*) in his inscriptions. For the first time in the history of the Ancient Near East, a literary composition attributed the creation and organisation of the entire universe to one single deity. The Epic of Creation came to circulate widely in Mesopotamia in its standard Babylonian form, and it served to justify Marduk's new position as the king of the gods.⁵⁵ Unlike in the case of Gilgamesh, no earlier version of this composition is known. All known manuscripts of the *Enūma eliš* date back to the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian or Late Babylonian periods. No copies from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I have yet been found. The oldest manuscript can be dated to the 9th century BCE.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the standard Babylonian version of the epic was recited in the new year's ritual and in a ritual during the month *kislīmu* throughout the first millennium BCE.⁵⁷ Its later inclusion in the royal cult underlines its importance. The festival of the new year was then used to ritually confirm the Babylonian king in his office. The Epic also had an impact on the Neo-Assyrian kings: Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) commissioned an Assyrian version to be written, in which Assur, the Assyrian chief of the

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- 53 Furthermore, another piece of evidence underlined the importance of the royal patronage of Nebuchadnezzar for the intervention in the production of knowledge: two chemical recipes for making artificial gemstones contained a colophon that specified that the tablet is “a copy of an original from Babylon (property of) the palace of Nebuchadnezzar I, king of Babylon” (K. 713). The tablet dates from the Middle-Babylonian Period; see for its edition Oppenheim 1966.
- 54 It has to be noted that among the authors who created the canonised series listed in the catalogue of authors and texts, seven out of ten seem to come from Babylon; see Lambert 1957.
- 55 184 manuscripts of the epic are known, which clearly present its success. The title ‘king of the gods’ for Marduk was already detectable in the Kassite onomastic. It also appeared in Šitti-Marduk's *kudurru*, contemporary with Nebuchadnezzar I, and in the bilingual epic of Nebuchadnezzar. *Enūma eliš* is the earliest literary text which ascribed the kingship over god to Marduk, which might indicate that it was composed during the reign of this ruler.
- 56 The oldest copy (VAT 10346) comes from Assur, but unfortunately, there is no information about its archaeological context or the findspot. For S.M. Maul, palaeographic features suggest that it is to be dated to the end of the second millennium or the beginning of the first millennium BCE. A dating of the manuscript between 1000–800 BCE is usually accepted in the secondary literature; see George 2005, 87, fn. 15 and Oelsner 2009, 464. The manuscript serves as a *terminus ante quem*.
- 57 The singers (*nāru*) sang the *Enūma eliš* the fourth day of the new year's ritual and the fourth day of a ritual during the month *kislīmu* in Babylon, see Çağırzan/Lambert 1991–1993.

pantheon, leads the creation instead of Marduk.⁵⁸ The ideology of the absolute power of Marduk, formulated in the Epic, and which reflected the imperial ambitions of Neo-Assyrian kings, must have aroused their interest.

Evidence for the importance of the memory of Nebuchadnezzar I in the first millennium Mesopotamia appears also on a tablet from the Babylonian city Uruk, which lists sages and scholars, each of them accompanied by the king whom they served (Table 3.1). The list is dated to 165 BCE, and it was composed by Anu-belšunu, a member of the Babylonian scholarly elite, a lamentation priest.⁵⁹ The list mentions Esagil-kinam-ubbib as the court scholar (*ummānu šarri*) of the king Nebuchadnezzar I.⁶⁰ Moreover, Anu-belšunu stated that Esagil-kinam-ubbib was also the scholar of Adad-apla-iddina (1064–1043), who reigned 36 years after Nebuchadnezzar I. Esagil-kinam-ubbib is known as the author of the *Babylonian Theodicy*.⁶¹ The first signs of the various stanzas of this composition spell his name in an acrostic, a further evidence for the outpouring of learned literary and poetic creativity during the second dynasty of Isin.⁶² The Esagil-kinam-ubbib was then succeeded by Esagil-kin-apli in the role of the court scholar during the reign of Adad-apla-iddina.⁶³ Under Adad-apla-iddina an important phase of the fixation of knowledge was also completed, as it is embodied by the figure of Esagil-kinam-ubbib and Esagil-kin-apli.⁶⁴ The latter is well known from different manuscripts, which mention him as the author of several medical compendia. Two of the best known are the medical-diagnostic series *Sakikkû* and the physiognomic series *Alamdimmû*.⁶⁵ A catalogue of *Sakikkû*'s forty tablets⁶⁶ known from Kalhu and Babylon⁶⁷ lists all the works that were believed to have been compiled by Esagil-kin-apli, and even offers an apologetic bibliographical note about him:

58 Frahm 2010, 8–10 and Kämmerer 2012, 26–33.

59 Van Dijk 1962, 44–52, Finkel 1988, 144 and fn. 3, and Heeßel 2010, 162–164.

60 *BaM Beth.* 2 89: l. 17–18.

61 The *Babylonian Theodicy* is a dialogue between a sufferer and his friend about god's justice. In a "catalogue of Texts and Authors" from Nineveh, Esagil-kinam-ubbib is claimed to have written the Theodicy under Adad-apla-iddina; see W.G. Lambert 1962, 66–67.

62 Lambert 1960, 63–91.

63 *BaM Beth.* 2 89: l. 16.

64 His inscriptions confirm his numerous renovation works of buildings damaged by Sutean and Aramean invasions. See Radner 2006–2008 for discussion.

65 *Sakikkû* combines medical symptoms with the corresponding diseases and predicts the patient's chances of recovery. The first two tablets were called "When the incantation priest goes to the house of the patient" (*Enūma āšipu ana bīt marši illaku*) and they cite the omens that the exorcist observes on the way to the patient's home.

66 The choice of the forty as the final number of tablets for *Sakikkû* is certainly not a coincidence, but was intended to symbolically refer to the god of wisdom Ea; see Heeßel 2000, 106, fn. 40.

67 Finkel 1988, 143–159, und Heeßel 2000, 104–110.

Concerning that which from old time had not received an (authoritative) new edition and was like disordered threads, having no duplicates – in the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, king of Babylon, to [work it] anew, Esagil-kin-apli, son of Asalluḫi-mansum, the sage of king Hammurapi, the *ummānu*-scholar of Sîn, Lisi and Nanaya, a prominent citizen of Borsippa, the *zabardabbû* of Ezida, the *pašišu* of Nabû who holds the gods' tablet of Fate, and can reconcile conflicting things, the *išippu* and *ramku* priest of Ninzilzil, lady of loving trust, sister of his love one, the *ummānu*-scholar of Sumer and Akkad, through the incisive intelligence that the gods Ea and Asalluḫi had bestowed on him, deliberated with himself, produced an (authoritative) new edition of *Sakikkû* (arranged) from head to foot, and firmly established it for learning.⁶⁸

This passage is a unique evidence for the creation and compilation of a new series by a Babylonian scholar. From the passage quoted, Esagil-kin-apli appears to have been a scholar whose memory was especially important in Babylonia during the first millennium. His name was also preserved in the handbook of the incantation priests, which lists all the compositions that an *āšipu* had to master.⁶⁹ The dependence on the lore whose authorship was traditionally ascribed Esagil-kin-apli was, however, not celebrated ubiquitous in Assyria and Babylonia. His authority was well established in Babylonia, and all the Babylonian manuscripts of *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmû* so far discovered follow his edition, but this is not the case everywhere in Assyria.⁷⁰

68 Translation: Frahm 2011, 326. See Finkel 1988, 148–50, Heeßel 2000, 104. The term used to describe the editorial enterprise is *sur-gibil*, in Sumerian 'the new text'. It comes from the Sumerian verb 'to spin'. This word stands in close semantic proximity to the Latin word *textus*. See Stol 2007, 241–42.

69 This text is known from seven manuscripts found in Assur, Nineveh and in Babylonia: Sippar, Babylon, and Uruk, see Geller 2000, Jean 2006, 62–82, Clancier 2009b. The manuscript from Assur simply gives the name of Esagil-kin-apli without specifying his titles and ancestors as the Babylonian tablets did; see Heeßel 2010, 160–161. The Assur text comes from the library of Kišir-Assur, see Maul 2010.

70 N. Heeßel 2010, 154–159, published a fragmentary tablet from Assur which adds information about how the Assyrian scholars saw Esagil-kin-apli. Certain scribes from Assur rejected his editorial work. They preferred the use of an earlier version of the physiognomic series *Alamdimmû*. The tablet edited by Heeßel is a rare glimpse into the scholarly discussions that surely must have taken place in the learned milieus of Mesopotamia. The text of the tablet makes it clear that the version copied by the scribe of Assur is not the one that Esagil-kin-apli replaced (*šá é-sag-gil-gin-a nu du₈.meš-šû*). According to N. Heeßel 2010, 157–158, the fact that this scholar had to explicitly claim the validity of an old version shows that the new version of Esagil-kin-apli had meanwhile become the standard or at least widely accepted. Furthermore, it has to be emphasised that not a single manuscript of *Sakikkû* has been found in Assur, see Heeßel 2010, 158–59, although

Although N. Heeßel has demonstrated that the *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmû* manuscripts from Nineveh of the first millennium contained the version established by Esagil-kin-apli, they did not mention his name at all, and a catalogue of texts and authors from Nineveh states that *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmû* were created by the god Ea.⁷¹ It seems that the Assyrian scholars were reluctant to place a Babylonian scholar from Borsippa in the foreground.

E. Frahm emphasises the idea that the “collecting, reorganizing and safeguarding the written knowledge available” under the Second dynasty of Isin may have been spurred on by the plundering of the Babylonian sanctuaries by Aramaeans and Suteans.⁷² This period of upheaval seems to be reflected in the Late composition known as the Epic of Erra. It presents Erra, the god of destruction and violence, bringing ruin and devastation to the world after convincing Marduk to leave his throne and repair his cult image in the netherworld.⁷³ Scholars may have feared the loss of cultural memory and opted to insert in newly compiled works the oral tradition or different versions of one composition which were at the moment in question in “disordered threads” to adopt the words of Esagil-kin-apli.

1.3 *First Millennium Celebration of the Past*

Many facts point towards the importance of the end of the second millennium for the formation of Babylonian and Assyrian written cultures. Numerous documents from this period are preserved in first-millennium copies. The Assyrian and Babylonian scholars maintained a real and remarkable awareness of the history of Sumero-Akkadian literature, as well as the history of Sumero-Akkadian kingship.

The literary and scholarly compositions were passed on thanks to the task of copying, which not only allowed the contents of the compositions to survive, but also ensured the transmission of knowledge and a specific *Weltanschauung* to the scribes, who were often apprentices. The kings of the

numerous tablets belonging to the series come from the other Neo-Assyrian cities of Hurizina, Nineveh and Kalhu.

71 Heeßel 2010, 161–162 et n. 38. For the “Catalogue of Texts and Authors” see Lambert 1962, 64.

72 Frahm 2011, 324. In the later literary tradition, the land of Elam is mainly seen as the most responsible for the looting and destruction affecting the Babylonian cities and their temples, especially with regard to the disappearance of the statue of the god Marduk, see Reynolds 2019, 70–101.

73 Lambert 1962, 76–77, Oppenheim 1977, 267–68 and Frahm 2010, 6–8; 2011, 347–49, Reynolds 2019, 97. See, for the most recent translation of the epic, Foster 2005, 880–911. It is most probable that the epic was composed in the 9th century BCE.

second millennium BCE were commemorated by the creation or the transmission of historical-literary compositions and the copying of their inscriptions.⁷⁴ Mesopotamian temples required regular renovation work due to the fragility of the brick construction. When temples were renovated, they had to be rebuilt on the same foundations that were believed to have been established since time immemorial, and where past kings had piously set up their building inscriptions.⁷⁵ Out of respect for the royal power, temples and palaces kept these testimonies of the bygone days in their treasuries, or what the secondary literature often describes as “museum”.⁷⁶ Copies of these inscriptions, and sometimes even their originals, were studied by apprentice scribes when they were learning how to write in an archaising script,⁷⁷ studying their history,⁷⁸ as well as to training in how to write new royal inscriptions. Mesopotamian kings usually asked the scribes to prepare foundation inscriptions which they would place in the renovated building, together with the older foundation deposits of their predecessors, to testify to the renovation they had undertaken. A monumental “old”-looking script was often employed in the first millennium for foundation inscriptions or building inscriptions inspired by Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian ductus.⁷⁹ The Kassite kings or the Second dynasty of Isin used the past and culture to create a history of themselves, in order to legitimize their power. This knowledge of tradition was then used as a *Herrschaftswissen* to acquire power,⁸⁰ making it appear, as J.-F. Billeter wrote, a part of “the natural order of things”. The best-known example of this use of knowledge for dynastic purposes, is still represented by the Sargonid dynasty in the first millennium BCE.

74 See for example Radner 2005, 244–250 and Paulus 2018.

75 See Schaudig 2003.

76 The secondary literature often uses the word of “museum”, see Goossens 1948, Weisberg 1996 on this topic. It is worth noting, however, that these inscriptions were not always the originals but were in some cases composed by later scholars in order to contribute to the construction of an idealised past (*fraus pia*); see Schaudig 2003. This fascination with the past is already attested earlier in the history of Mesopotamia, although more evidence can be dated to the first millennium because of its chronological posteriority. The evolution of writing in the first millennium BCE makes easier to distinguish an archaising ductus from the contemporary writing normally used by the first millennium scribe.

77 Radner 2005, 249–250, Hallo 2006, Beaulieu 2010, 10.

78 Beaulieu 2010, 10, Hallo 2006, Radner 2005, 249–250.

79 See for example the inscription of Esarhaddon celebrating the rebuilding of Babylon and Esagil (BM 91027, British Museum). Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562) is also well known for his use of an archaising cuneiform ductus for his monumental inscription, see for example the Ištar gate in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.

80 Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

2 The Age of Libraries: The Preservation of Canons under the Sargonid Dynasty of Assyria in the 8th and 7th Century BCE

The archaeological campaigns of the 19th century brought to light thousands of tablets kept in palace and temple libraries as well as in private scribes' collections. The so-called "libraries of Assurbanipal" in Nineveh remain the most famous discovery of this period. It was indeed, the decipherment of the royal archives and libraries that laid the foundations for a discipline newly named Assyriology. Assurbanipal (668–630/27 BCE), succeeded his father around 668 BCE, the inscriptions dating from this period highlight his wide-ranging educational accomplishments in the scribal craft and his personal interest in ancient wisdom.⁸¹ Even though different Assyrian monarchs had started to assemble the text collection in Nineveh over centuries,⁸² he seemed to have been the most ardent among the royal collectors.⁸³

2.1 *The Motif of the Wise King*

Under the Sargonid dynasty (722–609 BCE) and in particular during the reigns of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE), royal inscriptions and the letters of the court scholars often invoked the figure of the wise king: the king is constantly compared to the mythological figure of Adapa, a priest of Ea, and an antediluvian sage of Eridu, the earliest city of Sumer.⁸⁴ Thus, one of the court diviners writes to Assurbanipal:

Assur, in a dream, called the grandfather of the king, my lord, a sage; the king, lord of kings, is an offspring of a sage and Adapa: you have surpassed the wisdom of the Abyss and all scholarship.⁸⁵

81 In fact, he must have been quite young and still an apprentice when he acceded to the throne; see Villard 1997.

82 K. Radner 2015, 111–12 proposed that Aššur-uballiṭ I was the first to let his court scholar, the Babylonian Marduk-nadin-aḫḫe, assemble the first royal literary and scholarly texts collection of Nineveh in the 14th century BCE.

83 Numerous tablets contain the mention "ṭuppi Aššur-bani-apli" and "ekal Aššur-bani-apli," respectively "tablet of Assurbanipal," "tablet of Assurbanipal's palace". The king was also presented as the copyist of tablets; see Hunger 1968, 97–107 and Lieberman 1990. Assurbanipal's excellent education also resulted from the fact that he was not originally destined to succeed his father, but rather to exercise a high-ranking religious function, see Villard 1997.

84 Parpola 1993, xix, and Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 309–320. On the use of this motif in the inscription of Sennacherib see Frahm 1997, 280.

85 SAA 10, no. 174.

This courtier's flattery reveals the image that Assurbanipal wanted to transmit to posterity. He himself also used the figure of Adapa in inscriptions from the beginning of his reign:

I learned [the c]raft of the sage Adapa, the secret lore of all of the scribal arts. I am able to recognize celestial and terrestrial [om]ens and can discuss (them) in an assembly of scholars. I am capable of arguing with expert diviners about (the series) "If the liver is a mirror image of the heavens". I can resolve complex (mathematical) divisions and multiplications that do not have a(n easy) solution. I have read cunningly written text(s) in obscure Sumerian and Akkadian that are difficult to interpret. I have carefully examined inscriptions on stone from before the flood that are sealed, stopped up, and confused.⁸⁶

The appearance of this literary motif in the royal discourse seems to be an innovation of his dynasty.⁸⁷ In the passage cited above, Assurbanipal boasted about his mastery of secret knowledge, of the prognostic disciplines of astrology and sacrificial divination. He was also able to understand the omens and cited a canonised series on haruspicy. In addition to mathematics, he bragged about being able to read old inscriptions, "stone tablets from before the flood", further underscoring the authority that the most ancient compositions enjoyed in Assyrian and Babylonian scholarship. The exaggeration is clear here, but on the other hand the passage gives a fairly good account of the categories of texts found in the libraries of Nineveh. One letter of a court scholar also shows perfectly how Assurbanipal controlled the choice of series that were to be included in the libraries:

The series should be rev[ised]. Let the king command: two 'long' tablets containing explanations of antiquated words should be removed, and two tablets of the haruspices' corpus should be put (instead).⁸⁸

The importance of divination, especially haruspicy, in the libraries is again evident here. Assurbanipal encouraged supplying the library's collection with

86 K 2694 + K 3050 (CDLI: P394610), I 17–23 = Novotny 2014, no.18 (Assurbanipal L⁴), see also Streck 1916, 255–257. The translation used here follows the one in Novotny 2014, no. 18.

87 Sumerian kings as Shulgi already made use of this figure of the wise king. Assurbanipal may have been influenced by the inscriptions of this king, or the literary-historical compositions about him; see May 2013.

88 SAA 10, no. 177.

truly encyclopaedic knowledge, under which operational knowledge was the most important.

2.2 *Operational Knowledge and Assurbanipal's Reign*

Around 31,000 clay tablets and fragments were discovered in the Nineveh libraries, having survived the fire that engulfed the palaces on Nineveh in 612 BCE.⁸⁹ A very small minority of those texts belonged to literary genres, whereas texts related to divination represent more than the half of the total number of tablets found. One of the functions of the library was to provide the scholarly advisers of the king and the king himself with materials that would support the royal decision-making and secure divine favour for king and state.⁹⁰ Scholarship served primarily to stabilise the kingdom and to guarantee the well-being of the population.⁹¹

According to Assyrian royal ideology, the king was the image of the god Assur on earth.⁹² He was responsible for maintaining the link between the gods and humankind and for organising the society in such a way that the offerings for the gods would always be provided.⁹³ To maintain the peaceful relationship between gods and mankind, the scholars had to interpret signs sent by the divine world: the gods demonstrated their divine pleasure or displeasure with the king's conduct by means of portent, dreams, oracles, or visions. Gathering the entire knowledge of the empire in its libraries in a canonical and therefore not contradictory form offered the court scholars the means to interpret and respond to these signs gathered likewise from the totality of observable earthly and celestial phenomena. On the other hand, assembling the whole of available specialist knowledge presented the king the tools necessary to control his experts. The knowledge collected in the libraries of Nineveh is indeed the reflection of *Herrschaftswissen*, namely a knowledge which allows the king to

89 Literary and scholarly texts could be written on writing boards mostly made of wood so the fire of the city in 612 BCE would have completely destroyed them, see Pedersén 1998, 247–248 and Joannès 2000b, 24. The bulk of the tablets from Nineveh is now housed in the British Museum in London.

90 S. Parpola 1993, 56: “We are dealing with a sophisticated, well organized and comprehensive system of thought that had largely grown out of the necessity to advise and protect the king in his capacity as the god's earthly representative. It could not have developed as it did without this sort of background”. See also Joannès 2000b.

91 This idea was inculcated into apprentice diviner as evident from the following rhetorical question from the so-called Diviner's manual: (l. 47–52) “when you have identified the sign and when they ask you to save the city, the king, and his subjects from enemy, pestilence and famine (predicted) what will you say?” translation A.L. Oppenheim 1974.

92 Parpola 1993, xv–xvii.

93 Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 198–218.

establish his power and to stabilise it, as Pongratz-Leisten defined it.⁹⁴ The reign of Assurbanipal was also one of the longest in the Sargonid dynasty: forty-two years, which indicated maybe the success of his ideological endeavour.

Furthermore, Assurbanipal did not just order the expansion of the libraries' collection, but also presented himself as the editor of a new version of the pharmacological-botanical series *Uruanna*, relying on the biography of Esagil-kin-apli as a model for scholarly self-representation.⁹⁵ Additionally, he personally supervised the composition of several works, for example a Hymn to the god Marduk and a Hymn to the god Šamaš.⁹⁶ To a modern scholar, the idea that the king could be a promoter of new composition, or newly edited works, and the idea that the knowledge was created by gods might seem contradictory. In the Babylonian and Assyrian vision of history, Ea, the god of wisdom, transmitted crafts and scholarship to humankind through the intermediary of the antediluvian sages, and the postdiluvian masters (*ummanû*) after the flood. For Mesopotamian scholars, the prehistoric flood marked a turning point in the history of mankind.⁹⁷ However, the juxtaposition of the Neo-Assyrian king with Adapa shows that the king was himself chosen by the gods, and his alterations of the traditional texts may be understood as a divine choice. Secondly, as B. Pongratz-Leisten suggested, the "perpetual reconceptualization or reinvention of tradition" constituted after all of "variations upon received themes rather than products of originality".⁹⁸ The use of intertextuality in new compilations and new compositions allowed Assurbanipal to preserve the link to the received canonised knowledge.

2.3 *The Question of Serialisation in the First Millennium BCE*

The organisation of omens collections, both terrestrial and celestial, in series is a phenomenon well attested in the first millennium BCE, especially in the libraries of Nineveh. As M. Worthington defined it: "the term series is used to reflect the fact that ancient scholars distributed compositions over numbered sequences of tablets".⁹⁹ This meaning was expressed by the Akkadian word *iškaru* (sum. éš.gàr). It was at first used to describe various types of

94 Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

95 Frahm 2011, 332, fn. 1588. For an introduction to *Uruanna*, see Kinnier Wilson 2005.

96 Foster 2005, 704–709, 710–711.

97 This idea of a prehistoric flood that invaded Mesopotamia from the south appeared in several text, as for example in the eleventh tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, see George 2003, 700–725 for an edition.

98 Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 37.

99 Worthington 2009–2011, 395.

textual assemblages.¹⁰⁰ In the first millennium the word took on the meaning of “text series”, “canonical series”, because it implied that the text was a classic that scholar had to know.¹⁰¹ A composition could be designated as an *iškaru*, especially in colophons, letters, and catalogues.¹⁰² Furthermore, at the end of each literary or scholarly tablet that formed a part of a series, its scribe gave the catchline of the next tablet, in other words, the incipit of the following tablet-chapter, separating it from the rest of the text with a ruling, which allows the modern scholars to reconstruct the place of the tablets in the series. The colophon, a scribe’s note at the end of a tablet, usually followed the catchline with the mention of the tablet number within the series and with additional information about the scribe, the purpose of his copy, and sometimes the date. One speaks therefore of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh in its first millennium version of twelve tablets, or as already cited, the *Sakikkû* series with its forty tablets, this number bearing in this case a symbolic value: forty was one of the symbols of the god of wisdom Ea.

However, if the text of omen collections, medical series or literary works was generally fixed, the number of tablets they consisted of was not.¹⁰³ What mattered for scribes was the titles of each chapter within the series, but the divisions of the series by tablet number generally differed depending on scribal schools that used different tablet layouts.¹⁰⁴ The tablet with the omens concerning the appearance of the Pleiades in the astrological series *Enûma Anu Enlil*, bears the title “*When the Pleiades reach the constellation of the yock*” (*diš mul.mul mul.šudun kur-ud*). It represented the forty-seventh tablet of the series in Assur, but in Nineveh it was the fifty-third tablet, and in Babylon the fifty-fourth.¹⁰⁵ While standardisation of compositions dealing with scholarly knowledge is clearly attested, this example shows that the process did

100 See the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, I/J, 244. The term has also the meaning “collection” in the second millennium BCE, see Worthington 2009–2011, 395.

101 The canonical status of the *iškaru* series is evinced by a letter of Marduk-šapik-zeri who, together with a group of twenty able scholars, offers himself for the royal service: “I fully mastered my father’s profession, the discipline of lamentation; I have studied and chanted the series”. SAA 10, no. 160, f. 36–37.

102 About Assyrian and Babylonian catalogues see Steinert 2018.

103 Lieberman 1990, 333–334. As E. Jiménez 2016, 200, remarked about the hemerological genre: “the variability of tablet format and text combinations in short hemerologies contrasts starkly with the relative stability of the text they contain”.

104 Koch-Westenholz 1995, 79–80.

105 Fincke 2001, 28.

not mean a straightforward uniformization of all features of the text and its medium, and that the question of serialisation is more complicated.¹⁰⁶

The letters of the court scholars of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal use also the word *ahû* to describe less authoritative texts, texts that contain extraneous, non-canonical data, as opposed to the compositions designated with the word *iškaru*.¹⁰⁷ A complete and systematic picture of all the nuances of the word *ahû* is, however, difficult to obtain. The word was occasionally applied to excerpted omens¹⁰⁸ and seemed to describe a type of “appendix” or “excursus”,¹⁰⁹ while in other contexts the word seemed to refer to different type of text not included in the main series.¹¹⁰ A complete list of all meanings of this noun requires further study. Nonetheless, all the concepts expressed with the word *ahû* seem to have originated from Babylonia, while Assyrian scholars appropriated them in context of territorial warfare.

2.4 *Culture Transfers from Babylonia to Assyria*

In fact, the tablets from the libraries in Nineveh come partly from Babylonia, they could have found their way into the collections as looted goods, the practice of taking the written knowledge from the enemy having an old tradition in Mesopotamia. The Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233–1197 BCE) was the first Assyrian king to subdue Babylonia. In the epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I, which celebrates his victory over Babylonia around 1235 BCE, the scribe listed everything that the Assyrian army plundered in the Babylonian cities and took to Assur as booty – the passage is sadly only fragmentary:

Scepter [...] war vehicles [...] Treasure [...] Tablet of [...] Scribal lore [...] Exorcistic texts [...] Prayers to appease the gods [...] Divination texts [...] the ominous marks² of heaven and earth, Medical texts, procedure for bandaging [...] The muster lists of his ancestors [...] Records of? [...] slaves?, overseers?, and soldiers [...] Not one was left in the land of Sumer and Akkad! The rich haul of the Kassite king's treasure [...] He

106 A similar phenomenon is observable in the extremely long series of terrestrial omens *Šumma ālu*, “If a city is set on a height”. Tablet number forty-nine in Assur has for example number forty-five in Kalhu. They both share the same content; see Leichty 1970.

107 E.g. SAA 10, no. 8, r. 8. See Rochberg(-Halton) 1987. For *Enūma Anu Enlil* (celestial omens), or *Šumma izbu* (teratological omens), it is often not easy to identify the text considered as *ahû* without a colophon. Indeed, the extreme similarity of the content make it frequently impossible, when the tablets are badly preserved, to distinct the *ahû* text from the *iškaru*. See also concerning this term Lieberman 1990, Böck 2000, 21–22, and Frahm 2011, 318f.

108 Leichty 1970, 22.

109 Lieberman 1990.

110 Rochberg (-Halton) 1984, 139f.

(Tukulti-Ninurta) filled boats with the yields for Assur and the glory of his power was seen [...].¹¹¹

This poetic epic celebrated the looting of divinatory, religious, magical but also medicinal texts from Babylonia. The confiscation of learned compositions was a way to deprive the enemy, of a powerful tool, allowing the Assyrian king to enhance the capabilities of his own scholars to interpret signs sent by the gods. The author of the Epic emphasised that under Tukulti-Ninurta I: “not one (tablet) was left in the land of Sumer and Akkad (Babylonia)”. From that moment in the 13th century BCE onwards, the Assyrians had access to written tradition from Babylonia, which they used to develop their civil and military policies and form an Assyrian culture based on Babylonian *Weltanschauung*.¹¹²

Some centuries later the king Sargon II (721–705 BCE), founder of the Neo-Assyrian dynasty, also tried to confiscate Babylonian texts after his victory against the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina II around 710 BCE, just like his predecessor, Tukulti-Ninurta I, before him. A fragmentary letter dated to the reign of Sargon II reports that before the arrival of the Assyrians the Babylonian king collected the writing boards stored in the Babylonian temple library and hid them away in a safe place to prevent them from being pillaged by the enemy army.¹¹³

The descendant of Sargon II, Assurbanipal, appears to have emulated his ancestors successfully and enlarged the royal collection of Nineveh thanks to a real “brain drain” that occurred in Babylonia in favour of Assyria. It seems that the best Babylonian scholars, especially diviners, left Babylon and moved to Assyria to set up their schools or serve at the court.¹¹⁴ The encyclopaedic orientation of the knowledge gathered in the libraries of Nineveh underwent further development after the end of the war against Assurbanipal’s older brother, Šamaš-šum-ukin, in 648 BCE. Late Babylonian sources, whose

111 v 31'–vi 14'. Translation B. Foster (2005, 315).

112 The case of the haruspicy is interesting. In the temple of Assur for example, there are many texts or compendia of haruspicy written in a Middle Babylonian script. But, at the end of the second millennium BCE, manuals for the practice of extispicy started appearing in Middle Assyrian script. This shows the adaptation by the Assyrian scribes of a tradition of knowledge that would have come from Babylon; see Heeßel 2012, 11 and Maul 2013, 232–233. Some Middle Babylonian texts from the Assur temple also raise the question of the existence of a literary and scholarly tablets collection patronized by Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076), see on this topic Weidner 1952–1953 and Lambert 1976, 85, fn. 2.

113 SAA 17, no. 201 and Fincke 2004, 55.

114 In some letters, Neo-Assyrian scholars complained that non-literates employ Babylonian masters to give their son a scribe’s education. See the documents SAA 16, no. 65: 3–12 and SAA 8, no. 338.

reliability is somewhat doubtful, claims that Assurbanipal asked the Babylonian sanctuaries to give him their tablets and urged the scholars who remained faithful to the Neo-Assyrian empire to come to Assyria.¹¹⁵ A Late Babylonian copy of an answering letter from the scholars of Borsippa suggests that Assurbanipal asked the sanctuary to “write out all the scribal learning in the property of Nabû and send it to me”.¹¹⁶ The library of Nineveh did indeed house many tablets written in the Babylonian script. Around 17% of those must have originated from this acquisition policy or were copied by the imprisoned Babylonian scribes.¹¹⁷ It is possible that the colophon “Property of the palace of Assurbanipal, the king of the world, the king of Assyria” was in fact written partly on documents originating from private or temple collections that the king’s scholars confiscated or received as gifts for the king’s library.¹¹⁸ Some tablets from Nineveh do in fact bear a colophon that was clearly added later, usually written with red ink. Because clay tablets dried fast and were sometimes burned, the scribes of the Neo-Assyrian royal libraries had to make additional inscriptions with ink, if they wanted to provide the precious artefacts with statement of ownership.¹¹⁹

2.5 *Hermeneutics in Nineveh*

As Assurbanipal’s inscription cited above shows, the king was particularly fond of ancient tablets with difficult content. The preserved sources offer a different picture about the ability of the king to understand everything in the canonical series. Indeed, the content of the libraries confirmed that the corpus of texts

115 We know copies of the correspondence between Assurbanipal and the Babylonian sanctuaries from the end of the first millennium BCE. For example, BM 45642 from Borsippa and BM 28825 from Babylon (British Museum), both dating to the Seleucid period. Both are answers of the sanctuaries to Assurbanipal’s request to send him entire corpora of knowledge on writing-boards. They kept in memory this acquisition policy. These letters were copied in a school context. It is still difficult to know exactly the historical value of these letters. See for the edition: Frame/George 2005. For a study of the catalogue from the Nineveh library listing the tablets which newly entered the royal collection see Parpola 1983.

116 Line 9, see Frame/George 2005.

117 Fincke 2003–2004. A list of Babylonian scribes who were prisoners is also known: SAA 11, no. 156.

118 Reade 1986, 220.

119 For example, K 10100 and DT 273 (British Museum). Pictures in Reade 1986, 217. Some colophons from the Assurbanipal library were also incised on tablets. The tablets were certainly donated or confiscated – another possible explanation would be that the scribe wanted to make the colophon look like stone inscription (K 3353+, K 6244 and K 10430 from British Museum).

forming “the stream of tradition”¹²⁰ needed to be reactivated and explicated because the language used in it was getting older and was not always understood. The court scholars employed hermeneutical techniques to explain the standardised series in their correspondence with the king.¹²¹ It is evident from the letters that they did not always agree with each other on the interpretations of the canonical series or of the terrestrial or celestial phenomena they had observed.¹²² The authors of the astronomical reports noting the position of the stars and planets together with the celestial omens his observation forecasts quoted in their reports the astrological canonical series *Enūma Anu Enlil*.¹²³ In their missives, the observed phenomena were recorded first, followed by citations from the omen series. Authors of these missives employed an hermeneutical process through which both the observed phenomenon and the related forecast were interpreted.

Bellow follows an example of how the astronomical reports were organized: it was written by Nabû-aḫḫe-eriba, one of the most knowledgeable experts of Esarhaddon and mentor to Assurbanipal:

[...] [If] the moon is surrounded by a halo, and a planet stands in it: robbers will rage.

(Explanation): – Saturn stands in the halo of the moon.

If Jupiter comes near to the Bull of heaven (a constellation): the treasures of the land will perish; variant: the offspring of large and small cattle will not prosper.

(Explanation): – Jupiter entered the Bull of Heaven; the king my lord should beware of drafts.¹²⁴

120 This expression is generally accepted to designate the corpus of authoritative editions of texts since A.L. Oppenheim 1977, 13, employed it for “what can be loosely termed the corpus of literary texts maintained, controlled, and carefully kept alive by a tradition served by successive generations of learned and well-trained scribes”.

121 Parpola/Reade 1993, 35.

122 See Verderame 2014. In this article L. Verderame described the dispute between several court experts under the reign of Esarhaddon. They disagree about the appearance of Venus and Mercury in the sky.

123 According to J.C. Fincke, more than 98% of quotations in the 600 astronomical reports sent by the Neo-Assyrian experts come from *Enūma Anu Enlil*, see Fincke 2010, 36. For N. Veldhuis the scholars used mostly simplified versions of the *Enūma Anu Enlil* and a commentary canonized: *Šumma Šîn ina tāmartišu*, ‘if Šîn appeared’; Veldhuis 2010, 85. This interpretation didn’t exclude the authority of the *Enūma Anu Enlil*’s series.

124 Tablet SAA 8, no. 49. Translation: Verderame 2014, 715.

One sees that the scholar firstly introduced the quotations, and subsequently commented upon them. These exegetical methods are also evident in the commentaries, which developed significantly as a genre in the 7th century BCE. Approximately 454 commentaries were found in Nineveh, more than a half of the tablets belonging to this text genre.¹²⁵ The commentaries from Nineveh reflect the encyclopaedic scope of the entire collection: the commentaries are to be associated with numerous genres of primary texts to be commented upon and explicated. As an example, the commentaries to the astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil* had, according to E. Frahm, two main purposes:

One is to explain difficult words and expressions from the base text with the help of synonyms and paraphrases. The other, more interesting purpose is to re-interpret references to celestial bodies that are described in the series in vague or mythological terms, or are said to move in ways (such as astral constellations approaching each other) that are impossible from an astronomical point of view.¹²⁶

Indeed, astronomy in its Assyrian and Babylonian context cannot be separated from astrology, which constituted the ultimate goal of observations of the sky. Scholars had to ensure that their *frozen* body of texts remained intelligible, and compatible with new knowledge being constantly gained from their celestial observations, as well as secure the use of the texts within their professional sphere.¹²⁷ The tradition of commentaries did not die out after the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian state at the end of the 7th century BCE, and the cuneiform scholarship retreated to Babylonia, where it had begun nearly three millennia earlier, surviving in the temples and private houses of scholars until the Parthian era.

3 The Canonised Text in the Late Babylonian Period

The sources give the impression that scholarly or literary texts were no longer copied in North Mesopotamia after the sack of the Neo-Assyrian cities. Nevertheless, some written pieces of evidence shows that the memory of Assurbanipal and its royal library continued to interest the scholars of the late period. Two Hellenistic copies of letters recorded the correspondence between

¹²⁵ Jiménez 2013.

¹²⁶ Frahm 2011, 131.

¹²⁷ The expression “frozen” body of texts comes from E. Frahm (2011, 333).

Assurbanipal and the North Babylonian temples about the sending of entire corpora of learning from Babylon and Borsippa to Nineveh.¹²⁸ Tablets from Uruk dated to the Hellenistic period also were proofs that the Hellenistic scholars were still copying series edited and serialized in Nineveh.¹²⁹ Moreover, a tablet from the Ekur-zākir family private library in Uruk comes directly from the Assurbanipal library.¹³⁰ It is possible that it is linked to the activity of an ancestor of the family in Nineveh, but this remains very hypothetical.¹³¹ It is difficult to know the modes and degrees of transmission of knowledge from Assyrian libraries to Babylonian libraries.¹³² Whether for Uruk or Babylon, we know mainly the content of the collections between the end of the Achaemenid period and the Parthian period. We have very few sources that provide information on the state of the collections in the Neo-Babylonian and early Persian periods. This is partly related to the “weeding work” in the libraries. Indeed, the procedure of copying the originals to keep the text in good condition had as a consequence to throw away the ancient manuscripts.¹³³

Kings of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty seemed to have employed court scholars in the same way as their Neo-Assyrian predecessors had done, yet no royal correspondence has been found in the Neo-Babylonian palace of Babylon so far.¹³⁴ How did the Assyrian-Babylonian canons evolve after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire? Does the transition from a genuine monarchy to the region's integration into large-scale empires change the status of ancient Babylonian canonized texts? These questions remain difficult to answer, but the sources give us some indication of how to analyze the Late Babylonian employ of Sumerian-Akkadian tradition.

3.1 *The Babylonian Scholars and the Textual Transmission during the Second Half of the First Millennium BCE*

Writing evidences from Babylon, Borsippa, Nippur, Sippar, or Uruk coming from private and temple libraries attested that the series visible in Nineveh continued to be transmitted after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Temple

¹²⁸ Frame/George 2005 and Frahm 2005.

¹²⁹ See Farber 1987 and Beaulieu 2010.

¹³⁰ The private library of Iqišaya, scholar at Uruk, contained one manuscript with a Neo-Assyrian script and with a colophon of the Assurbanipal's library (SpTU 2, 46), see Farber 1987 and Beaulieu 2010.

¹³¹ W. Farber 1987, 35, proposed this hypothesis, also adopted by E. Frahm 2002, 97.

¹³² Beaulieu 2010, 14–15.

¹³³ Clancier 2009a, 260–261.

¹³⁴ M. Jursa argues that traces of a royal correspondence are obvious in some administrative texts; see Jursa 2014, 94.

cult personal still used the canonised series in Babylonia to provide the gods and to protect the mortals. The texts from private and temple collections testified that part of the corpus was linked to the religious function of the scholars in the cult of the gods. For example, in Babylon and Uruk, families of lamentation priest (*kalû*) were in the possession of hymns, prayers, literary epic that they recited in the cult of the gods.¹³⁵ The Sumerian dialect Emesal was often the language of these texts, and the lamentation priest seems to be one of the last specialists to be able to understand it.¹³⁶

Divination, magical and medical texts formed the bulk of several private collections of incantation priests (*āšipu*) in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic period.¹³⁷ The sources testify above all of the theoretical corpus that the incantation priest should know in order to be able to practise his profession, a lot of them seem to belong to a study context. The scholarly texts reflect how the incantation priest deals with the spiritual and physical components of a disease. This mission of protection of the population was still taken very seriously in this time.

In addition, the figure of the specialist in celestial phenomena became a key figure in the intellectual world of the time.¹³⁸ The astrologer was literary the scribe of the series of interpretations of astrological omens: *Enūma Anu Enlil* (*ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*). This title is attested from the 7th century to the 1st century BCE, and the appellation highlights that astrology and astronomy are intrinsically combined in the same professional.¹³⁹ It also underlined the prestige that the series of omens of celestial phenomena still had and its authority in the second half of the first millennium BCE. In the sources from Uruk, the incantation priest and the lamentation priest bore often the title of

135 Beaulieu 2000, Maul 2005, and Gabbay 2014.

136 Schretter 1990, Maul 2005, and Gabbay 2014.

137 Nippur: Joannès 1992, Sippar: Finkel 2000, Uruk: Clancier 2009a, in particular 81–85.

138 The role of the astrologer was reinforced under the Sargonid. If the administrative sources of the Esagil in the 4th century BCE (Jursa 2002, 112) and in Sippar in the 7th and 6th centuries, confirmed that the diviner is always employed in the temples, the astrologer reinforce his place and administrative sources from the Esagil showed that he was more paid than the diviner. The very strong growth in the number of astronomical texts in the light of the weak presence of those of the diviners shows that the discipline is gradually being erased by that of the astrologer in the first millennium BCE. See also on this topic Maul 2013, 237–241.

139 In the colophon of the tablet MLC 1866, the scribe introduces himself not with the title of *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*, but he uses the very elaborated title of *šassukku*, this word designates a specialist in cadastral surveying and land surveying, so it may underline that it was the scribe's knowledge of "celestial geometry" that authorised him to bear the title of "astrologer".

astrologer as a supplement title.¹⁴⁰ In Babylon, the sources show that from the 4th century onward, the Esagil temple endowed the astrologers with monthly allowances¹⁴¹ that they still received in the 2nd century BCE, in addition to land granted by the temple.¹⁴² The astrologer could still have been a royal counselor in the 2nd century BCE, as an administrative text from the Esagil shows us: Itti-Marduk-balaṭu, descendant of Mušeziḫ, leaves the temple to work at the court of the Parthian king Hyspaosines.¹⁴³

However, the position of these scholars seems to have changed with the fall of Nabonidus in 539 BC. After the arrival of Cyrus the Great, Babylonia would no longer belong to an independent kingdom. For the Sumerian-Akkadian scholars this meant that the expression of the Sumerian-Akkadian culture was to pass through the temples. Even if the king's protection rituals are still transmitted and learned by scholars, Persian, Achaemenid and Parthian kings do not seem to have been involved in promoting Sumerian-Akkadian culture. Furthermore, from Darius I (521–486) and Xerxes (486–465) onwards, the disappearance of Babylon's status as capital will have important repercussions.¹⁴⁴ After the conflict between the Babylonian elites and the Achaemenid kings in 484 BCE, the ancient Sumerian South gained autonomy, the Urukians put Anu, the city god, at the head of their pantheon, and distanced themselves from the figure of Marduk, the god of the ancient capital, Babylon.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, the arrival of Alexander the Great was not without consequences for the vitality of a scholarly micro-society which no longer represented the dominant culture in Mesopotamia at the end of the first millennium BCE. The new Hellenistic monarchs saw in these sanctuaries and their assembly, convenient interlocutors, as they were familiar with local political, economic and cultural issues. They naturally became the relay of the Hellenistic power.¹⁴⁶ Kings no longer exercised royal patronage over Sumerian-Akkadian culture since the Achaemenid dynasty, as is also reflected in some literary texts from the 2nd century BCE. Indeed, the so-called "Uruk list of Sages and Kings" (Table 3.1), testified how the Babylonian scholars dealt this new situation

140 Rochberg-(Halton) 2000. The phenomenon of this double title or even double function is not that well attested in Babylon but seems to have been possible. Only one individual from Babylon appears with the title of lamentation priest and astrologer (CT 19 144, Nabû-apla-uṣur).

141 Beaulieu 2006b.

142 CT 49 144.

143 BOR 4 132, see van der Spek 1985, 549–551.

144 See also Joannès 2000, 706 and Clancier/Monerie 2014.

145 Krul 2018 and Joannès 2000a.

146 See Clancier/Monerie 2014.

during the end of the Hellenistic period (165 BCE). Anu-belšunu, his author, divided this list into three sections: the first seven lines lists seven antediluvian kings and their sages (*apkallu*), after a paragraph partly broken follows the last section with eight postdiluvian kings and their master scholars (*ummānu*).¹⁴⁷ Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid, and Hellenistic rulers are decidedly absent. E. Robson accurately noted that:

The political intent of Anu-belšunu is clear: Uruk has been supported by kings, served by sages and master-scholars, since the time before the flood but in recent centuries, the bond between royalty and scholarship has been broken and the local, temple-based community of *āšīpus* and *kalûs* is now forced into self-reliance.¹⁴⁸

Royal power seemed to be losing its place as a referent in favour of the dynasties of sages in the mentality of the scholars of the Hellenistic period.¹⁴⁹ They appear to be the cogs of power just as important as the figure of the king. Listing the *apkallu* and *ummānu* parallel to that of the kings, one can trace the sages just like the monarchs back to antediluvian times¹⁵⁰ thus putting them on equal terms.¹⁵¹ Reference to the past justified the privileged social position of the families of scholars in the Hellenistic society and reflected the vision of these families, who considered that their roles were as important as the one of the king.¹⁵²

147 Van Dijk 1962. The list goes from Gilgameš, and Šîn-leqi-unninni, the legendary creator of the Standard Babylonian Epic, to Esarhaddon and one Tupšar-ellil-dari, known by the Aramaic name Aḫiqar. Apart from Gilgamesh, all six extant kings's names are historically attested.

148 Robson 2019, 187.

149 Joannès 2000, 710–711.

150 The antediluvian times marked a turning point in the history of mankind in Mesopotamian history.

151 Joannès 2000, 713.

152 The Uruk prophecy also shows that the Urukian scholars hope that the day will come where a new king will restore Uruk to its former glory, and make it the capital of the world. They hope that the king “will rebuild the temples of Uruk. He will return the gods' temples to their proper condition. He will renew Uruk. He will build Uruk's city gates with lapis lazuli. He will fill the watercourses and meadows with abundance and plenty. After him, a king, his son, will arise inside Tirana (archaising name of Uruk) and rule over the Four quarters. He will exercise rule and kingship inside Tirana. His dynasty will be permanent forever. The kings of Uruk will exercise rule like gods.” (Translation Robson 2019, 192). See also Beaulieu 1993, 49 about the identification of the king from this prophecy.

The scholars of the Late Babylonian period continued to hold the view that the spiritual protection of monarchs was a part of their mission. But the bulk of the scholarly and literary collections hinted that the transmitted knowledge is less and less concentrated on the palace and the king. Astrology, for example horoscopes, astrological medicine, and astrological magic gave more room to individuals.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, as the example of Itti-Marduk-balaṭu suggests, this does not mean that they stopped to be employed by the royal courts. The written evidence gave the impression that Cyrus and his successors did not adopt the Sumerian-Akkadian royal culture and ideology as it used to stand, which did not hinder the exchange of knowledge between the different satrapies of the Persian empire.¹⁵⁴ The few concessions that Persian or Hellenistic kings made to the sanctuaries had only local political significance, as the cylinder of Cyrus and Antiochus suggested.¹⁵⁵

3.2 *From the Observation of Celestial Phenomena to the Prediction of Them*

The second half of the first millennium marks a period of intense intellectual stimulation. The Babylonian Esagil seems to become an important “research centre”, as we would say today.¹⁵⁶ It seems that the preservation of the Babylonian texts also allowed the scholars of the Late Babylonian period to create new compositions anchored in the old ones. The process of copying canonical series authorized several generations of scribe to update and appropriate their content.¹⁵⁷

We do not have much information about the state of temple and palace libraries from the 8th until the end of the 5th century BCE in Babylonia. The library of Esagil in Babylon, as part of the temple of Bel-Marduk, seems to be similar to the library in Nineveh, as an encyclopaedic library.¹⁵⁸ The collections of Esagil were in use from the first half of the 7th century BCE until the beginning of the 2nd century CE at least. But the collection reached its peak between 200 and 100 BCE, according to the dates provided by the astronomical diaries, which were produced for the temple, and others literary tablets found in the

153 There are at date 28 horoscopes known in Babylonia. The oldest comes from Nippur, six from Uruk, the majority comes from Babylon. See on the evolution of astrology in the first millennium Reiner 1995, Rochberg-(Halton) 1998, Geller 2014.

154 See for example Pingree 1992.

155 For the Cyrus cylinder see Schaudig 2001, especially 550–556; see Stevens 2014 for a translation of the Antiochus Cylinder and the bibliography concerning it.

156 Clancier 2009a, 283.

157 Waerzeggers 2015, 110.

158 Clancier 2009a, 278–297.

collection of the temple' scholars. This encyclopaedic collection preserved the Sumerian-Akkadian tradition during its latest age.

The core of the Esagil library clearly shows new compositions were born out *Enūma Anu Enlil* based on regular observations of the sky during several centuries. The writing of astronomical diaries has been documented in the Esagil library of Babylon between 651 BCE and 60 CE.¹⁵⁹ Most of the texts were dated from the Hellenistic period, but the librarian kept at least one ancient astronomical diary dated to 651 BCE. The practice of observing the different aspects of the sky and recording their positions seems to have dated back to the 8th century BCE. Currently 2985 astronomical diaries are kept in the collection of the British Museum in London and come from the ancient collection of the Esagil temple. The production of astronomical diaries seems to be a speciality of Babylon, maybe promoted by the king Nabonassar (747–734 BCE).¹⁶⁰ The astrologer produced the astronomical diaries (*našāru ša ginê*) with almanachs (*mešhi*) and mathematic astronomic texts (*tersētu*) in the second half of the first millennium BCE. Scholars were able to calculate the position of the stars during the Hellenistic period, and mathematical astronomy originated at the same time as astronomical diaries appeared in Babylon. The discipline had been practiced in Uruk from the 4th century BCE onwards, while the city had only provided one astronomical diary to date.¹⁶¹ In Uruk, a comparison of the astronomical texts in the private collection of the descendants of Šangi-Ninurta with those from the Bīt Rēš offers a striking testimony of the evolution of astronomy between the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods.¹⁶² The studious notation of the position of the stars since the Neo-Assyrian period, made such later mathematical studies possible. It is however unclear whether the authors of astronomical diaries, or of mathematical astronomy texts, had planned to compile a new canonical series based on the structure of *Enūma Anu Enlil*.

3.3 *The Development of History*

Furthermore, texts with historical content evolved during this period. The genre of chronicles flourished in Borsippa and Babylon in the Hellenistic and Parthian period. A chronicle contains historical facts that follow a chronological order, but they never form a continuous narrative; lexical lists and the historical part of the astronomical diaries, indeed, inspired their structure. The status

159 Clancier 2009a, Waerzeggers 2015.

160 See for more information Hallo 1988.

161 The astronomical diary from Uruk is dated to 463 BCE.

162 See Steele 2019.

of these new texts in the ancient Near East is questionable. As the astronomical documents, they are never mentioned as a series (*iškaru*). The chronicles are known through unique manuscripts, they were not frequently copied.¹⁶³

While the last chronicle written in Borsippa dated to the reign of Neriglissar (560–556 BCE), the scholars who produced the chronicles in Babylon lived two hundred years after his reign. Their authors in Babylon also seem to have been the authors of the astronomical diaries and, as chroniclers, mainly seemed interested in recent events. The information they remembered could also be found in the event records of the astronomical diaries.¹⁶⁴ Astronomical diaries and Chronicles provide very precise data about the chronology of some events, such as the death of Alexander the Great, the wars between his Diadochi, and the renewal of Babylonian buildings by Hellenistic kings.¹⁶⁵ Only three chronicles from Babylon focus on ancient facts; one of these reports on the reign of the king Nabonidus (556–539 BCE).¹⁶⁶ The scholars employed royal inscriptions, among others, to write this historical-literary composition,¹⁶⁷ in which a fine network of intertextuality can be observed. But it is not the only text from the Esagil library that focuses on the figure of Nabonidus and Cyrus. Other compositions that mention them are the *Dynastic Prophecy*, the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the *Royal Chronicle* or the *Verse account*. These texts were all linked to each other, and they were certainly produced from the same sources. Indeed, it seems that the transition from the reign of Nabonidus to Cyrus the Great (539 BCE) aroused the interest of Babylonian scholars of the late Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods, because it was a crucial moment. It marked the end of the last native Babylonian dynasty. Although these texts reflect the dissatisfaction of the Babylonian clergy with Nabonidus' religious policies, they were studied and copied because they characterize the beginning of a foreign rule on the region. Moreover, these are not the only historical-literary text showing that the scholars of this time are redefining their culture and history in a world

163 We have one exception, the text ABC 1, this chronicle presents the reign of the kings who ruled Babylonia from Nabonassar (747–734 BCE) to Assurbanipal (668–630/27 BCE) and the main geopolitical events of the period. It is known from several copies. The colophon of the Babylon exemplar suggests that it was part of a series. It is still difficult to understand its context of creation.

164 About the link between astronomical diaries and chronicles, see Joannès 2000a.

165 See for their publication Grayson 1975, Glassner 1993 and the website livius.org by van der Spek and Finkel.

166 Waerzeggers 2012, 298–99.

167 CT 51 75 is a copy of a Nabonidus's inscription; CT 46 48 seems to be a literary text about his reign. See Schaudig 2001, 532 and 590–95. It is possible that the scholars from the Esagil have travelled to Harran to consult one of Nabonidus's stela. A copy of it was found in Larsa in a secondary context. Waerzeggers 2015, 113.

ruled by foreign rulers and alien cultures.¹⁶⁸ After this date, royal patronage of the temples and the Sumerian-Akkadian culture became increasingly rare, even though the region was a strategic place in the new Persian and Seleucid empires, its scholars were no longer at the heart of the decision-making bodies for the empire.

C. Waerzeggers offers an interesting interpretation of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. According to her, it should “have spoken to ideas circulating in a Greek cultural background”.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, it may have been a product of Hellenistic Period. In her opinion, the detailed account of the death of Nabonidus’ mother and Cyrus’ wife in the *Nabonidus Chronicle* may have interacted with Herodotus’ account of the death of Cyrus’ wife, Cassandane.¹⁷⁰ However, without sources from the 6th century available, it remains difficult to confirm whether or not it really was a Hellenistic composition. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude that all literature about Nabonidus appeared during the reign of Cyrus and that the Esagil’s manuscripts were merely later copies of it.

3.4 *Commentaries with a High Degree of Exegesis*

An increased sophistication of Babylonian scholarship is also evidenced by the commentaries written throughout this period. This genre appeared in the first millennium BCE and reflects an attempt to explain the content of standardised texts whose the vocabulary and phenomenal content were becoming older and difficult to understand. The aim of the commentator was not to extrapolate new meaning from the base text but rather to use all his knowledge to give consistency to a base text he had some difficulties to understand.¹⁷¹ Until now around 900 Akkadian cuneiform commentaries are known to have been written between the 8th century and the 1st century BCE.¹⁷² When commenting on them, the scholars often used the polysemy of cuneiform signs to make sense of the base text.¹⁷³ The commentator could have had difficulties to interpret a single word, or may not have understood a more extensive section of the base text.¹⁷⁴ Commentaries do not seem to be the work of one lone scholar interpreting texts but rather the produce of an assembly of scholars or the result of an apprentice work. This new genre of the first millennium BCE is linked to the

¹⁶⁸ See Jursa/Debourse 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Waerzeggers 2015, 117.

¹⁷⁰ Waerzeggers 2015, 117–18.

¹⁷¹ Gabbay 2016, 8–9.

¹⁷² Gabbay 2016, 1. The *Cuneiform Commentaries Project* counts 880 commentaries, U. Gabbay adds also to this estimation the cultic commentaries and explanatory texts.

¹⁷³ Gabbay 2016, 8 and 74–83.

¹⁷⁴ Gabbay 2016, 9.

teaching role of the scholars. Indeed some texts are labelled “oral explanations and questions from a master” (*šūt pî maš’altu ša pî ummâni*). U. Gabbay underlines that the terminology of commentaries indicates that they could have been written after a senior scholar had asked questions to a younger scholar during a lesson (*malsûtu*) about his interpretation of a canonical text and after the advanced scholar added his corrections and own explanations. It was then probably the younger scholar who was responsible for composing the commentary tablet based on the content of the lesson, and sometimes on other available commentary tablets.¹⁷⁵ The place taken by commentaries in the collections of the first millennium scholars is important and may be linked to their teaching activities. Roughly 25% of the tablets of the Neo-Assyrian court scholar Nabû-zuqup-kenu, are commentaries, it is approximately the same for the library of the Hellenistic scholar Anu-ikšur from Uruk.¹⁷⁶ The texts of this genre could have been part of the textual transmission but this phenomenon seems to have been rare.¹⁷⁷ As U. Gabbay and E. Jiménez have pointed out around 25% and 37% of the commentary tablets found at Uruk are copies or partial copies of earlier manuscripts.¹⁷⁸ The original text copied could have been a local text or could have come from other cities.¹⁷⁹ It is especially the fame of a scholar that seems to explain that apprentices from other cities attended his lessons and wrote commentaries under his supervision.

The commentators gave explanations often based on lexical lists, it was actually the most important genre employed to explain canonised text. As soon as they started their apprenticeship, scribes learnt to know by heart a huge collection of synonyms, homonyms, and antonyms lists which offered them a practical tool to understand the core of Sumerian and Akkadian texts.¹⁸⁰ In some cases they may also have used quotations from other sources to explain the base text.¹⁸¹ During the first millennium, especially from the Achaemenid period onwards, commentaries attested the growing importance of the astrological core of texts. For example, a text from Nippur, dated to the end of the 5th century BCE, comments on the first two tablets of the medical diagnostic

175 Beaulieu 2007, Frahm 2011, 313–314 and Gabbay 2016, 13–16.

176 Frahm 2011, 314.

177 Gabbay 2016, 59.

178 Gabbay/Jiménez 2019, 59–64.

179 Iqīšaya, the owner of a private library in Uruk at the end of the 4th century BCE, possessed some commentaries which show an Assyrian origin (SpTU 2 46 and SpTU 3 101). Nevertheless, some text indicated that the transmission from Assyria to Uruk have been mediated by the city of Nippur, see Gabbay/Jiménez 2019.

180 Frahm 2011, 88–94.

181 For the both methods see Gabbay 2018, 293–298.

series, *Sakikkû*. The commentator tries to explain in this tablet, and in the part cited below, the link between the situation, a phenomenon described in the protasis (the “if” clause) and the ominous prediction presented in the apodosis (the “then” clause) of the base text.¹⁸² The commentator seeks to answer the question: Why, if the incantation priest sees a deaf man on his way, would it mean that his patient has the disease “Hand of Nergal”? Line 32 reads:

If he sees a deaf man: (the patient is suffering from) the Hand of Nergal – (explanation:) (If a child) is born under the constellation Kaduha (Cygnus), it will be dumb; alternatively, deaf.¹⁸³

The commentator figures out in this quotation that the disease “Nergal’s hand” and the deaf man seen on the road of the incantation priest are associated because in another astrological transmitted tradition the birth of a child under the Cygnus constellation caused his deafness or dumbness.¹⁸⁴ The Cygnus constellation is also associated with the figure of the god Nergal in the corpora mastered by the scholar.¹⁸⁵ The hermeneutical tools at work here are fascinating as they help understand the omens of the canonical series studied and as they allow to update the content of canonised texts.

3.5 Conclusion

The standardised series in the first millennium are generally rooted in the little-known history of manuscripts from the end of the second millennium BC. The scholars of the first millennium kept a very vivid and mystified history of this work of standardisation. They celebrated the intervention of the king in the creation of the corpus of Sumerian-Akkadian written knowledges, and the preserved textual sources highlight in particular the intervention of the monarchs of the Kassite dynasty and of the Second Dynasty of Isin. These kings provided models for the kings and scholars of the first millennium. Nevertheless, to this date, sources from the Middle-Babylonian period remain quite rare and they can only offer hypotheses to this date. Before the Kassite dynasty and the second dynasty of Isin, a first enterprise of standardisation of knowledge seemed to have appeared during the Late Old Babylonian period, and it seems to be linked to a desire to preserve an oral culture in danger of disappearance. The

¹⁸² See Frahm 2011, 80–81.

¹⁸³ Translation: George 1991, 151.

¹⁸⁴ The same astrological omen is referred in the horoscope TCL 6 14, see George 1991, 160.

¹⁸⁵ The association of the constellation of Cygnus, namely the star ^{mul}ud.ka.duḫ.a, with the god Nergal is visible in the first tablet of the astronomical series *Mul.Apin* (for example see the text CT 33 1, i. 28).

same seems to be true for the canonisation of texts at the end of the second dynasty of Isin. Secondly, the effort to standardise culture also appeared to be the product of a prosperous monarchy which used it to build and support its royal ideology, as is the case of the Kassite dynasty and the Neo-Assyrian rulers. The intellectual policy of these dynasties seems to have been part of the manifestation of their power, but was also its tool for asserting and holding it.

Finally, the cuneiform sources of the end of the first millennium attest that from the moment the Persians came to power, royal patronage of the Sumerian-Akkadian culture came to an end. Their contributions in the Sumerian-Akkadian knowledge, written in cuneiform on clay tablet, were only partial. The Babylonian sanctuaries became the only promoters of this culture, which had as a consequence a reassertion of the social role of the scholar in the sources. Sumerian and Akkadian culture did not disappear in the second half of the first millennium: on the contrary, it flourished. The long study of existing knowledge, and the annotation of celestial observations for astrological purposes, during centuries, provided the framework for the elaboration of innovative knowledge: astronomy, mathematics, history blossomed. Furthermore, the commentaries at the end of the first millennium show that the Sumerian-Akkadian culture was still dynamic and that scholars constantly renewed their approaches of canonised knowledge. Canonization was then very productive in itself.

The last scholars to hold these commentaries, the Egibatila family from Babylon in 103 BCE, mentioned commentaries written on parchment scrolls.¹⁸⁶ This raises the question whether texts from the Sumerian-Akkadian tradition were transmitted on media other than clay tablets. It is possible that a change of medium may have led to the end of cuneiform clay sources. The question of the translation of Akkadian and Sumerian works into Aramaic or Greek remains a very difficult phenomenon to assess.¹⁸⁷ These works would have been written on perishable media and therefore they would not have reached us, be they written in cuneiform or not. The first book of the *Babyloniaca* by Berossus mentions a translation into Greek of the *Enūma eliš*, the epic of creation, but it seems that this was more an adaptation than a translation. Moreover, the Chaldeans's reputation in astronomy in Rome or Greece is underlined by classical sources and demonstrates that in one way or another these traditions had been passed on to the west.¹⁸⁸

186 Frahm 2011, 194 and Jiménez 2014.

187 Geller 1997, Westenholz 2007, and Maul 2009.

188 Diodorus of Sicily II, 2.29–31 and *Geography of Strabo*, 16.1.6.

TABLE 3.1 The Uruk list of sages and scholars^a

O.1	During the reign of Ayalu, the king, U-anna was sage (<i>apkallu</i>). During the reign of Alalgar, the king U-an-duga was sage (<i>apkallu</i>). During the reign of Ameluana, the king, Enmeduga was sage (<i>apkallu</i>). During the reign of Enmeušumgalana, the king, Enmebuluga was sage (<i>apkallu</i>).
5	During the reign of Dumuzi, the shepherd, the king, An-Enlilda was sage (<i>apkallu</i>). During the reign of Enmeduranki, the king, Utuabzu was sage (<i>apkallu</i>).
8–11	After the flood, during the reign of Enmerkar, the king, Nungalpirigal was sage (<i>apkallu</i>), whom Ištar brought down from heaven to Eanna. He made the bronze lyre, whose ... (were in) lapis lazuli, according to the technique of Ninagal. The lyre was placed before Anu..., the dwelling of (his) personal god. During the reign of Gilgameš, the king, Šîn-leqi-unninni was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>). During the reign of Ibbi-Šîn, the king, Kabti-ili-Marduk was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>). During the reign of Išbi-Erra, the king, Sidu, also known as Enlil-ibni, was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>).
15	During the reign of Abi-ešuh, the king, Gimil-Gula and Taqiš-Gula were the scholars.
R.	During the reign of [Adad-apla-iddina], the king, Esagil-kin-apli was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>). ^b During the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, the king, Esagil-kin-ubba, was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>). During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the king, Esagil-kin-ubba was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>). During the reign of Esarhaddon, the king, Aba-Enlil-dari was scholar (<i>ummânu</i>),
20	whom the Arameans call Ahiqar. [...] Nikarchos. Tablet of Anu-belšunu, son of Nidintu-Anu, descendant of Šîn-leqi-unninni, the lamentation priest of Anu and Antu, the Urukean. (Copied) by his own hand. Uruk, the 10th of Ayyar, the 147th year of Antiochos (= 165 BCE), the king.
25	The one who reveres Anu will not carry it off.

a Object number: W 20030, 7. See for the transliteration in Akkadian van Dijk 1962, 44–52. Translation: A. Lenzi with some modifications.

b For the reconstruction of the name of Adad-apla-iddina see Finkel 1988.

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Inserting or Ruminating: How Demotic Became Canonic

Damien Agut-Labordère

Canonization has an important place among the concepts of cultural phenomena. Borrowed from Medieval Latin and the law of the Catholic Church (“canon law”), the use of canonization, in its literary acceptance, results from a transfer of meaning from something that is specified with precision – that is, an act by which the Pope solemnly inscribes a person in the catalogue of Saints – to form a text that has the possibility of becoming definitive. This shift from the register of ecclesiastical law to that of the study of literature has certainly been facilitated by the use of the corresponding verb within the Church itself. “Canonize” can refer to the codifying of a decision taken by a Council, but also to inserting a *liber* within the corpus of the Holy Books. Therefore, and we shall return to this point, the canon appears first of all as a list (of books, laws, etc.).¹ It was only through a second semantic shift that the notion of canonization came to be used for designating a text as fixed. The multilayered nature inherent in the meaning of “canonization” certainly explains the great heterogeneity of answers given by specialists in Ancient Egyptian literature to the question of whether or not it was canonized. While the question of the canonization of Egyptian literature in the 2nd millennium BCE (what can be called “Classical” Pharaonic literature) has been well studied (we shall return to this a little later), the question of the canonization of Egyptian literature of the 1st millennium BCE has barely been sketched. In this essay I will deal with this second question. But first, it is worth recalling that a very large portion of Egyptian literature of the 1st millennium BCE is written in a cursive script called Demotic, deriving from the traditional Egyptian cursive writing, the Hieratic.² Demotic is attested in Egypt from the 7th century BCE to the

1 Smith 1982 and the comments made by Versluys in this volume, pp. 42–43.

2 I leave aside the question of literary texts written in abnormal hieratic, the other cursive script derived from hieratic. Abnormal hieratic is attested in Upper Egypt from the 8th to the 6th century BCE. Primarily because of the scarcity of the corpus, barely two texts – P. Queen’s College (Fisher Elfert 2013) and a wooden tablet from the Asasif (Vittmann 2006) – are known. Moreover, the work of deciphering the most important of them, P. Queen’s College, is still in progress.

middle of the 5th century CE. It is accompanied by an entirely new literature, which breaks completely with that of the third and second millennia BCE. Not only do new genres and works appear in Demotic, but the “Classics” of the Bronze Age (the *Story of Sinuhe*, *Instructions of Amenemhat* or works from the second part of the 2nd millennium BCE, such as *King Neferkare and General Saset*) also seemingly cease to be copied, and are therefore no longer transmitted. At the end of this essay I will return to the question of how to interpret this break in the transmission of literary works. Prior to that, it is important to emphasize that, while the “Classical” phase of Egyptian literature corresponds to a time when Egypt was the centre of an independent kingdom with phases of imperial extension (corresponding to the Middle and New Kingdoms), in contrast, the Demotic phase of the 1st millennium BCE corresponds to a historical period when Egypt was part of an empire (Persian, 5th–4th century BCE, Roman, from the end of the 1st century BCE) or was dominated by an exogenous elite (as was the case during the Hellenistic period, 3rd–1st century BCE). All this implies two major differences between Classic and Demotic phases of Egyptian literature:

- Demotic literature was growing in the context of the unprecedented increase of connectivity not only in the Eastern Mediterranean, but also in the Near East and North Africa.
- While Classical Egyptian literature emanated from a politically dominant class, Demotic literature belonged to a social group that no longer held political power.

The starting point for any discussion about the notion of canonization in Ancient Egyptian literature is Jan Assmann’s book, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, published in 1992. This work truly introduced the concept into the field of cultural studies of Ancient Egypt. The three cultures at the centre of *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Egyptian, Greek and Jewish, have in common that they were able to build collections of books. Assmann, however, distinguishes between Israel and Greece, on the one hand, where literature was canonized so as to fixate it as a basis for commentary, and Egyptian civilization, on the other hand, where the corpus was literally petrified on the walls of the temples that became the conservatories of a now immutable tradition. Following the classification proposed by Levi-Strauss,³ he distinguishes between the “warm” memory of the Jews and Greeks, for whom the injunction “Remember!” simultaneously

3 “Ces notions, d’ailleurs relatives, n’ont rien de réel mais renvoient aux manières subjectives dont les sociétés conçoivent leur rapport à l’histoire: soit qu’elles s’inclinent devant elle ou y adhèrent; soit qu’elles préfèrent l’ignorer et qu’elles cherchent à neutraliser ses effets.” Lévi-Strauss 1993, 9.

constitutes an imperative of collective identity, and opposes it to the “cold” memory of the Egyptians, who confined themselves to recording sacred texts. For Assmann, Egyptian canonization is firstly a list-like written form of knowledge management, with lists attributed to gods or to certain emblematic scholars from the past. Assmann was, in this field as in others, a pioneer. While he did manage to set the terms of the discussion, he nonetheless only touched on the question of the fixation of Egyptian literature of the third and second millennia BCE. This question actually proves very difficult to answer, at least when judging by the oxymoronic expressions that specialists in Egyptian literature from the 3rd and 2nd millennia are obliged to use to describe the process of textual transmission.⁴ In spite of these difficulties, most seem to be attached to the idea of maintaining the notion of canonization. In 2016, Pascal Vernus published a very comprehensive article on this issue, which, in our view, represents a turning point. Vernus begins by adopting a very precise (and restrictive) definition of the notion of canonization. According to him, a canon can be identified by certain minimal characteristics:⁵

- I. Spécificité organique: un canon est une formation culturelle, non réductible à la simple addition de ses composants.
- II. Intangibilité: un canon est constitué par sélection, et demeure clos sur lui-même, à tout le moins pour une période ou un domaine donnés; pas de modification; pas d'ajout; pas de retranchement.
- III. Exclusivité: un canon ne tolère pas de canon concurrent dans le même domaine, pour la même période, aussi longtemps qu'il est tenu pour valide.
- IV. *Auctoritas*: un canon est porteur de règles auxquelles se rapporter; il est donc axiologiquement érigé en modèle normatif et fait autorité.
- V. Expression identitaire: un canon est valorisé et légitimé en tant qu'expression identitaire d'une 'communauté', dans un sens très large, depuis un groupe social limité, jusqu'à une civilisation prise globalement dans son opposition à d'autres.”

On the basis of this, Vernus reviews an extensive corpus of Egyptian texts and concludes as follows: “on a constaté combien les textes échappaient aux processus de canonisation.”⁶ I will rely on the definition proposed by Vernus, with

4 “The canon was not a closed system, but open-ended both in formal terms and the formation of genres.” Parkinson 1996: 308. See also the “dynamic canonicity” proposed by Goldwasser 1991, 141.

5 Vernus 2016, 273.

6 Vernus 2016, 332.

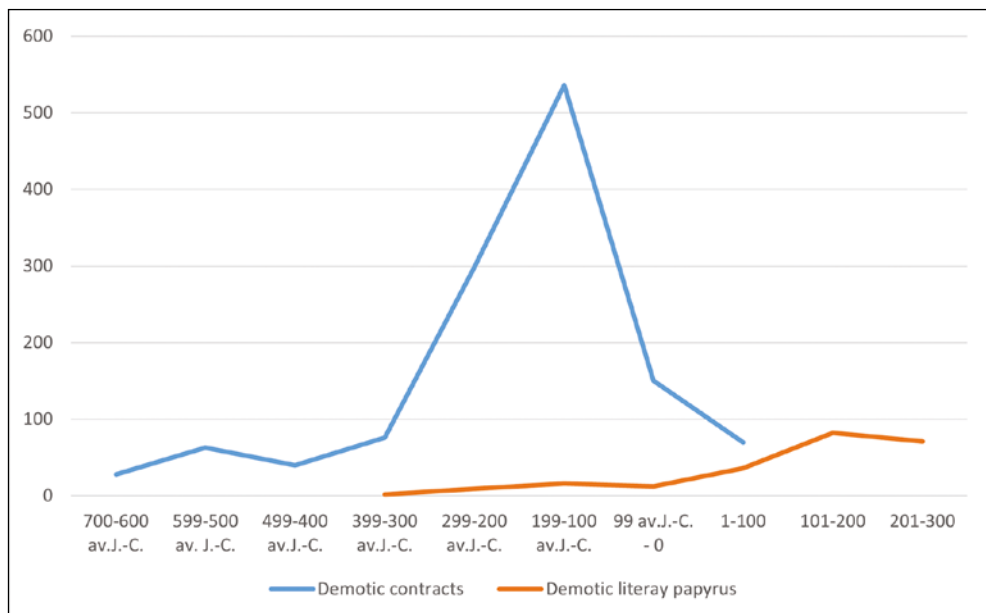


FIGURE 4.1 Comparative evolution of the number of Demotic contracts with the number of literary papyrus

particular reference to criteria II, ‘intangibility’, and III, ‘exclusivity’, to search for “canonized texts” in Demotic literature. The oldest Demotic literary texts in our possession were discovered on the Saqqara Plateau during the English excavations of the early 1970s. Palaeographic analysis allows us to date them to no later than the Persian Period.⁷ It therefore appears that, for three centuries, from the seventh to the fourth centuries BCE, Demotic was exclusively used as what French Assyriologists call “écriture documentaire”, dedicated to accounting and legal acts. The rise of Demotic literature then enters a second stage of Demotic history from the 4th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, when the use of this writing significantly declined in the legal or institutional fields. The more Demotic disappears from the world of public and private affairs, where it is replaced by Greek, the more its literary dimension seems to strengthen.

Asking the question of the canonization of Demotic literary texts will therefore allow us to understand how the Egyptians of the Hellenistic and Roman periods appropriated what we could call “Demotic culture”. The question

⁷ The chronology of Demotic literature is presented in Quack 2016: 1–7 and Quack and Hoffmann 2018, 14–21. See also Ryholt 1999, xiii.

can also be posed differently: how did Demotic become a *Kultursprache*? Answering this question implies the distinguishing of language from writing. The phase of the Egyptian language that we call Demotic indeed became a *Kultursprache*, a language able to convey norms, values and beliefs of general society, long before the end of the 1st millennium BCE. Indeed, some literary works dating from the 6th century BCE, such as the *Tale of Papyrus Vandier* or the so-called *Brooklyn Wisdom Text*, were written in Hieratic writing but in a language that can be described as Demotic. Therefore, the question that arises for the Hellenistic and Roman periods is: at which moment did Demotic writing become a *Kulturschrift*? A simple examination of the chronological graph above provides us with a first clue: the removal of Demotic writing from the realm of *textes de la pratique* would have increased its cultural value. Here we find the concept of “restricted knowledge” forged by John Baines:⁸ the growing scarcity of Demotic increased its cultural value. In fact, at the beginning of the Roman Period, the entirety of Egyptian literature ended up being written in Demotic. From specialized writing, used by businessmen and notaries, the Demotic had turned into the writing of priests, deeply rooted at the heart of Egyptian culture.

1 Rémi Brague's Two Models of Appropriation

It is necessary here to reflect on the meaning of the words “deeply rooted”. How do we know what is “deep” in a culture? Or, conversely, how do we know what is superficial? The notion of canonization, in the very restrictive definition proposed by Pascal Vernus, has an important heuristic value in answering these questions. The fact that a text is considered, at a given moment in its history, to be intangible and exclusive attests to its importance within a given literate culture. In fact, canonized texts lie at the heart of a culture, as they are protected by rules, read, taught and commented upon. If we conceive of culture as an ocean, then canonical texts are abyssal organisms. How do we locate a canonical text? It usually signals itself to us in two ways: firstly, by the discourse that we hold about it – for example, its intangibility, with its authority are clearly stated; and otherwise, the canonicity of a text can be inferred, most particularly through the existence of a great many copies that are faithful to an original. However, neither of these two criteria can be applied to the field of Demotic literature. Instead, we need to find another methodology that allows us to find canonical texts. I propose approaching it from a different angle by

⁸ Baines 1990, 6–17.

not focusing on the more or less canonical nature of the texts themselves (are they intangible? are they exclusive?), but rather on the way in which the ancient Egyptians appropriated their own texts through time. For this purpose, I will use the two models proposed by Rémi Brague, a specialist in medieval Christian, Jewish and Muslim philosophies. As a point of departure, Brague asked himself how the Christian West and the Muslim world have integrated Greek philosophy and, more precisely, Aristotle. He distinguished two ways. He called the first one *digestion*: Aristotle's texts are integrated not in their original form, but through paraphrases and commentaries made by authorities (such as Averroes). The second is referred to as *inclusion*. In this process, the original text is conserved and integrated, as far as possible, in its original form through quotations.⁹ In the framework of the inclusion process, most of the effort made by includers and by later users is therefore focused on establishing the text in such a way as to return it to its original state. Brague did not invent the concept of *inclusion*, but borrowed it from another specialist in medieval philosophy, Kurt Flasch.

As an example for the *inclusion* ("Einsetzung") process, Flasch chose a piece of art rather than a text: the Cross of Lothaire kept in the Treasury of Aachen (the works of Flasch and Brague show that, in this field, there is no difference between the phenomena that occur in material culture and those observed in the history of texts).¹⁰

He notes that a Roman cameo representing an emperor is set at the centre of the cross produced by Carolingian goldsmiths: "Inserting was not just preserving; it was not just preserving some ancient jewellery by inlaying it into sacred objects; it was bringing the past into the present. [...] Even if an old coin was inserted as it was, it was transformed into its true function. It became part of a new historical world; it became 'inclusion'."¹¹ Flasch has a very evocative formula that reveals the very meaning of the *inclusion* process: "It puts the past into the present." Inclusion reflects deference to the object included, because it is perceived as coming from a higher court. The texts that are transmitted

9 Rémi Brague 2006, 266, note 1: "L'utilisation de l'image de la manducation pour l'apprentissage est attestée très tôt, en Égypte ancienne comme dans la Bible." There is, however, a misunderstanding here. The Egyptian verb that metaphorizes learning is *'m*, which means to swallow and not to chew. This distinction is of great importance because swallowing may imply that the food is ingested as it is, without having been crushed by the work of the teeth. If learning is swallowing, it means that one integrates the text as it is, one learns it by heart.

10 M.J. Versluys returns to this in his chapter in this volume: "Texts were not the only important instrument; objects could play a similar role." (p. 50).

11 Flasch 1992, 3.



FIGURE 4.2 Cross of Lothair. Front side. 50 cm height, 38.5 cm width, 2.3 cm depth

through the *inclusion* process have the two characteristics that Vernus attributes to canonized texts: intangibility and exclusivity. Canonization is therefore closely connected to *inclusion*. In contrast, *digestion* expresses a feeling of equality: the text or the object can be reformulated/modified at will. This distinction highlights the fact that the process of canonization/inclusion is closely linked to a perception of time in which the past is perceived as better than the present (this is, for example, Renaissance humanists' perception of Greco-Latin Antiquity). However, the process of reformulation/digestion is underpinned by the idea that the present is superior to, or at least equal to, the past. The heritage of the past must be reworked in order to be assimilated. *Digestion* and *insertion* processes are both attested in what we could call "Demotic culture". What part do both of these processes play in the production and transmission of Demotic literary texts?

2 The Digested Texts

In a recent book devoted to the scribes of the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE), Chloe Ragazzoli comes to a radical conclusion about the transmission of literary texts written in Hieratic script: "J'irai même jusqu'à proposer l'idée qu'un texte original, originel et idéal, n'est guère compatible avec la pensée égyptienne, éminemment analytique et aspectuelle [...] un texte égyptien sera plus juste en multipliant les variantes et les versions."¹² A review of an extensive amount of Demotic literature seems to prove her right, as well as for later periods. This is particularly true in the field of narrative texts, tales and "historical novels" (to use the expression proposed by Youri Volokhine for the Inaros Cycle).¹³ There are no parallel versions, strictly speaking, in these literary genres. In other words, narrative texts do not seem to have been perceived as organic units. The common thread that seems to unite these different works are the characters, warriors, kings, priests and magicians that we find connected to the adventures described, hence the term "Sagenkreis", borrowed from Scandinavian literature by Wilhelm Spiegelberg to describe some of these literary ensembles. When we are fortunate enough to have two versions of the same story, the same narrative framework can be of two very different lengths from one version to another. As an example, the framework narrative that introduces the wisdom of Chasheshonqy, which recounts the misfortunes that led an unfortunate priest to prison, unjustly accused of plotting against the

¹² Ragazzoli 2020, 84 and 294.

¹³ Volokhine 2005, 48.

king, is known by two narratives whose lengths vary from single to triple. The absence of parallel texts in the field of narrative literature is of great importance to the question of textual transmission. This situation led Kim Ryholt to a conclusion not unlike that of Chloé Ragazzoli (quoted above): “These texts therefore attest to a remarkable degree of licence in the way wisdom literature was handled, no matter whether they are individual compositions which simply drew heavily upon other compositions or whether they are versions of the same original composition where the individual copyists felt at large to alter, exclude, and include whatever material they pleased.”

The malleable, fluctuating nature of the Demotic narrative literature may have been increased by two elements highlighted by recent research, namely, by both the oral and local dimensions of this literature.¹⁴ Thus, stories can be called *ꜥꜣꜣꜣ*, a “speech”.¹⁵ The story of Petese son of Petetum is presented as “The voice (*ḥrw*) which is before Pharaoh”, meaning that it has to be to be “spoken aloud to an audience rather than read”.¹⁶ The oral dimension of narrative texts has been underlined in a recent book by Jacqueline Jay. Using the concept promoted by specialists on Homer, she has identified two features in Demotic narratives that are specific to oral literature: the presence of elements of phraseology and the use of *Typischen Szenen*, scenes that occur two or more times in an identical manner or with some slight variations. Jay thus identified two major groups of *Typischen Szenen* within the Inaros Cycle: the armament in preparation for battle and the fight itself. She concludes that “any resemblances between the Inaros Cycle and the Homeric epics are to be explained by their common affinities to oral tradition in general rather than by any relationship between the two.”¹⁷ The tale, fable or epic narrative are first and foremost oratorical performances that are enriched by digressions, descriptions and adventures over time. The second point that could explain the fluctuating nature of Demotic narrative texts is related to the fact that they could be adapted to local constraints. Kim Ryholt found an excellent example of this in the story of the “Imprisoned Magician”. In this narrative, a magician is delivered from jail by two birds: one version places the story at Sais (Jar Berlin 12845 Krugtext A,1, 1/2nd CE), while another takes place at Elephantine (P. Heid. 736, First v. BCE).¹⁸

14 On oral dimension, see Ragazzoli 2020: 77–81 (for the 2nd millennium BCE) and Agut-Labordère 2011 and Jay 2016.

15 Ryholt 2005, 5, note 11.

16 Ryholt 1999, 69.

17 Jay 2016, 183.

18 Ryholt 1999, 89.

However, this shifting context is marked by a number of landmarks. Indeed, if the narrative texts are presented as works in perpetual transformation, we find sentences and elements of formulas to be particularly stable within them. These “canonized aggregates” (to take up a formula proposed by Orly Goldwasser)¹⁹ are made up of predetermined formulas as well as proverbs that are quoted from work to work.²⁰ Proverbs are the best example of these canonized masses. Their cultural importance is such that they have been the subject of specific collections, which we refer to as Demotic wisdom texts. The organic unity of these texts was felt to be necessary at the end of the Hellenistic period at least. This is evidenced by the fact that a collection of proverbs was preceded by a short narrative explaining the circumstances in which these maxims had been collected. I have briefly referred to the contents of this story above: after a conspiracy against the king led by the chief physician Harsiese, his friend, Chasheshonqy of Heliopolis, was locked up in the prison of Daphne. Deprived of his freedom, Chasheshonqy spent his time writing a collection of proverbs for his son so that he would not have to face the same fate. The same process is also attested in narrative literature to create collections of stories. The collection known as the *Story of Petese son of Petetum* contains 70 stories gathered by Petese after he learned that he had only 40 days to live.²¹ Egyptologists have become accustomed to calling these introductory narratives “frame stories”. Nevertheless, the story of Petese son of Petetum is not a *roman à tiroirs*, as the main story is not regularly interrupted by secondary stories before resuming its course once the secondary stories are completed (in the manner of the *Arabian Nights* or *The Canterbury Tales*). Each story actually functions independently, apart from the introductory story, which serves only to justify the very existence of the collection. The latter then acts like a magnet that has attracted to it tales or proverbs that had previously circulated independently. In Egyptian, this kind of collection of stories or proverbs was referred to as *shꜣwy* “collection”.²² If, within these literary collections, proverbs are in a relatively stable form, narrative texts can become extremely abbreviated. Each narrative framework can be briefly outlined or simply summarized by an evocative incipit, the reading of which triggers the continuation of the narrative in the reader’s mind.²³

19 Goldwasser 1991, 141.

20 Agut-Labordère 2011.

21 Ryholt 1999.

22 Vernus 2016, 285–286.

23 Vernus 2016, 284–285.

If the narrative texts do not seem to have been canonized (at least during the Hellenistic period), was the same true for the collections of stories and proverbs? There are several indications that, at least from the end of the Hellenistic period, these collections were stabilized. First, we have to underline the fact that each of the 70 stories allegedly gathered by Petese son of Petetum was assigned an individual number.²⁴ In the same vein, one or several collections of short stories were organized according to an alphabetical principle where the different letters are designated according to birds whose Egyptian names begin with the relevant letter.²⁵ This type of enumeration is also attested in the greatest Demotic wisdom text, that of the *Papyrus Insinger*. This text is not only divided into numbered thematic chapters, but the number of verses contained in each chapter is counted and appears as a total (*dmd*) indicated at the end of each chapter. Numbered sections are also attested in the herbal of Tebtunis (P. Carls. 230).²⁶ More significantly, a divinatory treatise (recently published by Joachim F. Quack) was also organized into numbered sections.²⁷ Several copies of this treatise, of which at least seven different hands are attested, show that this work was perceived as organic, thereby confirming the hypothesis formulated by Kim Ryholt about the history of Petese son of Petetum: "The purpose of the numbering may have been an attempt to protect the integrity of the works in question."²⁸ Hence, we have here a first element of what can be called the canonization of Demotic literature.

If we now examine the contents of these collections, a clear distinction must be made between collections of stories, on the one hand, and collections of proverbs and oracles, on the other.²⁹ Unlike narratives, divine words and proverbs were gathered and preserved as such collections. This means that not only were the structures of these collections fixed, but also the various elements that make up their content. Returning to the typology proposed by Brague, since the oracles and proverbs already existed before their subsequent collections, Demotic wisdom texts and oracular treatises are composed of *included*

24 Ryholt 2005, 4–6.

25 Devauchelle 2014.

26 Tait 1991.

27 Quack 2019.

28 Ryholt 2005, 5.

29 The compilation of sapiential and ritual texts known as the *Book of Thoth* could fall into the latter category. This opus is known from different versions dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Proverbs and elements of rituals as well as funerary compositions are cited in a dialogue between a master (identified with the god Thot if we are to believe the editors, Jasnow and Zauzich 2005) and a disciple designated as the *mr-rh* "the one who is eager to know". Joachim Quack offers a very different analysis of this opus which, in his view, is a manual used for the initiation of professional scribes (Quack 2007a and 2007b).

elements. The intrinsic value of these elements thereby added to the quality of the collection, implying that these works deserved to be fixed. Therefore, in Egyptian literary culture a proverb or an oracle is felt to be endowed with a unity stronger than that of a tale or fable. The former must be transmitted as they are, they must be *included*, while the latter can be reworked as needed, they can be *digested*. This distinction does not correspond to modern perceptions of literature: it is hard to imagine the idea that *Madame Bovary's* text could be reworked at will. How can we understand this distinction within the different types of texts within Egyptian culture? What is the basis for the choice to include rather than digest?

3 The Logics of Inclusion

Before going any further, it is worth asking whether the Egyptians of the 1st millennium BCE conceived texts (whether narrative, theological or “scientific” texts) as organic units for a longer period than proverbs or oracles. The answer is yes, without hesitation. The best example that can be found is the famous inscription from the end of the 8th century BCE, known as the *Memphite Theological Document*.³⁰ This text, which records a cosmogony and elements of mythography, was copied onto a granite slab and placed somewhere in the Temple of Ptah in Memphis. It is striking that the stone copy preserves the appearance of the original on papyrus even in its lacuna. Several columns have been left unengraved to evoke the missing parts of the papyrus. It is indeed the notion of the original document that is central here; the text on papyrus, even degraded, was placed at such a high level that any attempt to restore its contents would have been unfruitful. The introductory text that describes the conditions under which the stone was engraved states very explicitly that the text is in conformity with the original on papyrus:

[it] was copied by His Majesty [...] in the house of his father Ptah-who-is-south-of-his-wall, for His Majesty found it as made by the ancients, eaten by worms, so that it was not known from beginning to end. Then His Majesty copied it again, so that it was more beautiful than before, so that his name should remain and his monument should remain in the house of his father Ptah [...] for all eternity [...].

30 Quack 2006.

The discovery of ancient writings, whose prescriptions must be followed to the letter, is commonplace in the history of the foundation of Egyptian temples. For example, the plan of the temple of Edfu is said to have been inscribed on a papyrus that fell from the sky north of Memphis.³¹ The temple of Dendera is described in the texts that adorn its walls as the “renewal of the monument executed by the king of Upper Egypt Menkheperre, son of Re the Lord of the Crowns, Thutmes, after it was found in ancient writings from the time of King Cheops.”³² It is not surprising that the Egyptian temple, which dominated the Egyptian city with its strong silhouette of hard stones, here presents itself as an *inclusion* from a very ancient past in the urban landscape of the Hellenistic and Roman Egyptian city.

The intangible nature of the writings relating to temples and rites certainly explains how they are translated through the different phases of Egyptian language. Hence, the *Temple Manual*, describing all aspects of the functioning of an Egyptian temple, is a Demotic translation of a book originally written in Middle Egyptian.³³ This means that this kind of book cannot be transmitted by means of a simple paraphrase, and that only a faithful translation is capable of preserving the high value of its contents. The same phenomenon of translation or rejuvenation of the text can be observed for another type of book: medical books containing therapeutic magic formulas. The vocabulary of the P. Brooklyn 47.218.138 has been actualized without any alterations to the structure of the formulas or even to the structure of the work.³⁴

Where do these books that command such respect come from? The circumstances of their discovery are described in colophons that guarantee the origin of the book and state the “effectiveness” of its contents.³⁵ These passages sometimes detail the miraculous conditions in which these books were discovered, which was a sign, also here, of their exceptional value. As we have seen, such a book may have fallen directly from the sky³⁶ or may have been “found at night deposited in the forecourt of the temple of Coptos”³⁷ or at the foot of a divine statue.³⁸ What all books perceived as units have in common, is their origin in a distant past, a past that is perceived as intrinsically superior to the present. The way that these works, reputed for their antiquity, were

31 Edfu VI, 6.4, Volokhine 2005, 62.

32 Dendera VI 173, 9–10, Volokhine 2005, 63.

33 Quack 1992/1993.

34 Goyon 2012 and Quack 2013, 258.

35 Volokhine 2005, 49, note 10 and 50–55.

36 Sauneron 1988, 85–86.

37 Volokhine 2005, 55.

38 Volokhine 2005, 55–56.

transmitted within Egyptian culture verifies the logic of *inclusion* mentioned above: “putting the past into the present”. The Egyptian past, the 3rd or the 2nd millennium BCE, seems to have functioned as a normative point of departure for almost all books that were perceived as organic. As an example of this, P. Berlin 3057 (also called P. Schmitt), a composition from the Ptolemaic period that has gathered liturgies from the Pyramid Texts, would have been found on a “scroll” dated to the time of Thutmes III and Amenhotep III in the library of the temple of Osiris in Abydos.³⁹ Similarly, a series of formulas against snakes engraved on the east wall of the chamber of the sarcophagus of Ounas was reproduced on a Late Period stele.⁴⁰

Some of these “real” books were attributed to a small group of authors of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, including Imhotep, Hordjedef, Amenhotep and Khaemweset. In addition to these ancient figures, we find more recent “Demotic” authors, such as Chasheshonqy and Petese son of Petetum, already mentioned above. Among the “Classical” authors, it is particularly striking that, although the wisdom attributed to Hordjedef no longer seems to have been transmitted in the 1st millennium BCE, its (supposed) author has nonetheless remained a literary reference.⁴¹ The figure of Imhotep dominates the group of Classical authors. He is credited with the authorship of the plan of the temple of Edfu,⁴² as well as with a well-known astrological work whose introduction reads as follows: “Here is a copy of the book of Imhotep the Great, son of Ptah, the great god” (*tw=s ḥ.t p3 dm' ly-m-ḥtp wr s3 Pth p3 ntr '3*, P.CtYBR 422).⁴³ Here, we touch on a very important point that allows us to understand the Egyptian notion of author: a true author is more or less a god. That probably explains why the works that are attributed to him are perceived as “real” books.

The question of the divine origin of the Egyptian books can be posed in two ways, as being either historical or mythological. The first way consists of taking the writing of the books back to a moment that is both inside and outside of history: the time when the gods ruled Egypt.⁴⁴ The second way consists of attributing the books to a deity without specifying when the work was written. In this latter case, it is obviously the god Thot who stands out as the “god-author” *par excellence*. Clement of Alexandria therefore places the whole of Egyptian priestly literary production under the authority of Thot.⁴⁵ Turning

39 Backes 2016.

40 Osing 1992, 476.

41 Hordjedef also appears in the Book of Temple, Quack 2003, 13–15.

42 Volokhine 2005, 63.

43 Ryholt 2005, 13.

44 Luft 1978, 155–176; Vernus 1995, 39–42.

45 Sauneron 1988, 146–147.

to the Egyptian texts themselves, two categories of work are attributed to Thot: funerary and magic books. In the first category, according to a Roman-period text, the *Book of Breathings* is said to have been discovered by a priest on the bandages of the mummy of Psamtik I, coming from a book written by Thot “with his own fingers”.⁴⁶ Several chapters of the *Book of the Dead* also include a colophon mentioning their invention by Thot (chapters 30 b, 64, 137 a, 148). All of these “Thotian” rubrics function as certifications of sacredness, and thus, once again, of the effectiveness of these divine books that have fallen into the hands of men.⁴⁷

Death, magic and (how could it be otherwise?) rites and oracles, are the exclusive domains of the gods. It is striking that, with the exception of funerary books, other types of works constitute the bulk of what we know about the contents of Egyptian libraries.⁴⁸ Ritual books are the subject of dedicated catalogues (the most famous ones are engraved on the walls of the temples of Tod and Edfu).⁴⁹ One of them, drafted in Demotic, was recently published by Kim Ryholt.⁵⁰ It contains the titles of at least twenty books. Each of them is introduced by *dd r* “said concerning”. Basically, the ritual book contains words “to be said” aloud at a given moment in the liturgy.⁵¹ This presents the opposite of the textual relationship observed for narrative literature, which is connected with orality; canonized/included texts are closely related to reading aloud, which forbids any *faux pas*. The canonization of a text and its transmission through the process of *inclusion* is the only way to preserve the effectiveness of a ritual, magical or prophetic text that has been forged at a higher level than that in which the reader evolves. This helps us to understand that it was not the past, as such, that was perceived as superior by the Egyptians of the 1st millennium BCE, but the divine world. As the gods happened to have left texts to the men of the past, it was these texts of divine origin that philologists and archaeologists of Ancient Egypt (such as Prince Setne Khaemweset in the Demotic tale) have primarily sought.

46 Erichsen 1956, 64, col. III.8.

47 Volokhine 2005, 50–51.

48 Vernus 2005, 320; Ragazzoli 2020, 156–161.

49 Thiers 2004.

50 PSI inv. D 67, Ryholt 2019, 151–159.

51 Such a respect for the original text could explain why the *Tägliche Ritual*, originally written in traditional Egyptian, was transcribed into Demotic without having been translated into the language associated with that script. This explains the presence of many non-etymological scripts, i.e. words written in an unusual way, composed of signs used to write homophone words (Stadler 2016, 37–38).

The Wilbour papyrus lot, kept in the Brooklyn Museum, very probably from Elephantine, documents the contents of a library around the 5th and 4th century BCE,⁵² before Demotic became a *Kulturschrift*. Was it a library belonging to a private individual, or to a temple? We do not know. The fact remains that it contained only works written in Hieratic script that partially overlap the same three areas, mentioned above, that we find in the “god-made books”: medicine and magic, rite and mythology, and oracles.⁵³ Only the so-called *Brooklyn Wisdom Text* does not fit this category. This exception helps us to nuance the dichotomy established between god-made, included books and human-made, digested literary works. Between these two categories we find the wisdom texts, although they are never explicitly presented as being of divine origin, and proverbs nevertheless need to be quoted exactly, that is to say *included*, in order to retain all their power. It is perhaps not by chance that the structure and content of the wisdom of the *Papyrus Insinger* was fixed early on, at least at the beginning of the 1st century BCE. It was around the same time that Egyptian funerary literature came to be written in Demotic script. The first funerary papyrus written in Demotic does not appear until the very end of the Ptolemaic Period, with the *Book of Transformations* preserved on P. Louvre E 3452 dated to 57/56 BCE.⁵⁴ From that moment onwards, Demotic really became a *Kulturschrift*, worthy of being used to write works that should be *included*.

4 Conclusion: Anchoring Demotic in Egyptian Culture

In his groundbreaking article, Pascal Vernus wrote:

Que les écrits anciens – sur support à fin de maniements mais aussi sur supports monumentaux – et reconnus comme tels soient investis d'une *auctoritas* qui les qualifie comme instances normatives est maintes fois explicitement proclamé. Ils émanent immédiatement des prédécesseurs et ancêtres humains, et par leur truchement, des dieux, en dernière instance, les uns et les autres étant souvent associés comme origine indirecte et directe, l'origine des textes s'avère, en définitive, supra-humaine.⁵⁵

52 Sauneron 1966/1967; Quack 2013.

53 Guerneur 2012, 542, note 4 provides the bibliography.

54 Smith 2009, 627–649.

55 Vernus 2005, 275.

At first glance, Demotic literature seems to be in line with Vernus' assertion. Nevertheless, a review of Demotic literature conducted in light of the *digestion/inclusion* distinction proposed by Rémy Brague, makes it possible to qualify and somewhat clarify this latter statement.

Only texts or collections of texts produced by the gods or a limited number of authors of exceptional authority (some of whom are subsequently deified) have an organic unity and must be transmitted as intact as possible. The contents of these texts deal with very specific fields, such as the future in the Afterlife, rites, myths and oracles. Contrary to this, another part of Demotic literature comes from men and is rooted in their history. These texts, mainly of a narrative nature, could be largely reworked and modified according to circumstances.

Demotic tales are subject to the slow process of *digestion* that seems to have been completed at the end of the 1st century BCE, as attested by the versions kept in the Tebtunis temple library. Kim Ryholt describes the phenomenon of *digestion* in different words: "Egyptian literature might have been continuously reedited and brought up to date."⁵⁶ The notion of "editing" is directly related to

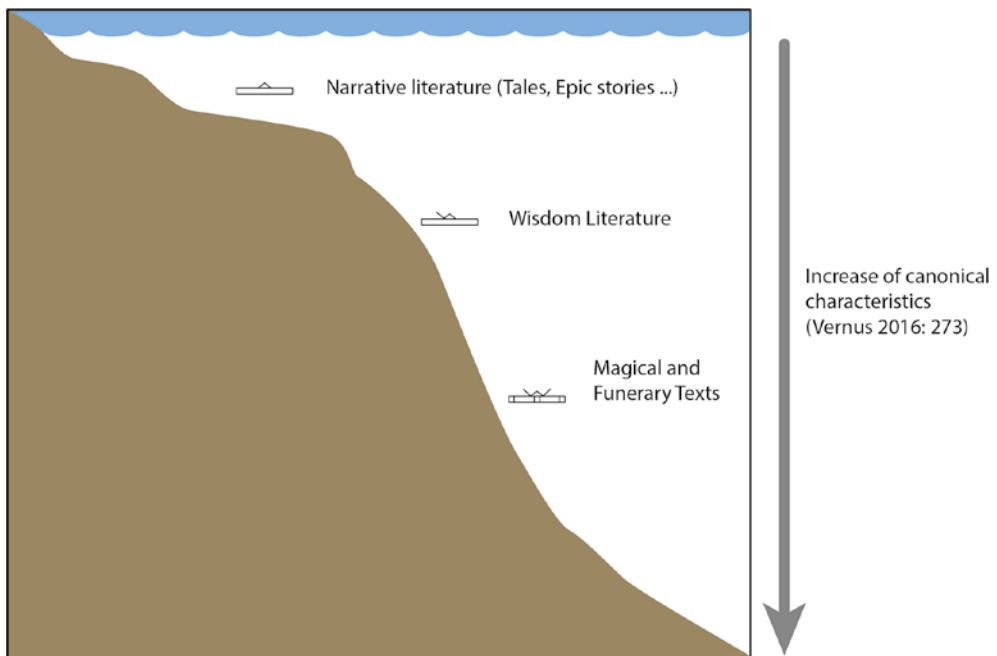


FIGURE 4.3 Textual genres and degree of canonicity in Egyptian culture of the 1st millennium BCE: an oceanic metaphor

⁵⁶ Ryholt 1999, 88.

the field of written literature and, even more so, to literature after the invention of printing. That said, Kim Ryholt formulates a hypothesis: "This opens the possibility that the 1st century saw a general re-edition of older literature...."⁵⁷ This means that, at the end of its existence, Demotic was deemed worthy of fixing the entirety of what we call literature: books created by men as well as books of divine origin. During the first centuries of the Roman period, Demotic was actually used to freeze an entire section of Egyptian literary culture. Narrative texts may have acquired a relatively fixed form and passed from the realm of texts subjected to *digestion*, to that of books that had to be *included*. At that time, some narrative literary texts were finally perceived as organic units. Precisely because some of these texts are attested by several parallel versions, Kim Ryholt is justified in using the term "reedition".

How do we explain such canonization of the works themselves as well as of the books that should be found in any good Egyptian library? It is most certainly in the second adjective that an answer may be found. From the second centuries, Demotic writing had been withdrawn from the temples, and the Roman administration, which still used it until the middle of the 1st century in Upper Egypt to raise taxes, stopped doing so. The Egyptian nature of this writing, then, was full and complete, just as the evolution of the spoken language had given the Demotic literary texts a touch of archaism, which sometimes made explanatory notes necessary. In short, Demotic literature of the Roman period had acquired a strong identity value.

In the end, the adoption of Demotic by Egyptian literature, at least at the very end of the Hellenistic Period, displays the anchoring of Demotic writing, invented seven centuries earlier, at the very core of the Egyptian culture – its naturalization, in fact. In the eyes of the Egyptian priests of the Roman period, Demotic writing had indeed become a traditional script, constituting their cultural identity.⁵⁸ It was by gradually moving from "digestible" works to books "that could be included" that Demotic both penetrated and encapsulated the heart of Egyptian literary culture. This movement took place from the end of the Hellenistic period to the first centuries of Roman domination, leading to a paradoxical situation. While the phenomenon of canonization is most often seen as an inaugural phenomenon in the development of a culture (whether one thinks, for example, of the fixation of the Biblical canon or of Chinese literature of the 3rd century BCE), the creation of a Demotic literary canon, which can be guessed from the contents of the Tebtunis library in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, occurred shortly before the disappearance of traditional

57 Ryholt 1999, 88.

58 For such processes of anchoring, but of Greek texts, see Lardinois and De Jonge this volume.

Egyptian culture. Canonization is not endowed with its own virtues; the perpetuation of canonized works depends closely on the situation of the institutions with which they are associated. In the case of Demotic literature, the Egyptian temples entered a phase of slow but real impoverishment during the Roman period. With them, Demotic literary culture faded away.

All this helps us to understand better how empires, by their very existence, give rise to canonizations. Corpora of intangible and exclusive texts can appear at the very heart of empires to justify their existence,⁵⁹ but also in the provinces as a reaction of provincial cultural communities to the dominant imperial culture. In the case of Egypt, the confrontation with the Persians, Greco-Macedonians, and finally the Romans, added to the relegation of Egyptian-language culture to the temples, thereby forcing the Egyptian speakers to redefine themselves. It was in the midst of this redefinition effort that Demotic writing, once confined to the fields of administrative and legal documents, gained its status as a *Kulturschrift*. Driven out of the public domain, Demotic found a new career in the temples. It became the writing of those who regard themselves as heirs to the Egyptian traditions and who helped Egyptians “to maintain their sense of orientation, identification and continuity” in a world dominated by foreign empires.⁶⁰ In this sense, Persian, Greek and Roman dominations led to the creation of the Demotic canon.

In this context, it is very striking that we can chronologically reconstruct a sequence from the progressive canonization of Demotic texts that corresponds with the one Hervé Gonzalez observed concerning the canonization of the Hebrew Bible:

- From the Persian period until the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, we can observe a progressive composition of some important *opera* (for example, the *Book of Breathings* and very probably the wisdom of the *Papyrus Insinger*) on the basis of the traditions of the Saite period.
- From the end of the 1st century CE and 2nd century CE, Demotic literature seems to have acquired a stable form: it includes classical works whose content is stabilized, as evidenced by the Tebtunis temple library.

The intermediate period between these two phases, from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE, is still rather poorly known due to a lack of sources. It seems, however, that it corresponds to a period during which narrative and wisdom collections crystallized. Since Judea and Egypt experienced a fairly similar political situation during this second part of the 1st millennium BCE, it is very likely that the similarities observed in the chronologies of the Judean

59 Billeter 2014, 16–19.

60 I use the words of M.J. Versluys, cf. pp. 37–39 on the notion of anchoring.

and Demotic “canonizations” are a result of the same phenomenon of reaction in a context of growing connectivity. These are the elements for a new Axial Age, at least for Egypt and Judea, which would have peaked at the end of the Hellenistic period.⁶¹ But that is another story.

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61 Concerning Axial Age and canonization, see M.J. Versluys in this volume.

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Creation or Confirmation of the Canon? The Measures of Lycurgus and the Selection of Athenian Tragedy in Antiquity

André Lardinois

We know that in the 5th-century BCE around 900 tragedies must have been produced in Classical Athens. Each year approximately nine tragedies were produced for the City Dionysia, the festival for the god Dionysus held in the Spring.¹ Nine per year adds up to 900 in the whole century. By the Byzantine period only 32 of these 900 plays had survived, among which the 24 plays that made up the canon of Greek tragedy at least by the 2nd century CE: seven plays of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles and ten of Euripides.² In this paper I will address the question how this selection was made and what role political authorities played in making this selection. I will focus in particular on the measures that the Athenian statesman Lycurgus took around 330 BCE to promote Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the three great Athenian tragedians, a status they still enjoy today. I will argue that in doing so he strengthened the canonical status that these three tragedians enjoyed already rather than inventing it, and that this is a pattern in the canonization of Greek tragedy in later periods as well. Unlike previous studies of the canonization of Greek tragedy, I view its development more as a confirmation and use of existing traditions than the invention of a new tradition. It was a bottom-up rather than a top-down process and this, I believe, is how cultures most often are formed.³

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- 1 Csapo and Slater 1995, 107. Not every year nine tragedies were produced at the City Dionysia, but some additional plays were written for other festivals, which evens things out. This study was supported by the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) through the Dutch Research Council (NWO), as part of the Anchoring Innovation Gravitation Grant research agenda of OIKOS, the National Research School in Classical Studies, the Netherlands (project number 024.003.012). I would like to thank the participants in the conferences in Paris and Leiden and in particular Miguel John Versluys for his valuable comments to an earlier draft of this paper.
 - 2 For a list of the 24 canonical plays, see the contribution of Marx to this volume. These include the *Prometheus Bound*, which was attributed to Aeschylus but is probably not by him, and the *Rhesus*, which was attributed to Euripides and is certainly not by him.
 - 3 Cf. the contribution by Versluys to this volume.

This paper is part of a larger research programme that studies innovation processes in antiquity. Underlying this programme, which goes by the name of “Anchoring Innovation”,⁴ is the idea that for the acceptance of innovations it is necessary that they not only deliver something new, but also remain connected to (be “anchored in”) what is already familiar and recognisable to the people who are supposed to adopt this innovation. A good example is Vergil’s *Aeneid*, which is innovative in many ways, but at the same presents itself as a traditional epic by its many references to Homer’s epics. In this way Vergil made his innovations not only acceptable, but he could also draw on Homer’s reputation to establish the authority of his own poem.⁵ Canons, either already existing or newly created, are perfect “anchors” to which to tie new developments and from which to derive authority. In this paper I will explore how the tragic canon was used as anchor for political and educational changes in antiquity.

The measures the Athenian statesman Lycurgus took with regard to the texts and reputation of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in the second half of the 4th century BCE form a memorable moment in the selection and transmission of Greek tragedy.⁶ He finished the stone theatre of Dionysus that still can be seen at the foot of the Acropolis, placed bronze statues of the three tragedians in it, and ordered copies of their plays to be made and stored in the state archives. Lycurgus’ measures selected 225 out of the 900 tragedies that were produced in Athens in the 5th century BCE.⁷ We know of at least fifty other tragedians who were active in Athens in the 5th century BCE,⁸ but Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides effectively had cornered the market: the three of them together composed one fourth of all tragedies produced in the 5th century. That they were already considered the best tragic poets in their own time is shown by the *Frogs*, a comedy that was produced by the Athenian comic poet Aristophanes in 405 BCE.⁹ In this comedy the god Dionysus descends into the underworld to bring back either Aeschylus or Euripides, after Sophocles defers to Aeschylus, because, so Dionysus says, after the death of these three

4 For an explanation of the concept, see Sluiter 2017. For more information about the research programme and its results, see the website www.ru.nl/oikos/anchoring-innovation/.

5 Cf. Conte 1994, 276–78; Tarrant 1997, 58.

6 For an excellent assessment of the measures of Lycurgus in their historical and cultural context, see Hanink 2014. My analysis in the following paragraphs is greatly indebted to her findings.

7 For the number of plays produced by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, see the contribution of Marx, p. 168. These numbers include their satyr plays.

8 For a list of their names, see Snell 1986, vi.

9 On this play and other comedies in which the tragedians are parodied, see Rosen 2005.

poets no good tragic poet could be found in Athens anymore.¹⁰ Both Sophocles and Euripides had died just before the play was produced, while Aeschylus had died half a century earlier already (in 456 or 455 BCE).

In 386 BCE the Athenians passed a law that from then on not only new plays had to compete in the City Dionysia, but one old play (*palaion drama*) would be presented on each day of the festival as well.¹¹ The performance records that are preserved from the 4th century BCE reveal that the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were most often chosen to be reperformed, especially those of Euripides.¹² They are also the playwrights who are most often cited in 4th-century authors, such as Plato and Aristotle. Everything suggests therefore that these three tragedians were already considered to be canonical before Lycurgus' measures.¹³ His reforms were not motivated by his own predilection but based on the popularity and socio-cultural capital these three tragedians already enjoyed in his time.

What exactly did Lycurgus' reforms consist of, besides finishing the stone theatre and setting up three statues of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in it? According to the *Life of the Ten Orators*, attributed to Plutarch, Lycurgus ordered

that bronze statues of the poets Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides be erected and that their tragedies be written down and conserved publicly, and that the city's secretary read them out to those acting in them for the purpose of comparison. For it was not allowed for these plays to be performed out of accordance with the official texts.¹⁴

The writing down and conservation of the plays is quite clear. That this was to happen "publicly" probably means that they were stored in one of the city's archives.¹⁵ But what was the city's secretary to do with these texts and why compare them to those which the actors had? It is important to remember that all texts in antiquity were hand copied, which inevitably caused changes

10 Aristophanes, *Ranae* 89–97.

11 If this privilege had already been extended to Aeschylus' plays after his death is debated: see Biles 2006–2007, 206–242.

12 Nervegna 2014, 162–63.

13 Cf. Hägg 2010, 116: "Lycurgus' political move merely meant the crowning of the canonization process and the confirming of what long had been the common opinion."

14 [Plut.] *Vit. Dec. Or.* 841f: ὡς χαλκᾶς εἰκόνας ἀναθεῖναι τῶν ποιητῶν, Αἰσχύλου Σοφοκλέους Εὐριπίδου, καὶ τὰς τραγωδίας αὐτῶν ἐν κοινῷ γραψαμένους φυλάττειν καὶ τὸν τῆς πόλεως γραμματέα παραναγινώσκειν τοῖς ὑποκρινομένοις· οὐκ ἐξεῖναι γὰρ <παρ'> αὐτὰς ὑποκρίνεσθαι.

15 Hanink 2014, 64.

to occur in them. There was furthermore little concern for what we today consider the artistic integrity of these texts and actors happily changed lines or even inserted whole new scenes when reperforming the plays.¹⁶ Our texts of the Greek tragedies contain several examples of such interpolations, which show us that Lycurgus' measure was not intended (or did not accomplish) to restore the texts of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides to their original form, but to freeze their transmission in time: no *further* changes were to be made to them.

Lycurgus' measure must have been, in practical terms, mostly symbolic.¹⁷ It is unlikely that the city's secretary, after he had read out the text to the actors, would sit in the audience and check if the actors exactly said what was written down on his papyrus role. The measure, furthermore, could only have been enforced in Athens. By the 4th century, however, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were reperformed in cities all over Greece and this, as we will see, may have been one of the main reasons why Lycurgus took this measure. It should signal to the rest of Greece that Athens was the legitimate owner of these plays and of their socio-cultural capital.¹⁸

When was the measure taken? Lycurgus led the Athenian state between 338 and 324 BCE and it is generally assumed that his law on scripts and the erection of the statues of the three tragedians was taken in the middle of his tenure, around 330 BCE.¹⁹ This is a significant moment in Athenian history. In 338 the Greek cities lost their independence to Philip II, the king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great, in the battle of Chaeronea. Because Athens had lost its political independence, Lycurgus may have wanted to boost its status as the old and original cultural centre of Greece by emphasizing the contribution Athenian playwrights had made to Greek culture.

The measure may even have been intended to challenge the hegemony of Macedonia specifically. The Macedonian kings loved Athenian tragedy. One of Alexander's predecessors, king Achelaus of Macedon, had enticed Euripides to come to Macedonia at the end of his life. This effectively made him in the eyes of the Macedonians, and some other Greeks, a half-Macedonian poet.²⁰ Besides, Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander* tells another, interesting story:²¹ while

16 On actor's interpolations, see Finglass 2015 with earlier references.

17 Scodel 2001. Cf. Hanink 2014, 67.

18 Hanink 2014, 6, 65, 73–74; Roisman in Roisman and Edwards 2019, 20–21.

19 Hanink 2014, 11.

20 Hanink 2008. On the performance of tragedy at the Macedonian court in the fourth cent. BCE, see also the contributions of E. Moloney and B. Le Guen to Csapo, Goette, Green and Wilson 2014.

21 Plut. *Alex.* 29.3. See Hanink 2014, 70–72 for an analysis of this story with earlier references.

on campaign in Phoenicia in 331 BCE, Alexander organized a theatrical festival to which he invited one of the leading actors of his day, Athenodorus. This Athenodorus, however, had previously committed himself to act in a play at the City Dionysia in Athens and therefore was fined by the Athenians for failing to show up there. When Alexander learned about this, he offered to pay the fine for him, which showed, also to the Athenians, that he could secure for himself the best actors, whenever he wanted. In the wake of such appropriations of Athenian tragedy, it is understandable that Lycurgus wanted to emphasize its Athenian origins.

The purpose of Lycurgus' measure can be surmised from a speech that he delivered around 330 BCE and which has, miraculously, survived.²² It is directed against a man called Leocrates, who had left Athens immediately after news of the defeat at Chaeronea had reached the city, when all citizens were ordered to stay. Lycurgus therefore accuses him of treason. Most of the speech is filled, however, with extolling the benefits of listening to "good" (i.e. morally uplifting) poetry, because it prevents men from becoming traitors like Leocrates. Lycurgus recalls that the Athenians had passed a law (*nomos*) to have the epics of Homer be recited at the yearly Panathenaic festival.²³ Similarly, the Spartans had passed a law (*nomos*) that their soldiers were to recite the verses of the poet Tyrtaeus, while they were on military campaign.²⁴ They did so, according to Lycurgus, because they believed that these poets installed virtue and courage in their citizens through their poetry. It is therefore also good, Lycurgus says, to listen to the poetry of Euripides, who has a lot of noble things to say: as an example he cites part of the speech of queen Praxithea, the wife of a mythical king of Athens who had sacrificed his daughters for the preservation of the city, from Euripides' lost play *Erechtheus*.²⁵

Lycurgus' speech thus proclaims the benefits for the city of regular performances of the tragedies of Euripides and, by extension, those of Aeschylus and Sophocles in a city festival. It is further worth noting that in the case of the recitation of the poetry of Homer and Tyrtaeus he speaks of "laws" (*nomoi*) that were passed, but not in the case of Euripides. This may be an indication that his own reforms regarding the theatre and the writing down of the tragic texts had not been passed yet, but that he tried to lay the groundwork for them in this speech. The idea that the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides

22 I follow the text of Conomis 1970. For an analysis of the speech with earlier references, see Hanink 2014, 25–59. Add Van Hilten-Rutten 2018 and Roisman and Edwards 2019.

23 Lyc. 26, 102. This custom was in fact initiated under the Peisistratids at the end of the sixth cent. BCE: see Roisman in Roisman and Edwards 2019, 183–84 with earlier references.

24 Lyc. 28, 107.

25 Lyc. 24, 100 = Eur. Fr. 360 Kannicht.

contribute to the morality of the citizens provided him with a good argument to preserve their heritage for Athens: this, after all, showed why these texts were something to be proud of and worth preserving.

It is interesting in this light that out of the three tragedians he picked Euripides as example of a morally uplifting poet, because his reputation used to be that of a poet who was subversive and undermined the state, for example in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Euripides furthermore ended his life as a poet at the court of the Macedonian king. By demonstrating that Euripides composed morally uplifting plays, Lycurgus sets him on a par with Aeschylus and Sophocles and can claim the moral value of all three tragedians. He also stresses in his speech against Leocrates that Euripides was a through-and-through *Athenian* poet; for Lycurgus there is nothing Macedonian about him.²⁶

Whereas Lycurgus' measures therefore boosted the reputation of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and helped to establish them as the three great tragedians, he did not create this reputation. They were already considered canonical well before Lycurgus' measures. Lycurgus uses their reputation to bolster the status of Athens as the cultural capital of Greece, not the other way around. The need to prop up the reputation of Athens was necessary after the Greek defeat at Chaeronea. After this battle Athens had lost its independence to Macedon and basically had to reinvent itself in order to come to grips with the new political situation. Lycurgus' measures seem to have been intended to secure at least part of the cultural hegemony the city had enjoyed ever since the 5th century. It is significant in this respect that the lives and dramatic successes of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides happened to coincide with the Golden Age of Athens.²⁷

As part of the "Anchoring Innovation" programme Jacqueline Klooster and Inger Kuin organised a conference at Groningen University entitled "After the Crisis: Remembrance, Reanchoring, and Recovery in the Ancient World".²⁸ This conference convincingly showed that after a major political crisis the need to innovate is particularly high, but that one cannot anchor new measures either in current affairs or in the more recent past, because they are directly related to and associated with this crisis. In such a situation one typically reaches back, therefore, to a more remote past, when the state was still considered to be doing well.²⁹ By commemorating the successes of Aeschylus, Sophocles and

26 Cf. Hanink 2014, 52–53.

27 Hanink 2014, 65.

28 See Klooster and Kuin 2020.

29 Cf. Assmann 1992, 125, also cited by Versluys in this volume: "In Zeiten verschärfter interkultureller Polarisierung, Zeiten zerbrochener Traditionen, in denen man sich entscheiden muss, welcher Ordnung man folgen wil, kommt es zu Kanonbildungen" ("In times

Euripides, Lycurgus and the group of politicians who supported him reached back to cultural icons that represented the state in better times and, in so doing, presented the current Athenian state as heir to that Golden Age, at least in cultural terms.³⁰

The success of Lycurgus' measures is illustrated by the story, told by Galen, how king Ptolemy III supposedly acquired the recorded texts of Lycurgus for the library of Alexandria. He asked for the texts so they could be copied, but then did not return the originals, allowing the Athenians to keep a huge amount of money he had deposited as security.³¹ We do not know if this is what really happened, but the story itself illustrates the cultural capital that was attached to this set of texts and the attempt, in general, of the Ptolemies to make Alexandria the new heart of Greek culture by collecting classical literature. They did so by collecting as many texts as possible on the one hand,³² and by adopting the predilections of classical Athens, especially in their scholarship, on the other, not only in the case of the three tragedians but in lyric poetry as well. Thus Theodora Hadjimichael remarks about the canonization of the nine lyric poets in the Hellenistic period:

The Alexandrians practically canonized the Lyric Canon, which had already been fixed by the time of the Peripatos [i.e. the school of Aristotle] and which they ultimately inherited ... Their role in the process of canonization was not to generate the canonical lyric list *ex nihilo* but rather to establish it as canonical with their scholarly activity.³³

This is an example of what Carsten Colpe has termed "secondary canonisation":³⁴ the Alexandrians adopted the canons of the Athenians, but at the same time strengthened them by adding "exegetes" in the form of scholars who

of heightened intercultural strife, times of broken traditions, in which one has to decide which order to follow, canons are formed").

30 See Roisman in Roisman and Edwards 2019, 25 for other measures Lycurgus took "to restore Athens to its golden age era."

31 Galen, *Comm. II In Hipp. Epid.* Γ xvii.i. p.607 Kühn, quoted by Hadjimichael 2019, 227. See also Marx's contribution to this volume.

32 Galen also claims that Ptolemy III had ordered that any books that were found on board of a ship that anchored in the harbour of Alexandria were to be seized and copied: Galen, *Comm. II In Hipp. Epid.* Γ xvii.i. p. 606 Kühn, quoted by Hadjimichael 2019, 226.

33 Hadjimichael 2019, 253. There is some evidence, however, that the canon of Attic orators was more fluid and still debated in the Hellenistic period, see Hadjimichael 2019, 251 and De Jonge's contribution to this volume.

34 Colpe 1987, cited by Versluys in this volume.

wrote commentaries to these texts and, in the case of the lyric poets, collected their poetry and fixed their texts.³⁵

The establishment of the Mouseion in Alexandria is a perfect example of “Anchoring Innovation”. On the one hand the Ptolemies presented their new regime, for example in their iconography, as a continuation of the Pharaonic regime.³⁶ At the same time, however, they also wished to present themselves to the wider Hellenistic world as the supreme Greek power. One way of doing so was to claim the cultural hegemony that Athens once enjoyed by appropriating its old texts and becoming the centre of new literary developments. It suited this agenda to adopt the canonical lists that were established in Athens a century earlier with regards to the three tragic or nine lyric poets instead of introducing new lists themselves.

The most important bottleneck through which tragedy had to pass and which had the greatest effect on the survival of our present texts, was the school curriculum. As William Marx (this volume) also remarks, it appears that around the 2nd century CE most Greek grammar schools, at least in the Greek-speaking part of the Roman empire, had settled on a fixed canon of seven plays of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles and ten of Euripides, all of which, as a result, have survived. It is commonly assumed that this selection was made only in the 2nd century CE, based on a variety of criteria,³⁷ but recent research by Patrick Finglass has shown that the ten plays of Euripides that were selected for the canon of 24 plays are also quoted most often by early Greek authors and best represented among the papyrus fragments in the centuries before the school curriculum was made.³⁸ The school curriculum thus seems to have made a selection of the plays that were already the most popular.

This selection was the result of an intersubjective process: no clear authority can be assigned. According to Finglass, the performability of plays must have played an important role: if plays were not reperformed, it would become harder and harder to find copies or to generate interest in them. Treatises like Aristotle's *Poetics* also may have influenced the selection: it is striking that

35 On the importance of “exegetes” and fixed texts for canonization, see Versluys' contribution to this volume; on the fixation of canonical texts, see Lardinois 2020, 49.

36 Stanwick 2002; Versluys 2017, 141–155.

37 Wilamowitz 1907, 195–97 famously had argued that one influential teacher was responsible for making the selection. While this is generally not believed any more, the school system is still regarded as the most important factor in the selection of the canonical plays: e.g. Marrou 1964, 245; Criboire 2001; Canfora 2002, 31–32 and Garland 2005, 69–70.

38 Finglass 2020. The same pattern is, admittedly, not seen among the papyrus fragments of Aeschylus and Sophocles, but their numbers are so small that it is difficult to draw any conclusions on the basis of them.

roughly half of the tragedies that Aristotle mentions by name in this treatise are found among the 32 tragedies that survived, which is much more than one would expect statistically.³⁹ Alternatively, these plays were already more popular in his days than the other ones. According to one of the ancient introductions to the *Antigone* of Sophocles, the Athenians awarded the poet with a generalship because of the success of this play.⁴⁰ A century later it is favourably quoted by Demosthenes in one of his speeches (19.247), in which he clearly assumes his audience to be familiar with the content of the play. Another century later, the Hellenistic poet Dioscorides (late 3rd century BCE) cites *Antigone* together with his *Electra*, which is also preserved, as the best plays of Sophocles in an epigram (AP 7.37). Is it really a coincidence that these two plays were included in the canon five centuries later? It appears that a number of plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides acquired popularity soon after their first production and that the process of selection started well before the 2nd century CE.

The status of these popular plays may in turn have favoured the preservation of other plays: the fame of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, already attested in the 5th century BCE, may have helped to preserve the treatments of the *Electra* story by Sophocles and Euripides, and the reputation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which Aristotle praises as the best play, may have helped to preserve the *Oedipus Coloneus* as well. William Marx is undoubtedly right that the fame of Homer favoured plays dealing with figures known from the Trojan War.⁴¹ Similarly, the only complete surviving satyr play, Euripides' *Cyclops*, is a parody of *Odyssey* Book 9, which was a popular text throughout antiquity. Marx is right that the canon also shows a preference for tragedies that end badly, compared to other tragedies that we know and which did not make the canonical list. This suggests that politics or pedagogy had little to do with the selection of these 24 tragedies, but that the early reputation of some of these plays and their playwrights, their performability, aesthetic quality and the scholarly interest in the plays played a more significant role in slowly narrowing the corpus from 900 to the 32 that have survived. Overall we seem to be dealing in the case of the canon of Greek tragedy with what Miguel John Versluys has called "the formalisation of a tradition-in-the-making" rather than the invention of a new tradition by one or more authorities.⁴²

39 Hanink 2014, 8. Marx, this volume, is sceptical that Aristotle's *Poetics* influenced the canon of 24 tragedies, but other scholarly treatises, now lost, may have done so.

40 *Hypothesis to the Antigone* 1.13–14, quoted by Jebb 1900, 3.

41 Marx, this volume.

42 Versluys, this volume.

In terms of “Anchoring Innovation” it would also make sense for those responsible for the school curriculum in the Roman or Byzantine period to assign the best known plays to their students. Parents want their children to learn new things at school, but at the same time not to miss out on those things that they (and their neighbours) regard as valuable. By adhering in their selection of plays to those that were generally recognized as the best, teachers could freely innovate in what they wanted their pupils to learn using these texts. In most cases this was rhetoric.⁴³ If a teacher could show that some modern rhetorical theory or device that he wanted to teach to his students could be illustrated by a passage in a famous play of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, it would probably be more readily accepted than if he had to use an example from an unknown source. In this way canons are useful not only to preserve the past, but also as “anchors” for the promotion of new ideas.

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43 Cribiore 2001.

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How Canonization Transformed Greek Tragedy

William Marx

Out of the hundreds of tragedies that were performed in Athens in the 5th century BCE, by dozens of playwrights, only 32 complete ones have been preserved for us, by three playwrights only. How was this canon created?

An intuitive answer to this question could be: let us just look at how Greek tragedies were performed in the classical period. For in many ways the tragic festivals in Athens during the classical period might easily be seen as an official canonization mechanism from the start: in the festival of the Great Dionysia, for instance, there was an official contest going on, with three poets competing against each other, the three poets were ranked by a jury, and a prize was given to the first one. One could be tempted to think that those successive competitions were eventually able to produce a canon of tragedies, and even *our* canon of tragedies. Things are more complicated, however.

We will argue here first that ranking and awarding a prize did not mean that a proper canon was being built. It means only that a selection was being made, and selection is not enough to produce a canon. Memory is needed too, that is tradition. The selecting process must be cumulative with time: only then can a canon be produced. We will then try to understand how decisive was the choice of tragedies made around the 2nd century CE, and what influence it exerted on our modern conception of tragedy.

1 Why and How Tragedies Were Selected in the 5th Century BCE

On principle, selection by competition, in classical Greece, had nothing to do with canonization. Selection was everywhere: in athletic games (e.g. the Olympic games), in the way the city functioned (selecting juries and leaders), in poetic performances (choruses, dramas, comedies, odes). Competition and selection were not used primarily to achieve better efficiency, they had no utilitarian value – this is a big difference with the way competition is seen and used today in our free-market society. They were valued primarily as a means to honor and please the gods. They had the value of an *ordeal*.

Selection was aimed at for its own sake (or for the gods' sake), whatever the means of selection. Actually, there were different ways of selection, apparently

(from our modern point of view) quite incompatible with each other: objective criteria (e.g. athletic performances: who runs the fastest, who wins at fight, etc.), votes, chance or fate. One could even reasonably argue that the democratic regime in Greece originated in the religious will to introduce selection and competition everywhere in the city in order to better please the gods – or, to put it in a less provocative and teleological way: the democratic process adapted very well to the general ordeal system that was then in use.

Fate – that is the most obvious and the least disputable contribution of the gods' hand – was everywhere in those selection processes: when juries or civic councils were drawn up in Athens, for instance, and also in tragic competitions. The intervention of fate took place at two levels:

- in selecting the jury: “Before the festival (or before the particular contest) the Council drew up a list of names selected from each of the ten tribes. [...] The names were then placed in ten urns, each containing the names selected from one tribe. These urns were sealed [...] and deposited in the Acropolis [...]. At the beginning of the contest for which the judges were required the ten urns were placed in the theatre, and the archon drew one name from each.”¹
- in selecting the winner poet: each of the ten jury members threw a ballot in an urn, and the archon drew five ballots (and possibly more in cases of equality) to determine the winner (the exact process is still largely conjectural, and it may have taken various forms).²

The intervention of fate in the process means that the question of the intrinsic quality or value (whatever this means) of the plays was not of primary importance. The selection had a value in the moment it was made and for the very context it took place in: an instantaneous value, not an enduring one.

Moreover, the prize was given to a poet for the tetralogy (or the tragic trilogy) he had presented to the public and the god, it was *not* given for a single play. This is a big difference with our current tragic canon. For when tragic canons were eventually constituted, they were made of single plays, not of trilogies, even less of tetralogies. There is then a fundamental discrepancy between the selection processes at work in Athenian tragic contests and the tragic canon as we now know it. This is the point we want to make first: one must not infer a direct link between the tragic contests of the 5th century BCE and the canon of Greek tragedies as we now have it, consisting of 32 tragedies. Not all competitions, not all selections lead to the constitution of a canon. Best example of

¹ Pickard-Cambridge 1988, 97.

² Gariazzo Lechini 2013, 58–59.

this: there were contests for dithyrambs too, and we have kept nearly nothing of them.

As soon as we have made this point, however, we must add some nuance. There was in a way something more than an instantaneous value of the prize awarded to the poet. Many other lesser tragic festivals were organized in Athens and outside Athens, in Attic or elsewhere, the rural Dionysia for instance, and we know that in those festivals some of the plays that had been performed at the Great Dionysia, and perhaps preferably those that had been awarded the prize, were performed again. Success in the major Athenian festivals could then produce larger success in Athens and outside Athens. This may have been the beginning of a canonization process as soon as the 5th century BCE.

Another parameter to be taken into account: monumental lists of winners and of rankings were erected in the city, reminding everyone of the history of the festivals, with a cumulative effect. Easy calculations could show that Sophocles, for instance, had won more contests than any other playwright. Aeschylus came second. One century later, however, Euripides was eventually considered as the best playwright of all, which still marks a disconnection between the rankings of the 5th century and the canonization process that took place later on.

Copies of the texts of the plays may have circulated as soon as the 5th century: that may explain the intertextual effects we can observe between plays from different playwrights, and also explain how Aristophanes could make such precise quotations in *The Frogs*. After Aeschylus' death in 456 Athens had given permission for the continued production of his plays in festivals in competition against living writers. Although we do not know from the extant record whether such revivals really happened in the 5th century, Aristophanes' claim in *The Frogs* that Aeschylus' poetry did not die with him (in contrast with Euripides') may allude to that revival practice.³

Patrimonialization effects may also have been favoured by the importance of families or clans in the field of theater: families of actors and of dramatists (both were linked together). We know for instance that Sophocles' grandson, Sophocles the Younger, premiered in 401 the play *Oedipus in Colonus*, since his grandfather had died in 405. The dramatist Astydamos, who was very popular in the 4th century (he was credited with 15 victories) belonged to Aeschylus' family: his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather (who was Aeschylus' nephew), his brother worked all in the theater business as poets and actors.⁴ Those families kept the original texts of the plays, and their inter-

³ Pickard-Cambridge 1988, 86.

⁴ Easterling 1997, 216.

est was to promote themselves as a brand, which may have contributed to the perennialization of the older plays of the family.

2 Patrimonialization and Repertoire of Tragedies in the 4th Century BCE

From 386 onwards, the Great Dionysia included the revival of an old tragedy by an actor, although we do not know whether the practice was regular before 341. Here again we can see how single tragedies were favoured against trilogies. Those revivals coincided with the progressive rise of actors as the major players of tragic contests, although in the 5th century this role was devoted to dramatists. In 341 and 340 the actor Neoptolemus organized the revivals of plays by Euripides: his fame and his wealth never stopped rising from that time.

We shall leave aside here the role played by statesman Lycurgus in choosing publicly Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the three major playwrights of the classical period: our reader is invited to refer to André Lardinois' paper on this topic in the same volume.

Aristotle's *Poetics* (written around 340) is the best extant testimony we have of the shift in the use of tragedies in the period. For Aristotle, tragic performances were quite superfluous; they provided only a pleasure of a vulgar order. Tragedies interested him more as texts than as performances and, according to him, it is as mere texts that tragedies could achieve their best effects. The shift from a living art (that is performance) to the practice of reading made easier, of course, the constitution of a canon, for texts can be conveniently stored and reproduced.

In the *Poetics* however the tragic canon proposed was still more diverse than ours: Aristotle quoted 15 playwrights and alluded to 60 plays, many more than our current canon. One could intuitively presume that Aristotle's preferences had an impact on our canon, but this is not so clear. Sure, our three great playwrights, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, were also the most quoted playwrights in the *Poetics*, but Aristotle did not stay at all at the origin of this choice: he only followed the fashion of his time. And if we look more closely at Aristotle's assessments of the plays he is commenting upon, then it becomes clear that his influence was quite shallow, if any.

For instance, in the *Poetics* the most quoted plays were *Oedipus Rex* (seven times), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (four times), *Medea* (three times) and *Orestes* (twice), and *Medea* and *Orestes* were quoted only as bad examples of tragedies. However, Euripides' canon in the 2nd century CE retained *Medea* and *Orestes*, which Aristotle disliked, and left *Iphigenia in Tauris* aside, although

this play was heavily praised by the philosopher. The fact that Aristotle also praised another play by Euripides, *Cresphontes*, did not prevent the text of this play to be completely lost, and if we eventually preserved the text of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, it is by chance alone, as we shall see below. This lack of influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* on the canonization of tragedies is actually congruent with the largely acknowledged fact that "neither before nor after the alleged loss of Aristotle's esoteric writings does the *Poetics* seem to have been widely read".⁵

True, our current tragic canon is dependent on the choice made by Athenians in the 4th century of choosing Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as their best playwrights, although there is a long way between that moment and our own small and residual corpus of tragedies, reduced to 32 tragedies. We have not even kept the whole corpuses of the three playwrights: Aeschylus wrote 90 plays, Sophocles 123, and Euripides 92.

Our oldest preserved tragedy is Aeschylus' *Persians*, created in 472. The most recent is from 401: it is *Oedipus at Colonus*, by Sophocles, which was performed posthumously. We can easily calculate the total number of tragedies performed during the major festival, the Great Dionysia, between 472 and 401. Three playwrights took part in the competition each year, and each one of them presented a tragic trilogy, that is three tragedies, plus a satyr play. Nine tragedies every year for 72 years make 648 in all, but we must add also all the tragedies that were performed in less important festivals like the Lenaia, and all those that were shown outside of Athens – and we have also to remember that the history of tragedy did not start in 472 and did not stop in 401. So the total of 648 should be easily doubled or tripled or even more. With our 32 preserved complete tragedies we have less than 5% of the production of tragedies in ancient Greece, and a figure around 1% or 2% is much more likely.

What happened in the meanwhile? Although the prominence of the three great tragedians was never questioned, it is sure that after the 4th century many more playwrights were performed, read or studied in the Greek world. In order to get a general view of the popularity of plays, a careful study should be made of the reception of tragedies in the Hellenistic period, taking into account not only the textual quotations, but also such material documents as vase paintings, whatever difficult they are to interpret.

3 The Canonic Choice of Tragedies of the 2nd Century CE

The second stage of the canonization process for tragedies, as we know it, took place much later than the 4th century BCE: at the end of the 2nd century CE

⁵ Lucas 1978, XXII–XXIII. See also Hardy 1932, 22.

(maybe prepared by a progressive selection process which lasted for centuries). At that time an anthology of 24 plays was used in schools, which contained:

- seven tragedies by Aeschylus, in this order: *Prometheus Bound*, *Seven against Thebes*, *The Persians*, *The Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*), and *The Suppliants*;
- seven by Sophocles (the first three were *Ajax*, *Electra*, and *Oedipus Rex*; we are not sure of the order of the last four: *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *The Women of Trachis*, and *Philoctetes*);
- ten by Euripides, in the following order: *Hecuba*, *Orestes*, *Phoenician Women*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Rhesus* (not considered as the work of Euripides anymore), *The Trojan Women*, and *Bacchae*.

This anthology was copied, it spread out, and saved eventually most of what we know of Attic tragedy.⁶ The hypothesis of the existence of such an anthology was made in the 19th century, and it was afterwards accepted by most scholars. It explains why in the manuscripts the plays come most often in the same order, with scholia, and why after the 2nd century the papyri with plays not included among those 24 tragedies became suddenly scarce.

The academic choice of the 2nd century must have obeyed a lot of criteria – educational, aesthetic, moral, philosophical, religious, political or ideological in general –, but in no way can it be seen today as a neutral reflection of reality,

6 The hypothesis of a choice made in the 2nd century CE was formulated for the first time by Theodor Barthold, then by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, who explained why some plays were retained, and not others (Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1907, 195–219). André Tuilier disputed about the date and the precise composition of the choice of Euripides' plays (Tuilier 1968, 88–113): according to Tuilier, the selection took place as late as the 5th century CE. Leighton Durham Reynolds and Nigel Guy Wilson express reservations about Wilamowitz' hypothesis (especially about the idea that only one man would have been responsible for the choice), and they agree with Tuilier to defer the selection as late as possible (Reynolds and Wilson 1991, 36–37). However, Jean Irigoin confirmed the date of the 2nd century CE with new arguments based on the recension of Egyptian literary papyri (Irigoin 2003, 162–167). Jacques Jouanna proposed a useful synthesis of the history of the transmission of Greek tragedies (Jouanna 2007, 524–531). To summarize the discussion, nobody denies the fact that some decisive choice took place. The only dispute is about its date and its precise composition (the doubts concern two or three plays by Euripides). Irigoin's stance seems the most reasonable. Those who oppose an early date base their argumentation on the fact that some quotations of plays not included in the choice were made by writers after the 2nd century; according to them, this would prove that the selection had not been made yet. But actually the influence of the selection on the most cultivated classes of population was indisputably slow: for centuries scholars had still access to anthologies of quotations and to libraries which contained large arrays of plays by the three great tragedians, if not their complete works. The quotations made by those scholars do not prove at all that a restricted choice was not already in use for teaching. However, after the 2nd century, the sudden scarcity of papyri relating to plays outside of the choice reflects more faithfully the state of popular culture in this period, and this is much more conclusive.

which only a random choice could have provided. The authors of this anthology may have retained the texts they preferred, or those that tradition preferred, or the easiest ones, or the least inappropriate, or even, as we would like to believe, the most representative of the variety of all tragedies. The problem is that we will hardly be able to ever know this, because no introduction, no preface, and no instructions were supplied with this selection. It is only likely that the choice was primarily educational, since it allowed references to the Homeric canon, which had already been read by the students (this explains why the tragedies drawing their subject from the Trojan war are so frequent in our current corpus), it arranged a progressive level of difficulty from one play to another, and it provided parallels between the works of the three authors.

According to André Lardinois, the hypothesis could be made that the number of 24 plays may have something to do with the 24 songs into which each Homeric poem was divided: the tragic canon was modelled somehow on the epic canon, and the number 24, like the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet, was a way to anchor the new canon in the tradition. The fact that more plays by Euripides were preserved, compared to Aeschylus and Sophocles, may also be owed to the use of Euripides' speeches as models in rhetorical education.

There is a way, however, to get a clearer picture of the implicit principles of this anthology: by looking at the plays that were not transmitted by it. For we do not have only the 24 tragedies aforementioned, but no less than 32 in all: to the 24 chosen for the school eight others were added, all of them by Euripides.

There are indeed a few medieval manuscripts that, in addition to the ten plays by Euripides selected for the school, include nine more plays, which come without any scholia, unlike the others. Strangely enough, those nine plays are classified more or less according to the initials of the Greek titles: epsilon with *Helen*; eta with *Elektra*, *Heracles* and *Heracles' Children*; kappa with *Cyclops*; iota with *The Suppliants (Hiketides)*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. This odd classification has an explanation: it follows approximately the alphabetical order of an ancient edition of Euripides' works, whose partial reproduction was still to be found in Thessaloniki in the 14th century; although that manuscript itself has now disappeared, we still have two copies of it in Florence and Rome, made in the 14th century.⁷ So here we are with

7 This is Wilamowitz' hypothesis, followed by Louis Méridier in his edition of Euripides (Méridier 1926, xx–xxx1), and generally accepted by scholars. According to Alexander Turyn, the original manuscript may have belonged to the Byzantine scholar Eustathius of Thessalonica (12th century); the Florence copy was due to the scribe Nicolas Triclines and revised by his parent Demetrios Triclinios in the 14th century (Turyn 1957, 222–306, especially 241–242 and 303–306; Zuntz 1965, 276–278; Jouan 1990, 52–55; Irigoin 1997, 129–137; Irigoin 2009, 335–336). According to Bruno Snell, a library case (*teukhos*) used to contain five

nine additional plays, including eight tragedies, miraculously recovered and narrowly escaping full oblivion.

Eight tragedies, this is not much of course, compared with all the tragedies produced in Athens or even with Euripides' tragedies alone. Yet we should not underestimate the importance of those eight alphabetical plays, which by a rare set of circumstances form a collection totally independent of any academic choice: those plays were not arbitrarily selected for reasons mostly unknown to us, but preserved *by accident*, according to the random order of the alphabet, and just because an edition of Euripides was in the right place at the right time. That makes a huge difference: it gives us at last a statistically representative sample that may allow us to know Euripides' tragedies in a more objective way.

The comparison of those alphabetical or random tragedies with the school tragedies gives a striking result indeed. We need not take more than one glance at the list to see that the alphabetical plays include the most atypical tragedies in the whole corpus, and in Euripides' in particular: *Helen*, *Ion*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris* notably. More specifically, among the eight alphabetical tragedies there is only one drama that ends badly: *Heracles*. The proportion is exactly the opposite in the ten selected plays, among which two only end well, *Orestes* and *Alcestis* (although *Alcestis* should not be classified among ordinary tragedies since it was performed originally as a satyr play). We could hardly get a more glaring contrast.

4 Euripides and the Modern Idea of Tragedy

Such a discrepancy between the two groups is highly instructive. It explains in particular why Euripides is generally considered in modern times as the least tragic playwright. Modern philosophers considered him as the least tragic of the three playwrights: according to Schlegel and Nietzsche, he was a real

rolls, that is five plays alphabetically ordered; if the alphabetical list of Euripides' works is divided in successive groups of five plays, one finds that the nine alphabetical plays belonged entirely to two sequential groups (or cases), which also included *Hecuba*; the first Byzantine copyist may have got hold of two such cases, that is ten plays, but he had to exclude *Hecuba* from his copy, since *Hecuba* already belonged to the traditional choice; this explained why nine alphabetical plays were rescued instead of ten (Snell 1935, 119–120). In spite of Snell's strong and clever argument, Tuilier disputes the fact that the alphabetical plays would have come from a complete edition of Euripides; they may have been the fragmentary testimony of a late Antiquity edition whose purpose was to complete the initial choice (Tuilier 1968, 114–127). In any case one thing is certain: that edition contained a large array of plays by Euripides, which was bound to represent more faithfully the poet's production.

destroyer of tragedy – a strange judgment indeed, since Aristotle saw him as the “most tragic poet” (*tragikotatos ton poieton*) (the most efficient in writing tragedies). The main problem they found with Euripides was the fact that he wrote too many “happy” tragedies, that is tragedies with happy endings, and this did not conform to the idea of tragedy (or tragic) the philosophers conceived at the end of the 18th century – or, to be more precise, to the *ideas* of tragedy.

Two main conceptions had emerged indeed. One saw tragic as the confrontation between man and destiny. Schelling saw in Oedipus the best illustration of the metaphysical question of freedom: although Oedipus had committed his crimes in spite of himself, he chose to expiate those crimes that were actually committed by fate alone, and in so doing he affirmed the value of human freedom. That commentary by Schelling was the origin of all interpretations that see tragic as the confrontation between man and destiny, an idea that August Wilhelm Schlegel popularized throughout Europe with his *Lessons on Dramatic Literature*. Still now, if one asks a student of letters about tragedy, there are all chances that he will come out with this definition of tragic – without knowing that it comes actually from Schelling and not from ancient writers.

Hegel brought another interpretation, a dialectical conception of tragedy: according to him the tragic conflict *par excellence* is not between man and fate, but between two equivalent moral authorities. The model here was less *Oedipus the King* than *Antigone*: Creon embodied the *raison d'État* against Antigone, who spoke for family values and piety. However, for Hegel, such a tragic conflict is only an appearance: it is the sign of a transcendent harmony that cannot be achieved in our world. So Greek tragedies aimed to teach the absolute nature of the moral norm.

In both conceptions, Schelling's and Hegel's, the tragedy must end with the hero's death or his complete defeat, because this is the only solution to the antinomies of reason as revealed by Kant's philosophy. For Schelling and Hegel, Greek tragedies were to give an answer to the philosophical problems of the German idealism of the 18th century, and this excluded happy tragedies from the picture, and Euripides with them.

However, Aristotle mentioned those happy tragedies, and said that Euripides' “most tragic” (*tragikotatai*) plays (that is, according to him, the most efficient as tragedies, the closest to their own essence) were those “which ended with misfortune”. He even opposed explicitly those “who blamed Euripides” for giving an unhappy end to his tragedies, which means that there was in Athens at the time a debate on this question, and that maybe most people preferred

happy endings – as in Hollywood movies today. In the 17th century, the French playwright Corneille mentioned the possibility of the *tragédie heureuse* too, which Italians called *tragedia a lieto fine*.

In fact, in the 18 tragedies we have kept under Euripides' name, nine only have an unhappy ending, that is 50%, and without any doubt this relatively low proportion helped to relegate Euripides in the margins of the tragic reflection developed by philosophers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Aeschylus, there are 71% of unhappy endings (five out of seven); for Sophocles, 57% (four out of seven). But we have just seen that Euripides' relatively low rate of unhappy tragedies is actually a mere artefact of the manuscript tradition, which combined two radically different groups of plays: the first ones, arbitrarily selected by the grammarians of the 2nd century CE, end badly with a rate of 80%; but in the second ones, which were preserved in a totally random way, the rate falls to 12% only.

If you consider Euripides' fragments too, which came also to us in a random way, you come to the same result: when it is possible to extrapolate the endings of fragmentary tragedies by Euripides (it happens in about 30 cases), we find that only 30% of them approximately have an unhappy ending. It is a figure much closer to the picture given by the alphabetic plays than by the canonical plays. If you consider Sophocles' fragments too in the same way, you arrive to a similar result: around 50% of his tragedies had a happy ending. The calculation is more difficult to make with Aeschylus because he wrote "bound trilogies", that is tragedies that followed the same story in a trilogy, which means that the end of a single tragedy is not as significant.

5 Stoic Influence on the Tragic Canon

That leads us to the question: why was the canonic choice made by grammarians in the 2nd century CE so unfavourable to happy tragedies?

Clearly, by selecting plays with common characteristics, the ancient academic choice of tragedies worked like a Procrustean bed. This much is certain, in particular: in Euripides' case, the selected plays fit much more easily the modern concept of tragic than those that were left aside, and such a discrepancy may well help us to understand the origin and the reasons of the choice of the 3rd century CE.

We have seen already that the modern concept of tragic could be summarized very roughly as man's struggle against transcendence and his crushing by fate. But although the idea of destiny appeared already in Homer, it was

expressed in Greek thought and literature through a variety of words and concepts not quite synonymous with each other (*ananke*, *tukhe*, *moira*, *heimarmene*, *aisa*, *pepromene*, *potmos*, *khreon*, etc.) – until the 3rd century BCE.⁸ Then Stoicism was invented, and it is only with Stoicism that the concept of fate (*heimarmene*) began to play a central and structuring role in ancient thought and philosophy.

But significantly enough, the rise of Stoicism coincided with the canonization process of tragedies, which may have taken several centuries. The end of the process, when the canon was eventually stabilized, took place at the end of the 2nd century and the 3rd century CE, that is exactly at the peak of the Stoic influence in the Greco-Roman world, an influence that extended up to the head of State: Emperor Marcus Aurelius adopted Stoicism as his personal philosophy; the Stoic concepts became commonplace, and spread in all the philosophical schools, and in particular the ideas of fate and providence acquired much more meaning and importance than at the time of the three great tragedians.

It is well known that the Stoics liked to quote Oedipus' story to explain the power of fate, and Seneca's tragedies show an undisputable preference for unhappy and even disastrous endings:⁹ the choice that was eventually stabilized clearly reflected that preference for works and myths that could echo the philosophical concerns of the time. We can therefore formulate the hypothesis that the tragic conceptualization based in modern times on Sophocles' and Aeschylus' works was somehow prepared and facilitated by an academic choice that selected plays fitting more or less the contemporary vision of the world, which was at the time influenced by Stoicism, where fate and providence played some role. And it must also be noticed that the same Stoic influence can be found in the early theology of Christianity, which developed around that time.

Conversely, Euripides' alphabetical plays fit much less easily that conceptual framework of Stoicism or of early Christianity: they show that the field of tragedy was even more diverse, aesthetically and ideologically, than we would

⁸ Gundel 1914, 34–39.

⁹ See Cicero quoting Stoician Chrysippus (*De fato* XIII–30), and Alexander of Aphrodisias (*On Fate* 31). Chrysippus used to base his argumentation not only on Oedipus' story, but also on Euripides' tragedies, *Medea* and *Phoenician Women* (Gourinat 2005, 270–273). About Stoic influence in the Roman imperial period, see Pohlenz 1992, 354–366; Reale 1994, 73–148; Gill 2003, 33–58 (in particular, on the concept of fate in Latin poetry, 57–58). Pierre Thillet insists on the decisive role of Stoicism in the diffusion of the concepts of fate and providence (Thillet 1984, LXXXII–XC; Thillet 2003, 30–42).

think on the basis of the plays the grammarians preserved for us nearly two thousand years ago.¹⁰

...

Clearly enough, our modern conception of tragedy is dependent on the implicit ideological or esthetical bias which pervaded the long canonization process that culminated in the 2nd century CE. This later canonization was of a different order than the one that took place in the 4th century BCE. It was, of course, already dependent on the choice of the three great playwrights made in Athens in the 4th century, but its aim was less obviously political than pedagogical. We cannot relate it to any explicit decree, such as the one that was taken by Lycurgus in Athens. It is not even sure that the grammarians who made that choice were completely aware of the Stoician ideas that may have influenced them, so pervasive were those ideas at the time. The canonization of tragedies was dependent on a large process of cultural formation implying dramatic mutations in the vision of the world (*Weltanschauung*), in the conception of nature, Providence, and gods.

Something is sure however: a school choice was stabilized, and this choice propagated rather fast. This suggests at least two last hypotheses:

1. Cultural communication must have gone fast at the time of the greatest extension of the Roman empire, for this speed suited the need for homogenization at the scale of the Empire, at least in the Greek-speaking parts: one empire, one emperor, one culture (or two, for the empire was bilingual), and also, by way of consequence, only one set of Greek tragedies to study in most parts of the empire.
2. The stabilization of a specific set of tragedies was perhaps induced by the need for efficiency in education. Selecting tragedies helped to decrease the number of tragedies that were to be studied, and many reasons may have entailed such a restriction: either less time could be devoted to education, or education costs went higher, or more and poorer people had access to education, or all or some of those reasons together.

Homogenization, need for efficiency and for economy: one may hear in those terms a summary description of our current world, but they may also describe accurately the Roman empire at the end of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century. Here again Jan Assmann's proposal seem to fit quite well: "In times of acute polarisation inside cultures, in times of broken tradition where it must be decided which order one should follow, then comes the formation

¹⁰ Marx 2012, 47–83.

of canons.”¹¹ Restricting educational corpuses was, and is, a way to adapt to an economic crisis, although it might lead later to an educational crisis.

The tremendous success of this school canon of the 2nd century contributed to the preservation of our current corpus of Greek tragedies, and to the formation of the culture of Modern Europe, and for this we may thank those grammarians of the 2nd century. However, the very success of those tragedies contributed also to the progressive oblivion of the other tragedies (a process that had already been going on for a long time before), and eventually to their definitive disappearance. This is both a success and a failure those grammarians of the 2nd century surely never dreamt of achieving.

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¹¹ Assmann 1992, 125.

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Fixer une mémoire : observations méthodologiques, philologiques et historiques sur la clôture du canon de la Bible hébraïque

Hervé Gonzalez

In memoriam Philip R. Davies (1945–2018)



Cette contribution propose de faire un bref état des débats récents sur la canonisation de la Bible hébraïque tout en esquisant des perspectives pour de futures recherches. En particulier, la présentation de deux sources incontournables dans ce dossier, *Contre Apion* I (37-43) et 4 Esdras (14), fera ressortir l'intérêt d'une approche socio-institutionnelle pour comprendre la clôture du canon de la Bible hébraïque.

1 Une canonisation événementielle ? La théorie classique et son effritement progressif

La théorie classique qui s'est imposée dans la recherche biblique à partir de la fin du XIX^e s. pour comprendre la canonisation de la Bible hébraïque est relativement simple, centrée autour de trois moments qui correspondraient à la canonisation de chacun des trois grands ensembles composant la Bible hébraïque (BH) :

- La Torah, ou le Pentateuque (les cinq premiers livres : Genèse, Exode, Lévitique, Nombres, Deutéronome), associée à Moïse, aurait été canonisée dans le courant de l'époque perse, notamment par le prêtre-scribe Esdras venu de Babylone à Jérusalem pour y faire observer la Torah (vers -398 ?).
- Les Prophètes (*Nebi'im*), la deuxième grande partie de la Bible composée des quatre livres historiques (les Prophètes antérieurs : Josué, Juges, Samuel, Rois) et des quatre grandes collections prophétiques (les Prophètes postérieurs : Esaïe, Jérémie, Ézéchiel et les Douze petits prophètes), auraient

été canonisés au temple de Jérusalem entre la fin du III^e et le début du II^e s. av. n. è.

- Les Écrits (*Ketubim*), la dernière partie de la Bible juive composée de livres de genres littéraires variés – des livres poétiques (Psaumes, Lamentations, Cantique des cantiques), des livres de sagesse (Proverbes, Job, Qohéleth), des nouvelles centrées sur une héroïne (Ruth, Esther), un livre apocalyptique (Daniel), et des textes historiographiques (Esdras-Néhémie, Chroniques) – auraient été canonisés vers la fin du premier siècle de notre ère, à l'occasion d'une assemblée de rabbins souvent désignée comme le « concile de Yabné ».

Cette théorie, qui s'est formée à la suite des travaux de chercheurs comme H. Graetz (1871), G. Wildeboer (1895², 1^{ère} éd. 1889), F. Buhl (1892) et surtout H.E. Ryle (1899², 1^{ère} éd. 1892), a dominé la recherche du xx^e s. et elle reste encore influente aujourd'hui, même si les chercheurs en modifient souvent l'un ou l'autre aspect¹. Le succès de cette théorie est dû, au moins en partie, à sa simplicité, centrée autour de trois grands moments de canonisation, correspondant aux trois grandes parties du canon hébreu et pouvant être résumés par des dates arrondies : -450/400, -200 et 90/100. Ce modèle présuppose, un peu comme pour la Bible chrétienne dont la canonisation a été ratifiée lors de grands conciles ecclésiastiques², que la canonisation de la Bible hébraïque aurait fait intervenir à trois moments précis une autorité religieuse décidant du statut canonique d'un corpus littéraire. Cette procédure est certes attestée dans le monde chrétien, notamment avec les conciles de Laodicée (vers 360-363), à Rome (382), à Hippone (393) et à Carthage (397 puis 419), où des décisions officielles sont prises à des moments précis par des autorités ecclésiastiques pour ratifier une liste de livres saints³. Toutefois, les recherches sur la canonisation du Nouveau Testament ont montré que ces conciles ne sauraient résumer un processus certainement plus complexe, dans lequel la validation institutionnelle n'intervient en général que secondairement, en appui de croyances et pratiques qui se sont déjà popularisées⁴. En outre, s'agissant du

1 Voir p. ex. Barthélémy 1984 ; Cohen 2006, 175-179 ; De Pury 2009 ; Schmid 2019, 68-80 ; Römer 2019, 20-35.

2 Voir p. ex. en ce sens, notamment s'agissant du soi-disant « concile de Yabné », Lightstone 1979, 141-142 ; Aune 1991.

3 Ce processus de ratification officielle se poursuit d'ailleurs encore plus d'un millénaire plus tard avec les conciles de Florence (1441) et de Trente (1546), qui distinguent à l'intérieur de l'Ancien Testament des livres protocanoniques et des livres deutérocanoniques, tout en réaffirmant la sainteté et le statut canonique de ces livres ; voir p. ex. McDonald 2017 11, 312-317.

4 Voir p. ex. McDonald 2017, 11 313 (et plus largement p. 312-319) : « For the most part, however, the churches' Scriptures were *not* determined "from the top," but generally from broad agreement rooted in widespread use in churches. The councils did not so much create biblical

judaïsme ancien, une telle procédure conciliaire est nettement moins évidente que dans le christianisme ancien.

Il faut à ce titre observer que la théorie classique s'est progressivement effritée dans la deuxième moitié du ^{xx}e s, aboutissant à de nouveaux modèles parfois très différents, qui élargissent la fourchette des datations de la canonisation biblique, depuis l'époque perse (voire même avant), jusqu'aux premiers siècles de notre ère. Plusieurs chercheurs ont notamment apporté des nuances à cette théorie, en étant plus prudents sur l'idée d'une canonisation de la Torah sous Esdras, en déplaçant quelque peu dans le temps la canonisation des Prophètes, notamment à l'époque maccabéenne ou hasmonéenne, ou en repoussant la clôture définitive des Écrits, plutôt autour des ⁱⁱe et ⁱⁱⁱe s. n. è. D'autres, en revanche, l'ont plus considérablement corrigée, mais cela dans des sens contradictoires. Si certains, comme récemment T. Lim (2013), s'inscrivent dans le sillage de J. Barton (1986) qui a souligné la fluidité des collections, en particulier des Prophètes et des Écrits, jusqu'à la fin de l'époque du Second Temple voire même au-delà, d'autres comme P. Davies (1998) ou A. Van der Kooij (1998 ; 2003) ont poursuivi l'orientation défendue notamment par S. Leiman (1976) et R. Beckwith (1985), envisageant plutôt une canonisation (de l'essentiel) des dernières collections bibliques au ⁱⁱe s. av. n. è., sous les Maccabées ou les Hasmonéens. Enfin, d'autres encore, comme S. Dempster (1997 ; 2008), S.B. Chapman (2000) ou L. Zaman (2008), sous l'influence de la critique canonique, envisagent la canonisation de l'essentiel des collections bibliques en lien avec leur développement compositionnel, un processus qui aurait d'emblée pour but d'en faire des collections littéraires d'autorité, notamment dès l'époque perse, si ce n'est avant. À mon sens, l'état fragmenté du débat actuel confirme un point fondamental pour comprendre le processus de canonisation de la Bible hébraïque : *aucun évènement précis de canonisation n'est clairement attesté dans l'histoire du judaïsme ancien.*

Dès les années 60, la principale critique adressée à la théorie classique portait sur le soi-disant « concile » ou « synode » de Yavné, l'assemblée qui aurait décidé du statut canonique des Écrits. L'article de J.P. Lewis (1964) a montré qu'une telle décision conciliaire relève d'une construction historiographique des chercheurs, devenue ensuite dogmatique, mais qui surinterprète le peu de données dont nous disposons sur l'assemblée de Yavné⁵. Dès lors, les chercheurs considèrent ce « concile », à juste titre, comme un mythe académique

canons as they endorsed them ; their decisions reflected more the state of affairs at the time that they met ».

5 L'idée remonte en particulier à Graetz 1871, reprise notamment ensuite par Ryle 1899², (182-184) ; plus récemment voir p. ex. encore Barthélemy 1984, 25-36 ; De Pury 2009.

plutôt qu'une réalité historique⁶. L'abandon de ce mythe a laissé la place à des tendances contradictoires au sein de la recherche. L'une souligne que les débats rabbiniques sur la sacralité de certains livres (notamment Qohéleth, Cantique des cantiques, Esther ou Ruth) se sont poursuivies au moins jusqu'au II^e s. n. è., ce qui prouverait que les limites du canon juif étaient encore en discussion durant les tout premiers siècles de notre ère⁷; encore récemment, T. Lim (2013), en s'appuyant notamment sur l'analyse des sources rabbiniques par P. Alexander (2007), a récemment défendu la clôture du canon rabbinique entre 150 et 250 n. è., conclusion à laquelle est aussi parvenue la grande synthèse récente de L.M. McDonald (2017)⁸. Une autre tendance fait au contraire remonter la canonisation (ou une forme de pré-canonisation) des Écrits en amont, dès le II^e s. av. n. è., à l'époque maccabéenne, comme l'ont notamment défendu S. Leiman (1976) et R. Beckwith (1985), ou sous la dynastie hasmonéenne, ainsi que l'ont notamment soutenu P. Davies (1998) et A. van der Kooij (1998; 2003)⁹. Selon cette deuxième tendance, les discussions rabbiniques plus tardives n'auraient qu'une portée limitée¹⁰, voire ne concerneraient pas la délimitation du canon mais plutôt la sacralité rituelle qui serait à attribuer aux différents livres déjà canoniques ou leur statut de livres inspirés¹¹. Certains chercheurs, se situent entre ces deux tendances; ainsi, A. de Pury envisage que la collection des *Ketubim* a pu être déjà agencée au milieu du II^e s. av. n. è., par une école (proto-)pharisienne, même si ce ne serait qu'après la chute du Second Temple que le canon juif aurait été pleinement accepté par les divers groupes juifs¹².

En ce qui concerne la supposée canonisation des Prophètes vers -200 dont parlent encore beaucoup les chercheurs, il faut souligner qu'il s'agit d'un évènement hypothétique pour lequel nous n'avons aucune attestation explicite.

6 Schäfer 1975; Lightstone 1979, 141-142; Beckwith 1985, 4-7; Aune 1991; Davies 1998, 169-170; Stemmerger 1988; 2004, 114-115; Lewis 2002; Lim 2013, 22-25; McDonald 2017 I, 374-378; Schmid 2019, 74; Leiman 1976, 120-124, garde l'idée d'un concile de Yavné mais il amoindrit son importance en mettant en question son caractère supposément décisif.

7 Lightstone 1979; Sanders 1987, 17; 2002, 258-259; Rüger 1988; Ulrich 2000 et 2003; Alexander 2007.

8 Voir notamment, Lim 2013, 35-53 et 180; McDonald 2017 I, 378-485.

9 Voir notamment Leiman 1976, 129-132; Beckwith 1985, 138-166; Davies 1998, 177-182. Voir aussi plus récemment dans cette direction Steinberg et Stone 2015. Notons que pour Ryle 1899, 184-199, même si le canon biblique a *officiellement* été clôturé vers 100 n. è., celui-ci était déjà accepté *en pratique* depuis la toute fin du II^e s. av. n. è.

10 Voir notamment Beckwith 1985, 278-323; Davies 1998, 170-171.

11 Voir notamment Leiman 1976, 51-120 (sp. 102-120) et 132-135; cf. Davies 1998, 172-173; Stemmerger 2004.

12 De Pury 2009, 23-27, qui continue de donner de l'importance à « l'époque de Yabneh ». Voir aussi, similairement, Lang 1998, qui parle d'un canon littéraire de l'époque hellénistique devenant sacré à l'époque romaine (p. 63).

En plus de faire appel à des observations internes à la collection¹³, l'hypothèse se fonde notamment sur le fait qu'au début du II^e s. av. n. è., Ben Sira semble bien disposer et user d'une collection de livres prophétiques à laquelle il attribue une autorité particulière¹⁴. C'est en particulier ce qu'indique l'« Éloge des Pères », aux ch. 44-50, qui renvoie notamment aux grandes figures de la Torah, des Prophètes antérieurs et des Prophètes postérieurs ; et environ un demi-siècle plus tard, son petit-fils, qui traduit le livre de son grand-père en grec, insiste dans le prologue de sa traduction sur l'importance d'une collection littéraire désignée « Prophètes ». Malgré cela, il faut aussi souligner qu'aucun événement de canonisation n'est clairement attesté à cette période. C'est d'ailleurs la raison pour laquelle, alors que beaucoup de chercheurs, comme O.H. Steck, datent cet événement aux alentours de 200 av. n. è.¹⁵, d'autres peuvent l'envisager de manière différente, notamment quelques décennies plus tôt, dans le courant du III^e s. av. n. è.¹⁶, ou alors un peu plus tard, à l'époque macabéenne ou hasmonéenne¹⁷, parfois en lien avec une canonisation de tout ou partie des Écrits.

Pour R. Beckwith, par exemple, la canonisation des Prophètes et des Écrits aurait pris place simultanément à l'époque macabéenne, lorsque les contours des deux collections auraient été délimités, possiblement par Judas Maccabée lui-même¹⁸. Néanmoins, de nombreux chercheurs remettent en question l'idée d'une collection des Prophètes qui serait distincte d'une collection des Écrits à l'époque du Second Temple¹⁹. C'est notamment le mérite de l'étude de Barton (1986), développant des perspectives déjà esquissées par N. Schmidt (1902) et J. Barr (1983)²⁰, que d'avoir souligné que le concept de « Prophètes » (נְבִיאִים) pouvait être employé de manière variable, plus ou moins large, jusqu'à la fin de l'époque du Second Temple et même au-delà (voir par exemple Josèphe, *C. Ap.* 1 38), pouvant inclure une variété de livres dont certains, au premier rang desquels Daniel, figurent aujourd'hui dans la collection des Écrits²¹. Ainsi,

13 La finale de Malachie (3,22-24) occupe une place importante dans cette discussion ; voir ci-dessous les références à la note 48.

14 Voir notamment Steck 1991, 127-144, qui souligne tout de même que la pleine acceptation de la collection des Prophètes aux côtés de la Torah a pris place selon un processus qui s'est poursuivi après le II^e s. av. n. è. et a culminé au I^{er} s. n. è. (*ibid.*, 175-178).

15 Steck (*ibid.*) ; voir p. ex aussi Schmid 2019, 77-79.

16 Voir notamment van der Toorn 2007, 252-261, qui parle prudemment de la clôture de l'ère canonique plutôt que du canon.

17 Voir p. ex. Römer 2019, 31-34, suivant notamment van der Kooij 1998.

18 Beckwith 1985, 138-166.

19 Voir p. ex. Carr 1996, 40-46 ; Davies 1998, 107 ; Lim 2013, 18 ; Schmid 2019, 75-76.

20 Notamment Barr 1983, 52-64. Chapman 2000, 34-36, mentionne aussi que la thèse non publiée de T.N. Swanson (1970) présente des observations en ce sens.

21 Barton 1986, 35-44 ; cf. p. ex. van der Toorn 2007, 260 ; voir aussi à ce propos Trebolle Barrera 2002, 128-145.

pour Barton, la seule collection biblique qui était close vers la fin de l'époque du Second Temple était la Torah ; la collection des Prophètes, elle, demeurait toujours fluide et ouverte, indistincte de celle des Écrits, et ce encore durant les premiers siècles de notre ère²². Malgré cette remise en question relativement radicale de la date traditionnelle de la canonisation des Prophètes, beaucoup de chercheurs continuent de défendre une canonisation de cette collection vers le II^e s. av. n. è. Ceci dit, Barton a mis le doigt sur un problème épineux qui est celui de l'étendue de la collection des Prophètes à l'époque du Second Temple. Ainsi, paradoxalement, même si Barton n'envisageait pas une canonisation des Prophètes avant la fin de l'époque du Second Temple, l'idée que la collection des Prophètes pouvait être plus large et inclusive que ce n'est le cas aujourd'hui et qu'il n'existait pas de véritable distinction entre les Prophètes et les Écrits à l'époque du Second Temple a poussé d'autres chercheurs à envisager que certains livres des Écrits ont pu être canonisés déjà avec les livres prophétiques autour du II^e s. av. n. è., voire même avant²³.

Qu'en est-il de la canonisation de la Torah par Esdras vers -400 ? Beaucoup de chercheurs restent attachés à cette partie de la théorie classique, se fondant pour cela sur le livre d'Esdras qui décrit comment celui-ci aurait fait connaître et observer la Torah apportée de Babylone à Jérusalem avec l'aval de l'empire perse, ce que souligne explicitement le décret d'Artaxerxès présenté en Esd 7²⁴. Le chapitre 8 du livre de Néhémie décrit aussi la lecture publique de la Torah par Esdras à Jérusalem, ce qui a pu être interprété comme une forme de « canonisation » du texte. Ainsi, déjà chez Ryle, c'est cette promulgation publique de la Loi par le scribe Esdras (Loi qui correspondrait à quelques détails près au Pentateuque tel que nous le connaissons) et son acceptation par la population locale qui représentent un événement décisif et fondateur dans le judaïsme, au cours duquel la Torah est devenue un texte sacré faisant dès lors autorité²⁵.

Plus récemment, cette idée a d'ailleurs été rendue plausible par une autre hypothèse qui a connu un certain succès dans les décennies récentes, celle de l'autorisation impériale perse. L'empire perse, ne disposant pas d'un système de loi centralisé, aurait validé l'utilisation de codes de lois locaux, dont la Torah, pour maintenir l'ordre dans les provinces²⁶. Toutefois, cette dernière

22 Barton 1986, 44-95.

23 P. ex. Davies 1998, sp. 177-182 ; van der Kooij 1998 ; 2003 ; voir aussi, un peu différemment, van der Toorn 2007, 252-262, qui associe la « publication » des Prophètes, qu'il situe au III^e s. av. n. è., notamment à celle des Psaumes et des Proverbes.

24 Voir p. ex. récemment Toorn 2007, 248-251 ; Lim 2013, 54-62.

25 Ryle 1899, 75-94.

26 Frei 1995 ; Schmid 2007 et 2019, 76-77 ; Lee 2011 ; Lim 2013, 59-62.

hypothèse a aussi fortement été remise en question²⁷. Peut-être certaines politiques et développements légaux dans l'empire perse ont-ils pu influencer les scribes judéens composant la Torah, mais toute intervention impériale directe en faveur de la Torah est douteuse. Si la relative autonomie des provinces sous l'empire perse a pu favoriser des développements légaux locaux, l'accréditation impériale d'un texte spécifique semble peu probable, d'autant plus lorsque ce texte n'est pas uniquement légal mais aussi mythologique, décrivant les origines d'une petite communauté de l'empire dans une perspective « nationaliste », qui plus est dans une langue qui n'est pas celle de l'administration impériale. À cela se rajoutent les problèmes historiques et littéraires que pose le décret d'Artaxerxès en Esd 7²⁸, des problèmes qui orientent vers une datation hellénistique, comme l'a notamment soutenu S. Grätz²⁹, et qui font que même des chercheurs, comme récemment T. Lim, qui voudraient y voir une source historique, doivent postuler que le document transmis dans Esdras a subi des révisions non négligeables³⁰. Plus largement, la complexité de l'histoire compositionnelle du livre d'Esdras, qui s'étend probablement jusqu'au II^e s. av. n. è. comme l'a par exemple défendu J. Pakkala³¹, devraient encourager les chercheurs à davantage de prudence dans l'utilisation de ce livre comme source historique sur l'époque perse.

En outre, le chapitre 8 du livre de Néhémie apparaît comme un ajout tardif, visant à relier de manière secondaire les traditions d'Esdras et de Néhémie³². Là encore, même s'il cherche à s'appuyer sur ce texte pour évoquer la période perse, Lim admet que Né 8 parle davantage de l'époque hellénistique que du v^e s. av. n. è.³³ ; et il insiste en outre sur le fait que Né 8-10 semble plutôt renvoyer à une « Torah » hexateuquale (incluant le livre de Josué) que pentateuquale. Soulignons surtout qu'il est frappant qu'au début du II^e s. av. n. è., le

27 Voir notamment le débat dans les différentes contributions dans l'ouvrage collectif Watts 2011 ; voir p. ex. les remarques synthétiques de Römer 2019, 25-28.

28 Voir p. ex. Janzen 2000 ; cf. Lim 2013, 54, avec références.

29 Grätz 2004.

30 Lim 2013, 54-62, qui postule une édition du texte selon une perspective théologique sacerdotale ; voir p. ex. aussi la prudence de Schmid 2019, 77.

31 Pakkala 2004. Voir p. ex. aussi les remarques de Carr 2011, 168-169, ou encore Honigman 2019.

32 Voir notamment l'analyse littéraire de Wright 2004, 317-340, qui soutient que Né 8-10 est la section la plus tardive en Esdras-Néhémie. L'indépendance originelle de la tradition d'Esdras par rapport à celle de Néhémie est attestée par une version grecque du livre d'Esdras, Esdras α, non liée à Néhémie.

33 Lim 2013, 62-73 (p. 69 : « As such, it tells us more about the community of the editor, thought to belong to the priestly circles and dating to around 300 BCE, than the returnees from exile in the fifth century »).

scribe Ben Sira, fortement attaché à la Torah et au culte de Jérusalem, retrace un panorama des grandes figures ayant marqué le passé d'Israël (l'« Éloge des pères », Ben Sira 44-49) en mentionnant Néhémie (49,13) mais en ignorant Esdras. Peut-être les traditions d'Esdras existaient-elles déjà au début du 11^e s. av. n. è, mais le moins que l'on puisse dire est qu'elles n'étaient pas centrales ou largement acceptées. Même un scribe fortement attaché à la Torah et aux traditions du temple de Jérusalem semble ignorer cette figure, ou en tout cas ne la considère pas comme ayant marqué le passé d'Israël de manière suffisante, alors même qu'on aurait attendu l'inverse de la part de Ben Sira. Il aurait pu s'identifier au scribe Esdras et s'étendre largement sur son action pour souligner combien il est important de faire connaître et observer la Torah, ce que Ben Sira cherche aussi à faire (voir p. ex. ch. 24). Une observation similaire peut aussi être faite au sujet du deuxième livre des Maccabées, un peu plus tardif, puisqu'il date de la deuxième moitié du 11^e s. av. n. è. Le livre souligne non seulement l'importance de la Torah, mais aussi le rôle de Néhémie dans la restauration du culte et des livres anciens (2 M 1,18-2,18). Dans ce contexte, surtout si les traditions d'Esdras et de Néhémie étaient déjà associées, on pourrait s'attendre à une référence à Esdras en tant que champion des traditions anciennes, et notamment de la Torah ; or il n'en est rien. D'ailleurs, un regard sur les manuscrits de la communauté de Qoumrân confirme la marginalité des traditions liées à Esdras encore au 11^e s. av. n. è., voire au-delà : parmi les 900 (environ) manuscrits retrouvés, et malgré toute l'importance que la communauté attribuait à la Torah, seul un manuscrit du livre d'Esdras a été retrouvé (contre, par exemple, une douzaine de manuscrits liés aux traditions d'Hénoch, des traditions qui, pourtant, ont finalement été exclues du canon juif)³⁴. Ces observations montrent qu'il est douteux de postuler une canonisation de la Torah autour de -400 av. n. è. sur la base du livre d'Esdras. Même si le livre reflétait un quelconque évènement historique, non seulement un tel évènement resterait à définir mais aussi, et surtout, le supposé évènement n'aurait en tout cas pas marqué la mémoire collective judéenne avant le 11^e s. av. n. è. Plutôt qu'un témoignage de la canonisation de la Torah à l'époque perse, le livre d'Esdras semble davantage être le reflet de l'importance grandissante de la Torah comme texte de référence dans le courant du 11^e s. av. n. è., bien attestée par les sources de cette période. À cette époque tardive (hellénistique), l'attribution de la Torah à Esdras permettait d'insister sur la Torah comme un document qui aurait été central pour la communauté judéenne dès l'époque perse. Tout au

34 Les rapprochements que fait C. Hempel 2020, sp. 302-305, entre les traditions sur Esdras et d'autres traditions des rouleaux de la mer Morte, notamment légales, ne rendent la quasi absence d'Esdras à Qoumrân que plus significative.

plus le livre d'Esdras préserve-t-il la mémoire de la composition de l'essentiel de la Torah à l'époque perse, mais le récit est probablement en bonne partie fictif. Il correspond avant tout à une construction idéalisée de l'histoire des Judéens au sein de l'empire perse, insistant sur le fait que les rois achéménides auraient accordé de l'importance à leur texte sacré. Ce passé idéalisé prend beaucoup d'importance au II^e s. av. n. è, puisqu'il permet d'opposer au pouvoir séleucide, qui ne respecte pas les traditions des Judéens, un modèle de royauté incarné par les Perses qui, eux, auraient ratifié leurs traditions.

Avec la fragilité de l'hypothèse d'une canonisation de la Torah sous Esdras³⁵, plusieurs chercheurs ont tout bonnement remis en question l'idée d'une canonisation de la Torah précédant celle(s) des autres collections bibliques, envisageant plutôt que celle-ci ait pris forme et ait acquis de l'autorité de manière plus ou moins parallèle à la collection prophétique, notamment à l'époque du Second Temple. Cette critique du modèle de canonisation tripartite avait déjà été initiée auparavant, notamment par W.J. Beecher (1896), G. Hölscher (1905), puis par R.E. Clements (1965 ; 1975) et Lebram (1968), poursuivie notamment par B.S. Childs (1979)³⁶ et défendue plus récemment par S.B. Chapman (2000)³⁷. Ce dernier qui insiste sur la composition plus ou moins concomitante de la Loi et des Prophètes ainsi que sur leurs influences mutuelles, défend que la Torah ne bénéficiait pas d'une priorité ou d'une plus grande autorité que les Prophètes à l'époque du Second Temple³⁸. Dès lors, si certains auteurs, en s'appuyant notamment sur le témoignage de Ben Sira, parlent plutôt d'une canonisation de la Loi et des Prophètes vers le II^e s. av. n. è.³⁹, d'autres, comme Chapman, envisagent que les deux collections ont été canonisées bien avant, en lien avec leur composition entre le VI^e et le IV^e s. av. n. è.⁴⁰.

35 Voir p. ex. Barr 1983, 51 : « The Torah was never 'canonized'. No process of listing, or of choosing as against competing books, or of excluding others, was involved ».

36 Childs 1979, 53-55, 64-65 (p. 53 : « One cannot assume that one canonical section was tightly closed before another was formed because of the lack of solid evidence from which to draw such a conclusion »).

37 Voir la présentation des positions de ces auteurs par Chapman 2000, 9-13, 24-31 et 44-53. Voir p. ex. aussi Seitz 2009, sp. 26, 109 et 129, qui s'inscrit dans cette lignée.

38 Chapman 2000, 250, 284-286 ; voir aussi sur les liens entre les deux collections, Davies 1998, 109-112, 115.

39 Voir notamment Childs 1979, 63-65, même s'il considère que le processus canonique commence déjà au VII^e s. av. n. è.

40 Chapman 2000, 284-286.

2 Canonisation ou fin de composition ?

Au-delà d'une remise en question de certaines dates précises ou même de l'existence de certains événements de canonisation dans le judaïsme ancien, il semble que ce soit la conception même de la canonisation qui a évolué depuis l'époque de Ryle et qui continue de varier encore aujourd'hui en fonction des chercheurs.

Pour bâtir son modèle, Ryle présupposait que la canonisation des textes était un phénomène séparé de celui de la composition des textes, venant s'y ajouter secondairement : « The literature must first arise, before the process of selection begins that leads to the formation of a Sacred Collection [...] *the beginnings of the Hebrew Canon are not to be confounded with beginnings of the Hebrew Literature* »⁴¹. Selon lui, la construction littéraire des textes et leur intégration à un canon correspondent à deux phénomènes distincts : « the one, by which the Books reached their present literary form by composition and compilation ; the other, by which they were separated from all other writings as the sacred and authoritative expression of the Word of God »⁴².

Cette conception de la canonisation de la Bible hébraïque est devenue de plus en plus problématique dans la recherche récente, notamment au vu des dates de plus en plus tardives avancées pour la finalisation des grandes collections bibliques. S'agissant de la Torah, l'idée d'une canonisation vers -400 (ou 450, pour Ryle et bien d'autres) était plus facilement envisageable dans le cadre de la théorie documentaire qui régnait dans le courant du ^{xx}e s. pour expliquer la formation de la Torah. Selon cette théorie documentaire, la dernière source de la Torah, la source sacerdotale (P), aurait été composée à l'époque exilique ou au début de l'époque perse (vers la fin du ^{vi}e s. av. n. è) et la Torah dans son ensemble aurait ensuite été finalisée peu après. De la sorte, Ryle pouvait envisager un certain laps de temps entre la composition de la Torah et sa canonisation. Or, ce scénario a depuis largement été remis en cause, notamment en Europe, de nombreux chercheurs ayant plutôt souligné l'importance du travail rédactionnel qui a suivi l'addition du document sacerdotal dans un ensemble littéraire plus large. La composition de la Torah implique certes la réunion de certaines sources, notamment deutéronomiste et sacerdotale, mais

⁴¹ Ryle 1899, 15 et 16.

⁴² Ibid., 17. Ryle distinguait plus spécifiquement trois phases différentes : « These are firstly, the 'elemental' stage, or that of the formation of the literary antecedents of the Books of the Old Testament : secondly, the 'medial' stage, or that of their compilation and redaction to their present literary form : thirdly, the 'final,' or that of their selection for the position of honour and sanctity in the Canon of Holy Scripture. The distinction between these three phases is essential » (*ibid.*, 17).

cette mise en commun s'accompagne d'un long et complexe processus rédactionnel, incluant de nombreuses additions et révisions littéraires (notamment post-deutéronomistes et post-sacerdotales), qui prend place tout au long de l'époque perse, voire même au-delà⁴³. Les manuscrits de Qoumrân attestent d'ailleurs d'une fluidité non négligeable des livres de la Torah à l'époque hellénistique et jusqu'à la fin de l'époque du Second Temple, ce qui suggère que le texte de la Torah a pu encore être modifié après l'époque perse⁴⁴. On comprend dès lors que certains chercheurs qui retiennent l'hypothèse de l'autorisation impériale perse restent tout de même prudents sur la soi-disant canonisation de la Torah sous Esdras, préférant parler de la « formation » de la Torah à l'époque perse plus que de sa « canonisation »⁴⁵. Néanmoins, une autre tendance, rencontrant en cela l'appui des travaux continuant l'approche canonique, est d'associer plus spécifiquement les dernières étapes compositionnelles de la Torah avec sa canonisation. C'est ainsi par exemple qu'Alexander Fantalkin et Oren Tal envisagent la composition de l'essentiel de la Torah d'emblée dans le but d'être canonisée autour de -398⁴⁶. Conscients que le texte a probablement encore subi des modifications après cela, ils utilisent le terme de canonisation plutôt dans le sens d'une « proto-canonisation » n'excluant pas des révisions ultérieures du texte.

Cette tendance est peut-être encore plus visible s'agissant des Prophètes, dont la composition s'étend vraisemblablement jusqu'à l'époque hellénistique⁴⁷. Les chercheurs sont en général d'accord pour penser que certains des passages les plus tardifs des livres prophétiques ont été ajoutés dans le but de structurer et consolider une large collection d'écrits prophétiques. Le cas le plus évident est celui de Ml 3,22-24 qui conclut les Douze voire plus largement l'ensemble du corpus prophétique, en soulignant l'importance de l'obéissance à la Loi et l'attente du retour d'un prophète (Élie), comme beaucoup l'ont observé⁴⁸. Le

43 Voir un état de la discussion récente sur la formation du Pentateuque dans les différentes contributions au volume Gertz *et al.* 2016 ; voir p. ex. aussi les synthèses de Nihan et Römer 2009 ; Nihan 2010 ; Römer 2019, 51-81.

44 Sur la fluidité textuelle de la Torah à l'époque du Second Temple, voir p. ex. Lange 2010, ou la présentation des manuscrits anciens dans Lange et Tov, 2017, 3-246.

45 Voir p. ex. Schmid 2019, 76-77 ; Römer 2019, 31 : « La compilation de la Torah durant l'époque perse ne signifie pas pour autant que le texte soit désormais intouchable ; il est possible d'imaginer des ajouts et des révisions jusqu'au début de l'époque hellénistique, comme le montrent les variantes qui sont attestées pour les livres du Pentateuque à Qoumrân, au II^e siècle avant l'ère chrétienne ».

46 Voir p. ex. Fantalkin et Tal 2012, 3-4.

47 Ce point fait l'objet de débats ; voir, avec les références, Gonzalez 2021.

48 Voir notamment Blenkinsopp 120-123 ; Steck 1991, 128-134 ; Dempster 1997, 198-200 ; Chapman 2000, 131-149 ; Schmid 2012, 127-142 ; *idem* 2019, 78-79 ; Römer 2019, 32-33.

caractère relativement tardif de ce texte pousse bon nombre de chercheurs à le dater à l'époque hellénistique, vers la fin du III^e s. voire le début du II^e s., un contexte qui correspond plus ou moins à celui de la supposée canonisation des Prophètes, dont le livre de Ben Sira attesterait. Dès lors, beaucoup considèrent, notamment à la suite de Steck, que les derniers ajouts faits au corpus prophétique, et notamment Ml 3,22-24, ont été introduits dans le but de canoniser cette collection⁴⁹. Selon cette perspective, ce serait en définitive la volonté de canoniser le texte qui aurait conduit à sa finalisation, en vue de sa promulgation officielle. Notons brièvement que ce type de considération peut aussi être faite pour certains livres des Écrits, notamment par des chercheurs qui font remonter leur canonisation déjà au II^e s. av. n. è. (plutôt qu'après la chute du Second Temple). En particulier, étant donné que, pour la plupart des biblistes, la composition de livres comme les Psaumes ou encore les Proverbes ne s'achève pas avant l'époque hellénistique, les chercheurs qui envisagent une canonisation de ces livres autour du II^e s. peuvent penser que ces livres ont été finalisés dans la perspective de leur canonisation ou publication officielle⁵⁰.

Dans l'ensemble, il apparaît que les dates de plus en plus tardives proposées dans la recherche pour la composition des derniers textes de la Torah et des Prophètes a facilité un changement de conception d'une canonisation non pas distincte mais plutôt liée à la fin de la composition des textes. Ce changement de conception a notamment été théorisé par le courant de la « critique canonique », qui s'est développée dans la recherche biblique au cours de la deuxième moitié du XX^e s. et semble avoir eu un impact significatif en ce sens. L'objectif de cette approche était de rendre compte non seulement de la nature et de la fonction du canon biblique dans son ensemble mais aussi du processus par lequel celui-ci s'est constitué en tant que canon⁵¹. Même si les premiers tenants de cette approche, tels que J.A. Sanders ou B.S. Childs, restaient plus ou moins dans la continuité de la théorie classique de la canonisation en trois étapes⁵², leurs réflexions sur la fonction de la Torah et des Prophètes au moment de leur composition mettaient l'accent sur l'autorité des textes avant leur canonisation, jetant ainsi un nouvel éclairage sur les raisons de leur canonisation ultérieure. L'approche canonique a ainsi impulsé dans la

49 Steck 1991, 127-166 ; voir p. ex. aussi, de manière plus nuancée, van der Toorn 2007, 252-262 ; Schmid 2012, 139-142 ; 2019, 79.

50 Voir p. ex. comment van der Toorn 2007, 257-261, parle des dernières rédactions des Psaumes et des Proverbes (en lien avec celles des Prophètes) comme ayant pour but la publication officielle d'une bibliothèque nationale dans le courant du III^e s. av. n. è.

51 Voir p. ex. Sanders 1984 et 1987.

52 Sanders (1972, 94) considère néanmoins que les Prophètes et les Écrits auraient été canonisés au cours du II^e s. av. n. è. ; cf. Chapman 2000, 36-40.

recherche l'idée d'une composition des textes, ou en tout cas leur finalisation, comme faisant déjà partie d'un processus d'acquisition d'autorité, préliminaire indispensable à leur canonisation plus formelle. Elle a poussé à développer une conception plus large du processus canonique ainsi qu'une définition plus ouverte du canon, qui ont été relayées par une grande partie des travaux de la fin du xx^e s. Pour Sanders, en particulier, « By canon we mean here not a story or tradition, which had been stabilized and set for all time ; that is only a secondary and late characteristic of canon. Rather we mean the seat or reference authority ».

Dès lors, et même si cela n'était pas forcément de la volonté des premiers défenseurs de la critique canonique, la (fin de la) composition des textes ou des collections littéraires, impliquant de leur attribuer une certaine autorité, en est venue à être synonyme de canonisation. Notamment vers la fin du xx^e s., plusieurs travaux ont en effet tâché de montrer comment les dernières phases compositionnelles des grandes collections bibliques (ou les dernières rédactions) ont pu faire partie du processus de canonisation, voire être liées à de possibles événements de canonisation, en ce sens qu'elles participeraient à la création et à la structuration d'un canon⁵³. Par exemple, Chapman envisage la canonisation de la Torah et des Prophètes comme un processus d'époque perse (voire même dès le milieu du vi^e s.), au cours duquel le développement compositionnel de ces collections selon un même grand cadre littéraire et conceptuel, notamment théologique, leur a permis d'acquérir une autorité canonique⁵⁴ ; il parle ainsi de « canon-conscious redactions »⁵⁵. De façon similaire, S. Dempster évoque par exemple aussi un processus de « redaction of a canon at the end of the biblical period », processus canonique qui aurait déjà abouti à l'époque maccabéenne⁵⁶. Selon ces études, qui se fondent essentiellement sur le contenu interne des collections littéraires, fin de composition, voire composition progressive, d'une collection littéraire et sa canonisation seraient en quelque sorte les deux faces d'une même pièce.

Ce qui est frappant dans cette approche est la haute date à laquelle sont situées les premières « canonisations » de la Bible hébraïque. On arrive ainsi à une situation où, pour une même collection donnée, les chercheurs qui

53 Des passages charnières entre les collections, comme Dt 34 (notamment 10-11), Jos 1 (notamment v. 7-8), Mt 3,22-24 ou Ps 1 ont à ce titre reçu une attention particulière. Voir p. ex. de manière générale Blenkinsopp 1977 ; Sheppard 1980 ; Dempster 1997 ; Chapman 2000, sp. 111-149 ; ou encore voir p. ex. aussi H. Koorevaar 1997 ; 2015, qui envisage les Chroniques comme conclusion volontaire du canon.

54 Chapman 2000, sp. 283-287.

55 *Ibid.*, 106.

56 Dempster 1997, 218.

viennent d'être mentionnés considèrent que la canonisation a pu commencer dès le VI^e s. av. n. è.⁵⁷ alors que d'autres, présentés plus haut (comme Barton par exemple) ne parlent de canonisation qu'au cours des premiers siècles de notre ère. On voit bien ici comment l'affaiblissement du modèle classique, tripartite, de la canonisation de la BH s'est accompagné de l'émergence de nouveaux modèles à priori complètement opposés. Néanmoins, malgré des énoncés qui apparaissent contradictoires, il faut bien noter que le problème ne se situe pas tant au niveau de la reconstruction de l'histoire littéraire de l'Israël et du judaïsme anciens (même si cela peut aussi en faire partie) qu'au niveau de la définition du terme « canonisation », qui varie en fonction des chercheurs, rendant difficile de se repérer véritablement dans les débats.

3 Quelle définition ? Le canon comme liste close de livres saints

Nombreux sont les chercheurs qui ont aussi insisté sur le fait que le problème fondamental réside dans la définition du terme « canon » ou de « canonisation »⁵⁸. En fonction d'une définition plus ou moins ouverte du terme « canon », les chercheurs envisagent son existence plus ou moins tôt dans l'histoire du judaïsme ancien⁵⁹. Il faut ici rappeler qu'en ce qui concerne la Bible, le sens qui s'est imposé dans la tradition chrétienne, notamment à la suite de son utilisation par Athanase au IV^e s. n. è. dans sa *Lettre festale* 39 (datée de 367, qui parle des livres « canonisés », *kanonizomena*), est celui d'une *liste close de livres saints*, divinement inspirés et normatifs notamment en matière de foi⁶⁰.

57 C'est par exemple le cas d'un premier canon (*core-canon*) deutéronomiste dès le VI^e s. av. n. è., dont Chapman 2000, sp. 283-287, retrace l'évolution au fur et à mesure de l'addition de nouveaux textes, résultant en un canon bipartite, la Loi et les Prophètes, dans le courant de l'époque perse ; cf. Collins 1995, 232. D'une certaine manière, l'approche de L. Zaman (2008), qui retrace les grandes lignes d'un « processus canonique » dans la composition de l'Ennéateuque (Genèse-2 Rois) comme collection deutéronomiste au cours de la première moitié du I^{er} millénaire av. n. è. (un processus catalysé par l'exil), n'est pas fondamentalement différente, même s'il parle plutôt de période pré-canonique (*ibid.*, 42) et se refuse à parler de canon avant la fin de ce millénaire (*ibid.*, 24-41).

58 Voir déjà J.G. Eichhorn 1820-1824, I 106, qui regrettait l'usage du terme de « canon. » Plus récemment, voir p. ex. Barton 1976, 32-33 (voir aussi la note suivante 59) ; Childs 1979, 51 : « In sum, much of the present confusion over the problem of the canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology » ; McDonald et Sanders 2002, 4, 8-15 ; Ulrich 2003, 57-60 ; 2015, 265-279 ; van der Kooij 2003, 28-29.

59 Voir p. ex. Barton 1976, 32-33, qui souligne que les positions de Sundberg et Leiman sont divergentes surtout par l'usage différent qu'ils font du terme de canon.

60 Voir notamment Ulrich 2003, 58-59 et 78-79 ; 2015, 269-273, avec une liste de définitions issues de dictionnaires variés ; cf., p. ex., Barr 1983, 49.

Dans l'ensemble, les chercheurs reconnaissent que l'idée d'une liste close de livres saints n'est formellement attestée dans le judaïsme qu'à partir de la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., ainsi qu'on le verra, notamment par Flavius Josèphe (*Contre Apion* 1 38), 4 Esdras 14 ou par la baraïta en *b. Baba Bathra* 14b-15a⁶¹. Néanmoins, ainsi que l'a largement souligné le courant de la critique canonique, comprendre l'émergence du canon hébreu nécessite de ne pas s'intéresser uniquement aux événements du 1^{er} s. n. è., lorsque de telles listes sont clairement attestées, mais aussi à l'époque antérieure, celle du Second Temple, lorsque les livres qui seront ensuite mentionnés dans ces listes acquièrent l'autorité qui leur permettra d'y figurer⁶².

Suivant cette direction, beaucoup de chercheurs ont travaillé avec d'autres définitions du terme, moins formelles et qui font davantage valoir le processus que le produit fini. Mentionnons par exemple van der Kooij, qui parle d'un canon à l'époque hasmonéenne comme d'une collection de livres jouissant d'une grande autorité, mais sans que cette collection soit fermée ou fixée⁶³. van der Toorn, lui, parle d'une clôture non pas du canon mais de la période canonique, c'est-à-dire du temps de la révélation, qui prendrait fin à l'époque perse ; cette idée aurait été inventé au III^e s. av. n. è. pour donner de l'autorité uniquement aux livres perçus comme anciens, sans que cette collection soit véritablement délimitée⁶⁴. Davies tout particulièrement a largement souligné le processus canonique, insistant sur le fait que la compréhension du canon ne peut s'arrêter à l'idée d'une liste close de livres saints. Pour lui, le processus de canonisation ne résulte d'ailleurs pas nécessairement dans la délimitation d'une liste d'œuvres ; il serait en réalité intrinsèque à la culture scribale, où l'on collecte, copie, archive, sélectionne et organise les traditions littéraires : « copying and archiving are the very stuff of canonizing. A work does not become canonized by being included in a formal list : that is a final flourish »⁶⁵.

61 Voir p. ex. Talmon 1987, 74-79 ; Davies 1998, 178-179 ; van der Kooij 1998, 17 ; van der Toorn 2007, 261.

62 Voir p. ex. Childs 1979, 58 : « to conceive of canon mainly as a dogmatic decision regarding its scope is to overestimate one feature within the process which is by no means constitutive of canon. It is still semantically meaningful to speak of an open canon ».

63 van der Kooij 2003, 29.

64 van der Toorn 2007, 252-262.

65 Davies 1998, 10 ; voir aussi « Thus, canonizing comprises a sequence of stages from the creation of texts, through transmission, and discrimination to formal lists. Though one stage tends to lead naturally to another, so that we can speak of a sequence of processes, even when the production of final canonical lists does not result, we can, and should, speak of a canonizing process. The notion of a canon can be present without any written definitive list (as it does in our own day). Indeed, the actual drawing up of formal canons is only a final stage in the entire process. For even before such lists are created, canons

Pour développer cette approche, Davies prend appui sur la notion grec de *kanôn* qui, déjà dans l'Antiquité, pouvait renvoyer à des règles pour la création artistique (la poésie, la musique ou la sculpture) ; le terme véhicule ainsi les notions de norme et d'idéal. C'est sur cette base que le terme de canon en est venu à désigner la ou les œuvre(s) qui manifeste(nt) ces règles de la façon la plus parfaite, des œuvres dignes d'être préservées et étudiées⁶⁶. En ce sens, un canon n'a pas besoin d'être formalisé dans une liste définie pour exister. Ce n'est d'ailleurs qu'à partir du XVIII^e s., sous l'impulsion de David Ruhnken (1768), que le terme *canon* a commencé à être utilisé pour désigner une liste d'œuvres littéraires classiques de référence autre que le canon biblique⁶⁷, et ce, même si des listes d'œuvres ou d'auteurs de référence existaient déjà dans l'Antiquité, comme celle des trois grands tragiques ou des neuf lyriques⁶⁸. Cette approche a le mérite de souligner le processus qui peut (ou pas) mener à la définition d'une liste de livres canoniques, et sans lequel on ne peut comprendre cette dernière étape. C'est sur ce genre de bases théoriques que beaucoup de chercheurs ont exploré le lien entre composition littéraire et canonisation, aboutissant parfois à des datations très hautes pour le début de la canonisation, ainsi qu'on l'a vu. Chapman, notamment, comprend le canon comme « an *intertextual collection of scriptures* »⁶⁹, présentant un même cadre littéraire et conceptuel, une « grammaire théologique », dont il retrace la formation progressive⁷⁰.

Si l'importance du processus préliminaire à la sélection d'une liste exclusive de livres saints ne doit pas être sous-estimée, il faut aussi noter qu'une spécificité notable du canon biblique par rapport à bien des collections littéraires de l'Antiquité est précisément qu'il s'est formalisé dans une liste close de livres saints. Il ne s'agit certes pas de la seule liste d'œuvres de référence de l'Antiquité, mais cela reste tout de même une particularité significative qu'il

are created on shelves and in boxes, where literature of a certain kind or a certain value is grouped together physically. The tendency to issue canonical lists is in fact typical of a "postclassical" age anxious to preserve in writing the values of a culture that in reality is gone » (*ibid.*).

66 Davies 1998, 7 ; cf. Ulrich 2015, 266-267.

67 Ruhnken 1768, sp. xcv-xcvi ; voir p. ex. McDonald et Sanders 2002, 13 ; Gorak 2014, 44-52.

68 Van der Kooij 2003, 29. Voir aussi les contributions de W. Marx et A. Lardinois dans le présent volume.

69 Chapman 2000, 285, cf. p. 106-110.

70 Malgré sa volonté de se distinguer de l'analyse idéologique du canon par Davies, Chapman le rejoint sur l'importance accordée au processus de formation de collections tout en allant plus loin dans cette direction : « In my view, such writings constituted *religious scripture* and were considered 'self-contained and cohesive' much earlier than Davies is willing to concede, even if the boundaries of this 'canon' continued for a time to be somewhat porous » (*ibid.*, 85).

convient de ne pas minimiser. Même si c'est pour mieux mettre en évidence un processus qui n'est pas étranger aux différentes cultures sribales de l'Antiquité (Mésopotamie, Égypte ou Grèce), Davies tend à niveler différents types de « canons », plus ou moins formalisés et avec des fonctions et des degrés d'autorité variés. S'il est indispensable de comparer le canon biblique aux autres grandes collections de l'Antiquité, la comparaison doit aussi faire ressortir les particularités culturelles. Dans le cas du canon biblique, la délimitation d'une liste fermée de livres saints, telle qu'on la voit dans les sources dès la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., ne représente pas un aspect secondaire d'un processus courant qui prendrait place essentiellement en amont mais, plutôt, une donnée incontournable qui mérite une explication spécifique⁷¹.

On peut à ce titre observer que les chercheurs qui travaillent avec une définition relativement ouverte du canon tendent à utiliser les sources de l'époque postérieure à la chute du Second Temple (notamment Josèphe, 4 Esdras 14 et *b. Baba Bathra* 14b-15a) comme des témoignages d'un processus qui aurait pris place avant tout à l'époque du Second Temple⁷². Ainsi, par exemple, Davies semble contredire son approche ouverte du canon en termes de processus lorsqu'il postule, en s'appuyant sur ces données de la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., qu'une liste de livres canoniques existait déjà sous les Hasmonéens⁷³. En outre, une autre tendance des chercheurs qui travaillent avec une définition ouverte du canon est de survaloriser les données internes aux textes bibliques qui semblent attester du projet scribal d'élaborer, structurer ou finaliser des collections littéraires. Des héritiers de la critique canonique tels que Chapman ou Dempster vont le plus loin en ce sens puisqu'ils se fondent essentiellement sur les textes bibliques pour reconstruire la naissance du canon, n'accordant que peu

71 Voir p. ex. aussi les remarques de T. Lim 2017, sp. 13-15, qui définit le canon sur la base des « ressemblances de familles » non-exclusives entre des livres, tout en prenant en compte le fait que certains de ces livres ont été sélectionnés et d'autres pas.

72 Le cas le plus flagrant est celui de Beckwith (1985) qui considère que les livres qui auraient été canonisés par Judas Maccabées au 11^e s. av. n. è. correspondraient exactement à la liste rabbinique, attestée environ trois siècles plus tard, *b. Baba Bathra* 14b-15a. Pour une critique de Beckwith en ce sens, voir p. ex. Peels 2001. Notons que le prologue de Ben Sira est aussi souvent invoqué pour défendre l'idée d'un canon au 11^e s. av. n. è., même si, contrairement aux sources plus tardives, il ne présente pas un nombre précis de livres, seulement des désignations relativement floues de collections littéraires qui ne semblent pas être clairement délimitées ; voir p. ex. Orlinsky 1991 ; Rüger 1984, 66-67 ; Barton 1986, 47 ; Carr 1996, 43-44 ; Lange 2008 ; VanderKam 2010, 181 ; Lim 2013, 100-102 et 106.

73 Davies 1998, 177-180, notamment p. 178 : « We have, alas, to jump over two centuries (in which a great deal can happen) to find further witnesses to a restricted collection, and we cannot be certain that the restrictions go back to the Hasmonians ; it is just an informed hypothesis ». Voir p. ex. aussi van der Kooij 1998, notamment 17-19 ; van der Toorn 2007, 252-262.

d'attention aux témoignages extrabibliques ; comme si la délimitation nette du canon attestée au début de notre ère n'était qu'un aboutissement logique de l'écriture des textes bibliques, sans nécessité d'autre explication que celle de leur composition. Malgré la prudence de Childs sur ce point⁷⁴, la naissance du canon correspond plus ou moins, pour eux, à la composition des collections, notamment à l'époque perse, lorsque ce n'est pas avant. Selon cette perspective, ce qui se passe après la chute du Second Temple appartiendrait davantage à l'histoire de la réception du canon qu'à l'histoire de sa formation.

Cette double survalorisation, 1) des données postérieures à la chute du Second Temple (les listes canoniques attestant de l'existence d'un canon) et 2) des données internes au corpus biblique (notamment l'intertextualité des livres attestant de l'existence de collections littéraires), dans l'étude du statut et de la fonction sociale des collections littéraires à l'époque du Second Temple me semble être une conséquence problématique de l'emploi d'une définition ouverte de « canon(isation) » dans le domaine des études bibliques. Ce type de données est bien sûr à prendre en compte, mais les définitions larges facilitent l'emploi de cette terminologie pour l'époque du Second Temple sans pleinement affronter le problème complexe des attestations externes, extrabibliques, de la réception du supposé canon à cette époque. Il en effet notable que d'autres travaux qui s'intéressent spécifiquement à la réception des textes bibliques dans le judaïsme du Second Temple se montrent beaucoup plus circonspects sur le caractère « canonique » des textes bibliques. Il est par exemple frappant que, même s'agissant des livres de la Torah, l'étude de J.H. Choi sur leur réception dans la littérature biblique et de l'époque du Second Temple conclut à une réception contrastée qui ne soutient pas l'idée que le Pentateuque ferait nécessairement autorité après sa composition⁷⁵.

Dans l'ensemble, il importe de prendre au sérieux le fait que les premiers témoignages explicites sur des listes closes de livres saints datent du 1^{er} s. n. è. et de considérer que ces données nous renseignent avant tout sur leur propre époque au début de notre ère, une période marquée par d'importants

74 Voir p. ex Childs 1979, 61 : « In my judgment, this identification of the literary and the canonical history, whether stemming from the left or the right of the theological spectrum, is a step backward and cannot be sustained. The two processes are not to be identified, but clearly they belong together ».

75 Choi 2010, 240 : « We can no longer maintain that either the Pentateuch or its component source documents were regarded as dominant and authoritative literature immediately after their promulgation. As indicated throughout my study, multiple biblical authors exhibit either ignorance of or lack of regard for the Pentateuch. What is more, many authors of the Second Temple period regard the Pentateuch as only one among several authoritative texts, or else they reject the authority of the Pentateuch by offering up competing conceptions of divine instruction ».

changements institutionnels en lien avec la chute du Temple, plutôt que sur la période institutionnelle antérieure, celle du Second Temple, ainsi qu'on le développera plus bas. De plus, il faut aussi souligner que la construction et la structuration de collections littéraires plus ou moins élaborées avec une certaine cohérence (relative), ce dont témoignent notamment les derniers ajouts faits aux livres de la BH, participent certes à donner de l'importance à ces livres, mais cela n'est pas en soi le gage d'une canonisation formelle, ni d'une autorité largement acceptée. On ne peut partir du principe que la fin de la composition d'un texte ou d'une collection littéraire corresponde presque automatiquement à sa canonisation⁷⁶. Il y a ici le risque de projeter le résultat final, ultérieur (le canon biblique), sur une étape antérieure de la préhistoire du canon.

Pour mieux rendre compte à la fois de la particularité formelle du canon biblique tout en soulignant l'importance du processus qui en est à l'origine, certains chercheurs, comme Gerald Sheppard (1987), ont proposé de distinguer des niveaux de canonicité, en parlant de « canon 1 » pour des livres disposant d'une grande autorité et de « canon 2 » pour parler d'une liste close de livres faisant autorité⁷⁷. Il me semble toutefois que cette terminologie prête à confusion, et qu'elle peut aussi induire l'idée d'un développement logique de canon 1 à canon 2⁷⁸. C'est pourquoi, en tout cas s'agissant de la Bible, je m'en tiendrai essentiellement à la définition formelle du terme « canon », comme une liste close de livres saints, afin de mieux mettre en évidence la particularité du canon biblique et aussi d'éviter des confusions terminologiques. Par ailleurs, il me semble que la clarté de cette définition formelle peut, si elle est suivie de manière rigoureuse, éviter de projeter des réalités relativement tardives sur des contextes plus anciens. Cette approche est notamment celle de Barton ou encore E. Ulrich, qui a fortement plaidé pour une utilisation plus stricte de ce terme dans les études bibliques afin d'éviter toute confusion et des discussions biaisées dès le départ⁷⁹. Ainsi qu'il le souligne : « There was

76 Van der Kooij 2003, 28.

77 Voir par exemple aussi dans ce sens Sanders 1992, 839, qui distingue deux sens du mot canon : « There are two basic uses of the word "canon" : the one refers to the shape of a limited body of sacred literature ; the other refers to its function. Traditionally it is viewed as both an authoritative collection of books (*norma normata* – shape) and a collection of authoritative books (*norma normans* – function ; Metzger 1987, 282–288). The word "shape" refers, however, to more than the number and order of books contained in a community's canon ; and the word "function" refers to more than how a community used its canon. Both terms include consideration of pre- and proto-canonical literary and historical factors as well as factors resulting from eventual stabilization of text and canon ».

78 Voir p. ex. Kraemer 1991.

79 Voir entre autres, Barton 1997, 157–158 ; *idem*, 2017, 82 ; Ulrich 2015, 265–279.

a lengthy process whose end was the canon ; and it is inaccurate, anachronistic, and confusing to use the term canon for any of the stages along that trajectory until the end of the process had been reached »⁸⁰. Ulrich distingue ainsi une étape où des livres peuvent bénéficier de fait d'une autorité importante (en anglais *Scripture*), d'une étape postérieure où ces livres (mais pas nécessairement une forme textuelle particulière) ont fait l'objet d'une décision consciente et réfléchie les incluant au sein d'une collection visant à faire autorité ou, au contraire, les en excluant : « Simply having books that are binding for the community is again a matter of authoritativeness ; after the reflective judgment and decision that these books but not those books are henceforth authoritative, the community has a canon »⁸¹.

Chapman critique la définition formelle du canon en arguant que celle-ci n'est pas adéquate pour l'étude de la période du Second Temple⁸². Il souligne à juste titre que, s'agissant de cette époque, la conception d'une liste close de livres saints est anachronique. Le fait que la définition classique du canon, qui s'est développée pour rendre compte de la particularité biblique, ne fonctionne pas pour l'époque du Second Temple ne devrait pas nous pousser à modifier cette définition mais plutôt à rendre compte différemment du statut et du rôle des collections littéraires qui se construisent à cette époque. Garder l'acception formelle du terme et, donc, ainsi qu'on le fera ici, employer le terme essentiellement pour la période postérieure à la chute du Temple, est précisément ce qui peut permettre une approche différenciée évitant les confusions anachroniques. En effet, surtout dans les études bibliques, la rigueur terminologique est importante afin de ne pas employer le même terme de « canon » pour désigner des réalités socio-culturelles bien différentes telles que des écrits judéens du VI^e s. av. n. è. et la collection sainte du judaïsme rabbinique, confusion qu'a eu tendance à engendrer la critique canonique. Ceci dit, se limiter à une définition formelle du canon ne signifie pas ignorer le processus préliminaire par lequel des textes ont acquis de l'autorité avant d'être formellement canonisés. Au contraire, une explication globale du canon hébreu se doit d'éclairer le processus prenant place en amont sans lequel il n'y aurait pas eu de canon⁸³.

80 Ulrich 2003, 58-59.

81 *Ibid.*, 60.

82 Chapman 2000, 70-110 ; voir aussi p. ex. Childs 1979, 58-59.

83 En ce sens, même en employant le terme de canon au sens formel, nous rejoignons la réflexion de Childs 1979, 53 : « The formation of the canon was not a late extrinsic validation of a corpus of writings, but involved a series of decisions deeply affecting the shape of the books. Although it is possible to distinguish different phases within the canonical process – the term canonization would then be reserved for the final fixing of the limits of scripture – the earlier decisions were not qualitatively different from the later. When

Une telle démarche implique de s'intéresser non seulement à la réception des textes, mais aussi au processus de leur composition (et notamment leur finalisation) qui, en général, semble avoir eu pour fonction d'attribuer une autorité croissante aux collections littéraires naissantes.

Rappelons encore que, de fait, l'utilisation des termes « canon » ou « canonisation » dans le contexte du judaïsme ancien s'est souvent faite en important une vision chrétienne de ce qu'est un canon et du processus de canonisation, impliquant notamment l'idée d'une autorité statuant à un moment précis, tel un concile, sur le statut supérieur d'une sélection de livres à l'exclusion d'autres. Or, comme on l'a souligné, de tels événements ne sont pas véritablement attestés dans le judaïsme ancien ; et même si le terme grec *kanôn* (« règle » au sens physique et abstrait) est étymologiquement apparenté à une racine sémitique attestée en hébreu⁸⁴, il convient d'observer qu'aucun terme hébreu ou araméen n'est utilisé dans le judaïsme ancien comme équivalent au grec *kanôn* dans la tradition chrétienne pour désigner les Écritures saintes⁸⁵. Il importe donc d'être prudent dès lors que l'on applique cette terminologie à la Bible hébraïque, en tâchant notamment de ne pas y importer des conceptions marquées par la tradition chrétienne. Si des listes closes de livres saints sont bel et bien attestées dans le judaïsme ancien à partir de la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è. (après la destruction du Second Temple par les Romains en 70), les données dont nous disposons pour la période précédente, celle du Second Temple, sont loin d'être aussi claires. Plutôt que de décrire un processus de « canonisation » en des termes événementiels (voire conciliaires), ces données invitent plutôt à envisager un « processus d'acceptation publique »⁸⁶, prenant progressivement place dans des contextes socio-institutionnels qui ont permis à des collections littéraires d'acquiescer une autorité croissante.

C'est dans cette perspective que la suite de cette étude se focalisera maintenant sur deux sources incontournables pour comprendre la fixation du canon de la Bible hébraïque, *Contre Apion* (1 37-43) et 4 Esdras 14, toutes deux datant des alentours de la toute fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., époque particulièrement troublée du point de vue des différentes communautés juives.

scripture and canon are too sharply distinguished, the essential element in the process is easily lost ».

- 84 Voir notamment l'akkadien *qanûm*, « roseau », et l'hébreu *qaneh*, « roseau » ou « canne », pouvant servir à mesurer. L'étymologie du terme remonterait au terme sumérien du même sens, *gi, gi-nah* ; Sheppard 1987, 62-63 ; H.W. Beyer, « κανων », *TDNT* 3 : 596-602.
- 85 Voir p. ex. Barr 1983, 50 ; Ulrich 2015, 267. Gilles Dorival 2004, 103-105, propose comme équivalent le terme hébreu *seder*, « ordre », mais aussi intéressante que puisse être cette proposition, l'utilisation du terme *seder* pour parler de l'ensemble des livres de la Bible hébraïque n'est, à ma connaissance, pas attestée dans la tradition rabbinique.
- 86 Stemberger 2004, 131.

4 La clôture d'une collection de livres saints après la destruction du Second Temple de Jérusalem : l'éclairage de *Contre Apion* I 37-43 et 4 Esdras 14

Dans des genres et des buts très différents, l'apologie du judaïsme de Flavius Josèphe, *Contre Apion* (I 37-43), et le texte apocalyptique de 4 Esdras (ch. 14) apportent les premières attestations explicites de l'idée d'une collection fermée de livres saints dans le judaïsme ancien⁸⁷. La particularité commune à ces deux textes est de définir un nombre exact de livres faisant autorité. Ce point commun est d'autant plus notable que les deux textes datent de la fin du I^{er} s. n. è. et qu'aucune source antérieure ne témoigne de la même préoccupation de dénombrer les livres saints, ainsi qu'on l'a évoqué. Ceci dit, les deux textes montrent aussi que la manière de dénombrer, d'organiser et d'envisager la fonction de ce canon varie.

Flavius Josèphe insiste sur le fait que les Juifs n'ont « pas des myriades de livres en désaccord et en contradiction, mais uniquement vingt-deux livres, qui contiennent les annales de tous les temps, dignes de confiance »⁸⁸. De manière générale, un point important que Josèphe cherche à défendre dans son premier livre de *Contre Apion* est la parcimonie, la prudence et la fiabilité des Juifs, contrairement aux Grecs, lorsqu'ils écrivent l'histoire – des qualités qu'il met bien sûr aussi à son actif dans son propre travail d'historien⁸⁹. Josèphe défend ainsi la haute antiquité et la dignité du peuple juif, sur lesquelles il a déjà largement insisté notamment dans ses *Antiquités juives* en s'appuyant sur les textes juifs anciens (*C. Ap.* I 1-5, 47-59). Pour lui, le nombre limité des annales officielles (*ἀναγραφὰι*) racontant le passé des Juifs est dû au fait que seuls les prophètes, sous inspiration divine, pouvaient écrire l'histoire passée ou mettre par écrit les faits de leur temps (*C. Ap.* I 37). En effet, Josèphe perçoit le canon hébreu avant tout comme une bibliothèque historique, qu'il organise en trois grandes catégories, notamment en fonctions des genres littéraires⁹⁰ : les cinq livres de Moïse contiennent les lois et les traditions portant sur l'origine de l'humanité, et couvrent une période de 3 000 ans ; puis, prenant la suite, treize livres prophétiques racontent l'histoire à partir de Moïse jusqu'au règne d'Artaxerxès ; enfin, quatre autres livres ne sont pas particulièrement

87 L'étude toute récente de J.C. Ossandón Widow (2018) entreprend également la comparaison de ces deux sources ; elle est à ce jour l'étude la plus poussée sur ce sujet et nous servira donc d'appui même si l'on s'en éloignera aussi sur certains points.

88 *C. Ap.* I, 38 : οὐ μυριάδες βιβλίων εἰσὶ παρ' ἡμῖν ἀσυμφώνων καὶ μαχομένων δύο δὲ μόνα πρὸς τοῖς εἴκοσι βιβλία τοῦ παντός ἔχοντα χρόνου τὴν ἀναγραφὴν τὰ δικαίως πεπιστευμένα.

89 Leiman 1989, 51-52 ; Mason 2002, 112-119.

90 Voir en ce sens Mason 2002, 114.

historiques mais contiennent « des hymnes à Dieu et des préceptes pour la vie des hommes » (C. Ap. I 39-40). Josèphe souligne non seulement le nombre restreint de livres mais aussi pourquoi celui-ci est définitivement arrêté : « Depuis Artaxerxès jusqu'à nos jours, cela a bien été écrit de manière fiable, mais on n'accorde pas à ces écrits la même valeur qu'aux précédents, parce que les successeurs des prophètes n'étaient pas aussi précis »⁹¹. En d'autres termes, l'histoire écrite par les Juifs après le règne d'Artaxerxès est toujours fiable, mais elle n'a pas la même valeur et autorité que celle écrite précédemment, car elle n'a plus été écrite par des prophètes. Josèphe renvoie ici à une conception qui semble attestée au moins dès le II^e s. av. n. è., selon laquelle les prophètes ont cessé de se manifester à l'époque perse (voir notamment 1 M 4,46 ; 9,27 ; 14,41)⁹².

Ces considérations permettent à Josèphe de décrire un canon bien délimité de vingt-deux écrits, dont la présentation générale se rapproche du canon rabbinique mais en diffère aussi ostensiblement⁹³. En effet, même si Josèphe évoque une organisation du canon qui peut faire écho à la tripartition rabbinique (le Pentateuque, des livres prophétiques et des écrits complémentaires), les différences sont néanmoins sensibles : contrairement aux rabbins, Josèphe présente l'essentiel du canon comme des livres prophétiques (et historiques), alors que la tripartition rabbinique propose une version beaucoup plus étoffée de la dernière collection, les Écrits⁹⁴. S. Mason a ici raison de souligner que la présentation des livres faite par Josèphe est avant tout (mais pas

91 ἀπό δὲ Ἀρταξέρξου μέχρι τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνου γέγραπται μὲν ἕκαστα πίστewς δ' οὐχ ὁμοίως ἡξίωται τοῖς πρὸ αὐτῶν διὰ τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι τὴν τῶν προφητῶν ἀκριβῆ διαδοχὴν. Ce sens a récemment été défendu par S. Mason (2019), qui montre bien le caractère problématique de l'interprétation courante d'une succession discontinue de la lignée des prophètes après l'époque perse (récemment encore reprise par Ossandón Widow 2018, 46-54). Dans tous les cas, ce passage de Josèphe reflète la conception de la fin d'une époque spécifiquement caractérisée par la présence des prophètes se produisant au cours de la période perse.

92 Cette conception transparait déjà dans des textes prophétiques tels que Za 9-14 et Malachie ; voir p. ex. Gonzalez 2013, 32-42 ; cf. Ossandón Widow 2018, 49. La question de savoir jusqu'où il était possible d'envisager des manifestations prophétiques à la fin de l'époque du Second Temple est débattue et la réponse dépend vraisemblablement des différents groupes en présence. P. ex., en B.J. I, 68-69 et A.J. XIII, 299, Josèphe lui-même accrédite le roi hasmonéen Jean Hyrcan du don de la prophétie ; ou encore, la communauté de Qoumrân revendiquait aussi une forme d'inspiration ; en outre, l'idée d'un retour d'un prophète à un moment ou un autre était prégnante (voir notamment 1 M 3,22-24 ; 1 M 4,46 ; 14,41 ; Mt 11,7-11). Néanmoins, dans l'ensemble, la catégorie de prophète (נביא) était essentiellement réservée à des figures pré-hellénistiques, dans la continuité desquelles certains pouvaient chercher à s'inscrire plus ou moins directement. Voir p. ex. la discussion avec références dans Mason 2019, 527-537 ; cf. Brooke 2012.

93 C'est notamment la position défendue par Leiman 1989, 54-55 ; Beckwith 1985, 125.

94 Cf. Ossandón Widow 2018, 44.

uniquement) établie par genres littéraires⁹⁵. Josèphe s'adresse à des non-Juifs et, dès lors, il n'utilise pas des catégories juives mais grecques, des catégories qui vont d'ailleurs dans le sens de sa principale préoccupation personnelle, d'ordre historique. Malgré ces observations, la présentation de Josèphe montre *a minima* que, si jamais il connaissait déjà la répartition des Prophètes et des Écrits telle qu'elle s'imposera chez les rabbins, celle-ci ne lui paraissait pas du tout incontournable, au point non seulement de ne pas en faire état dans sa présentation des livres officiels, mais aussi de proposer une autre répartition, principalement par genres littéraires. C'est aussi ce que confirme le nombre de livres indiqué par Josèphe, celui de 22, alors que les rabbins ont opté pour celui de 24. Certes, tout comme Esdras et Néhémie sont comptés ensemble dans la tradition rabbinique ancienne (cf. *b. Baba Bathra* 14b-15a), une tradition rapportée par Eusèbe, qu'il tiendrait d'Origène (*Histoire Ecclésiastique* VI 25), montre que, dans l'Antiquité, le livre de Ruth pouvait être compté avec celui des Juges, et les Lamentations avec le livre de Jérémie⁹⁶. Dans ce cas les 22 livres de Josèphe pourraient correspondre aux 24 livres rabbiniques, le nombre de 22 ayant pour intérêt de résonner avec le nombre de lettres hébraïques, comme le souligne la tradition rapportée par Eusèbe (voir aussi *Jubilés* 2,22-24 qui souligne l'importance de ce nombre). Quoi qu'il en soit, la présentation du canon ne semble pas être figée ou codifiée à la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., au point que même le comptage des livres pouvait varier.

De plus, en dépit de la tradition de comptage rapportée par Eusèbe, on ne peut pas partir du principe que les 22 livres évoqués par Josèphe correspondent nécessairement aux 24 du canon rabbinique. Il est certes fort probable que Josèphe inclut le livre de Ruth dans la catégorie des livres prophétiques (et historiques) puisqu'il l'utilise comme source et raconte cette histoire au livre v de ses *Antiquités juives* après avoir raconté les histoires des Juges. Le cas de Lamentations est moins clair, mais il pourrait aussi en faire partie étant donné que, dans *A.J.* x 78, Josèphe parle aussi d'une lamentation composée par Jérémie. Toutefois, il n'est pas du tout certain que Josèphe comptait Ruth ensemble avec Juges et Lamentations avec Jérémie. Notons que le comptage de ces livres ensemble n'est attesté pour la première fois qu'environ deux siècles plus tard. Il est en ce sens tout à fait possible qu'il se soit développé *a posteriori*

95 Mason 2002, 114.

96 Voir notamment Leiman 1976, 31-34 ; Barthélemy 1984, 39-40 ; Beckwith 1985, 235-273. En ce sens, les 13 livres prophétiques (et historiques) de Josèphe seraient Josué, Juges-Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Ésaïe, Jérémie-Lamentations, Ézéchiël, les Douze prophètes (comme un livre), Job, Daniel, Esdras-Néhémie, Chroniques et Esther, comme le défend notamment Leiman 1989, 53-54 ; les quatre autres livres seraient Psaumes, Proverbes, Qohélet et Cantique des cantiques.

dans le but d'harmoniser des traditions sur le nombre des livres qui, à l'origine, avaient des divergences de fond sur les marges du canon ; de la sorte, la tradition des 22 livres dont atteste Josèphe n'était plus en dissonance avec celle des 24 livres retenue par les rabbins⁹⁷.

Plusieurs chercheurs considèrent en effet que le canon décrit par Josèphe était en réalité plus restreint, ne comprenant notamment pas le Cantique des cantiques et/ou Qohéleth⁹⁸. J.C. Ossandón Widow souligne à juste titre que la catégorie « des hymnes à Dieu et des préceptes pour la vie des hommes » ne correspond pas très bien aux poèmes d'amour du Cantique des Cantiques⁹⁹. La question de la place du livre de Job me paraît ici décisive. Ceux qui défendent le même contenu pour les 22 et les 24 livres placent en général Job dans la catégorie des treize livres à la fois prophétiques et historiques, afin de laisser la place à des livres comme Qohélet et Cantique des cantiques aux côtés de Psaumes et Proverbes parmi les quatre livres d'hymnes et d'instruction sapientiale¹⁰⁰. Or, non seulement le contenu de Job le rapproche davantage des livres de « préceptes pour la vie des hommes », mais il faut observer que Josèphe n'y fait aucunement référence lorsqu'il retrace l'histoire d'Israël dans les *Antiquités juives*¹⁰¹. Si, comme cela semble être le cas, Job est plutôt à situer parmi les quatre livres de la troisième catégorie évoquée par Josèphe, aux côtés notamment de Psaumes et Proverbes, cela impliquerait que soit le Cantique

97 Le nombre de 22 est notamment mentionné par des auteurs chrétiens tels qu'Eusèbe (se rapportant à Origène) et Jérôme, qui prétendent le tenir des Juifs. *Contre Apion* a probablement été un des véhicules importants de cette tradition, y compris chez ces auteurs. Beckwith 1985, 235-240, mentionne également un ajout fait dans la tradition grecque du livre des Jubilés (au ch. 2), ajout qui insiste sur le nombre de 22 comme étant celui des œuvres de la création, des lettres, des livres et des ancêtres d'Adam à Jacob. Beckwith considère que cet ajout serait introduit vers le 1^{er} s. av. n. è. d'emblée par le traducteur grec du livre des Jubilés mais cette hypothèse ne s'impose pas, d'autant que la traduction éthiopienne, qui se base sur un original grec, ne présente pas cet ajout. L'hypothèse de Beckwith d'une correction secondaire de la traduction grecque ou éthiopienne retirant l'ajout pour suivre l'hébreu n'apparaît pas comme le scénario le plus simple.

98 Voir p. ex. Hengel 2002, 101, ou les hypothèses présentées par Guillaume 2005, 32.

99 Ossandón Widow 2018, 44.

100 Par exemple, Leiman 1976, 33 ; 1989, 53 ; Beckwith 1985, 253.

101 Mason 2002, 121-124 ; Ossandón Widow 2018, 44-45 (p. 44 : « If Job is one of the thirteen books, it could be implied that it narrates facts that happened after Moses which belong to the history of Israel, which is not the case »). À noter aussi que Ben Sira, au début du 1^{er} s. av. n. è. ne mentionne pas non plus Job dans son Éloge des Pères (ch. 44-49) ; cf. Guillaume 2005, 13. Plus tard, vers le 1^{er} s. n. è., les rabbins se demandent si Job est un personnage historique (le livre serait-il une parabole ?), quand il aurait vécu et s'il appartient au peuple juif (*b. Baba Bathra* 14a-15b). Même si les rabbins présentent aussi Job comme un prophète, ces observations tendent à appuyer l'idée que Josèphe inclurait Job dans les écrits de sagesse plutôt que parmi les treize livres à la fois prophétiques et historiques.

des cantiques, soit Qohéleth, deux livres qui peuvent difficilement faire partie des treize livres prophétiques, n'était pas inclus dans le canon de Josèphe. D'ailleurs, le statut de ces deux livres est discuté par les rabbins au début de notre ère¹⁰². Dans l'ensemble, l'hypothèse selon laquelle les 22 livres de Josèphe correspondent aux 24 livres rabbiniques ne me paraît pas s'imposer.

Certes, Josèphe prétend parler pour tous les Juifs, qui révèreraient exactement les mêmes livres (*C. Ap.* 1 42). Mason souligne que, ce faisant, l'historien prend le risque de s'exposer à la critique de la part de ses compatriotes en cas d'erreur sur le canon ; son discours impliquerait donc un canon largement accepté par les communautés juives et donc, déjà défini de longue date¹⁰³. À mon sens, cette conclusion prend peu en compte le but et la stratégie rhétoriques de Josèphe dans ce passage de *Contre Apion* : celui-ci ne s'adresse pas à ses compatriotes mais à des non-Juifs, précisément dans le but de défendre la valeur des écrits juifs. En ce sens, Josèphe ne peut faire état d'éventuels débats internes sur les limites du canon, d'autant que le cœur du canon, lui, est probablement largement accepté dans beaucoup des communautés juives de son époque ; sinon, il s'exposerait au risque bien plus grand de complètement discréditer son propos auprès de ses destinataires non Juifs¹⁰⁴. L'important pour Josèphe est de défendre la supériorité des traditions juives en mettant en avant la particularité et l'unicité du rapport des différentes communautés juives à leurs écrits anciens : celles-ci en auraient toujours pris et en prendraient encore grand soin, un point sur lequel Josèphe ne s'exposait vraisemblablement pas à la critique de ses compatriotes. Son discours étant avant tout apologétique, il importe de pas le prendre à la lettre pour comprendre la situation interne aux communautés juives¹⁰⁵. Josèphe n'aurait probablement pas formulé les choses de la même façon s'il s'adressait à elles.

À mon sens, le texte de Josèphe permet surtout d'observer une des fonctions de la délimitation du canon hébreu qui s'opère dans les tout premiers siècles de notre ère : celle-ci sert à *mieux définir et défendre l'identité juive vis-à-vis des*

102 Cf. *m. Yadayim* 3,5 ; *b. Meguila* 7a ; *t. Yadayim* 2,14 ; voir p. ex. Broyde 1995 ; Giszczak 2016.

103 Mason 2002, 125-126.

104 Cf. Ossandón Widow 2018, 197.

105 Voir aussi Carr 1996, 52. Ainsi, p. ex., l'idée que les Juifs n'auraient jamais modifié leurs textes (*C. Ap.* 1 42) est évidemment apologétique, en décalage avec la réalité historique comme l'attestent bien les manuscrits du tournant de notre ère retrouvés dans le désert de Judée. On peut aussi rappeler à titre d'exemple que, s'agissant des traditions sur Esdras, Josèphe se base sur 1 Esdras plutôt que sur le livre d'Esdras qui a été retenu par les rabbins ; Pohlmann 1970, 74-114 ; Ossandón Widow 2018, 71-72. Ceci-dit, ce discours de Josèphe pourrait tout de même refléter le processus de standardisation textuelle en cours de son temps, notamment après 70 (même si celle-ci débute vers le tournant de notre ère) ; cf. Lange 2007 ; 2009 (sp. p. 80).

autres groupes de l'Empire romain, et notamment du pouvoir dominant. Elle permet en particulier de véhiculer l'idée que toutes les communautés juives auraient en commun un même socle de textes et seraient unies par la déférence qu'elles leurs accordent, idée qui facilite la présentation et l'apologie du judaïsme vis-à-vis des autres¹⁰⁶. De la sorte, il apparaît que l'importante connectivité entre les différents groupes vivant sous l'Empire romain a été un facteur déterminant dans la délimitation du canon juif. On peut se demander si le besoin de clarifier son identité n'a pas aussi été provoqué par des problématiques internes aux communautés juives, dont les fondements ont été ébranlés à la suite de la destruction du temple de Jérusalem en 70 ; nous reviendrons sur ce point ultérieurement. Pour l'instant, rappelons que non seulement la présentation et l'organisation de ce canon mais probablement aussi son contenu n'étaient pas aussi évidents que ce que Josèphe voulait le signifier à ses lecteurs non-juifs, ainsi que nous venons de le voir et ainsi que le suggère aussi le texte à peu près contemporain de 4 Esdras.

Il est en effet intéressant de mettre en regard la présentation du canon par Josèphe et celle faite en 4 Esdras 14, non seulement parce que ces sources sont à peu près contemporaines (fin du 1^{er} s. n. è.), mais aussi parce que 4 Esdras apporte un autre point de vue, cette fois-ci interne, sur la question. À la différence de Josèphe, 4 Esdras ne s'inscrit pas dans un dialogue avec des non-juifs mais, dans le genre de l'apocalypse, ce texte développe au contraire un discours ésotérique à l'intérieur des communautés juives. Dans ce contexte, 4 Esdras apparaît en porte-à-faux complet par rapport au propos de Josèphe car, contrairement à ce dernier, il ne défend pas un nombre restreint d'écrits inspirés, mais bien plutôt leur grand nombre ; non pas un canon de 22 livres, mais pas moins de 94 livres révélés, qui incluent vraisemblablement de la littérature apocalyptique dont 4 Esdras reprend le genre. La fiction pseudépigraphique montre en effet le scribe Esdras qui, seulement 30 ans après la destruction de Jérusalem, à Babylone (4 Esd 3,1-2), est troublé par la désolation de Jérusalem et la domination babylonienne. Celui-ci est alors en dialogue avec l'ange Ouriel sur les desseins divins et il reçoit des révélations portant notamment sur l'avenir, le jugement divin, le salut des justes ou la restauration de Sion. Finalement, le ch. 14, qui correspond à la septième et dernière section du livre, présente Esdras qui, à la manière d'un nouveau Moïse¹⁰⁷, reçoit en révélation et met par écrit (avec l'aide de cinq scribes pendant 40 jours) le contenu de 94 livres. Après cela il reçoit la consigne de rendre publics les 24 premiers livres, destinés à tous, « les dignes et les indignes » ; en revanche les 70 autres livres, eux,

106 *Ibid.*, 41 et 214.

107 Kaestli 1984, 90-92 ; Ossandón Widow 2018, 130-134.

doivent rester cachés, destinés uniquement à un nombre limité d'initiés, les « sages » du peuple¹⁰⁸.

4 Esdras contredit donc clairement Josèphe sur la question du nombre des écrits inspirés, cherchant au contraire à légitimer toute une littérature supplémentaire, à la fois ancienne et révélée, notamment ésotérique (et apocalyptique) et spéculant sur l'avenir¹⁰⁹. En particulier, le chiffre symbolique de 70 évoque la complétude de la collection ainsi que son ampleur¹¹⁰. Ceci dit, il est frappant que, malgré cette contradiction, 4 Esdras s'accorde tout de même avec Josèphe sur l'idée d'un nombre limité d'écrits *officiels* juifs¹¹¹. Certes, le nombre 24 diffère de celui de 22, s'accordant plutôt avec la conception rabbinique et les références littéraires gréco-romaines évoquées *supra* par A. Lardinois et W. Marx ; et ainsi qu'on l'a vu, il n'est pas certain que les deux nombres renvoient exactement à la même collection. Cependant, les deux sources soulignent tout de même l'idée d'une collection limitée de livres officiels (un peu plus de vingt) qui serait commune aux différents groupes juifs ; et c'est précisément parce que les auteurs de 4 Esdras acceptent la limitation de cette collection officielle sans pour autant s'en contenter qu'ils insistent aussi sur l'existence d'une révélation cachée additionnelle. Il semble ainsi qu'à la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., l'idée d'un nombre limité de livres officiels s'imposait aux différents groupes juifs, et que seule la présentation ou la structure de la collection, voire aussi les marges de son contenu, pouvaient encore être discutées. Josèphe, qui insiste sur le nombre restreint des écrits anciens, opte pour 22, alors que 4 Esdras, qui vise à légitimer une vaste collection de livres supplémentaires, préfère le nombre de 24 livres officiels.

Il faut aussi noter que 4 Esdras s'accorde aussi implicitement avec Josèphe sur la raison pour laquelle les livres inspirés, en particulier ceux de la collection officielle, peuvent être limités en nombre : ceux-ci proviennent tous d'une période ancienne, notamment pré-hellénistique¹¹². Certes, contrairement à

108 4 Esd 14, 45-47 : « Lorsque les quarante jours furent passés, le Très-Haut me parla et dit : "Les premiers livres que tu as écrits, publie-les ; que les dignes et les indignes les lisent. Quant aux soixante-dix derniers, tu les conserveras pour les livrer aux sages de ton peuple. Car en eux est la source d'intelligence, la fontaine de la sagesse, le fleuve de la connaissance" » (traduction du texte latin par P. Geoltrain 1987, 1464-1465).

109 Voir p. ex. Stone 1990, 429-441.

110 Kaestli 1984, 94 ; Geoltrain 1987, 1464 n. 43-47 ; Ossandón Widow 2018, 171.

111 *Ibid.*, 186. Comme 22, 24 raisonne avec le nombre des lettres de l'alphabet, mais grec.

112 Ossandón Widow 2018, 200-201 (cf. p. 210-214). Kaestli 1984, 96-97 souligne que l'auteur de 4 Esdras pouvait envisager la composition de nouvelles œuvres littéraires au début de notre ère, sous l'inspiration divine et la sagesse que permet l'étude des textes révélés (4 Esd 14,40.47). Il faut néanmoins souligner qu'à l'instar de 4 Esdras, de telles œuvres devaient se présenter comme anciennes.

Flavius Josèphe, 4 Esdras n'évoque pas explicitement la période perse. Bien qu'il utilise une figure scribale traditionnellement située à l'époque perse, le texte insiste sur le fait qu'Esdras est en exil à Babylone, seulement quelques décennies après la destruction de Jérusalem¹¹³. Étant donné la perspective inclusiviste du livre, cette présentation babylonienne d'Esdras ne s'inscrit vraisemblablement pas dans une polémique contre les livres associés à l'époque perse (dont Esdras-Néhémie fait notamment partie)¹¹⁴. Elle vise plutôt à présenter la figure d'Esdras en exil, confronté au choc de la destruction de la ville et de son temple, aspect qui, dans le livre, fait l'objet de plaintes et de révélations¹¹⁵ et qui résonne avec le contexte historique des auteurs du texte peu après la destruction du Second Temple en 70 n. è. (d'autant que 4 Esdras ne parle pas seulement du passé mais se projette aussi largement dans le futur)¹¹⁶. En ce sens, 4 Esdras ne souligne pas seulement que la littérature sainte est nécessairement ancienne ; le texte insiste aussi sur l'importance des livres révélés en situation d'exil, de destruction de la ville de Jérusalem et d'absence de temple.

Pour J.-D. Kaestli, 4 Esd 14 polémiquerait contre les initiatives des Pharisiens qui cherchaient à délimiter un canon de 24 livres, en insistant sur le fait que la littérature révélée ne se cantonne pas à ces livres¹¹⁷. Ossandón Widow est plus prudent sur cette hypothèse, soulignant qu'on ne connaît pas véritablement ni le rôle des pharisiens, ni celui des rabbins, dans la fixation du canon des 24 livres. Toutefois, il considère tout de même que le but du texte est de s'opposer à la limitation de la littérature révélée en défendant une conception ouverte de la révélation¹¹⁸. Sur cette base, Ossandón Widow accentue le contexte

113 La référence à la trentième année de la ruine de la ville en 4 Esd 3,1 permet notamment de faire allusion à Ez 1,1 ; cf. Ossandón Widow 2018, 117-118.

114 Ce déplacement chronologique d'Esdras (conscient ou pas) a probablement été facilité par la mention d'un Esdras du VI^e s. en Esd 3,2 ; 7,1-5 ; cf. *ibid.*, 118.

115 Voir en particulier la vision de la femme en deuil et son explication en 9,38-10,59 ; voir p. ex. aussi 3,1-2 (ou ex. 12,48).

116 On peut aussi y voir une polémique anti-romaine, dans la mesure où le nom de Babylone pouvait être utilisé de manière cryptique pour renvoyer à l'empire romain, comme le montre en particulier l'Apocalypse de Jean (ch. 17-18).

117 Kaestli 1984, 94-97.

118 Ossandón Widow parle notamment de « Resistance to a Collection of Twenty-Four Books » (il s'agit du titre d'une section ; 2018, 186) ; voir aussi p. 189 : « However, it is not unreasonable to understand 4 Ezra in these terms, namely, as an apology for an open of "still not closed" revelation. The symbolic character of the numbers twenty-four books and seventy allows us to suppose that the author does not want to defend any closed collection : he knows one group of twenty-four books and wants to leave room for more ». Il est toutefois quelque peu ambigu sur cette résistance, puisqu'il soutient aussi que la

polémique de la délimitation d'une collection de 24 livres au sein des communautés juives. Il soutient que cette délimitation, qui serait intervenue vers la fin du 1^{er} s. n. è., relèverait d'une réaction conservatrice face aux nouveaux mouvements juifs du début de notre ère et la littérature à contenu eschatologique qu'ils développaient¹¹⁹. Dans ce contexte, selon Ossandón Widow, 4 Esdras représenterait une réponse de la part d'un des mouvements qui s'opposait à une telle délimitation de la littérature inspirée.

À mon sens, le problème de ce type d'interprétations polémiques est que 4 Esdras ne polémique nullement contre la délimitation des 24 livres ; au contraire, il la confirme, un fait qu'il s'agit de prendre pleinement en considération. On peut donc plutôt comprendre que le texte reconnaît la nécessité d'une liste limitée de livres inspirés, au nombre de 24, qui soit publique et officielle. Certes, 4 Esdras souligne aussi que le nombre des livres révélés est loin de s'arrêter là et il légitime en sus une vaste littérature ésotérique comme étant également d'inspiration divine. Toutefois, cette littérature s'inscrit non pas en opposition mais en complément avec la première collection des 24, permettant notamment d'approfondir la voie de la sagesse. En ce sens, il me paraît plus judicieux de comprendre que 4 Esdras cherche à clarifier la fonction des différents livres qui circulent dans les communautés juives : certains sont publics et destinés à tous ; d'autres ne sont destinés qu'à ceux qui souhaitent s'initier davantage et progresser dans la sagesse.

Cette distinction n'est probablement pas un simple artifice trouvé par les auteurs de 4 Esdras pour refuser une limitation et légitimer une vaste littérature de révélation ; elle répond plus vraisemblablement aux enjeux d'un contexte socio-politique. Rappelons que ce texte est écrit dans un contexte de conflits importants entre les Juifs et l'Empire romain (entre les deux guerres juives), qui ont notamment provoqué la chute du temple. Or, la littérature apocalyptique juive, dans laquelle s'inscrit 4 Esdras et qui cherche précisément à apporter un réconfort face aux drames de l'histoire, a pour tendance générale de développer une perspective opposée au pouvoir en place. Dans ce contexte, le fait de maintenir caché ce genre de textes peut s'avérer une stratégie opportune¹²⁰. Une telle stratégie a d'ailleurs probablement été inspirée par la

collection des 70 livres ne s'oppose pas aux 24 (*ibid.*, 151-155). Voir p. ex. Carr 1996, 53 et 56, qui interprète aussi le texte dans le sens d'une « résistance » au canon des 24.

119 Ossandón Widow 2018, 214-216.

120 À l'inverse de la conception de 4 Esdras, les rabbins se sont refusés à écrire de nouvelles compositions, privilégiant le medium oral (la Mishna se présentant comme une compilation des paroles des Tannaïm). Ceci-di, comme le propose N. Dohrman 2020, 441, même cette insistance sur l'oralité pourrait relever d'une forme de résistance à l'Empire romain : « Might we gloss this reticence to write as a resistance to being read, collected, copied,

pratique des cultes à mystères, en vogue dans l'Empire romain à cette époque, qui préconisaient précisément la préservation de secrets réservés aux initiés. Par ailleurs, notons que la reconnaissance d'une collection clairement délimitée de 24 livres destinés à tous permettait au groupe porteur de 4 Esdras de rester lié aux autres communautés juives, y compris celles qui ne partageaient pas leur littérature ésotérique, en se fondant sur un même socle commun de livres. En ce sens, et malgré leurs différences importantes, ce groupe s'accorde avec Flavius Josèphe sur l'idée d'un peuple dont la particularité serait d'avoir une même collection de livres saints en partage. Ainsi, dans un contexte mouvementé marqué par la perte de l'institution culturelle centralisante, ils participaient à renforcer une nouvelle unité des communautés juives, centrée autour de leur littérature sainte, tout en préservant en même temps leurs spécificités, voire leurs mystères.

De manière générale, le cas de 4 Esdras montre bien que la fixation d'un canon officiel commun aux différents groupes juifs n'exclut en rien des divergences théologiques significatives entre eux¹²¹, pouvant aller jusqu'à l'étude (et la composition) de nombreux autres livres également considérés comme anciens et inspirés, contrairement à ce que souligne Flavius Josèphe. Ainsi, plutôt que d'accentuer l'idée d'une polémique interne aux différentes communautés juives, 4 Esdras 14 doit plutôt être lu à la lumière de son contexte socio-institutionnel troublé, au sein duquel la clôture du canon a pu bénéficier à une variété de groupes juifs. Une telle approche peut permettre de mieux comprendre le succès du canon qui s'imposera progressivement au cours des premiers siècles de notre ère dans différents milieux juifs¹²². Dans l'ensemble, les deux sources analysées montrent que la clôture du canon qui s'opère progressivement à partir de la fin du I^{er} s. n. è. a permis de redéfinir et préciser un fondement de l'identité juive dans un contexte où celle-ci était ébranlée, en particulier par la chute du temple. Vis-à-vis de l'extérieur, c'est-à-dire les autres groupes de l'Empire et surtout le pouvoir en place, cette nouvelle définition permettait de mieux présenter et défendre l'identité juive malgré l'absence d'institution centrale à laquelle se rattacher. À l'interne, celle-ci permettaient aux différentes communautés juives de préserver une certaine unité en dépit de leurs divergences significatives et de la disparition de leur cœur institutionnel.

quoted, shelved, or epitomized – in short, to become a primary source in someone *else's* history ? ».

121 C'est d'ailleurs aussi ce que montrent les débats rabbiniques conservés dans la Mishna.

122 Cette approche a le mérite de ne pas survaloriser le rôle des rabbins vers la fin du I^{er} s. n. è., comme le préconise la recherche récente ; voir p. ex. Mimouni 2012 ; Costa 2015 ; cf. Ossandón Widow 2018, 5-15.

Les livres prenant le relai du temple, la collection des livres saints ne pouvait plus rester ouverte.

L'approche de la clôture du canon qui vient d'être esquissée mériterait d'être approfondie, notamment par l'analyse des sources rabbiniques. En outre, elle pourrait être complétée par la reconstruction des processus qui sont à l'origine du cœur des collections aujourd'hui contenues dans la Bible hébraïque et qui lui ont permis d'acquérir une autorité croissante à l'époque du Second Temple. Les observations apportées permettent néanmoins de pointer l'importance des changements institutionnels pour comprendre des phénomènes de (trans)formation culturelle tels que la canonisation de la Bible hébraïque.

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Challenging the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators: From *kanôn* to Canon

Casper C. de Jonge

1 Introduction

The so-called Canon of the Ten Attic Orators is a problematic concept. It refers to an ancient selection of Greek orators who were – according to Greek and Roman teachers of rhetoric – superior to others: Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides, Lycurgus, and Dinarchus. Most of these men were Athenians; two of them – Dinarchus from Corinth, Lysias' family from Syracuse – settled in Athens in order to work there as speechwriters.¹ They were all active in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. These orators and speechwriters were considered superior to others in the sense that their speeches were held to be more useful material for reading, studying and imitation by later generations, especially in Hellenistic and Roman schools. By consequence, the speeches of the selected orators were copied more often than those of their colleagues. This particular selection of ten orators thus had a profound influence on the transmission of classical Greek speeches, from classical Athens, via the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine ages, to the modern world and the 21st century CE. Most of the ancient Greek speeches that we can read today were indeed written by one of the Greek orators who were included in the 'Canon'.²

Why is the Canon of Ten Attic Orators a problematic concept? There are three problems that complicate the traditional narrative as briefly outlined above. First, the selection of ten Attic orators was in the ancient world never called a 'canon'.³ To be sure, 'canon' (κανών) is a Greek word, which

1 Edwards 1994 offers a very short modern introduction to the lives and works of the ten Attic orators.

2 We do however possess extant speeches by some classical Greek orators who were not included in the Canon: Gorgias, Antisthenes and Alcidas. Furthermore, we have some speeches by Apollodorus and Hegesippus, which were wrongly attributed to Demosthenes. See Kennedy 1994, 64; Pernot 2000, 59.

3 Cf. Pfeiffer 1968, 207. Ruhnken 1768 introduced the term canon for the list of Attic orators: see below.

frequently occurs in ancient rhetorical treatises. But the ancient word refers to a 'model' or 'standard' that could be imitated, like Polyclitus' statue with its perfect proportions, or, indeed, like Demosthenes with his forceful style.⁴ In ancient terms, one orator could be called a canon, but a canon could not refer to a selection of orators. This may seem a superficial observation, but it is more than just a matter of terminology, as we will see below. Second, the selection of ten Attic orators was far from the only one that was proposed in antiquity. In fact, up to the 2nd century CE many different selections and lists of orators circulated in Hellenistic and Roman schools, with different names and different numbers: some of these lists had six, others had ten or twelve names. In other words, 'the' Canon of the Ten Attic Orators was only one of several competing ancient lists, which happened to be the most successful one after a very long process of negotiation and debate. Third, the origins of the list of ten Attic orators are rather obscure. What we can say with confidence is that it was compiled somewhere in the extensive period between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE. It is often assumed, partly because Quintilian (ca. 35–100 CE) mentions their names, that the Alexandrian scholars Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus of Samothrace (second and first centuries BCE) were responsible for the selection of ten.⁵ Hence, references to the 'Alexandrian Canon of Ten Attic Orators' are not uncommon in literature.⁶ As we will see, however, we actually do not know who was responsible for establishing the selection; it will be argued below that the list of ten Attic orators did not gain general acceptance before the 2nd century CE.

Two opinions dominate current scholarship on the Canon of Ten Attic Orators. First, scholars have often suggested that the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators was from an early date closed and stable. Second, several scholars have argued that the Canon had a destructive effect: in the words of Ian Worthington, the Canon 'sentenced the speeches of other orators to probable extinction'.⁷ This chapter will challenge this current opinion in two ways.

First, I will argue that for a very long period 'the Canon' did not actually exist. Up to the 2nd century CE there was in fact a great flexibility and variety in the number and selection of orators that were put forward, depending on the context in which such selections were presented. Rhetoricians like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Caecilius of Caleacte, Dio of Prusa, Quintilian, Hermogenes

4 For ancient (and modern) meanings of the term 'canon', see also Papadopoulos, this volume.

5 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.54. This passage however concerns the Alexandrian lists of epic poets, not a list of orators.

6 E.g. Sarton 1959, 503; Waterfield 2016, 114. Smith 1995 argues that the Alexandrian scholars established the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators.

7 Worthington 1994, 259.

of Tarsus and Pseudo-Plutarch proposed very different lists of classical orators. Even one single rhetorician could present two different reading lists of Attic orators at different moments in his life, depending on the specific purpose and audience of the selection. These lists (or catalogues), based on clear principles, were perhaps intended to be closed by their adherents, but in practice they were open-ended, as they continuously provoked other rhetoricians to come up with competing, alternative lists. Analyzing processes of canonization in general Jonathan Smith has argued that a list can (in modern terms) be called a canon if it is fundamentally complete and closed.⁸ While individual ancient rhetoricians may have presented their own list as closed, general agreement concerning the closure and completeness of the list of Attic orators was not reached before the 2nd century CE. If one wishes to use the term 'canon' (in Smith's sense of the word) for the ancient selection of orators, one should therefore not apply it to the competing lists and reading lists that circulated before the 2nd century CE, including the one with ten names. It might be even more prudent not to use the term at all: the fact that we possess some speeches by orators who were not included in the Canon of Ten Attic Orators means that it was never completely and universally closed (and thus never a 'canon' according to Smith's definition).⁹

Second, I will argue that selections and reading lists of orators were in many respects not destructive, as Worthington has argued, but rather productive. In educational contexts model authors guided students in writing new speeches, inspiring them not just to imitate but to emulate their Attic predecessors in innovative ways.¹⁰ Furthermore, the constant competition between rhetoricians and their different reading lists indeed prevented the canon from being closed. The canon of Greek orators was thus "constantly in the making".¹¹ Rhetoricians distinguished themselves from their colleagues by presenting innovative lists, including the models of their own choice, thereby encouraging their students to keep reading (and preserving and copying) the speeches of many different orators, beyond the 'canonical' ones presented by others. The Canon of the Ten Attic Orators was, as I will argue, the late product of a long

8 Smith 1982, 44–45. See also Versluys in the introduction to this volume: "For a canon there must be an element of closure. In terms of documentation, one of the most important steps in the process of canonization is the closing of the canon."

9 See n. 2 above on Gorgias, Antisthenes and Alcidas.

10 Pernot 2000, 58 rightly observes that canons also had a positive impact: "ils ont rendu de grands services en assurant la préservation des oeuvres jugées les meilleures".

11 See Versluys in the introduction to this volume, p. 39: "Although it should look stable and immutable, therefore, in fact a canon is constantly in the making."

and intensive process of negotiation and compromise between many different parties with different interests.¹²

2 Canonization, Classicism and Cultural Formation

The ancient rhetoricians who proposed and defended their own preferred selections of orators (and poets, historians, and philosophers) played the role of ‘exegete’ or ‘hermeneut’: they cited, explained and evaluated the texts from the past, demonstrated their qualities, and thereby contributed to the preservation of these texts for the future.¹³ Jonathan Smith has defined the hermeneut as “an interpreter whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists without altering the canon in the process”. The history of the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators tells a slightly different story: each critic (hermeneut, exegete) proposes and defends his or her own list of orators as the perfect list; but soon another critic will raise his hand and respond by proposing his own list, with different names and numbers. It is only from the 2nd century onwards that something like a closed canon emerged. In other words: hermeneuts and exegetes play their role not only once ‘the canon’ has been established, but also in the long and complex process that precedes it and leads towards the moment of closure.

One of these exegetes was the rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus.¹⁴ Active in Rome under emperor Augustus, he wrote several treatises on Greek rhetoric and literature, which he presented to his Roman students and patrons. Like many other Greek rhetoricians in Rome, Dionysius selected and evaluated what he thought was most valuable of the Greek past for the Roman present and future. Thus Dionysius, as we will see, included six Attic orators in his treatise *On the Ancient Orators*: Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, Demosthenes, Hyperides, and Aeschines. Dionysius’ rhetorical treatises were well known among Roman and Greek rhetoricians of later periods, like Quintilian and Hermogenes. Given his influence on later rhetoricians, Dionysius seems to have been one of the key figures who, through an annotated and critical selection of orators, contributed to the transmission and survival of classical Greek rhetoric.

12 Cf. Versluys in the introduction to this volume, p. 39: “[C]anonisation is never merely a top-down process, but rather a form of negotiation and compromise between different societal groups and their interests. Moreover, these canonisations often stretched out over a long period of time, as a slow and in fact never finalized project.”

13 See Smith 1982, 48. See also Versluys in the introduction to this volume, p. 43.

14 On Dionysius, see De Jonge 2008; Wiater 2011; Hunter and De Jonge 2019.

In studying Dionysius' treatises (and those of his colleagues, like Caecilius and Hermogenes) we can learn how canonization contributes to processes of cultural formation.¹⁵ By presenting his own selection of Greek authors from the past, and citing and evaluating them in his didactic works, Dionysius makes it clear what Greek culture actually means to him, and what he thinks it should mean to his Roman students and patrons. For Dionysius and other rhetoricians of his age, 'Greece' was primarily classical Greece, that is, the Greek world of the fifth and the fourth centuries BCE: the age of Pericles, Polyclitus, Sophocles, Plato and Demosthenes. This construction of 'Greece' (1) neglects or ignores the orators – and other writers, artists, philosophers – of what we call the Hellenistic age (i.e. the period after 323 BCE) and (2) it adopts a strongly Athenocentric worldview.¹⁶ Dionysius' selection (or 'canon', in modern terms) of six orators supports and confirms this construction of Greek culture: his six Attic orators (like the members of the Canon of Ten Attic Orators) were all active in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and they were all either Athenians or active in Athens. Were they considered superior for aesthetic reasons (as Dionysius and other critics claim), or were classical orators just preferred because they were from the right period and place, unlike their successors from Hellenistic and Imperial ages, or their colleagues from other towns?¹⁷ Canonization and classicism go hand in hand.¹⁸ Dionysius' selection and construct of 'classical' Greek culture (for which he was of course not responsible alone) was indeed extremely influential: the modern periodization of Greek history into a 'classical', a 'Hellenistic', and an 'Imperial' age ultimately goes back to Dionysius' *On the Ancient Orators*.¹⁹

15 On canonization and cultural formation, see Versluys in the introduction to this volume, pp. 34–38.

16 This is where classicism meets Atticism. Dionysius (preface to *On the Ancient Orators* 1.2) presents the year 323 BCE as the end of classical Greece: ἐν γὰρ δὴ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν χρόνοις ἡ μὲν ἀρχαία καὶ φιλόσοφος ῥητορικὴ προπηλακίζομένη καὶ δεινὰς ὕβρεις ὑπομένουσα κατελύετο, ἀρξαμένη μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνα τελευτῆς ἐκπνεῖν καὶ μαραίνεισθαι κατ' ὀλίγον, ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς καθ' ἡμᾶς ἡλικίας μικροῦ δεήσασα εἰς τέλος ἠφανίσθαι. "In the epoch preceding our own, the old, philosophic rhetoric was so grossly abused that it fell into a decline. From the death of Alexander of Macedon it began to lose spirit and gradually wither away, and in our generation had reached a state of almost total extinction." (Translation Usher 1974). See Hidber 1996; De Jonge 2014, 393–398.

17 Dio of Prusa, *Discourse* 18 is exceptional in including orators from the Augustan Age in his reading list: see below.

18 On classicism, see Porter 2006a and Wiater 2011. On classicism and canonization, see Porter 2006b, 50–53 and Citroni 2006a. Dionysius' preface to *On the Ancient Orators* (edited by Aujac 1978) is also called his 'Manifesto of Classicism': see Hidber 1996.

19 See De Jonge 2014, 388–389.

By canonizing orators from one period and one place, Greek rhetoricians thus contributed to the construction of Greek culture, and, in a second instance, to processes of cultural formation in Rome: classical Greek culture was one dominant factor (apart from Egypt, Hellenistic kingdoms, etc.) that deeply shaped the cultural identity of Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome.²⁰ Here one can observe how canonization and classicism can be considered forms of ‘anchoring innovation’:²¹ in Rome, lists (or canons) of Greek orators (and poets, historians, sculptors, architects) from the classical Greek past functioned as anchors that validated and supported the introduction of innovative rhetorical styles (like those of the so-called Attici), new speeches (like Cicero’s *Philippicae*, which were inspired by Demosthenes’ *Philippicae*) and, more generally, the cultural ‘revolution’ in Rome, which, if needed, could present itself as the natural successor of Greece.²²

One reason why Dionysius is particularly interesting for the topic of this volume, is the fact that he frequently uses the Greek term *κανών* for an author or artist who is regarded as the model of a certain style, which could be imitated and emulated. In the works of Dionysius – and other ancient rhetoricians up to the 2nd century CE – there is no sign of what we call the ‘Canon of the Ten Attic Orators’, with its supposedly closed and destructive character. What we do find, however, is a wide variety of diverse ‘canons’ (i.e. models), which are presented in a context that we can characterize as open, flexible and productive.

3 The Canon of the Ten Attic Orators: The Ancient Evidence

There is much disagreement among scholars concerning the date at which the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators came into existence.²³ The ancient evidence is limited and in some cases rather difficult to interpret. The following table (Tab. 8.1) presents the ancient texts that have been understood to refer to the Canon:

20 On the significance of classical Greece to the Augustan Age, see Bowersock 1965; Galinsky 1996, 332–363; Spawforth 2012.

21 See Sluiter 2016; Versluys in the introduction to this volume, pp. 50–52.

22 On Gaius Licinius Calvus and the Attici, who preferred the pure style of Lysias and Hyperides, see Wisse 1995. On the Augustan cultural revolution, see Wallace Hadrill 2008; Spawforth 2012.

23 See Brzoska 1883; Hartmann 1891; Douglas 1956; Kennedy 1972, 348–349; Edwards 1994, 8; Worthington 1994; Smith 1995; Pernot 2000, 57–59; cf. section 4 below.

TABLE 8.1 Ancient evidence for the “Canon of the Ten Attic Orators”

Caecilius of Caleacte	1st century BCE (Augustan Age)	Treatise <i>On the Style of the Ten Orators</i> ; the treatise itself is lost; we know the title only from the Suda (10th cent. CE).
Quintilian	1st century CE	<i>Inst.</i> 10.1.76: ... <i>ut cum decem simul Athenis aetas una tulerit</i> . “... that a single age produced ten at the same time in Athens”
Hermogenes of Tarsus	late 2nd century CE (under Marcus Aurelius)	<i>On Types of Style</i> 2.11: characterizations of twelve orators: “Thus <i>the other ten orators</i> , among whom I have included Critias, are inferior to Demosthenes”
Harpocration	2nd century CE (?)	<i>Lexicon of the Ten Orators</i>
Pseudo-Plutarch	3rd century CE (?)	<i>Lives of the Ten Orators</i>
Photius	9th century CE	<i>Bibliotheca</i> 259–268 (adapted version of Pseudo-Plutarch’s treatise)
Suda	10th century CE	Encyclopedia

The two earliest texts that might seem to refer to the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators constitute in fact problematic evidence. According to the Byzantine encyclopedia Suda (10th century CE), the Greek rhetorician Caecilius of Caleacte, who was active in Rome under emperor Augustus, composed a treatise *Περὶ τοῦ χαρακτῆρος τῶν δέκα ῥητόρων*, *On the Style of the Ten Orators* (Suda K 1165; Caecilius T1 ed. Woerther 2015).²⁴ Nothing survives of the treatise, however, apart from the title, which we find nowhere else; the (rather late) report of the Suda is our only source. Some caution is in order, as titles mentioned in the Suda are not always reliable: the original title of Caecilius’ work may have been different.²⁵ According to Kennedy, Caecilius’ work was “perhaps responsible for the formation of the canon of ten Attic orators”.²⁶ Woerther is even more cautious: “En tout état de cause, aucun témoignage conservé ici ne

24 See O’Sullivan 1997; Kennedy 1972, 366–367; Woerther 2015, 45–46.

25 The singular *Περὶ τοῦ χαρακτῆρος* (*On the Style* or *On the Character*) in the title should make us a little suspicious: ancient rhetoricians tend to emphasize the differences between the styles (plural) of Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, etc. rather than summarizing their qualities as ‘the style’. See also Douglas 1956, 40 on the possibility that Suda gives us a ‘late and anachronistic title for a collection of separate monographs’.

26 Kennedy 1972, 367. O’Sullivan 1997, 46 argues that Caecilius made “an important – perhaps *the* important – contribution” to the ideas behind the lists of writers recommended for imitation. The word “perhaps” is crucial in both citations.

permet de tirer de conclusion concrète sur le rôle que certains critiques ont voulu accorder à Caecilius dans l'élaboration du fameux Canon des orateurs attiques (...).²⁷

In *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.76 Quintilian (ca. 35–100 CE) presents an overview of the Greek and Latin authors of each literary genre whose texts and styles Roman students should imitate and emulate. When he comes to Greek oratory, he points out that “a single age (*aetas*) produced ten orators at the same time in Athens”:

Sequitur oratorum ingens manus, ut cum decem simul Athenis aetas una tulerit. Quorum longe princeps Demosthenes ac paene lex orandi fuit: tanta vis in eo, tam densa omnia, ita quibusdam nervis intenta sunt, tam nihil otiosum, is dicendi modus, ut nec quod desit in eo nec quod redundet invenias.

Next comes the vast army of orators – so vast that a single age produced ten at the same time at Athens. Of these, Demosthenes was far the greatest, almost a law of oratory in himself: such is his force, the concentration of his thought, his muscular firmness, his economy, his control – one feels there is nothing lacking and nothing superfluous.

Translation: RUSSELL 2002

It is possible (as Worthington and Smith believe) that Quintilian here refers to the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators, but his statement is far from straightforward.²⁸ Quintilian does not go on to list the names of the ten orators; in fact he mentions only six orators as exemplary models in his reading list, and twelve in the final book of his work (see below on *Institutio* 10.1.76–80 and 12.10.20–24). Furthermore, if the word *aetas* here means a single “generation” (as it usually does), it could not really cover all of the orators of the Canon of Ten, since Antiphon (470–411 BCE) and Andocides (440–390) lived much earlier than Demosthenes (384–322) and Dinarchus (361–291 BCE).²⁹ Quintilian’s reference to Demosthenes as almost “a law of oratory” (*lex orandi*) might be an

27 Woerther 2015, xxxii.

28 Worthington 1994, 253. Smith 1995, 73. The important point however is that even if Quintilian is here referring to a (well-known) selection of ten, it is obviously not a closed ‘canon’, as he himself goes on to list twelve names in *Institutio* 12.10.20–24.

29 For discussion of *aetas* in this passage, see Douglas 1956, 32–24; Worthington 1994, 252–253; Smith 1995, 71–72.

allusion to the Greek tendency of presenting one single orator (and especially Demosthenes) as ‘the canon’ (χανών) of good style (see below, section 6).

It has been argued that we are on safer ground with Hermogenes of Tarsus (late 2nd century CE). Hermogenes twice mentions “the ten” when he is listing a group of Attic orators in one of the final chapters of his treatise *On Types of Style*. First, he points out that Antiphon of Rhamnous (ca. 480–411 BCE) was the earliest of the orators included in his list (2.11.21, p. 222 Patillon):

καὶ γὰρ ἐστὶ τοῖς χρόνοις τῶν δέκα ῥητόρων τούτων πρεσβύτατος ἀπάντων.

Indeed, as far as chronology is concerned, Antiphon of Rhamnous is the eldest of all the ten orators.

Translation: WOOTEN 1987

A moment later, Hermogenes concludes that all orators in his list are inferior to Demosthenes, who is the supreme model for all styles (*On Types of Style* 2.11.31, p. 224 Patillon):

Τῷ μὲν οὖν Δημοσθένει οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν δέκα, μεθ’ ὧν καὶ ὁ Κριτίας, ὑποτεταγμένοι οὕτως ὡς τὰ δεύτερα καὶ τρίτα τοῦ δικανικοῦ τε καὶ συμβουλευτικοῦ τῶν λόγων εἶδους ἀποφέρονται.

Thus the other ten orators, among whom I have included Critias, are inferior to Demosthenes. They carry off the second and third prizes in judicial and deliberative oratory.

Translation: WOOTEN 1987

Again, the evidence is rather confusing. In the first instance, Hermogenes appears to have a list of ten Attic orators in mind, when he refers to “the ten orators” and “the other ten”.³⁰ But if one reads carefully, one will find that Hermogenes himself in fact discusses twelve orators: he first lists Lysias, Isaeus, Hyperides, Isocrates, Dinarchus, Aeschines, Antiphon of Rhamnus, Antiphon the Sophist (Hermogenes explicitly claims that these two Antiphons must be distinguished – not all modern scholars agree with him),³¹ Critias, Lycurgus

³⁰ A more precise translation of οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν δέκα would be “the rest of the ten orators”. Wooten 1987, 124 translates “the other ten”, presumably because Hermogenes does in fact list more than ten orators (eleven or twelve: see below). The confusing text suggests that Hermogenes is indeed playing games with the number ten (see below).

³¹ Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* 2.11.21–24, pp. 221–222 Patillon. Cf. Edwards 1994, 10.

and Andocides, before concluding (in the passage cited above) that all these orators were inferior to Demosthenes. Hermogenes' "the rest of the ten orators" thus turn out to be in fact eleven orators, including two Antiphons, but still excluding the superior champion Demosthenes. Eleven plus Demosthenes gives us a total of *twelve* orators. It seems that modern scholars have been misled by Hermogenes' reference to the number "ten" (*On Types of Style* 2.11.21; 2.11.31), so that they have presented Hermogenes' treatise as clear evidence for the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators in the 2nd century.³² On closer inspection, Hermogenes appears to be playing games, extending the list first to eleven and then to twelve orators, thus showing that ten is not a sacred number for him.

What the two passages cited do suggest is that Hermogenes, like Quintilian, is familiar with the notion of "ten orators" and that he expects his readers to be familiar with a list of ten. It is thus plausible that a list of ten orators was proposed by other rhetoricians in the period before Hermogenes composed *On Types of Style*: his references to "the ten" and "the rest of the ten" must be understood as allusions to such a list. But Hermogenes himself does not give us a clear list of ten; he rather turns away from the notion of ten, playfully extending the number first to eleven, and then to twelve. This fact again demonstrates that even if a list of ten orators had been proposed, it was not a fixed and closed canon in Hermogenes' age.

Where, then, do we find an unproblematic version of the Canon of Ten? Harpocration's *Lexicon of the Ten Orators* probably belongs to the same period as Hermogenes' treatise (i.e. the reign of emperor Marcus Aurelius).³³ From roughly the same period we also have a revealing anecdote, which again confirms that 'the ten orators' was a familiar notion in the Second Sophistic (ca. 50–250 CE). When the famous sophist Herodes Atticus, who was the educator of Marcus Aurelius, had completed one of his speeches, the audience praised him, cheerfully calling him 'one of the Ten'. Herodes Atticus reportedly presented a witty answer: "I am surely better than Andocides!"³⁴ Like the passages in Hermogenes' *On Types of Style* mentioned above, Philostratus' story about Herodes Atticus suggests that 'the ten orators' was a common idea in the second half of the 2nd century CE; but it does not mean that the canon was closed: the anecdote rather suggests the opposite, as Herodes Atticus could jokingly challenge Andocides' position in the selection, thereby undermining

32 Wooten 1987, 148; Pernot 2000, 57; Carey 2012, 203; Roisman and Worthington 2015.

33 See Keaney 1991. There were similar lexica by Julianus, Philostratus of Tyrus and Diodorus: see Photius, *Library* 150.

34 Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 564–565. Cf. Pernot 2000, 57–59. Herodes Atticus' reaction confirms that Andocides, while being one of the famous Attic orators, was not as deeply admired as Lysias, Isocrates or Demosthenes.

somehow the status and authority of the list. Pseudo-Plutarch's *Lives of the Ten Orators* should presumably be dated to the 3rd century CE. Photius (9th century) includes an adapted version of Pseudo-Plutarch's treatise, and the Suda (10th century) is also familiar with the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators, as we have seen above. These texts do indeed present a clear list of ten Attic orators.³⁵ It is important however to remember that these works are relatively late (they postdate the Alexandrian scholars, and important authors like Cicero, Dionysius and Quintilian) and that some of the earliest of these authors – including Harpocration and Pseudo-Plutarch – can themselves not be securely dated.

Let me make two general observations that follow from the facts stated so far. First, there is no evidence at all for the existence of the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators before the 1st century BCE, and no *secure* evidence before the second century CE. Even in the 2nd century CE, Hermogenes and Herodes Atticus are playfully departing from the “ten” that their audience is assumed to know. Second, the list of ancient rhetoricians, lexicographers and biographers referring to the Canon is in fact not impressively long, considering the large number of Greek and Latin grammarians and rhetoricians who are not included in Table 8.1: there is no trace of the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators in the works of major authors like Demetrius (the author of *On Style*), Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Longinus: these authors do of course discuss the styles of Attic orators, and some of them present lists or hierarchies of the best orators (as we will see below); but they either do not know or do not accept the list of Ten Attic Orators, or they do not find it interesting enough to mention it.

4 Dating the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators

In the previous section I have presented and examined the ancient evidence for the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators. Interpreting this evidence, modern scholars have proposed different dates for the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators. The four most recent scholarly discussions of the Canon are those of Douglas, Worthington, Smith, and Roisman and Worthington.³⁶

Douglas (1956) has argued, rightly in my view, that there is “no positive evidence for the canon before the 2nd century AD”.³⁷ Worthington (1994) believes

35 For Pseudo-Plutarch and Photius, see Roisman and Worthington 2015.

36 Douglas 1956; Worthington 1994; Smith 1995; Roisman and Worthington 2015.

37 Douglas 1956, 30.

that Caecilius of Caleacte is the author of the Canon. He accepts the evidence in the Suda that Caecilius wrote a treatise *On the Style of the Ten Orators*; and he interprets Quintilian as saying that “in the time of the age of the orators Athens produced *the ten*”.³⁸ He repeats this view in Roisman and Worthington (2015), dating the Canon to the Augustan Age, with Caecilius as its author. Smith (1995) on the other hand argues that the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators originated much earlier, already in the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria. He reminds us that the great grammarian Callimachus included the Attic orators in his *Pinaces* (a sort of library catalogue) and that the Alexandrian scholars wrote commentaries on the orators. According to Smith, the Canon did not belong to the schools of the rhetoricians, who were focusing on the imitation of models in the present and future, but rather to the field of philologists and lexicographers, who were interested in preserving the best literature from the past. This is all circumstantial evidence, of course: the fact that Callimachus produced scholarly works on the orators does not imply that he produced or used a Canon of Ten. The following table (Tab. 8.2) presents the different dates that have been proposed for the emergence of the Canon of Ten Attic Orators:

TABLE 8.2 Dating the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators

Smith 1995	3rd century BCE	Alexandrian scholars
Worthington 1994	1st century BCE	Caecilius of Caleacte
Roisman and Worthington 2015	1st century BCE	Caecilius of Caleacte
Douglas 1956	2nd century CE	Hermogenes of Tarsus (?)

As I have argued above, there is in fact no secure evidence for the Canon of Ten Attic Orators before the 2nd century CE. The existence of a list of ten orators seems to be implied by vague and playful references in Quintilian, Hermogenes, and Philostratus (on Herodes Atticus). But the same texts show that there is no clarity about the names on the list; that the list was not the only one; and that there was much room to disagree (seriously and jokingly) both with the number ten and with the names on the list. Before the 2nd century CE, therefore, there was no closure, hence no real canon.

38 Worthington 1994, 253. My italics.

5 The Flexibility of Ancient Reading Lists

Modern scholars who have studied the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators have concentrated on one question: when was the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators first presented? A better question would actually be: when was the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators closed and generally accepted? As we have seen, the evidence suggests that the Canon was perhaps not that powerful after all, at least not before the 2nd century CE; otherwise it might have been easier to find its traces. A more important question, then, is the following: what role did the Canon (and other reading lists or selections of authors) play in ancient rhetoric and literary criticism? Worthington has argued that the Canon was a “destructive” tool with negative impact:

The selection of the ten orators has proved a disaster for the survival of the works by those who missed out. A disaster not only for the orators affected but also for posterity in that we have no real knowledge of other orators and their talents. (...) Since we have no means to become acquainted with any of the other orators, the destructive nature of the canon is clear.³⁹

I disagree with this statement for three reasons. First, we do actually have knowledge of other orators and their talents: we possess speeches by Gorgias, Antisthenes and Alcidamas, who were not included in the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators.⁴⁰ Second, from one perspective we could regard a canon of *ten* (10) Attic orators as rather generous, especially if we compare this canon with other canons, for example that of the three tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides).⁴¹ We still have three speeches by Dinarchus and three by Andocides, but we have no single tragedy by the important tragedian Agathon. I suppose that many classicists would be very happy if the situation was reversed. Third, the examinations above have suggested that at least for the period up to the 2nd century CE (i.e. for the first five hundred years after Demosthenes) one can seriously doubt that there actually was something like ‘the Canon of Ten Attic Orators’ at all. In reality a number of different lists of orators were proposed, with varying numbers and varying names: these reading lists, which were to guide future orators in their rhetorical education, were competing with each other in a long process of negotiation – but it is hardly helpful to talk about

³⁹ Worthington 1994, 247–249.

⁴⁰ See n. 2 above.

⁴¹ On the origins of the canon of tragedians, see Lardinois and Marx in this volume.

different ‘canons’ here, as they were clearly neither closed nor universally accepted. Douglas has rightly pointed out that we should be careful not to use the term canon with too much fluidity:

We mean by ‘canons’, if we mean anything at all, that when someone referred e.g. to the Ten Orators, all educated people knew who were meant, and that they were the best, or the only, surviving models of that particular genre.⁴²

There is very little evidence for such a clear and fixed canon until the second or 3rd century CE. As we have seen, even those authors who seem to refer to the Canon of Ten Attic Orators are not clear about the names; and someone like Hermogenes, as we have seen, while alluding to “the ten”, himself presents eleven or twelve orators.

Let us compare, then, the different reading lists of Attic orators that were proposed by Greek and Roman rhetoricians between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE (Tab. 8.3):

TABLE 8.3 Reading lists of Attic orators (1st century BCE to 3rd century CE)

Author	Work	Number of orators	Names of the orators listed
Dionysius	<i>On Imitation</i>	6	Lysias, Isocrates, Lycurgus, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides
Dionysius	<i>On the Ancient Orators</i> 4	6 (3 + 3)	Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus; Demosthenes, Hyperides, Aeschines
Quintilian	<i>Institutio oratoria</i> 10.1.76–80	6	Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides, Lysias, Isocrates, Demetrius of Phalerum
Quintilian	<i>Institutio oratoria</i> 12.10.20–24	12	Lysias, Coccus, Andocides, Isocrates, Hyperides, Lycurgus, Aristogeiton, Isaeus, Antiphon, Aeschines, Demosthenes, Pericles

42 Douglas 1956, 31.

TABLE 8.3 Reading lists of Attic orators (1st century BCE to 3rd century CE) (*cont.*)

Author	Work	Number of orators	Names of the orators listed
Dio of Prusa	Discourse 18, <i>On Training</i>	5 (3 + 2)	Hyperides, Aeschines, Lycurgus, although Lysias and Demosthenes are the best
Hermogenes	<i>On Types of Style</i> 2.11	12 (11 + 1)	Lysias, Isaeus, Hyperides, Isocrates, Dinarchus, Aeschines, Antiphon the Rhamnusian, Antiphon the Sophist, Critias, Lycurgus, Andocides, Demosthenes
Pseudo-Plutarch	<i>Lives of the Ten Orators</i>	10	Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, Aeschines, Lycurgus, Demosthenes, Hyperides, Dinarchus

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who came to Rome in 30 BCE, published a number of rhetorical works for Roman students.⁴³ His *On Imitation*, which survives in fragments and an epitome, includes a reading list of those poets, historians, philosophers and rhetoricians which should be read, imitated and emulated by students of rhetoric.⁴⁴ He presents a list of six orators and characterizes their style; they are Lysias, Isocrates, Lycurgus, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides. This list of six differs not only from the Canon of Ten Attic Orators that the Suda attributes to Dionysius' friend and colleague Caecilius of Caleacte (see above, section 3), but it also intriguingly differs from the list of six that Dionysius himself presents in his work *On the Ancient Orators*: the latter work consists of two parts, each containing discussions of three orators: the early orators are Lysias, Isocrates and Isaeus; the later orators are Demosthenes, Hyperides and Aeschines.⁴⁵ Isaeus, in other words, has here taken the place of Lycurgus. We can only guess about the reasons for the change. One possibility is that

43 See above, section 2.

44 Editions by Aujac 1992; Battisti 1997.

45 Edition by Aujac 1978. *On Imitation* was probably Dionysius' earliest work and written before *On the Ancient Orators*: see Bonner 1939, 37.

Dionysius needed Isaeus in his *On the Ancient Orators* because he could be presented as a bridging figure between the two sets of three orators, the early orators and their later successors. Dionysius reports that Isaeus was a pupil of Isocrates and a teacher of Demosthenes, who is in *On the Ancient Orators* portrayed as the very best orator of all times.⁴⁶ Although the precise motivations behind the inclusion of Lycurgus and Isaeus in the two lists is lost to us, the difference between the two selections of six shows that reading lists were flexible and dynamic tools, which could be adapted to the specific audience and the context in which they were presented.⁴⁷

Quintilian's famous reading list of Greek literature in *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.76–80 also has a list of six Attic orators (despite his reference to the 'ten' produced in one age at Athens, see above: section 3).⁴⁸ But here Demetrius of Phalerum (ca. 350–283 BCE) has taken the position of Isaeus and Lycurgus. In preferring Demetrius to Isaeus and Lycurgus, Quintilian may be following Cicero, who admired Demetrius of Phalerum as a statesman and philosopher, who incorporated Plato's ideal of the philosopher-statesman.⁴⁹ Thus Demetrius enters the list of six orators. In the first centuries BCE and CE it would indeed be more suitable to refer to a 'Canon of Six Attic Orators' rather than a 'Canon of Ten Attic Orators', as we have three different lists of six orators, two in Dionysius, one in Quintilian.

In *Institutio oratoria* 12.10.20–24, a lively discussion of the superiority of Attic eloquence, Quintilian mentions the names of twelve Greek orators.⁵⁰ We are not surprised about Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Hyperides, nor about Lycurgus and Isaeus, the two orators who compete for inclusion in the list of six in Dionysius' works (see above). But Demetrius of Phalerum, whom Quintilian includes in the list of *Instituto oratoria* 10.1.80, is absent here; instead we get Antiphon, Andocides, Aristogeiton, Coccus, and Pericles.⁵¹ The latter three, Aristogeiton (4th century BCE), Coccus and Pericles (5th century BCE) are quite unusual in ancient lists, although Pericles is of course universally regarded as one of the best orators of all times. Like Dionysius, Quintilian thus

46 On Dionysius' discussion of Isaeus, see Edwards 2013.

47 Cf. Kennedy 1972, 349: "Different critics and even a single critic at different times apparently had different lists."

48 On Quintilian's reading lists of Greek and Latin literature, see Steinmetz 1964; Citroni 2006b; Schippers 2019.

49 Cicero, *Brutus* 37.

50 See Worthington 1994, 254. This is not so much a 'reading list', as it seems to include authors whose speeches were not accessible to Quintilian.

51 Carey 2012, 204 wrongly states that Quintilian mentions ten orators in *Institutio oratoria* 12.10.20–24: in reporting the orators mentioned by Quintilian Carey ignores Aristogeiton and Pericles.

presents two different lists; and it may be significant that apart from three list of six orators, we now have a list of twelve (two times six).

Dio of Prusa (40–115 AD) needs only three orators: in his 18th discourse, the *Letter on Training for Public Speaking*, he limits his pragmatic reading list to Hyperides, Aeschines and Lysurgus, although he admits that Lysias and Demosthenes are ‘the best’. The explanation for this remarkable selection is that in this letter (which may in fact be an ironical pastiche) Dio is giving practical advice to a wealthy and influential politician (perhaps an emperor) who has no time to work hard or to read a lot of literature.⁵² For this addressee, Dio (18.11) selects only the easiest and the simplest models of oratory:

πλὴν οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ σοι συμβουλεύσαιμι τὰ πολλὰ τούτοις ἐντυγχάνειν, ἀλλ’ Ὑπερείδῃ τε μᾶλλον καὶ Αἰσχίνῃ. τούτων γὰρ ἀπλούστεραί τε αἱ δυνάμεις καὶ εὐληπτότεραι αἱ κατασκευαὶ καὶ τὸ κάλλος τῶν ὀνομάτων οὐδὲν ἐκείνων λειπόμενον. ἀλλὰ καὶ Λυκούργῳ συμβουλεύσαιμι ἂν ἐντυγχάνειν σοι, ἐλαφροτέρῳ τούτων ὄντι καὶ ἐμφαίνοντί τινα ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀπλότητα καὶ γενναιότητα τοῦ τρόπου.

However I should not advise you to read these two chiefly [i.e. Demosthenes and Lysias], but Hyperides rather and Aeschines; for the faculties in which they excel are simpler, their rhetorical embellishments easier to grasp, and the beauty of their diction is no one whit inferior to that of the two who are ranked first [Demosthenes and Lysias]. But I should advise you to read Lysurgus as well, since he has a lighter touch than those others and reveals a certain simplicity and nobility of character in his speeches.

Translation: COHOON

Dio (18.12) goes on to praise several orators of later times: Antipater, Theodorus, Plution, and Conon, who were active in Augustan Age. This is quite a revolutionary addition, given that the traditional rhetorical handbooks limit their discussions to the classical Attic orators. Dio’s unconventional approach again underlines the flexibility of ancient rhetorical reading lists. But his choice was not very influential: Antipater, Theodorus, Plution, and Conon were only briefly allowed to enjoy the status of canonical orators – they were excluded again in later lists.

We have already seen (section 3 above) that Hermogenes of Tarsus seems to be familiar with a list of ten, to which he twice appears to allude. But we have also seen that he himself consciously departs from that list of ten: he

⁵² On Dio of Prusa 18, see Billault 2004; Bost-Pouderon 2008; De Jonge 2022.

distinguishes between two different orators called Antiphon, he adds the Athenian orator and politician Critias (460–403), one of the Thirty Tyrants, and concludes that Demosthenes is by far superior to all of the others. These playful departures from the list of ten thus lead to a list of twelve, which is actually a list of eleven plus the superior Demosthenes. Twelve is two times six – and six was, as we recall, the number embraced by both Dionysius and Quintilian; the latter likewise presents a list of twelve.

Pseudo-Plutarch's *Lives of the Attic Orators*, finally, has an unproblematic list of ten, but let us notice that the order in which he presents the orators differs from all the previous lists that we have seen so far. The order in these lists is usually determined by a combination of factors: chronology, importance and connections between orators who are somehow related (as teacher and student, for example).⁵³ In Pseudo-Plutarch, however, chronology determines the order: Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, Aeschines, Lycurgus, Demosthenes, Hyperides, Dinarchus. We observe that Critias and Demetrius of Phalerum have been silently removed from the list.

The significant differences between the reading lists of Dionysius (twice), Quintilian (twice), Dio, Hermogenes and Pseudo-Plutarch show us a number of things. First, there was evidently no agreement among ancient rhetoricians (up to the 2nd century CE) as to which orators belonged to 'the Canon'. To be sure, the orators in the lists mentioned so far belong to a limited group of orators. With the exception of some of Dio's preferred models, the orators included in the readings lists were all active in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE: classicism is the enduring attempt to canonize 5th and 4th century Athens. If we ignore for a moment Dio's unconventional list (which includes a series of orators of the Augustan Age), we will find that ancient critics did agree concerning some of the members of the Canon: leaving aside Dio's practical reading guide, there is no list that does not include Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Hyperides and Aeschines. But beyond these five canonical "canons", each critic could select his own favorite models of rhetoric.

Second, rhetoricians competed with each other and proposed their own selections of orators, thus contributing to a long and complex process of negotiation. Third, until the 2nd century CE, the number six turns out to be more dominant than the number ten: lists of six and twelve orators are found in Dionysius (6, 6), Quintilian (6, 12) and Hermogenes (12). Finally, and most importantly, the reading lists were different depending on the audience for which they were compiled or the context in which they were presented: Dionysius at one place needs Lycurgus, at another place Isaeus; Quintilian first

53 See Steinmetz 1964; Schippers 2019.

gives a list of six and later mentions twelve names. Dio of Prusa's selection differs from that of all his colleagues, because (as he claims) he is writing for a lazy politician, who has no patience to read Demosthenes or Isocrates. For the period that we have examined (3rd century BCE to 2nd century CE) there is no evidence for the view that the Canon of the Attic Orators had "a destructive nature".⁵⁴ What we do see is an open debate among various authors, who felt free to propose their independent lists and selections. In fact, these lists seem to have had a *productive* nature: they invited comparative criticism, and stimulated colleagues to come up with their own adaptations and versions of the lists in a spirit of healthy competition.

6 From κανών to Canon

Having observed the flexibility of the ancient reading lists, we can now return to the question whether the term 'canon' should be used at all for ancient lists of Attic orators. The modern term 'canon' was introduced for a fixed list of orators in 1768 by David Ruhnken in his *Historia critica oratorum Graecorum*.⁵⁵

Exorti enim sunt duo summo ingenio et singulari doctrina critici, Aristarchus et Aristophanes Byzantus, qui, cum animadvertissent, ingentem scriptorum turbam plus obeisse bonis literis, quam prodesse, suum iudicium secuti, certum omnis generis scriptorum delectum haberent. Itaque ex magna oratorum copia tamquam in canonem decem dumtaxat rettulerunt (...).

For Aristarchus and Aristophanes of Byzantium, two critics of outstanding intellect and extraordinary learning, made their appearance, and, having realized that a great crowd of writers could harm rather than benefit good literature, they carried out a firm review of writers of all kinds, following their own judgement. Therefore, from a great abundance of orators **they brought only ten into the canon (...)**.

Translation: MATIJAŠIĆ 2018, 14

Ruhnken argued, on the basis of two passages in Quintilian, that the Alexandrian scholars Aristophanes and Aristarchus were responsible for the canons of

54 Worthington 1994, 259: see above, section 1.

55 Ruhnken 1768, xciv–xcv (edition of Publius Rutilius Lupus' *De Figuris*). See Pfeiffer 1968, 207. For Ruhnken's influence on the modern understanding of ancient canons, see Matijašić 2018, 23–31.

Greek literature, including that of the ten Attic orators.⁵⁶ In fact, however, Quintilian there only mentions Aristarchus and Aristophanes as the judges of poetry (*poetarum iudices*), and Aristarchus alone as the judge of iambic poetry. Quintilian does not state that the Alexandrian scholars were responsible for the list of Attic orators. Ruhnken claims that Aristarchus and Aristophanes “brought ten orators into the canon” (*in canonem decem dumtaxat rettulerunt*). The terminology that Ruhnken uses here sounds familiar to modern ears, but it departs from the terminology of Quintilian, who uses the words *numerus* (number, rank, class, category) and *ordo* (order, rank, class).

The Greek term *κάνων* does occur in the rhetorical treatises that I have discussed. It there refers to the ‘model’ or ‘standard’ of a particular style or genre.⁵⁷ An ancient canon is thus not a list or a catalogue, but an author or artist whose particular style is presented as useful for imitation and emulation. It is important to conclude this chapter with a few examples of this usage, because the terminological difference between ancient rhetoricians (*κάνων*) and modern scholars (canon) points to a more fundamental issue: it is precisely the multitude of ‘canons’ (plural) that makes the ancient reading lists so dynamic and productive.

The rhetorician who uses the term *κάνων* most frequently is Dionysius of Halicarnassus: I have already referred to his works *On Imitation* and *On the Ancient Orators* (sections 2, 5). The latter work contains separate essays *On Lysias*, *On Isocrates*, *On Isaeus*, and *On Demosthenes*. We can now add his works *On Thucydides* and his *Letter to Pompeius*.⁵⁸ In these works, Dionysius states that the orator Lysias is the “best canon” (*ἄριστος κανών*) of Attic language (*On Lysias* 2.1); he portrays Thucydides as the best “standard and canon” (*ὄρος καὶ κανών*) of the grand style (*On Demosthenes* 1.3). He states that Homer is the “best canon” (*κράτιστος ... κανών*) of the mixed composition style (*On Demosthenes* 41.2). In a systematic comparison (*σύγκρισις*) of the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, he claims that Thucydides is the best “canon” (*κανών*) of the Attic

56 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.54: *Apollonius in ordinem a grammaticis datum non venit, quia Aristarchus atque Aristophanes poetarum iudices neminem sui temporis in numerum redegerunt* (...). “Apollonius does not appear in the grammarians’ list, because Aristarchus and Aristophanes, who evaluated the poets, included none of their own contemporaries (...).” *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.59: *Itaque ex tribus receptis Aristarchi iudicio scriptoribus iamborum ad hexin maxime pertinebit unus Archilochus*. “Thus of the three writers of iambs accepted by Aristarchus’ ruling, Archilochus alone will be particularly relevant to the formation of *hexis*.” Translation: Russell 2001.

57 Rutherford 1998 examines the functions of “canons of style” in the 2nd century CE (esp. in the works of Hermogenes and Pseudo-Aelius Aristides). On the ancient terminology, see also Papadopoulos, this volume.

58 See Bonner 1939; Hunter and De Jonge 2019.

dialect, and Herodotus the best “canon” (κανών) of the Ionic dialect (*Letter to Pompeius* 3.16). According to Dionysius (*On Thucydides* 2) many rhetoricians consider Thucydides the “canon” (κανών) of historiography and deliberative oratory. The writers whom Dionysius lists in his work *On Imitation* are called “good and approved canons” (καλοὶ καὶ δεδοκιμασμένοι κανόνες, *On Thucydides* 1). Plato is the “canon of correct language use” (κανών ὀρθοεπείας) (*On Demosthenes* 26.7). Finally, the term canon (κανών) can not only refer to an author, but also to a text. Thus, Dionysius tells us that many people regard one particular speech by Lysias (about the statue of Iphicrates) as the typical “canon” (κανών) of Lysias’ talent (*On Lysias* 12.2).⁵⁹

The many occurrences of the word ‘canon’ (κανών) in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus cast light on the nature of the ancient Canon of Attic Orators: Dionysius knows that there are numerous models of rhetoric and literature to be imitated and emulated; each model has its own values and qualities. Many of these models are called “the best” (ἄριστος, κρᾶτιστος) canon of a certain style, language or genre, which implies that there are also other (less outstanding) models of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, we should take into account the didactic dimension of these ‘canons’: they are presented as classical Greek models for imitation and emulation by students training to be politicians and rhetoricians in Rome. While the modern terminology of the Canon of Ten Attic Orators focuses on the processes of selectivity and the elimination of models that should be forgotten, the ancient terminology of κανών draws attention to the standard, model, or paradigm that *encourages* artists or writers to produce *new* works, inspiring them to go beyond that which they have found in their books and reading lists.

7 Conclusion

Our survey of the ancient selections and lists of orators has established that, for a very long period, there was no Canon of Ten Attic Orators, but many different, competing selections and reading lists, each of which presented an independent view on what should be remembered from the past. To be sure, some orators were almost always included: Lysias, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Hyperides, and Aeschines. But any other orator could be invited to join these five – as long as he was an Athenian male from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In his important analysis of classicism in ancient literary criticism, James Porter

59 The word ‘canon’ does not occur in Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* book 10. Demetrius, *On Style* 87; 91 uses the term κανών in the sense of “rule” or “criterium”.

has rightly drawn attention to the widely different positions that we find in ancient texts:⁶⁰

Instead of critics presenting a united front, what we find is each critic variously defining his own stance towards the past in a series of acts of self-positioning within a highly contested field. (...) Scanning the field, what we find is not some essential classicism that is everywhere alike but rather a variety of *classicisms*, each differently conceived and for the most part contesting contemporary and predecessor versions.

The variety of lists and selections of orators that we have encountered in this chapter represents indeed a variety of classicisms. Dionysius, Quintilian, Dio of Prusa, Hermogenes, Pseudo-Plutarch and their colleagues all present their own selections of authors from the classical past. What they agree on is that Greek rhetoric is the rhetoric of classical Athens (Dio is the exception here). In focusing on the fifth and fourth centuries BCE of Athens, the ancient critics contribute to the classicizing construction of Greece and Greek culture, which in its turn becomes an important factor in the formation of Roman culture in Imperial Rome. But their versions of Greek rhetoric are all slightly different, thus fueling the debate among critics on the true nature and identity of classical Greek rhetoric.

Scholars have dated the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, and this Canon has been characterized as “destructive”. I have argued that there is no unproblematic evidence for the existence of the Canon of the Ten Attic Orators before the 2nd century CE. More importantly, I hope to have shown that many different competing reading lists were circulating at least until the 2nd century CE, showing different numbers (with a prominent role for the numbers six and twelve rather than ten) and varying names of orators. The lists differed from one author to the other, and even between two works of one rhetorician. The lists were extremely flexible and dynamic, inviting criticism, responses and reactions from other rhetoricians. This open debate on the quality of classical Athenian orators can indeed be characterized as productive rather than destructive. It is useful to remember how the ancient Greek rhetoricians themselves used the term ‘canon’ (κάνων), because it makes clear that rhetorical imitation was a didactic tool, which stimulated students to read, to imitate and to emulate many different models, from which they could learn in order to develop their own, innovative style. Selections of authors and reading lists were indeed the anchors

⁶⁰ Porter 2006b, 50.

of innovation, as canonization always served the purpose of producing new speeches and new works of art.

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L'Arétalogie d'Isis : biographie d'un texte canonique

Laurent Bricault

1 Introduction

Dans le premier livre de sa *Bibliothèque historique*, entièrement consacré à l'Égypte et rédigé entre 43 et 30 av. J.-C., Diodore de Sicile, dans le chapitre 27, s'intéresse à la question des mariages consanguins dans le royaume de pharaon, mariages qui vont, selon lui, à l'encontre de la coutume générale. Mais s'il en est ainsi en Égypte, c'est en raison d'un précédent prestigieux, celui qui a vu la déesse Isis épouser son propre frère, Osiris. À l'appui de ses dires, Diodore cite un texte (a priori complet, mais nous verrons qu'il n'en est rien), rédigé en écriture sacrée (c'est-à-dire en hiéroglyphes¹, ce qui n'est pas exact), qui se dresserait à Nysa, en Arabie, là où, selon certains historiens qui l'ont précédé, se trouverait le tombeau d'Isis et d'Osiris². Cette localisation, surprenante, est probablement conditionnée par le fait que cette Nysa d'Arabie serait à l'origine du nom Nysaios, l'un des noms de Dionysos, rapproché plus ou moins explicitement d'Osiris dans ce passage. Plus tôt, au chapitre 22.2, il rapporte une autre version qui place cette fois le tombeau d'Isis à Memphis, dans une enceinte consacrée sise dans le sanctuaire d'Héphaïstos³, qui n'est autre que

1 L'écriture sacrée égyptienne, ancestrale et vénérable, indéchiffrable et inaccessible, source de savoir et de connaissance pour les initiés ; voir, en contexte isiaque, Apulée, *Métamorphoses* XI.22 (*litteris ignorabilibus*) avec les commentaires de Gwyn Griffiths 1975, 285 et Keulen *et al.* 2015, 379 ; plus généralement, Winand 2013, chap. IV “Les hiéroglyphes après l'Égypte”, 83-115.

2 Burton 1972, 114-116 ; Gustafson 1997.

3 Diod. 1.22.1-2 : Τὴν δὲ Ἴσιν φασι μετὰ τὴν Ὀσίριδος τελευτὴν ὁμόσαι μηδενὸς ἀνδρὸς ἔτι συνουσίαν προσδέξασθαι, διατελέσαι δὲ τὸν λοιπὸν τοῦ βίου χρόνον βασιλεύουσιν νομιμώτατα καὶ ταῖς εἰς τοὺς ἀρχομένους εὐεργεσίαις ἀπαντας ὑπερβαλλομένην. ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ταύτην μεταστᾶσαν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τυχεῖν ἀθανάτων τιμῶν καὶ ταφῆναι κατὰ τὴν Μέμφιν, ὅπου δείκνυται μέχρι τοῦ νῦν ὁ σηκός, ὑπάρχων ἐν τῷ τεμένει τοῦ Ἡφαίστου : Selon ce qu'ils (*i.e.* les prêtres) disent, Isis jura, après la mort d'Osiris, de ne plus souffrir commerce avec aucun homme et elle passa le reste de sa vie à régner tout à fait en conformité avec les lois et à surpasser tout le monde par les bienfaits à l'égard de ses sujets. Semblablement, elle aussi, quand elle quitta la vie, obtint des honneurs immortels et fut ensevelie à Memphis où on montre maintenant encore l'enceinte consacrée qui se trouve dans le sanctuaire d'Héphaïstos. (trad. M. Casevitz, LBL).

celui de Ptah, le démiurge de Memphis, le dieu créateur qui façonna la terre et ses habitants.

Le texte de cette stèle, tel que livré par Diodore (1.27.4), serait le suivant :

Ἐγὼ Ἰσίς εἰμι ἡ βασίλισσα πάσης χώρας, ἡ παιδευθεῖσα ὑπὸ Ἑρμοῦ, καὶ ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐνομοθέτησα, οὐδεὶς αὐτὰ δύναται λῦσαι. Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ τοῦ νεωτάτου Κρόνου θεοῦ θυγάτηρ πρεσβυτάτη· ἐγὼ εἰμι γυνὴ καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὀσίριδος βασιλέως· ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ πρώτη καρπὸν ἀνθρώποις εὐροῦσα· ἐγὼ εἰμι μήτηρ Ὠρου τοῦ βασιλέως· ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἐν τῷ ἄστρῳ τῷ ἐν τῷ κυνὶ ἐπιτέλλουσα· ἐμοὶ Βούβαστος ἡ πόλις ὠκοδομήθη. χαῖρε χαῖρε Αἴγυπτε ἡ θρέψασά με.

Moi je suis Isis, la souveraine de toute contrée, celle qui a été instruite par Hermès ; et toutes les lois que j'ai instituées, nul ne peut les abolir. Moi je suis la fille aînée de Kronos, le plus jeune dieu ; moi je suis l'épouse et la sœur du roi Osiris ; moi je suis celle qui découvrit la première les fruits pour les hommes ; moi je suis la mère du roi Horus ; moi je suis celle qui se manifeste dans l'étoile du Chien ; pour moi, la ville de Boubastis a été édifiée. Salut, salut, Égypte, toi qui m'as élevée.

La citation de ce texte, chez Diodore, est suivie par celle d'un second texte, qui concerne cette fois Osiris et sur lequel je reviendrai en conclusion.

En 1925, lors de fouilles menées à Kymè, en Éolide, sur la côte égéenne de l'Asie Mineure, le savant tchèque Antonin Salač découvrit, dans ce qu'il a supposé avec vraisemblance être un temple d'Isis, une stèle, aujourd'hui au musée d'Izmir, portant deux inscriptions rédigées en grec : une dédicace adressée à Isis, d'abord, qui sert d'introduction à un long texte, complet semble-t-il, structuré en une cinquantaine de versets, qui est l'objet central de cette contribution⁴. C'est ce texte que l'historiographie du xx^e siècle a pris l'habitude de nommer l'*Arétalogie d'Isis*, le plus souvent avec un "A" majuscule⁵, et dont Diodore – ou sa source – a transmis une version tronquée.

Mais la stèle de Kymè et Diodore ne sont pas les seuls à nous avoir conservé ce texte. On connaît aujourd'hui quatre autres copies, fragmentaires, de l'arétalogie d'Isis, au contenu quasiment identique, presque au mot près :

4 Salač 1927 ; cf. Bouzek *et al.* 1980, 59 et pl. 39. On trouvera *infra* p. 254-257 le texte grec et une traduction en français de celui-ci.

5 Parmi les nombreuses republications plus ou moins richement commentées de ce texte, on verra Roussel 1929 ; *IG* XII Suppl., p. 98-9 ; Harder 1943-1944, 20-1 ; Grant 1953, 131-3 ; *I.Kyme* 97-108 n° 41 et pl. XI ; Totti 1985, 1-4 n° 1 ; Merkelbach 1995, 115-8 ; Beard *et al.* 1998, vol. 2, 297-298 n° 12.4a ; Streete 2000 ; *RICIS* 302/0204 (ph) ; Muñiz Grijalvo 2006, 73-98.

deux proviennent de Thessalonique⁶ et Kassandreia⁷ en Macédoine, une de l'île d'Ios⁸ dans les Cyclades, et la dernière – encore inédite – de Telmessos en Lycie⁹. Ce sont donc six copies du même texte, cinq gravées sur pierre et la sixième transmise par la tradition littéraire, qui sont désormais connues. L'ambition de cette étude est d'en brosser, en quelques pages, la biographie¹⁰.

2 Le texte et ses enjeux

L'aréologie ainsi développée semble pouvoir être décomposée en trois parties principales : l'introduction de la divinité elle-même, avec sa filiation, son identification, presque son "livret de famille" ; les domaines d'action qui sont les siens dans les mondes divin et humain ; enfin, les diverses manifestations de son universelle puissance¹¹.

Pour ce faire, le ou les auteurs de ce texte ont combiné le fond et la forme, pour le rendre le plus efficace possible, dans l'optique, l'intention, l'objectif qui étaient les leurs. L'aréologie d'Isis apparaît ainsi comme la résultante d'une formalisation volontaire, active et en partie novatrice d'une tradition littéraire égyptienne ancienne¹², celle de l'autobiographie laudative, dont la littérature d'époque pharaonique nous a fait connaître un certain nombre d'exemples et qui voit telle ou telle divinité faire état de ses qualités, de ses compétences et de ses bienfaits pour les hommes, à la première personne du singulier¹³.

La principale difficulté pour les auteurs du texte originel consista à faire coexister les puissances multiples d'Isis, considérée comme la responsable de tous les aspects de la vie humaine, avec celles des divinités du panthéon gréco-romain qui possédaient déjà chacune leur(s) propre(s) sphère(s) de

6 IG X 2, 254 = *RICIS* 113/0545 : I^{er}-II^e s. apr. J.-C. ; 17 lignes correspondant à 24 versets sont partiellement conservées.

7 Veligianni & Kousoulakou 2008 ; *RICIS* Suppl. I, 113/1201 : II^e s. apr. J.-C. ; 17 lignes correspondant aux 18 premiers versets sont conservées.

8 IG XII 5, 14 = *RICIS* 202/1101 : II^e-III^e s. apr. J.-C., qui donne la première moitié de l'aréologie.

9 Inédit ; cf. *RICIS* 306/0201 : époque romaine ; les premières lignes de l'aréologie sont gravées sur la partie supérieure d'une stèle brisée à hauteur du verset 4.

10 Sur le concept de biographie culturelle, voir la mise au point de van Eck *et al.* 2015 ; pour son application aux *Aegyptiaca*, Versluys 2015.

11 Parmi les multiples études consacrées à ce texte, mentionnons Festugière 1949 ; Müller 1961 ; Bergman 1968 avec la réponse de Müller 1972 ; Henrichs 1984 ; Dousa 2002 ; Quack 2003 ; Jördens 2013.

12 Une réalisation qui peut aisément être qualifiée d'*anchored innovation*.

13 Comparer avec Lambert 1999 ; cf. dans ce volume xxx.

compétence(s). Pour élaborer ce texte, il fut donc nécessaire de combiner à la fois des éléments distinctifs issus de la longue sédimentation des compétences d'Isis dans la vallée du Nil, au contact de divinités égyptiennes ou autres, mais aussi des éléments de rupture, nouveaux, qui apparaissent pour la première fois dans ce texte. L'arétalogie se présente donc comme un produit hybride qui mélange, dans une structure parfois surprenante pour un esprit cartésien – mais nécessaire pour conserver au texte une apparence fondamentalement non grecque et, ce faisant, lui conférer authenticité, vénérabilité et donc autorité –, des caractères égyptiens traditionnels (sa généalogie, ses liens avec le Nil et la ville de Bubastis), des pouvoirs traduits pour une audience grecque (son pouvoir sur le destin, ses qualités de thesmophore) et des compétences inédites propres à séduire de nouvelles populations (l'élimination des tyrans, l'invention de la navigation)¹⁴.

Au final, Isis, à qui les concepteurs ont prêté leur calame, comme les paroliers d'une chanson à succès, y livre un condensé de ses multiples pouvoirs. Un condensé parce que ce texte ne pouvait être trop long, ni trop bref pour être véritablement efficace. Il a donc fallu opérer une sélection d'informations permettant à la déesse de se définir le mieux – c'est-à-dire de la manière la plus efficiente et performante, faute de pouvoir tout dire. Elle s'y dépeint donc comme une déesse souveraine, solaire, démiurge, maîtresse des éléments, législatrice, protectrice des humains en toute circonstance, inventrice de bienfaits nombreux (écriture, langues, temples, mystères, navigation, commerce), la déesse par excellence des femmes, incarnation de la fonction maternelle, protectrice des naissances, du foyer et des récoltes, garante de l'amour et du respect entre les hommes et les femmes, entre les parents et les enfants et, aussi – voire surtout –, maîtresse du destin. On observera que sa maîtrise de la magie, comme sa ruse tant célébrée dans les textes égyptiens, n'apparaissent pas ici, probablement en raison de la défiance des Grecs à cet égard¹⁵.

L'existence d'un tel texte invite d'emblée à s'interroger sur son contexte d'apparition.

3 Contexte d'apparition

Quatre questions principales se posent pour déterminer le contexte d'apparition de l'arétalogie : quand, où, par la volonté de qui, et rédigée par qui ?

14 Sur le concept d'*interpretatio*, Ando 2005 ; Versluys 2013 ; Colin *et al.* 2015 ; Pfeiffer 2015 ; Bettini 2016.

15 Voir Gasparini & Gordon 2014.

Déterminer la date n'est pas aisé. Il est nécessaire de combiner éléments objectifs et subjectifs, au risque d'un raisonnement circulaire. Le texte originel est antérieur à la rédaction du livre premier de Diodore, donc à 43-30 av. J.-C., mais la *Quellenforschung* n'a pas permis de déterminer quelle source Diodore utilisa pour ce passage. Certes, Diodore a pu lire le texte qu'il livre chez l'une ou l'autre de ses sources qui, en ce qui concerne les *Aegyptiaca*, furent certainement Hécatee d'Abdère, Agatharchide de Cnide ainsi peut-être qu'Artémidore d'Éphèse¹⁶. Mais le simple fait que l'arétalogie ait été diffusée assez largement n'interdit pas de penser qu'il ait pu la rencontrer lui-même au cours de ses voyages.

Cette date peut toutefois être remontée d'au moins un siècle. Lors de labours, en 1969, on découvrit à Maronée, en Thrace, dans un champ jamais fouillé scientifiquement, mais d'où furent exhumés sporadiquement d'autres inscriptions relatives au culte d'Isis, un poème laudatif destiné à remercier Isis d'avoir guéri l'ophtalmie du rédacteur¹⁷. La structure du poème en forme d'arétalogie rédigée cette fois à la deuxième personne du singulier, composé vers 120 av. J.-C., présente de nombreux traits communs avec l'Arétalogie d'Isis. Celle-ci est donc très certainement antérieure à la fin du 11^e s. av. J.-C. Voilà pour les éléments objectifs.

Où fut-elle initialement rédigée ? Si le texte lui-même n'apporte aucun élément, les dédicaces qui le précèdent, lorsqu'elles sont conservées, sont plus suggestives.

Texte de Kassandreia (*RICIS* 113/1201) :

Ἀγαθῇ Τύχῃ. / Διὶ Ἑλίῳ Σαράπιδι καὶ Ἰσιδι μυριωνύμῳ. / Τάδε ἐγράφη ἐκ
τῆς στήλης τῆς ἐν Μέμφει, / ἥτις ἔστηκεν πρὸς τῷ Ἑφαιστείῳ·

À la Bonne Fortune. À Zeus Soleil Sarapis et Isis myrionyme. Ceci a été copié d'une stèle de Memphis, qui se trouve près du temple d'Héphaïstos.

Texte de Kymè (*RICIS* 302/0204) :

Δημήτριος Ἀρτεμιδώρου ὁ καὶ Θρασέας Μάγνη[ς] / ἀπὸ Μαϊάνδρου Ἰσιδι
εὐχὴν· / Τάδε ἐγράφη ἐκ τῆς στήλης τῆς ἐν Μέμφει, ἥτις/ς ἔστηκεν πρὸς τῷ
Ἑφαιστιῳ·

16 Burton 1972, 1-34 ; Chamoux 1993, xxiii.

17 Grandjean 1975, 17-21 ; Totti 1985, 60-1 n° 19 ; *RICIS* 114/0202 ; Loukopoulou *et al.* 2005, 383-5 n° E205.

Démétrios, fils d'Artémidôros, appelé aussi Thraséas, de Magnésie sur le Méandre (adresse) une prière à Isis. Ceci a été copié d'une stèle de Memphis, qui se trouve près du temple d'Héphaïstos.

Texte de Telmessos (*RICIS* 306/0201) :

[–] stèle de Memphis, élevée près du temple d'Héphaïstos.

Qu'une stèle ait été ou non réellement érigée à Memphis, dans un sanctuaire lié à la supposée tombe d'Isis et situé à proximité du grand temple de Ptah (ici mentionné sous le nom d'Héphaïstos), c'est ce que paraît suggérer également le passage de Diodore (1.22) évoqué *supra*. Il semble donc que le texte qui a circulé et servi à graver les copies que nous connaissons ait comporté, à l'incipit, une phrase indiquant l'origine officiellement attribuée à l'original : Memphis, près du temple de Ptah.

Quels ont alors pu être le ou les commanditaires de l'aréalogie, ainsi que son ou ses rédacteurs ?

La cristallisation de tous les éléments composant l'aréalogie, mentionnés *supra*, doit correspondre à une stratégie d'écriture conditionnée par les enjeux et les objectifs des commanditaires et des auteurs, à savoir présenter la déesse, ses champs d'action, ses puissances, à un public hellénophone qui ne la connaît peut-être pas, ou pas suffisamment, afin d'accompagner et de renforcer ses premiers pas *ex Aegypto*. Si Memphis est bien le lieu d'origine et de conception de l'aréalogie, le clergé local de la déesse pourrait bien en être l'auteur¹⁸. Un clergé memphite qui, en compétition avec le clergé thébain de Zeus-Ammon, semble avoir pris le pas sur ce dernier au cours du III^e s. av. J.-C. dans le partenariat qui s'est mis en place entre le pouvoir politique gréco-macédonien et les élites religieuses égyptiennes, comme le suggèrent les différents décrets royaux datant de la seconde moitié de ce siècle et du tout début du II^e. Devenu l'un des – sinon le – partenaire religieux privilégié du pouvoir lagide, maîtrisant parfaitement les deux cultures, grecque et égyptienne, le clergé isiaque de Memphis aura conçu un texte destiné à promouvoir le culte de sa déesse auprès des non-Égyptiens, selon un procédé théologique inconnu jusqu'alors en Égypte, la rédaction d'une aréalogie à la première personne dans une langue qui n'est *pas* l'égyptien.

18 L'introduction du culte de Sarapis sur l'île de Délos est due à un prêtre du nom d'Apollonios, dont l'origine memphite est clairement affirmée, voire revendiquée, que cela soit vrai ou non ; *RICIS* 202/0101 ; Moyer 2011, 142-207.

4 Validation et affichage

Mais rédiger un texte dans le scriptorium d'un temple est une chose. Le diffuser largement en est une autre. Plusieurs étapes sont nécessaires pour transformer un texte unique en un texte multiple, à commencer par sa validation. Deux hypothèses peuvent être envisagées :

- 1- Soit le commanditaire et le concepteur/rédacteur sont une même personne ou un même groupe de personnes.
- 2- Soit le commanditaire diffère du concepteur/rédacteur.

Dans le premier cas, la validation par une autorité extérieure ne s'impose pas et la diffusion peut s'avérer totalement fortuite, suite à l'affichage du texte dans l'espace (public voire privé) du sanctuaire-source.

Dans le second cas, qui semble a priori le plus probable si l'on admet la grande vraisemblance d'une composition ayant pour objectif de présenter Isis à une population hellénophone, le texte a dû être validé par le commanditaire avant d'essaimer. Ce commanditaire a pu être le supérieur du sanctuaire-source, l'un des Ptolémées ou, plutôt, l'un des titulaires de la grande-prêtrise de Ptah, réintroduite par Ptolémée II dans le deuxième quart du III^e s. av. J.-C.¹⁹, à savoir Esisout-Petobastis ou son fils Annôs, premier prophète responsable des prêtres de tous les temples d'Égypte, responsable des insignes royaux (et donc probablement du couronnement du roi en tant que pharaon) ainsi que du culte d'Apis à Memphis²⁰.

L'affichage du texte sur une stèle gravée dans le sanctuaire memphite d'Isis s'imposait alors logiquement.

5 Diffusion et circulation

Commanditée, conçue, rédigée, validée, affichée, l'aréologie d'Isis devait ensuite être mise en circulation pour atteindre l'objectif fixé. Les modalités de la probable diffusion initiale du texte nous échappent a priori totalement,

19 Sur les relations entre les Lagides et les grands prêtres de Memphis, Thompson 2012, qui montre bien le pouvoir grandissant du clergé memphite dès le début du II^e s. av. J.-C. ; voir aussi Quaegebeur 1980 ; Thompson 1990 ; Huß 2000 ; Gorre 2003, 33-4 ; Gorre 2009, 605-22 ; Gorre 2013, 104-5.

20 Agut-Labordère & Gorre 2014, 41-4. Cette création est contemporaine de la réunion de synodes nationaux, à Alexandrie, Memphis, Canope, etc. Sur le sens et les implications de ces décrets, on verra notamment, pour celui d'Alexandrie, essentiellement Kayser 2012 ; pour le décret de Canope, Daumas 1952 ; Pfeiffer 2004 ; enfin, pour le décret de Memphis, Leclant & Valbelle 1999 ; Nespoulous-Phalippou 2015.

aucune copie n'étant antérieure au milieu du 1^{er} s. av. J.-C. Ce hiatus temporel entre le III^e et le 1^{er} s. av. J.-C. invite à s'interroger sur l'évolution même du contenu du texte. Celui que nous connaissons aujourd'hui et que nous reproduisons à l'envi dans nos publications scientifiques est-il bien celui rédigé à l'origine, en grec ? Ou bien le texte originel a-t-il connu des transformations, des retouches, des amendements avant de se stabiliser à un moment quelconque ? Force est d'avouer que nous l'ignorons, faute d'éléments concluants et de balises chronologiques assurées pour l'affirmer. Nonobstant cette incertitude, le mode opératoire utilisé doit être questionné.

Peut-on envisager, à partir de Memphis, une diffusion concertée et centralisée du texte transcrit sur un ou plusieurs papyrus dont aucun ne nous a pour le moment été conservé ? Ou bien supposer une circulation aléatoire du texte, au gré d'initiatives personnelles et de circonstances propices ?

La seconde option est sans doute à privilégier, la probabilité d'un réseau institutionnalisé et structuré autour d'une autorité centrale (égyptienne) n'étant guère envisageable. Le réseau qui a facilité la diffusion et la circulation du texte était sans doute relativement informel²¹, organisé sur la base de relations humaines ou matérielles ayant existé entre des communautés locales de dévots – ou des individus appartenant à ces communautés –, dont on sait aujourd'hui qu'elles étaient généralement organisées différemment les unes des autres, mais reliées entre elles par des éléments communs, notamment rituels et liturgiques²². Cette glocalisation dans l'espace méditerranéen d'époque gréco-romaine, qui n'appartient pas aux seules communautés isiaques, combinait réalités locales (organisation des espaces, calendrier des fêtes et cérémonies, pratiques rituelles, identités communautaires) et éléments fédérateurs (panthéon, référents mythologiques, discours sur la puissance divine) dont la cohérence a dû être facilitée par la diffusion d'un texte commun comme l'arétalogie.

Les copies préservées de l'arétalogie proviennent toutes de sites côtiers de l'espace égéen, ce qui peut n'être qu'une coïncidence liée au hasard des trouvailles, mais peut aussi suggérer combien les réseaux maritimes ont pu faciliter la circulation du texte. Ces copies, quasiment identiques sur le fond, le sont aussi sur le plan formel – et visuel –, comme nous allons le voir. Ceci implique que la circulation du texte arétalogue s'est opérée sous forme écrite et non par transmission orale. La longueur du texte suggère fortement que le ou les

21 Sur ces réseaux de diffusion, Eidinow 2011 ; sur le modèle théorique, en réalité bien fragile, des réseaux appliqué aux idées religieuses à l'époque impériale, Collar 2013.

22 Bricault 2014 et Arnautoglou 2018 pour les associations de Sarapiastes, par exemple.

supports utilisés furent plutôt le papyrus ou tout autre support mobile, plutôt que des stèles de pierre de plusieurs dizaines de kilos.

6 Réception et transmission

Probablement diffusé sur papyrus ou sur un support aisément transportable, le texte aréologique fut ensuite gravé sur pierre à l'initiative de personnes privées (Démétrios, fils d'Artémidôros, appelé aussi Thraséas, de Magnésie sur le Méandre, pour celui de Kymè, un dédicant anonyme à Kassandreia et Telmessos)²³ et exposé dans des contextes qu'il est parfois possible de déterminer.

À Kymè, à Thessalonique, les stèles portant le texte proviennent d'un sanctuaire isiaque. Pour Kassandreia et Telmessos, le contexte archéologique n'est pas clairement identifié. Concernant Ios, la pierre fut réemployée dans une église chrétienne. Tout porte cependant à croire que ces cinq stèles furent érigées, initialement, dans des sanctuaires isiaques.

Une autre question se pose, celle de la chronologie, aucun des cinq monuments n'étant antérieur au début de l'Empire. La copie d'Ios, paléographiquement, appartient même certainement au III^e s. apr. J.-C., c'est-à-dire au moins 400 ans après la rédaction première du texte. Plusieurs hypothèses, qui ne s'excluent pas nécessairement, peuvent être avancées pour expliquer cette situation.

- 1- Il peut s'agir de regravures *in situ* de stèles anciennes usées, gravées antérieurement à partir d'un texte écrit sur un support mobile qui aura connu une circulation assez large mais peut-être limitée dans le temps, à l'époque hellénistique ;
- 2- il peut s'agir aussi de copies ou de re-copies à partir d'une stèle gravée vue dans un autre site, via une transcription sur papyrus, à quelque époque que ce soit ;
- 3- il peut enfin s'agir – même si cela semble moins probable – de gravures étalées dans le temps, opérées à partir de textes écrits sur des papyrus ayant circulé de temple en temple pendant plusieurs siècles.

Quoi qu'il en soit, il est remarquable que la mise en page des cinq copies inscrites soit identique. Certes, la longueur des lignes varie d'une stèle à l'autre, mais chaque lapicide a systématiquement respecté les espaces ou les points

23 La ou les premières lignes du texte d'Ios (RICIS 202/1101) manquent, tout comme le début du texte de Thessalonique (RICIS 113/0545).

d'interpunction séparant les unités de sens révélées par la déesse, selon un principe courant dans les papyrus²⁴.

7 Canonisation

Arrivé à ce point de mon propos, il semble utile de rappeler certains éléments :

- 1- Nous connaissons aujourd'hui six copies (cinq sur pierre, une littéraire), fragmentaires pour cinq d'entre elles, d'un même texte, identiques à quelques détails près (un mot ou un verset omis ici ou là). Ces copies sont à dater du milieu du I^{er} s. av. J.-C. au III^e s. apr. J.-C. ; l'original, lui, date du III^e ou du II^e s. av. J.-C.
- 2- Ces copies proviennent de sites côtiers de l'espace égéen, assurément d'un sanctuaire isiaque pour deux d'entre elles.
- 3- Ce texte a donné naissance à des adaptations poétiques rédigées dans des contextes particuliers, dont par exemple la guérison d'une ophtalmie par la toute puissante Isis.
- 4- Lorsque la partie supérieure de la stèle inscrite est conservée, le texte proprement dit de l'arétalogie est précédé d'une dédicace qui précise à chaque fois que le texte d'origine est gravé sur une stèle qui s'élève à Memphis.
- 5- Enfin, les copies partagent une même mise en page formelle, d'origine papyrologique, strictement retranscrite lors de la gravure sur pierre, par respect pour le texte d'origine.

Tous ces éléments me semblent converger vers l'idée que l'arétalogie d'Isis, conçue à Memphis pour présenter Isis à des populations non-égyptiennes et hellénophones lorsque le culte de la déesse s'en est allé se répandre dans le bassin méditerranéen oriental, est devenu, sans doute assez tôt, un texte-référent, repris à l'identique dans ses termes comme dans sa forme, jusqu'au moins au III^e s. de notre ère. La volonté claire de le transmettre tel quel, sans aucune modification, atteste du caractère canonique qui lui fut attribué par un certain nombre de communautés isiaques, donnant même naissance à des textes dérivés (Maronée, Andros). Le texte a dû être conservé dans de très nombreuses bibliothèques de temples, sur papyrus, et avoir été occasionnellement, lors d'un acte de reconnaissance ou par évergétisme, gravé sur pierre à l'initiative d'un dévot²⁵. Nous connaissons aujourd'hui cinq de ces monuments. Le caractère ancestral du texte, réaffirmé à chaque fois comme provenant du

²⁴ Moyer 2017a, 326-35.

²⁵ Comparer Wagman 2013.

sanctuaire memphite de la déesse, la mise en forme spécifique, distincte de celle des hymnes grecs hexamétriques ou élégiaques, systématiquement respectée, vont dans ce même sens d'une forme de sacralité, de vénérabilité, d'authenticité première de cet écrit rédigé en grec, mais fondamentalement lié aux origines égyptiennes de la déesse, comme le rappelle d'ailleurs sa généalogie initiale. Ce faisant, par son essence même, l'objet intellectuel et identitaire qu'est l'aréologie d'Isis s'extrait d'une certaine manière de la religion égyptienne traditionnelle pour accompagner l'évolution et la transformation d'Isis *ex Aegypto* et s'affirmer, sans doute, comme une forme de doxa isiaque propre à former et à orienter les nouveaux adeptes du culte de la déesse.

Il est alors plus que probable que ce texte eut une valeur rituelle dans un grand nombre de sanctuaires isiaques. Lu, récité, interprété lors de certaines cérémonies difficiles à déterminer²⁶, il a dû fonctionner pour les personnes présentes comme un condensé mémoriel des puissances d'Isis, déesse originaire d'Égypte, et de ses bienfaits pour l'humanité tout entière. C'est probablement dans ce cadre que les dévots ayant dédié les stèles de Kymè, de Kassandreia et de Telmessos ont eu connaissance de l'aréologie, à l'origine un discours publicitaire et mémoriel volontaire, devenu bientôt un discours identitaire à même de structurer les communautés isiaques qui se créaient et se développaient sur le pourtour du bassin méditerranéen. Cette dimension identitaire, cette dynamique positive de création, de développement, d'expansion doit en grande partie justifier le choix de certains dévots de faire graver sur pierre, précisément, ce texte fondamental, ce texte-référent devenu presque texte-fondateur, afin de l'inscrire dans la durée – quitte à le faire re-graver si besoin était, et de l'afficher au vu et au su de tous, et pas seulement de ceux participant directement aux rituels à l'occasion desquels le texte aréologique devait être "performé".

8 Conclusion

Je terminerai par une réflexion en creux, en négatif. Chez Diodore, l'extrait de l'aréologie d'Isis est suivi d'une seconde citation, qui concerne cette fois Osiris²⁷. Contrairement à l'aréologie d'Isis, nous ne connaissons aucun autre

²⁶ Martzavou 2012, part. 276-86.

²⁷ "Πατήρ μὲν ἐστὶ μοι Κρόνος νεώτατος θεῶν ἀπάντων, εἰμὶ δὲ Ὀσίρις ὁ βασιλεὺς, ὁ στρατεύσας ἐπὶ πάσαν χώραν ἕως εἰς τοὺς ἀοικητούς τόπους τῶν Ἰνδῶν καὶ τοὺς πρὸς ἄρκτον κεκλιμένους, μέχρι Ἰστρου ποταμοῦ πηγῶν, καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὰλλα μέρη ἕως ὠκεανοῦ. εἰμὶ δὲ υἱὸς Κρόνου πρεσβύτατος, καὶ βλαστὸς ἐκ καλοῦ τε καὶ εὐγενοῦς φύου σπέρμα συγγενὲς ἐγεννήθην ἡμέρας. καὶ οὐκ ἐστὶ τόπος τῆς οἰκουμένης εἰς ὃν ἐγὼ οὐκ ἀφῖγμαι, διαδοὺς πᾶσιν ὧν ἐγὼ εὐρετὴς ἐγενόμην."

exemplaire sur pierre ou sur papyrus de l'aréalogie d'Osiris. S'agit-il d'un texte dont l'existence n'a pu être confirmée pour le moment par hasard des trouvailles, ce qui, en toute rigueur, ne peut être exclu ? S'agit-il d'un texte ayant réellement existé mais dont le parcours a été stoppé, quelque part entre sa validation et sa réception dans les sanctuaires isiaques de Méditerranée ? Ou bien s'agit-il d'une composition de circonstance élaborée par Diodore, ou sa source, pour faire pendant à l'aréalogie d'Isis ?

Quelle que soit la réponse, force est de constater, a contrario, le destin exceptionnel de l'aréalogie d'Isis. Si, en règle générale et en matière de religion, les groupes de textes définis comme canoniques s'apparentent à une liste réduite d'écrits en fonction de critères particuliers, le canon est ici poussé à l'extrême puisqu'il se résume à un unique texte d'une cinquantaine de versets. D'une certaine manière, si les isiaques ne font assurément pas partie des peuples du Livre, ils sont les dignes représentants de celui du Texte. L'aréalogie d'Isis mérite alors sans doute son "A" majuscule.

Appendice

Le texte de Kymè

1 Δημήτριος Ἀρτεμιδώρου ὁ καὶ Θρασέας Μάγνη[ς]
ἀπὸ Μαιάνδρου Ἰσιδι εὐχὴν·

- 2 Τάδε ἐγράφη ἐκ τῆς στήλης τῆς ἐν Μέμφει, ἥτι-
ς ἔστηκεν πρὸς τῷ Ἑφαιστίῳ· 3a Εἰς ἐγὼ εἰ-
5 μι ἡ τύραννος πάσης χώρας· 3b καὶ ἐπαιδεύθεν ὑπ[ὸ]
Ἑρμοῦ καὶ 3c γράμματα εὖρον μετὰ Ἑρμοῦ, τὰ τε ἱερὰ
καὶ τὰ δημόσια γράμματα, ἵνα μὴ ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς
πάντα γράφηται. 4 Ἐγὼ νόμους ἀνθρώποις ἐθέμην,
καὶ ἐνομοθέτησα ἃ οὐθεὶς δύναται μεταθεῖναι.
10 5 Ἐγὼ εἰμι Κρόνου θυγάτηρ πρεσβυτάτη. 6 Ἐγὼ εἰμι γ[υ]-
νή καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὀσερίδος βασιλέως. 7 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ καρπὸν
ἀνθρώποις εὐρούσα. 8 Ἐγὼ εἰμι μήτηρ Ὠρου βασιλέως.
9 Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἐν τῷ τοῦ Κυνὸς ἄστρῳ ἐπιτέλλουσα. 10 Ἐγὼ
εἰμι ἡ παρὰ γυναιξὶ θεὸς καλουμένη. 11 Ἐμοὶ Βούβαστος
15 πόλις ᾠκοδομήθη. 12 Ἐγὼ ἐχώρισα γῆν ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ.
13 Ἐγὼ ἄστρον ὁδοῦς ἔδειξα. 14 Ἐγὼ ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης[ς]
πορέαν συνεταξάμην. 15 Ἐγὼ θαλάσσια ἔργα εὖρον. 16 Ἐ-
γὼ τὸ δίκαιον ἰσχυρὸν ἐποίησα. 17 Ἐγὼ γυναῖκα καὶ ἄνδρα
συνήγαγον. 18 Ἐγὼ γυναικὶ δεκαμηνιαῖον βρέφος εἰς

- 20 φῶς ἐξεγενεῖν ἔταξα. 19 Ἐγὼ ὑπὸ τέκνου γονεῖς
 ἐνομοθέτησα φιλοστοργίσθαι. 20 Ἐγὼ τοῖς ἀστόρ-
 γ(ω)ς γονεῦσιν διακειμένοις τειμω(ρ)ίαν ἐπέθηκα.
 21 Ἐγὼ μετὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ Ὀσίριδος τὰς ἀνθρωποφα-
 γίας ἔπαυσα. 22 Ἐγὼ μυήσεις ἀνθρώποις ἐπέδε[ι]-
 25 ξα. 23 Ἐγὼ ἀγάλματα θεῶν τειμᾶν ἐδίδαξα. 24 Ἐγὼ
 τεμένη θεῶν ἰδρυσάμην. 25 Ἐγὼ τυράννων ἀρ-
 χὰς κατέλυσα. 26 Ἐγὼ φόνους ἔπαυσα. 27 Ἐγὼ στέρ-
 γεσθαι γυναῖκας ὑπὸ ἀνδρῶν ἡνάγκασα. 28 Ἐγὼ
 τὸ δίκαιον ἰσχυρότερον χρυσίου καὶ ἀργυρίου ἐποίη-
 30 σα. 29 Ἐγὼ τὸ ἀληθὲς καλὸν ἐνομο[θέ]τησα νομίζε[σ]-
 θαι. 30 Ἐγὼ συγγραφὰς γαμικὰς εὗρον. 31 Ἐγὼ διαλέκτους
 Ἑλλήσι καὶ βαρβάρους ἔταξα. 32 Ἐγὼ τὸ καλὸν αἰσχρο[ν]
 διαγεινώσκεσθαι ὑπὸ τῆς φύσεως ἐποίησα. 33 Ἐγὼ
 ὄρκου φοβερώτερον οὐθέν ἐποίησα. 34 Ἐγὼ τὸν ἀδίκως
 35 ἐπιβουλεύοντα ἄλλοις {ἄλλω} ὑποχείριον τῷ ἐπιβου-
 [λ]ευομένῳ παρέδωκα. 35 Ἐγὼ τοῖς ἄδικοις πράσσουσιν
 τειμωρίαν ἐπιτίθην. 36 Ἐγὼ ἰκέτας ἐλεᾶν ἐνομοθ[έ]-
 τησα. 37 Ἐγὼ τοὺς δικαίως ἀμυνομένους τειμῶ. 38 Πά-
 ρ' ἐμοὶ τὸ δίκαιον ἰσχύει. 39 Ἐγὼ ποταμῶν καὶ ἀνέμων
 40 [κ]αὶ θαλάσσης εἰμί κυρία. 40 Οὐθεὶς δοξάζεται ἄνεν τῆς ἐ-
 μῆς γνώμης. 41 Ἐγὼ εἰμι πολέμου κυρία. 42 Ἐγὼ κεραυ-
 νοῦ κυρία εἰμί. 43 Ἐγὼ πραῦνω καὶ κυμαίνω θάλασσαν.
 44 Ἐγὼ ἐν ταῖς τοῦ ἡλίου αὐγαῖς εἰμί. 45 Ἐγὼ παρεδρεῦω τῇ
 τοῦ ἡλίου πορείᾳ. 46 Ὁ ἄν ἐμοὶ δόξη, τοῦτο καὶ τελεῖται[ι].
 45 47 Ἐμοὶ πάντ' ἐπέκει. 48 Ἐγὼ τοὺς ἐν δεσμοῖς λύω. 49 Ἐγὼ
 ναυτιλίας εἰμί κυρία. 50 Ἐγὼ τὰ πλωτὰ ἄπλωτα ποι[ῶ] ὅ]-
 ταν ἐμοὶ δόξη. 51 Ἐγὼ περιβόλους πόλεων ἔκτισα. 52 Ἐ-
 γὼ εἰμι ἡ Θεσμοφόρος καλουμένη. 53 Ἐγὼ ν(ή)σους ἐγ β[υ]-
 [θ]ῶν εἰς φῶ(ς) ἀνήγαγον. 54 Ἐγὼ ὄμβρων εἰμί κυρία. 55 Ἐγὼ
 50 τὸ ἱμαρμένον νικῶ. 56 Ἐμοῦ τὸ εἰμαρμένον ἀκούει.
 57 Χαίρε Αἴγυπτε θρέψασά με.

Démétrios, fils d'Artémidôros, appelé aussi Thraséas, de Magnésie sur le Méandre (adresse) une prière à Isis.

Ceci a été copié d'une stèle de Memphis, qui se trouve près du temple d'Héphaïstos.

3a Moi, je suis Isis, la souveraine de toute contrée,

3b j'ai été instruite par Hermès

3c et j'ai inventé l'écriture avec Hermès, la sacrée et la démotique, afin qu'on ne dût pas tout écrire avec la même écriture.

- 4 Moi, j'ai donné aux hommes les lois, et j'ai décrété ce que personne ne peut
changer.
- 5 Moi, je suis la fille aînée de Kronos ;
6 je suis l'épouse et la sœur du roi Osiris ;
7 je suis celle qui découvrit aux hommes les fruits ;
8 je suis la mère du roi Horus ;
9 je suis celle qui se manifeste dans l'étoile du Chien ;
10 je suis celle qui est appelée Déesse parmi les femmes ;
11 Pour moi, la ville de Boubastis a été édiflée.
12 J'ai séparé la terre du ciel ;
13 j'ai indiqué leur route aux étoiles ;
14 j'ai déterminé la voie du soleil et de la lune.
15 Moi, j'ai inventé la science nautique.
16 Moi, j'ai rendu le droit puissant.
17 Moi, j'ai accouplé la femme avec l'homme ;
18 j'ai fixé à la femme comme terme le dixième mois pour mettre au monde son
enfant ;
19 j'ai ordonné que les parents fussent aimés de l'enfant ;
20 j'ai infligé une punition aux parents qui ne manifestent pas de tendresse.
21 Moi, avec mon frère Osiris, j'ai fait cesser l'anthropophagie.
22 Moi, j'ai révélé aux hommes les initiations ;
23 j'ai enseigné aux hommes d'honorer les statues des dieux ;
24 j'ai fondé les sanctuaires des dieux.
25 Moi, j'ai renversé le gouvernement des tyrans ;
26 j'ai arrêté les massacres.
27 Moi, j'ai obligé les époux à chérir leurs épouses.
28 Moi, j'ai rendu le droit plus puissant que l'or et l'argent ;
29 j'ai ordonné que la vérité fut reconnue pour belle ;
30 j'ai inventé les contrats de mariage.
31 Moi, j'ai fixé leur langue aux Hellènes et aux Barbares.
32 Moi, j'ai fait en sorte que le beau et le honteux fussent distingués par la Nature.
33 Moi, j'ai fait en sorte que rien ne fut plus terrible que le serment ;
34 j'ai livré celui qui dresse injustement un piège aux autres aux mains de celui à qui
il dresse le piège ;
35 je punis ceux qui pratiquent la fraude.
36 Moi, j'ai ordonné d'avoir pitié des suppliants ;
37 j'honore ceux qui se défendent justement ;
38 Auprès de moi règne le droit.
39 Moi, je suis la souveraine des rivières, des vents et de la mer.
40 Personne n'atteint la gloire sans mon consentement.

- 41 Moi, je suis la souveraine de la guerre.
 42 Moi, je suis la souveraine de l'éclair ;
 43 j'apaise la mer et y déchaîne la tempête ;
 44 je suis dans la splendeur du soleil ;
 45 je fais route avec le soleil.
 46 Ce que j'ai dans l'intention s'accomplit.
 47 À moi, tout le monde obéit.
 48 Je délie les liens.
 49 Moi, je suis la souveraine de la navigation ;
 50 je rends les eaux navigables impraticables aux navires quand il me plaît.
 51 Moi, j'ai fondé les remparts des cités.
 52 Moi, je suis appelée la Législatrice.
 53 J'ai fait surgir les îles des abîmes à la lumière.
 54 Je suis la souveraine des pluies.
 55 Je vaincs le destin ;
 56 À moi, le destin obéit.
 57 Salut, Égypte qui m'a élevée.»

Abréviations

- IG* *Inscriptiones Graecae*
I.Kyme Engelmann 1976
RICIS Bricault 2005

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Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion

Alessandra Rolle

Varro, *vir Romanorum eruditissimus*, “the most erudite of the Romans”, according to the famous definition proposed by Quintilian,¹ was undoubtedly one of the most important and influential Roman intellectuals of the late Republican period. Unfortunately, he is also one of the Latin authors whose thought and impact are the most difficult to reconstruct. This paradox is due to the fact that we have lost most of his numerous and varied works. He was deeply appreciated by his own contemporaries for the wide range of his erudite interests and particularly for his antiquarian studies.² In a well-known passage of the first book of Cicero's *Academica posteriora*, published in 45 BCE and dedicated to Varro, we find an enthusiastic praise of his antiquarian works on Rome's past. These works would have restored to the Romans their lost cultural identity allowing them, so to speak, to come home (*ac.* 1.9):

nam nos in nostra urbe peregrinantis errantisque tamquam hospites tui libri quasi domum deduxerunt, ut possemus aliquando qui et ubi essemus agnoscere. tu aetatem patriae tu descriptiones temporum, tu sacrorum iura tu sacerdotum, tu domesticam tu bellicam disciplinam, tu sedem regionum locorum tu omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum nomina genera officia causas aperuisti.

in fact we were outsiders and wandering in our city, like foreigners, and your books brought us, shall we say, home, so that we could finally know who and where we were. You revealed the age of the homeland, the chronological divisions, the religious and priestly law, the civil and military discipline, the location of regions and places, the names, types, functions and reasons for all that is divine and human.³

¹ Quint. *inst.* 10.1.95.

² On the relevance of Varro's figure for his contemporaries see Baier 1997.

³ All translations are mine.

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has opportunely highlighted the bitter paradoxicality of the image evoked by Cicero: “where Roman legal language divides the world into Roman citizens and *peregrini*, outsiders, the Romans now emerge as outsiders in their own city who have wholly lost the sense of identity (*qui aut ubi essemus*) and need showing their way home”.⁴

This praise by Cicero seems to respond to the presumably recent publication of Varro’s most important antiquarian work: the *Antiquitates*. These consisted of 41 books, of which we only know fragments preserved through indirect tradition, but which must have systematically dealt with the various aspects of Roman civil and religious life, concerning their relationship with the past. The *Antiquitates* were divided into two parts: the *Antiquitates rerum humanarum* (25 books) and the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* (16 books). The publication date of this monumental work is not certain, but the hypothesis, proposed by Nicolas Horsfall,⁵ of a publication in 46 BCE after Caesar’s victory at Thapsus in April, is quite convincing.⁶

The *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* were dedicated to Caesar as *pontifex maximus*, an office he had held since 63 BCE.⁷ From Augustine, we learn that these followed the *Antiquitates rerum humanarum* (Aug. *civ.* 6.4 = Varro *div.* 1 fr. 5 C.):⁸

Iste ipse Varro propterea se prius de rebus humanis, de divinis autem postea scripsisse testatur, quod prius extiterint civitates, deinde ab eis haec instituta sint.

Varro himself declares to have written first about human things, and then about divine things, since cities are born first, and then these institutions were created by them.

This arrangement, which sees the civic discourse preceding the religious one, immediately highlights the importance of the political dimension of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*. These were not intended as a general or

4 Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 232–233.

5 Horsfall 1972, 120–122.

6 This dating is also accepted by Rüpke 2014, 253 and Tarver 1996, 41–48. Momigliano 1984, 200 thinks instead of 47 BCE, dating already proposed by Merkel 1841, CX–CXI and followed by Rüpke 2016, 17. For a discussion about the publication either in 47 or in 46 BCE, see also Rolle 2021. *Contra* Jocelyn 1982, 164–177 has proposed an earlier dating of the work, that would have been published in his opinion around the early 50s (thus also North 2014, 233 n. 26).

7 Cf. Lact. *inst.* 1.6.7 and Aug. *civ.* 7.35.

8 The edition of reference of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* is Cardauns 1976.

philosophical reflection on the divine or on the essence of religion, such as for instance Cicero's contemporary *De natura deorum*.⁹ Varro rather composed an antiquarian work, approached from a historical perspective of fixing and defining the variegated and multiform religious heritage handed down from the Roman tradition. In other words, the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* were a treatise on Roman religion as a result of the *civitas Romana*.¹⁰ According to Varro, the relationship between a state and its religious tradition is the same as between a painter and his painting (Aug. *civ.* 6.4 = Varro *div.* 1 fr. 5 C.):

sicut prior est ... pictor quam fabula picta, prior faber quam aedificium, ita priores sunt civitates quam ea, quae civitatibus instituta sunt.

as the painter exists before the painting, the laborer before the building, so also the cities precede the institutions that were created by them.

In Antiquity, the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* were considered to be the most complete and systematic reflection on Roman religion.¹¹ Accordingly, these are commonly cited as the reference work on this subject by grammarians of the imperial age, such as Servius or the so-called Pseudo-Acro. The latter, for instance, in the commentary on Horace's epistle 1.10, cites the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* with regard to the scarcely known goddess Vacuna, as Horace refers to her crumbling shrine at the end of his poem.¹² Pseudo-Acro, after listing a series of possible identifications for this goddess, cites Varro and opposes the mention he made of her in the first book of his treatise on religion to the rest of the tradition. The Varronian evidence, the last cited, appears more authoritative than the others, which remain anonymous (*Pseudoacron. Schol. in Hor. epist.* 1.10.49):¹³

Vacunam alii Cererem, alii deam vacationis dicunt, alii Victoriam, qua favente curis vacamus. Vacunam apud Sabinos plurimum cultam quidam Minervam, alii Dianam putaverunt; nonnulli etiam Venerem esse dixerunt;

9 Most probably composed in 45 BCE, cf. Dyck 2003, 2–4.

10 Cf. Ando 2010, 75–78.

11 Cf. Rüpke 2007, 60.

12 Hor. *epist.* 1.10.49: *haec tibi dictabam post fanum putre Vacunae* “I was dictating these words to you behind the crumbling shrine of Vacuna”.

13 The final reference to Varro constitutes fr. 1 of Cardauns 1976 edition (p. 15). For a comment to this passage, probably derived from the preface to the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, see Cardauns 1976, 2, 136–137 and Rolle 2021.

sed Varro primo rerum divinarum Victoriam ait, quod ea maxime hii gaudent, qui sapientiae vacent

Some say that Vacuna is Ceres, others say she is the goddess of *vacatio*, others Victory, since, when she is favourable, we are free from worries. Some believed that Vacuna, mainly venerated by the Sabines, was Minerva, others Diana; some even said she was Venus; however Varro, in the first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, says that she is Victory, since those who enjoy her are mainly those who have spare time for knowledge.

Also Servius and Servius Danielis, in explaining the works of Virgil, continuously refer to the authority of Varro, citing the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* in regard to everything that concerns Roman religion, its gods and its rituals.¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Serv. auct. *Aen.* 3.113:

ET IUNCTI CURRUM DOMINAE SUBIERE LEONES (...). sane dominam proprie matrem deum dici Varro et ceteri adfirmant: nam et ibi Proserpinam ideo a Vergilio dominam appellatam, quod ipsa terra esse dicatur, sicut et mater deum.

AND THE YOKED LIONS ARE SUBJECTED TO THE CARRIAGE OF THE MISTRESS (...). Certainly, Varro and all the others claim that the Mother of the Gods is rightly called Mistress: in the same passage also Proserpina is called Mistress by Virgil for this reason, because it is said that she is the Earth, as it is said for the Mother of the Gods.

Once again, the authority of Varro appears to be much more relevant than the rest of the antiquarian tradition, which remains anonymous.¹⁵

The role that the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* must have immediately played as an authoritative text in the field of Roman religion clearly explains why they later became a privileged target of Christian apologists' attacks.¹⁶ In fact, the Christian apologists have preserved most fragments of this work, in particular Tertullian and Augustine, the latter representing our main source

14 See Delvigo 2011, 13–32 and Vallat 2017. Varro's influence on the whole Virgilian work has been particularly highlighted by Horsfall: see mainly Horsfall, Salvatore 1990 and Horsfall 2000, XX–XXI with several references in the commentary. See also Mac Góráin 2021.

15 For an analysis of this passage, and for the opportunity to relate it to the sixteenth book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, see Rolle 2017, 103–104.

16 Cf. Hadas 2017.

with his *City of God*. As noted by Jörg Rüpke,¹⁷ the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* provided Christian authors with “the canonical description of traditional Roman religion”. Thus, see Aug. *civ.* 6.2:

Quis Marco Varrone curiosius ista quaesivit? quis invenit doctius? quis consideravit adtentius? quis distinxit acutius? quis diligentius pleniusque conscripsit?

Who has investigated this subject (sc. Roman religion) with more care than Marcus Varro? Whose discoveries have been more erudite? Who has examined it more closely? Who has drawn more subtle distinctions? Who has written with more care and exhaustiveness about it?

Starting with this passage by Augustine, the exhaustive systematisation applied to the national religious tradition, in all its articulations, is the first element to be highlighted in order to interpret the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* as an attempt at canonisation of Roman religious heritage. In this work we might define canonisation as a process of comprehensive organisation of the religious matter, through a selection that aims to define a reference standard.¹⁸

The exhaustiveness of the text does not exclude, in fact, a selection made by Varro when setting his canon of deities and rituals. The *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* comprise indeed just the gods, mostly Roman and Italic, and the religious public and private ceremonies that were officially recognised in Rome at the end of the Republic. Among the non-Italic deities only those integrated in the Roman national pantheon, such as the Greek Apollo¹⁹ and Asclepius²⁰ or the Phrygian Cybele (called *Mater Magna* or alternatively *Mater*

17 Rüpke 2005, 172.

18 More in general, in Varro we can find a trend to canonise the various subjects he writes about, by treating them systematically and authoritatively in order to fix them in a definitive form and to prevent loss and misappropriations. Varro's antiquarian approach certainly promotes this attitude, since the transmission of the different aspects of Roman culture and tradition requires their prior setting and organisation. However, political and social implications of the canonisation process in the religious matter are undoubtedly particularly strong and relevant. On the topic of canonisation linked to religion, see also contributions by Papadopoulos, Versluys, Agut-Labordère, Gonzales and Bricault in this volume.

19 Cf. Varro *div.* 14 fr. 157 C. = Aug. *civ.* 4.21; Varro *div.* 16 fr. 229 C. = Aug. *civ.* 7.2; Varro *div.* 16 fr. 251 C. = Aug. *civ.* 7.16; Varro *div.* 16 fr. 252 C. = Lact. Plac. *Theb.* 8.198.

20 Cf. Varro *div.* 1 fr. 3 C. = Aug. *civ.* 4.22; Varro *div.* 14 fr. 157 C. = Aug. *civ.* 4.21.

deum in Rome)²¹ are present. This latter goddess was the object of a double worship in Rome in the Republican age: an official one, *more Romano*, linked to the aristocracy, and a *more Phrygio* cult, which was private in nature and not recognised by the senate.²² In the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* reference is made exclusively to the Roman component of the Cybelic cult, withholding the rituals celebrated without recognition by the State, such as the ceremony of self-castration of the Galli, the attendants to the Cybelic cult, who could not be Roman citizens because of their status as eunuchs.²³

After an initial introductory book, the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* dealt, in triads, with the different aspects of Roman religion: the priests (books 2–4), the cult places (books 5–7), the festivities of the religious calendar (books 8–10), the sacred ceremonies (books 11–13), and finally the different deities of the pantheon (books 14–16).²⁴ Unfortunately few fragments survive from books 2–13 concerning the Roman cult and ritual tradition: these books must have been of less interest to Christian authors, or perhaps they no longer had the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* in their entirety. The last three books, to which the greatest number of preserved fragments belong, respectively concerned the *dei certi* (book 14), the (minor) gods with revealing names in charge of particular aspects or moments of human life; the *dei incerti* (book 15), probably opposed to the *dei certi*, since their names have no clear significance and whose identity is not well known, and finally the main gods of the Roman pantheon, the *dei praecipui atque selecti* (book 16).

Augustine tells us that Varro, probably in the preface of the first book, stated that he had carried out this work of systematisation of the Roman religious heritage in order to save it from the *neglegentia civium*, from the ignorance and disinterest of his fellow citizens²⁵ (Aug. *civ.* 6.2 = Varro *div.* 1 fr. 2a C.):

se timere ne (dei) pereant, non incursu hostili, sed civium neglegentia, de qua illos velut ruina liberari a se dicit et in memoria bonorum per eius modi

21 Cf. Varro *div.* 16 fr. 267–268 C. = Aug. *civ.* 7.24 and Varro *div.* 16 fr. 269 C. = Serv. auct. *Aen.* 3.113.

22 See Fasce 1978; Beard, North, Price 1998, 1, 96–98 and 160–166; Nauta 2005, 109–116; Rolle 2017, 27–29.

23 For an analysis of the figure of Cybele in the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and for commentary on the three surviving fragments referable to her (*supra* n. 20), see Cardauns 1976, 2, 232 and Rolle 2017, 93–104. Regarding the impossibility for Roman citizens to become Galli, cf. D.H. 2.19.5, and see Beard, North, Price 1998, 1, 97 and Van Haepelen 2011, 472.

24 We know the structure of this work from Aug. *civ.* 6.3.

25 Concerning this passage, see Romano 2003, 100–102.

libros recondi atque servari utiliore cura, quam Metellus de incendio sacra Vestalia et Aeneas de Troiano excidio Penates liberasse praedicatur.

(Varro states) that he fears (the gods) would perish not by an enemy's invasion, but by the negligence of his fellow citizens. He claims that he rescues them from this as from a downfall, and that through such books he restores them in the memory of good citizens and safeguards them with a more useful care than Metellus is said to have used when he rescued the holy objects of Vesta from the fire, and Aeneas when he saved the Penates from the fall of Troy.

This passage probably has to be regarded as an Augustinian reformulation of Varro's original text, of which some key terms seem to have been kept, however. At the beginning of his treatise, Varro presumably compared his antiquarian work about the preservation of Roman religion to the famous manifestations of *pietas*, religious piety, of two very well-known figures of the Roman historical-mythological tradition. The first to be mentioned is Lucius Caecilius Metellus, who had saved the *sacra*, and in particular the Palladium,²⁶ from Vesta's burning temple in 241 BCE. The second is Aeneas, who had saved the Penates from the fires of Troy and had brought them to Italy. According to Augustine's testimony, Varro claimed to have acted *utiliore cura*, with a more useful solicitude than that of his two famous predecessors, entrusting the Roman religious heritage to the memory of the *boni* through the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*. Since the combination *utiliore cura* does not appear elsewhere in Augustine's abundant production, it can probably be attributed to Varro himself. He would then have begun his monumental treatise by affirming, with force and pride, the civic and political importance of his work to safeguard and systematise the whole of the national religious tradition, which was in danger of deviance or oblivion.²⁷ His action would be more useful than those of Aeneas and Metellus, as Varro is destined to give their lost memory

26 Cf. Cic. *Scaur.* 47; Plin. *nat.* 7.141; Sen. *contr.* 4.2.; Liv. Per. 19.24. Leonardis 2019, 197 believes that Varro refers in both cases to the rescue of the Penates, since from Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.66.3–5 and 1.69.4) we learn that at a certain point these had become part of Vesta's *sacra*. However, all the other ancient evidence, even contemporary to Varro, such as Cicero, expressly refers to Palladium. If Varro had wanted to highlight in both cases the rescue of the Penates, he would have hardly explicitly named them only in relation to Aeneas, speaking in general about *sacra Vestalia* in reference to Metellus.

27 See in particular Rüpke 2016, 17–21.

and cultural identity back to his fellow citizens.²⁸ According to the point of view of the antiquarian Varro, this danger was not present, or at least not with the same urgency, during the earliest phases of Roman history.

In this passage the canonisation process seems to respond to a moral imperative, since it aims to correct a negligence. At the same time, the political dimension of the religious systematisation operated by Varro clearly emerges from the two proposed parallels. If Aeneas was indeed considered the ancestor par excellence of the Roman power, Metellus was famous for obtaining, while he was consul in 251 BCE, an important victory against the Carthaginians during the First Punic War. Both are “statesmen” who saved religious symbols of primary importance for the history of Rome. Like them, Varro was personally involved in the politics of his time and his work of safeguarding Roman religion is closely connected to his civic commitment.

The parallel with Aeneas implicitly but clearly suggests for him a role, so to speak, as re-founder of the religious tradition and shows the will to propose to his fellow citizens the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* as a canonisation of religion capable of offering them a stable reference model for the future. Moreover, Metellus, who had endangered his life to save *sacra* of great antiquity and importance for Roman religion, was likewise considered as a *pater patriae*, to a certain extent. For that reason, in Seneca the Elder’s *controversia* 7.2.7, Cicero, who had saved his homeland from the danger of the conspiracy of Catilina, is compared to Metellus, who had thrown himself into the burning temple of Vesta (thus extinguishing the fire itself, in rhetorical fiction): *Metellus Vestae extinxit incendium, Cicero Romae*.²⁹

The *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* may have been considered an attempt to define and fix the various aspects of Roman religion in order to counteract its natural frailty, its intrinsic tendency to evolution, to include new deities – associated with new rituals, new places and new priests – liable to supplant the ancient ones.

In the fourth book of the linguistic and grammatical treatise *De lingua Latina*, probably composed in the same years as the *Antiquitates*,³⁰ Varro states, in regard to the ancient goddess Furrina, that now only the feasts established in

28 A different interpretation is given by Leonardis 2019, 197–198, who follows Van Nuffelen 2010 and believes that Varro focuses his work preserving tradition on the Penates and that his greater efficacy consists in the fact that he is able to provide an explanation of the true nature of the gods, thanks to the instruments of antiquarianism and to philosophical analysis.

29 Sen. *contr.* 7.2.7 “Metellus put out the fire in the shrine of Vesta, Cicero the fire of Rome”.

30 For a summary of the composition and publication issues concerning the *De lingua Latina* see Ax 1995, 150–151 and De Melo, 2019, 4–5.

her honour (the Furrinalia, celebrated on July 25) and the priest in charge of her cult remain as vestiges of her ancient importance in Rome (*ling.* 6.19):³¹

Furrinalia <a> Furrina, quod ei deae feriae public<a>e dies is; cuius deae honos apud antiquos: nam ei sacra instituta annua et flamen attributus; nunc vix nomen notum paucis.

The Furrinalia (come) from Furrina, since this is the day of public celebration in honour of this goddess; this goddess was honoured by the Ancients: for her, in fact, annual ceremonies were instituted and a *flamen* was assigned to her; now her name is barely known to few.

Similarly, in a passage included in the first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* by Cardauns,³² the downward trend of an ancient Roman deity is mentioned: the god Summanus, in charge of night lightning. In spite of being more important than Jupiter in the past, his name is now unknown to the majority (Varro *div.* 1 fr. 42 C. = Aug. *civ.* 4.23):

Romani veteres (...) Summanum, cui nocturna fulmina tribuebant, coluerunt magis quam Iovem, ad quem diurna fulmina pertinerent. Sed postquam Iovi templum insigne ac sublime constructum est, propter aedis dignitatem sic ad eum multitudo confluit, ut vix inveniatur qui Summani nomen, quod audire iam non potest, se saltem legisse meminerit.

The ancient Romans (...) worshiped Summanus, to whom they attributed nocturnal lightning, more than Jupiter, to whom the daylight lightning belonged. But after the construction of the distinguished and lofty shrine for Jupiter, due to the splendour of the sanctuary the crowd rushed towards him so that hardly anyone can be found who remembers having read even the name of Summanus, that can no longer be heard.

This passage is taken from the fourth book of Augustine's *City of God*. No explicit reference is made in the Augustine passage to the source of the evidence, since it comes with a generic annotation: *sicut enim apud ipsos legitur*, "as in fact is read among them" (that is among Roman writers). Cardauns

³¹ Cf. also Varro *ling.* 5.84 and 7.3, who highlights the obscure nature of the name of the *flamen Furinalis*, related to a deity no longer actively venerated in Rome. See the commentary of De Melo 2019, 724–725 and 827.

³² Cardauns 1976, 1, 32.

believes that, in the first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, the different deities introduced to Rome during the monarchic age were mentioned.³³ The attribution of our passage to this context depends on the fact that, in the fifth book of the *De lingua Latina* (*ling.* 5.74), Varro ascribes the introduction to Rome of the worship of Summanus to the Sabine King Titus Tatius. A linguistic element may perhaps corroborate the hypothesis proposed by Cardauns: the expression used to indicate the mere persistence of the name of Summanus in Rome, *vix inveniatur qui Summani nomen ... se saltem legisse meminerit*, is close to the expression used in *ling.* 6.19 with regard to the goddess Furrina, fallen into oblivion herself, *nunc vix nomen notum paucis*. Both passages show the common occurrence of the terms *vix* and *nomen*.³⁴

Several fragments, mainly belonging to the fourteenth book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, dedicated to the *dei certi* in charge of very specific aspects of human life, mention deities that are otherwise unknown to us.³⁵ For instance, the gods Vitumnus and Sentinus – whose obscurity Augustine himself highlights when he cites the passage, – are mentioned (*Aug. civ.* 7.2 = Varro *div.* 14 fr. 97 C.):

ibi sunt et duo nescio qui obscurissimi, Vitumnus et Sentinus, quorum alter vitam, alter sensus puerperio largiuntur.

there (sc. in the fourteenth book), two more are very obscure, Vitumnus and Sentinus, of whom one gives life and the other sensation to the new-born child.

Around the middle of the 1st century BCE, the will to systematise and fix the complex and stratified framework of Roman religion is certainly also connected to the identity crisis related to the violence of the internal conflicts between *optimates* and *populares*, aristocrats and democrats, of the 60s and 50s, and to the horror of the subsequent civil war between Caesar and the Pompeians, which was not yet concluded when the *Antiquitates* were published. During

33 Cardauns 1976, 2, 136.

34 This element may not be trivial if we consider that the association of both these terms in a similar context of reporting the persistence, in the corruption of the present, exclusively of the name and not of the essence of something seems to recur otherwise only in the introduction of Tacitus' *Dialogue on Oratory*: 1.1 *cur ... nostra potissimum aetas deserta et laude eloquentiae orbata vix nomen ipsum oratoris retineat* "because ... our age especially, deserted and deprived of the praise of eloquence, hardly may retain the name itself of orator".

35 On the *dei certi*, see Perfigli 2004; Lentano 2018, 135–146; Bettini 2019, 267–276.

this period, the diffusion of new conceptions of the divine, which were barely compatible with the models of Roman religion, was indeed combined and associated with these political struggles.

Among the foreign cults deprived of real integration that were more successful in Rome in the 1st century BCE, we find the worship of the Egyptian gods. The particular relation between these deities and the mercantile and popular classes made them precious allies for the *populares* who fought against the senate. Varro seems to have dealt with this subject in the first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, according to Cardauns.³⁶ In remembering the central role of the senate in religious politics, he has likely reported, *inter alia*,³⁷ the example of the senate's opposition to the construction of altars in honour of Egyptian deities on the Capitol at the beginning of the 50s (Tert. *nat.* 1.10.17–18 = Varro *div.* 1 fr. 46a C.):

Ceterum Serapem et Isidem et Arpocraten et Anubem prohibitos Capitolio Varro commemora<t> eorumque <aras> a senatu deiectas nonnisi per vim popularium restructas. Sed tamen et Gabinius consul kalendis ianuariis, cum vix hostias probaret prae popularium coetu, quia nihil de Serape et Iside constituisset, potioem habuit senatus censuram quam impetum vulgi et aras institui prohibuit.

Varro recalls that Serapis, Isis, Harpocrates and Anubis were kept off from the Capitol and that their altars, demolished by the senate, were reconstructed only through the violence of the *populares*. Nevertheless the consul Gabinius, on the Kalends of January, while he barely examined the sacrificial victims because of the tumult of the *populares*, since he had not taken any decision regarding Serapis and Isis, he valued more the judgment of the senate than the assault of the crowd and forbade the erection of altars.

The passage has been transmitted to us in the first book of Tertullian's *Ad Nationes* and Cardauns' attribution of it to the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* is highly possible, considering that this work represents one of the main sources of this book. This text underlines the relevance of the role played by the senate, supported by one of the two consuls, during a repression of the Isiac cult in Rome, which can be approximately dated to 58 BCE. It is a rather difficult fragment and the exact reconstruction of the episode described in it

36 Cardauns 1976, 1, 33–34 and 2, 136, who follows Agahd 1898, 161.

37 Cf. also Varro *div.* 1 fr. 44 and fr. 45 C. = Tert. *nat.* 1.10.14 and 16.

is much-debated.³⁸ However, the element of interest to be stressed here is the likelihood that it mentions the first of a series of senatorial actions aimed to eliminate the cult of the Egyptian deities from the Capitol. During the 50s, in fact, a real struggle took place between the senate and the faction of the *populares*, who seems to have tried to officialise the cult of the *gens Isiaca* by installing it on the *curia deorum* (as Tertullian calls the Capitol) without, and even contrary to, the authority of the senate.³⁹ In his extensive treatise on Roman religion, Varro may have wanted to highlight the prerogatives of the senate in integrating foreign deities into the Roman pantheon by choosing a recent and symbolic political event related to issues of religious regulation.⁴⁰

During the same period, even the diffusion of abstract and rationalist representations of the divine derived from the Greek philosophical reflection could raise doubts about the Roman religious tradition and the traditional representation of the divine. In the first half of the 1st century BCE, we observe the recovery and re-elaboration in Rome of a system of tripartite representation of the divine, at least in part of Greek origin, which made a distinction between mythical, philosophical and civil approaches. Varro, in the first book of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, had to propose an important reinterpretation of this theorisation, to the extent that nowadays we commonly speak of Varro's tripartite theology.⁴¹

Unfortunately, our knowledge of this theorisation is inevitably fragmented and has been warped by the distorting lenses of the Christian apologists who transmitted it to us. However, it seems that Varro, while making a distinction between the representation of the divine by poets, philosophers and statesmen, particularly insisted on the enhancement of the points of contact between them (Varro *div.* 1 fr. 11 C. = Aug. *civ.* 6.6):

ea, quae scribunt poetae, minus esse quam ut populi sequi debeant; quae autem philosophi, plus quam ut ea vulgum scrutari expediat. quae sic

38 For a detailed analysis of the passage and the different readings that have been proposed, see Rolle 2017, 177–185 and Santangelo 2019, 478–479.

39 On this issue see Malaise 1972, 362–377; Coarelli 1984; Versluys 2004; Bricault 2004 and 2013, 146–151 and 170–180; Rolle 2017, 125–128.

40 Rüpke 2016, 18–19 shows the value of this episode as an example of correction of a religious deviance.

41 See Pépin 1956; Lieberg 1973, 63–115; Lehmann 1997, 193–211; Rüpke 2005, 107–129 and 2012, 172–185, who highlights how the expression *theologia tripertita* is a modern coinage not found in ancient sources (pp. 172–173). Augustine rather talks about *tria genera theologiae*.

abhorrent, inquit, ut tamen ex utroque genere ad civiles rationes adsumpta sint non pauca.

what poets write is less than what people should follow; instead what philosophers write is more than what it is useful for the populace to investigate. And these arguments are so incompatible, he (sc. Varro) states, that however not a few elements have been recalled by one and by the other for political science.

This passage clearly shows Varro's effort to reconcile and harmonise the three possible different *theologiae*. In particular, this concerned the integration of at least part of the arguments of both the poets and philosophers within the civil and state theology.⁴² Augustine himself comments as follows, introducing the passage (*civ.* 6.6):

cum memoratus auctor civilem theologiam a fabulosa et naturali tertiam quandam sui generis distinguere conaretur, magis eam ex utraque temperatam quam ab utraque separatam intellegi voluit.

when our renowned author (sc. Varro) tried to distinguish the civil theology from the mythical and the natural one as a third of a specific kind, he wanted it to be intended as combined from both rather than separated from both.

This reinterpretation of the concept of tripartite theology, probably partly original, seems to propose, at the beginning of the work, an adequate philosophical framework for the political aims that this treatise on religion pursued.⁴³ As noted by Rüpke, on a more general level, while comparing contemporary thoughts on religion by Cicero and Varro: “while Cicero concentrated on translating Greek philosophy and making it socially acceptable, Varro went further, justifying traditional Roman practices by developing a theory of their practice that gave it theoretical status, and therefore a higher dignity”.⁴⁴

The philosophical frame, in part of Greek origin, within which Varro sets his attempt to canonise Roman religion, provides it with a new intelligibility and dignity. This new pattern allows not only to preserve religious tradition,

42 See also Rüpke 2014, 264.

43 On the relationship between philosophy and antiquarian practice in the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* see in particular Rüpke 2012, 172–185.

44 Rüpke 2012, 184.

but also to keep it alive in the present (and hopefully in the future) and to let it communicate with the different levels of contemporary society.⁴⁵ Certainly, the *ratio civilis*, the political science, in order to be strong and stable, must be essentially based on civil theology, albeit without totally rejecting reflections on the divine neither from poetry – even though often its stories reveal poor morality – nor from philosophy – even if its theories are often too abstract and complicated. All the different components of society must be and feel represented and integrated into the traditional religious model: theatres as well as philosophical schools are equally part of the State. The national religion, as the result of a composite cultural stratification, must be able to interact with different levels of consciousness and awareness to represent the glue of society, and not an element of division or fracture.⁴⁶

The systematic discussion about the civic aspects of the cult, an element of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* of which our knowledge is particularly limited due to the almost total loss of books 2–13, could be proposed as the definition, in the cult tradition, of a canon that was more stable and less subject to possible modifications. It could arise from the desire to fix the cult itself, preserving it from political discretion or opportunism. A few years earlier, the need to (re-)define Roman religious law in a more stable and more effective form, and therefore subject to political interferences to a lesser extent, is clearly expressed in the second book of Cicero's *De legibus*. The composition of this work probably largely dates back to the end of the 50s, but it remained interrupted and was probably never completed.⁴⁷ In it, Cicero denounces the ignorance of the worship's traditional practices as the basis of the religious deviance of which Rome is now a victim (*leg.* 2.20):⁴⁸

Quoque haec privatim et publice modo rituque fiant, discunto ignari a publicis sacerdotibus.

And how and according to which ritual these sacrifices are to be privately and publicly performed, those who ignore it should learn it from the public priests.

45 Cf. Flasch 1987, 1–6 and his concept of *Enseitzung*.

46 Rüpke 2016, 19–20 appropriately underlines Varro's denunciation of the mass religious deviance represented by the poetic representations of the gods, which contain "a lot of fiction contrary to the dignity and nature of the immortals" (*Aug. civ.* 6.5 = *Varro div.* 1 fr. 7 C., *multa contra dignitatem et naturam immortalium ficta*). But, instead of opposing a clear refusal, Varro, having to deal with it, "demands that it be at least spatially confined, and restricted to the theatre" (p. 20) (cf. *Aug. civ.* 6.5 = *Varro div.* 1 fr. 10 C.).

47 See Schmidt 1969 and Dyck 2004, 5–7.

48 On this passage and on *Cic. leg.* 2.19 cited below see the comment by Rüpke 2016, 24–30.

It is possible to establish a parallel between this passage and Varro's choice to dedicate the first three books of his work (books 2–4) to the three most important magistrates for the public cult (*pontifices*, *augures* and *quindecimviri sacrorum*). As noted by Rüpke:⁴⁹ “it was these (usually) senators who bore responsibility for the institutions. It was the Senate who held and applied regulatory power in the event of conflict, and it was this regulatory core whose functioning it was Varro's purpose to secure”.

The religious model that was maintained and defended by the public priests was the one handed down by the ancestors, of which Cicero claims that the best must be preserved (*leg.* 2.22):

Ex patriis ritibus optima colunto.

Of the ancestral rites the best shall be preserved.

Tradition may present a series of evolutions and stratifications, as Cicero himself explains later, reaffirming the indissoluble link between the antiquity and the quality of the ritual: everything that is *optimum* must be considered *antiquissimum* (*leg.* 2.40):

Deinceps in lege est, ut de ritibus patriis colantur optima; de quo quom consulerent Athenienses Apollinem Pythium, quas potissimum religiones tenerent, oraculum editum est: 'eas, quae essent in more maiorum'. Quo quom iterum venissent maiorumque morem dixissent saepe esse mutatum quaesissentque, quem morem potissimum sequerentur e variis, respondit: 'optimum'. Et profecto ita est, ut id habendum sit antiquissimum et deo proximum, quod sit optimum.

In the next provision of the law there is that of the ancestral rites the best shall be preserved; and when the Athenians consulted the Pythian Apollo on this point, which religious practices in particular should be preserved, the oracle answered: ‘those that were in the tradition of your ancestors’. And when they had come back again saying that the customs of the ancestors had often changed and asking which specific custom they should follow out of the various, he replied: ‘the best one’. And it is certainly so, that what is the best has to be considered most ancient and nearest to the god.

49 Rüpke 2016, 21.

Cicero's comment, aimed to elucidate the ambiguity of the oracular response, highlights the relevance of antiquarian research in the creation of a national religious identity.⁵⁰

In the second book of the *De legibus*, Cicero also underlines the importance of the control function carried out by the Roman State in relation to the introduction of foreign cults in terms that, once again, recall the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, and in particular the fr. 46a C. analysed above (*leg.* 2.19):

*Separatim nemo habessit deos neve novos neve advenas nisi publice adscitos; privatim colunto, quos rite a patribus <cultos acceperint>.*⁵¹

Separately no one should have new or foreign deities, unless publicly recognised; privately the gods <they have received venerated> by the fathers in accordance with the rite should be venerated.

The final admonishment about the opportunity to privately venerate the gods whose cult was transmitted by the ancestors "in accordance with the rite" (*rite*) seems to correspond with the spirit of composition of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, as well as with their aim to define a canon of reference for the Roman religious tradition.

Finally, we can compare these passages to an excerpt of the first book of Livy's *History of Rome*, which concerns the institution of the pontifical office by Numa Pompilius (1.20.6):

Cetera quoque omnia publica privataque sacra pontificis scitis subiecit, ut esset, quo consultum plebes veniret, ne quid divini iuris neglegendo patrios ritus peregrinosque adsciscendo turbaretur.

He also subjected all the other public and private ceremonies to the decrees of the pontifex, so that there would be someone to whom the plebs could come for advice, in order to avoid that some aspect of the divine law might be upset due to the negligence of the ancestral rites and to the assumption of foreign ones.

This passage underlines once again the importance of the social role played by public priests, and in particular those who would have later formed the pontifical college, in the preservation and transmission of the ancestral religious

⁵⁰ See the comment by Dyck 2004, 360–361 on this passage.

⁵¹ This integration, generally accepted, is due to Madvig. For a comment to the passage see Dyck 2004, 293–294.

heritage. As was the case with Cicero, it is emphasised that every ceremony, both the *publica* and the *privata culta*, is their prerogative. The most interesting element of the passage, however, is the fact that the negligence of ancestral rites and the acceptance of foreign ones are indicated as the two liable factors that potentially put this heritage in danger. These are in fact the same elements that we find in Varro and in Cicero. In particular, from a lexical point of view, the expression *neglegendo patrios ritus* closely recalls the *civium neglegentia*, from which Varro intends to save the national gods by means of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*.⁵² In the first book of his *History of Rome*, probably first published before 31 BCE,⁵³ Livy therefore seems to date back to the first religious legislation of Rome, under Numa Pompilius, the two dangers that were felt as the main threats to the Roman religious tradition by the two most important authors dealing with religious matter at the end of the Republic.

In the middle of the 1st century BCE, the political dimension of religious inquiries is confirmed by the fact that the reflection on the national religious tradition is a prerogative of senatorial elite members, who were personally involved in the political struggles during the 60s–40s.⁵⁴ First of all, Varro and Cicero. Furthermore, since 63 BCE Caesar held the most important religious office in Rome, that of *pontifex maximus*. During the 40s, his interest towards religious issues seems to increase in parallel with his growing dominance in the city of Rome.

In particular, in 46 BCE, the publication year of the *Antiquitates*, Caesar completed his famous calendar reform, which came into effect the following year.⁵⁵ The Roman civil calendar, which consisted of 355 days with an intercalary month of 22 or 23 days that was generally added every 2 years,⁵⁶ was now completely out of sync with the calendar year. It was replaced by the much more stable and exact system of a 365-day year, which required the mere addition of one day every four years at the end of February. The adoption of the new calendar allowed the Romans to re-establish a close correspondence between the civil and the solar year, and thus to restore meaning to the religious festivities that marked the Roman calendar and were often linked to the rhythm of the seasons. At the same time, this reform also had very specific political aims.

The interferences to the calendar, made possible by the addition of the intercalary month, following the decision of the *pontifices*, represented a real instrument of political struggle, allowing politicians to bring forward or delay

52 Aug. *civ.* 6.2 = Varro *div.* 1 fr. 2a C. cited *supra*.

53 See in particular Bayet[, Baillet] 1985, xvi–xix.

54 In this respect, see Momigliano 1984.

55 About Caesar's calendar, see Feeney 2007; Rüpke 2011, 109–124.

56 For a detailed discussion, see Michels 1967, 145–172.

the elections and to prolong or reduce the duration of the magistrates' offices.⁵⁷ The elimination of the intercalary month took this political discretion from the *pontifices*. However, this reform should also be considered as integral part of a wider programme destined to put Caesar's name and presence indispensably central to the various fields of Roman life.⁵⁸ The *fasti* became an instrument of personal political affirmation through the addition, at the behest of the senate in 45 BCE, of the dates related to Caesar's great victories in the civil war as *feriae publicae*,⁵⁹ and of the dedication of the month of his birth, Quintilis, to him by making it Julius in 44 BCE. Thus, for the first time, the *fasti* mentioned *feriae* established in honour of a human being and aimed to commemorate entirely human actions, unrelated to religion or myth.⁶⁰

Thomas Tarver has convincingly shown how it is possible to find a convergence of interests between Varro's treatise and Caesar's contemporary reform of the calendar.⁶¹ If the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* were intended as a systematisation of the entire Roman religious heritage, Caesar's reform was giving back their meaning to the calendar's religious festivities, which constituted an element of fundamental importance in the construction of the Roman cultural identity.⁶² In both these actions we can observe a similar will to fix religious matters and to save them from oblivion, deviance and political opportunism, but with clearly different aims.

The new calendar, which (re-)established a balance between religious festivities and the seasonal cycle, in fact also marked the Roman year with new festivities linked to Caesar's victories, which were subsequently destined to be integrated into the collective Roman identity. The religious tradition ceased to be an instrument of political struggle and instead became a way to affirm the personal power of the winner of the civil war. In the same years, the creation of a religious canon by Varro aimed to transmit a stable image of their own religious tradition to the consciousness of his contemporaries, but, in my opinion, from a clearly Republican standpoint. I would see evidence of this for example in fr. 46a C., concerning the expulsion of the Egyptian gods from the Capitol in 58 BCE. In a work published in 46 BCE, the mention of this event could have the tacit function of underlining the traditional hierarchy of powers in

57 To try to overcome this issue Cicero in the *De legibus* (2.29) indicates the need to strictly adhere to Numa's precepts in the insertion of the intercalary month. On this passage, see the comments by Dyck 2004, 338 and Rüpke 2011, 109–110.

58 See Feeney 2007, 196–197.

59 Cf. C.D. 43.44.6; App. *BC* 2.106.

60 See Fraschetti 1990, 16–17 and Feeney 2007, 188–189.

61 Tarver 1996.

62 See in particular Beard 1987.

the Roman religion and the importance of the role played by the senate in this at a time when these could be perceived as endangered by the fact that Caesar, the dedicatee of this work, had become lord of Rome.⁶³

At a time of major political and cultural crisis, the canonisation carried out by Varro towards the Roman religious tradition contributes to make society more cohesive and to ensure continuity of the community with its own past. It has thus a clear function of cultural reappropriation, as explicitly stated by Cicero in the *Academica posteriora*. With the change of regime taking place in the Augustan age, the reflection on the national religious tradition was no longer the prerogative of the powerful elite members of society, who were personally involved in the political life of the State but became the domain of poets with subordinate social positions. It was therefore a poet, Ovid, who came to assume the task of singing the stories related to the festivities of the (new) Roman calendar.⁶⁴

Since the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* are not preserved in their entirety, unfortunately we cannot clearly define the influence that Varro's attempt to fix a Republican religious canon had on Octavian's work of religious restoration, or rather on his construction of a new Imperial religious ideology.⁶⁵

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63 Concerning a more general Republican attitude of Varro, we can recall the lost eulogy of Pompey written at the moment of his death (cf. Dahlmann 1935, c.1178) and the eulogy for the death of Porcia – Cato's sister – that he wrote in 45 BCE, as attested by Cic. *Att.* 13.48. Thus, Appian (BC 4.47) says that in 43 BCE Varro was proscribed, being considered ἐχθρὸς μοναρχίας, "enemy of the monarchy". For a political reading in a Republican regard of fr. 1 C. of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, see Rolle, forthcoming.

64 Certainly, Ovid's own tendencies towards the insertion of criticism of the Augustan regime into his poetry are well known and have not to be underestimated. However, the way Ovid expresses them, as well as, on a more general level, his attitude towards the political power are radically different from the late Republican authors.

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PART 3

Conclusion



What Becomes of the Uncanonical?

Greg Woolf

1 Canons as Cultural Centres

A canon is an assemblage of distinct but similar items. A canon with one member is unimaginable. So perhaps is a canon that includes a thousand items. But it is not possible to set a numerical limit. More important is the recognition that there must be a limit. Everything in a given category cannot be part of the canon. In other words, canons are the product of distinction. The criteria against which items are judged vary considerably: they may be judged especially sacred, or authoritative, or simply of very high literary quality. From the outside we might consider them to be items in which considerable cultural capital has been invested, but those who create and use canons see things differently. Crucially the existence of a canon implies the existence of entities of broadly the same kind that are not members of the canon – the excluded, the not-selected, and the uncanonical – hence my title. Canons are all about distinction.

Canons direct attention to their boundaries. Many papers in this volume discuss the boundaries of particular canons. But it is also possible to focus on the relationships between the component parts of a canon. One such relationship is similarity. All tragedies have, roughly speaking, the same structure, as do all orations. The standardization of Mesopotamian literature in Akkadian established common principles of a different kind. There are also relations of interconnection. The books of the Pentateuch and the Prophets can collectively be read as a history of Israel from the creation to the Persian period. A given set of orations might be regarded as providing a sufficient set from which to teach Greek rhetoric. The books of the Christian Old and New Testaments together formed the basis for more systematic theological discourse, even if none were composed with that end in mind. Canons are more than the sum of their parts.

A canon suggests a map of a cultural system. The textual production of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt expressed, in genre and language and script, some of the social and political geography of the region.¹ More generally a

¹ See Agut-Labordère in this volume.

canon can be considered as a bounded cluster of entities at the centre of a range of discursive and ritual practices. Canons function as centres in a range of ways. Canons may become points of reference, or standards of comparison. Canons attract all sorts of secondary texts, among them midrashim and scholia, commentaries and parodies.

Canons have often been contested centres. Marcion of Sinope in the 2nd century CE attempted to establish a Christian canon consisting of just one gospel (an abbreviated version of that of Luke) and ten Pauline epistles. The eventual New Testament canon was formed by stigmatising him as a heretic, as well as by positive approbation of additional books in a series of church councils. Different Christian and Jewish traditions today are distinguished (in part) by which books they include in their canons. Rejected books may be deemed heretical, or simply deuterocanonical or apocryphal. Once again, the uncanonical is an essential part of the cultural landscape created by canonisation processes.

Canonisation has something in common with classicisation and the creation of literatures.² Classics also possess accumulated cultural capital, attract commentaries and critiques, but the term often focuses on a single work such as the works of Homer.³ The term “literature” denotes an assemblage of similar texts, distinguished from others on one criterion or another, typically a mixture of style, moral and aesthetic value. Some literatures were consciously assembled and curated, as was the case in the royal libraries of Assyria,⁴ and the first Latin poetry at Rome.⁵ Perhaps it is common for cultures in which texts are important to be structured in this way viz. around a central cluster of special texts, distinguished both from those that did not qualify, and from secondary texts that affirm the canonical or classical or literary status of the chose group by engaging in exegesis, imitation or commentary.

Canon formation is one response to an existing body of texts, but there are others. Because all these responses are evaluative, they can only be conducted retrospectively.⁶ Encyclopaedism is one response, and Varro’s *Antiquities* is often cited as an early example.⁷ Epitomes, libraries and curricula all also organise knowledge without necessarily defining a canon.⁸ In classical antiquity we see all these responses beginning in the fourth and third centuries BC and they continued at intervals well into the Byzantine and western Middle

2 Porter 2006; Guillory 1993; Lande and Feeney 2021.

3 See Papadopoulos in this volume.

4 See Young in this volume.

5 Feeney 2016.

6 See Papadopoulos in this volume.

7 On Varro, see Rolle in this volume. On encyclopaedism see König and Woolf 2013.

8 König and Whitmarsh 2007.

Ages. Each episode of reflection had the potential of reshaping canons and bodies of knowledge, but what was lost in one episode was rarely available to be reinstated in later ones. The effect of successive moments of selection was a thinning of the body of texts.

Are canons ubiquitous? This volume examines societies and cultures that do have something like a canon. It would be interesting to compare them with cultural systems organized in different ways. Several papers in the volume explore cognate uses of the term canon especially the idea of a canon as a model, or standard.⁹ Those kinds of standards can also be used to regulate and structure cultural production. Some ancient architectures made use of proportions derived from these discussions, and some sculptural traditions used particular models. Perhaps it is not surprising that the idea of canon works best in relation to assemblages of texts. When we consider how images or ritual and routine performances are integrated into cultural systems, the idea of a canon may prove less useful. For now, however, it offers one way to explore the way knowledge and cultural artefacts were ordered by those who created and used them.

2 Canons and People

Canonisation processes are grounded in specific social formations. Almost every contribution to this volume considers the social context of canons and the agency of the humans who made and used them. Typically, discussions began from authority.¹⁰ But the relationship between cultural and social authority turns out to be more complex than at first it seems. Christian traditions emphasise the decision making of church councils, with or without divine guidance, yet it is clear that the broad outlines of the New Testament were settled in the second and third centuries CE. Heresiologists like Irenaeus and Justin Martyr took strong positions, but often seem to have been justifying an existing selection of texts that are already the most often cited by church fathers. The complex story of how some tragedians and just a few of their tragedies were distinguished from the rest involved bottom-up initiatives, as well as the work of Lycurgus, Alexandrine and Constantinopolitan librarians and school teachers.¹¹ Probably we would observe equally complex relationships if we knew more about the selection processes which generated other canons.

9 See Papadopoulos, Versluys, Agut-Labordère, Gonzalez, and Bricault in this volume.

10 See Versluys, Gonzalez, and Bricault in this volume.

11 See Lardinois, and Marx in this volume.

At the heart of this we see a recursive process whereby canons derived their authority from the social power of those who selected them, while those selectors and their patrons increased their social authority by association with a canon of texts.

Canons might nevertheless be used to confer authority on other social groups. Mastery of the classics distinguished several governing classes in history, from the *pepaideumenoí* of the Hellenistic and Roman eastern Mediterranean to the Chinese mandarinates. New dynasties signalled their power by reshaping canons, as the First Emperor of Qin is said to have done when organizing the burning of Confucian texts or as Augustus attempted to do by patronizing a set of new literary creations in Latin. The brute politics of canon formation force us to qualify Assmann's proposition that the canon is the *voluntary* memory of a society. What had been decanonised or excluded was rarely available for members of a society to choose. Canons and curricula had a role in socialization.

Canons were not, however, always as mutable as authorities wished. Augustan Rome provides a good example. Horace's programme for a poetic canon, laid out in his *Letter to Augustus*, did include Virgil's epic, which effectively eclipsed the *Annals* of Ennius on which Cicero and his generation had been raised and other earlier epics. Ennius' poem now survives only in fragments. But Horace's other star, Varius, completely failed to make it into the literary canon. Religious innovation provides a helpful parallel. Attempts to remove some late Hellenistic elements from Jewish sacred canons failed. The influence of texts such as the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Enoch was long-lasting even if they did not find their way into either the Hebrew or Christian Bibles. Social, political and linguistic fragmentation created families of canons that might be thought of as cousins.

Canons might also be bound up with local authority. Textual communities grew up in monasteries, around libraries and in centres of teaching.¹² As well as interpreting texts and generating new secondary ones, these communities played a part in the vital documentation, curation, conservation and recopying of works. There was considerable variation in how this happened. Centralized communities like that around the royal libraries of Assyria may be contrasted with dispersed communities like those led by the rabbis of the diaspora and by Christian bishops forming their consensus by letters and occasional councils. Quite likely it was a dispersal of authority that 'closed' many canons simply because revision was so much more difficult when texts, teachers and readers were scattered. This might help explain why the canon of Latin literature

¹² Stock 1983.

remained for centuries composed of works that had become canonical in the late Republic and the principate of Augustus.

3 Canons in History

A canon has a fictive eternity. It is never explicitly formulated as contingent, temporary, or of merely strategic importance. Yet, as most contributions to this volume show, canons take a while to come into being, and are often subject to successive revisions before they pass away altogether. The fictive eternity of canons is better seen as a means by which each was declared central within a given cultural system. A permanent canon asserted the permanence of the criterion by which it was selected and claimed enduring authority for the social groups associated with it. We are dealing with ideology.¹³

The concept of a canon was originally theological. The creation of canons based on literary rather than religious criteria, can be understood in terms of the secularization of cultural authority and the establishment of modern (vernacular) classics. If the notion of canon was created first by Christian heresiology and then by modernizing discourses in Europe, we should wonder how effective it may be as a generalizing tool of analysis. Once again we are returned to the question of whether all cultural systems are centralised in this way.

Canonisation does, however, have a history. Several papers make reference to Karl Jaspers' idea of an Axial Age and others to the early empires that (for Jaspers) followed it.¹⁴ An alternative approach might be in terms of the history of the technologies by which texts were created, curated and reproduced. The starting point would be the Bronze Age when the first writing systems and texts were created, and particularly late Bronze Age cultures which had to deal with a body of existing texts. Not all writing media lend themselves equally well to the processes of selection, assemblage and reproduction. There is a difference between a canon inscribed on temple walls in hieroglyphs and one produced and reproduced on clay tablets or papyri. Reproducibility of texts (and images) is central to the arguments of David Wengrow about what he calls the first age of mechanical reproduction, referring to the Bronze Age civilizations of the Ancient Near East.¹⁵ Royal libraries and temples are the most likely locations

13 See Versluys in this volume.

14 On the Axial Age, see Versluys, and Papadopoulos in this volume. On Imperial context of canon formation, see Agut-Labordère, Young, and Gonzalez in this volume.

15 Wengrow 2014.

for the first efforts at distinguishing different kinds of text. Yet in Athens there is not much sign of it before the 4th century BCE.¹⁶

Canons clearly played a part in some identity formation throughout history. Several papers suggest that this was most striking for minorities within imperial states. Links have been suggested between emerging literatures and subaltern groups, such as the Jews within the Achaemenid Empire or the Greeks under Rome.¹⁷ Analogies with postcolonial literatures are easy to discern. Yet perhaps canons were as important in helping ruling minorities elaborate a sense of their cultural distinction. This might be true of the efforts of some Hellenistic kings to promote libraries and scholarship, and also of the Roman invention of a Latin literature at around the time they took control of the Mediterranean.¹⁸

4 The Uncanonical

Canons imply their opposite. If canonisation is a matter of selection, we should also ask what happened to what was discarded in the selection process. Christian theologians in some traditions labelled certain books deuterocanonical, meaning they had some value, but were not to be treated as authoritative in argument nor made the object of liturgical practice. The later part of the stories of Daniel and Esther remained quite well known, even by groups who did not include them in their Old Testaments. Other kinds of works were perhaps designedly secondary from the start. Post-Virgilian epic, for instance, did not seem designed to displace the *Aeneid* and depended to some extent on a good knowledge of it.¹⁹ Works like these sustained the centrality of canonical works through their tacit acknowledgement of the primary nature of the works to which they referred.

Canon formation also led to the destruction of other texts. There are instances of the deliberate destruction of heretical texts by Christian authorities, and the Great Persecution was marked by attempts to gather and destroy Christian scriptures. But most texts perished in other ways. The term epistemicide has been coined to describe the process by which Roman expansion entailed the erasure of alternative memory traditions.²⁰ The literatures of conquered populations such as the Carthaginians were dispersed and devalued.

16 See Lardinois in this volume.

17 See Gonzalez in this volume; Schwartz 2001; Swain 1996; Whitmarsh 2001.

18 Feeney 2016.

19 Hardie 1993; Hinds 1998.

20 Padilla Peralta 2020.

They were not curated in libraries, nor were they enshrined in curricula. Few works in languages other than Greek or Latin were cited by authors working in those languages. The authority of alternative traditions was rejected. In provincial societies social success depended on buying into new knowledge regimes. On occasion these regimes left small spaces for alternative literatures, subaltern canons. Demotic literature provides one example, Babylonian astronomy another, Talmudic scholarship a third.

Canons ensured the survival of some texts at the expense of others. Libraries played a part in this, ensuring the storage of multiple copies and probably in some cases high quality texts of popular books.²¹ At least some of the literature that survives from Greek and Latin antiquity was preserved in libraries, like the volume of Euripidean tragedies recovered from Byzantine Thessalonica. But the scale and professionalism of ancient libraries has often been overestimated.²² It was recopying that was vital. Papyrus scrolls rarely survive for two centuries except in exceptional circumstances. Most non-canonical literature presumably perished simply because no group was interested enough in recopying it. So the Book of Jubilees, composed in Hebrew and known through Greek and Latin translation by many Jewish and Christian communities in the first centuries AD, has survived only in a Ge'ez version because only in Ethiopia was it treated as canonical. Much medical and scientific writing in Greek was not recopied, but has survived in Arabic translation thanks to translations carried out for the Abbasid rulers by some of their Christian subjects.²³ When a work featured on a curriculum it was necessarily recopied many times: it is to this we owe, for example, the surviving corpora of selected Greek orations.²⁴ Likewise the survival of so much Terence, Cicero and Virgil owes a good deal to its importance in western educational systems. Even works that survived in a few copies until late antiquity, like Ennius' *Annals* and Varro's *Antiquities*, disappeared through lack of recopying in the centuries that followed. Latin literature as a whole came close to being lost entirely during the centuries when only Christian texts were recopied.²⁵

Canons were particularly vulnerable to changes in language and writing technology. Much Greek literature survived for centuries in Byzantium, but not in areas under Arab control (except for what was translated). Vast Mesopotamian literatures were lost for millennia when Aramaic supplanted Akkadian and cuneiform culture was replaced by writing on papyrus and

21 König, Oikonomopolou, and Woolf 2013; Baratin and Jacob 1996.

22 Dix 1994; Bagnall 2002.

23 Gutas 1998.

24 See Lardinois as well as de Jonge in this volume.

25 Reynolds and Wilson 1974.

parchment.²⁶ There were similar losses in the transition from hieroglyphic to hieratic and demotic writing systems in Egypt.

Canonisation was changed fundamentally with the invention of printing and of more durable media. Non-canonical works, heretical ones and works demoted from canons in the course of their revision now survived in large numbers. Occasionally some were preserved even by groups attempting to suppress them, as was the case with the Inquisition or the libraries of forbidden books in the Soviet Union. From the 19th century the work of archaeologists and linguists has allowed the recovery of a few lost canons, notably in Egypt and the Near East. It is difficult now to imagine texts being lost forever. Yet until modern times the history of canons has been marked by quite sudden moments of loss and epistemicide. Mostly what was lost has proved irrecoverable. The history of civilization is a history of erasures as well as of accumulated cultural capital.

Canons thus form part of a discontinuous history of cultures. As the centres of temporary configurations of texts and cultures, canons helped organized creativity. In that sense they did provide anchors for innovation. But these anchors were less secure than the ideology that surrounded them claimed, and many of our classics have become detached from their anchors. Canons were vulnerable to dramatic changes, whether brought by new writing systems or new regimes, or simply to the emergence of new criteria of discrimination. Neglect and disinterest were fatal in a world without permanent media of storage. Canons were created by acts of selection, and they perished in the same way. Their history is entangled with the history of the discarded, the rejected and the devalued, that is with all versions of the uncanonical.

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26 Brown 2008; Radner and Robson 2011.

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Index

- Aachen 135
 Abydos 143
Academica Posteriora 263
 Achelaus of Macedon, (king) 155
 Achaemenid 45, 64, 66
 dynasty 110
 eras 85
 period 108, 109
 Achsenzeit (Axial Age) 26, 28, 38, 53, 54, 57,
 58, 60, 65, 291
 Acropolis 153
 Adad-apla-iddina (Babylonian scholar) 94
 Adapa 98, 101
Aegyptiaca 247
 Aeneas 269, 270
 Aeneid 70, 153, 292
 Aeschines 218, 221, 226, 232, 233, 234, 235,
 238
 Aeschylus 18, 152, 153, 154, 157, 160, 161, 166,
 169, 170, 173, 230
 Aethiopia 65
 Agatharchides of Cnidus 247
 Agathon 230
 Agentiality 54, 58
 Akkad 93, 105
 Akkadian 63, 86, 88, 287, 293
 literature 92
Alamdimmu 94, 96
 Alcidas 230
 Alexander the Great 24, 26, 66, 111, 155
 Alexandria 23, 46, 66, 159, 229, 289
 library of Alexandria 66, 158
 Alexandrians 23
 Alkibiades 25, 26
 Alterity 71
 Amenhotep III 143
 Amenhotep, (Egyptian author) 143
 Anatolia 88
 Anchoring 51, 52
 innovation 50, 153, 157, 159, 160, 161
 Andalucia 63
 Andocides 218, 225, 227, 230, 235
 Andros 252
 Annos (son of Ptolemy II) 249
Antigone 160
 Antiochus 112
 Antipater 234
 Antiphon 218, 225, 226, 235
Antiquitates 264, 268, 269, 271, 272, 273, 276,
 278, 280, 281, 288, 293
 Antisthenes 230
 Anu-belsunu (Seleucid scribe) 94, 111
 Anu-iksru (Hellenistic period scholar from
 Uruk) 116
 Anubis 273
 Apelles 24
Apkallū 89, 111
 Apollo 267, 277
 Arabia 243
Arabian Nights 138
 Aramaic 118, 293
 Arameans 91, 96
 Archaic 14, 27, 57
 Aristarchos of Samothrace 23, 24, 25, 219
 Aristarchus 236, 237
 Aristophanes of Byzantium 23, 24, 219
 Aristophanes 153, 157, 236, 237
 Aristotle 18, 23, 24, 135, 159, 167
 Artaxerxes 184, 199
 Asclepius 267
 Ashmolean Museum 7
 Assmann, Jan 26, 29, 30, 34, 38, 44, 45, 55,
 92, 131, 175, 290
 Assur 89, 90, 93, 100, 102, 103
 Assurbanipal 83, 100
 Assurbanipal 98, 105
 Assyria 83, 88, 90, 91, 104, 288, 290
 Assyrian 37, 93
 army 103
 capital 89
 cultures 96
 king 103
 kingdom 91
 scholars 96, 102
 Assyriology 83, 98
 Athanasius 191
 Athenians 22
 Athenodorus 156
 Athens 18, 19, 46, 152, 153, 157, 164, 165, 166,
 168, 235, 292

- Athenian
 tragedians 18
 tragedy 155, 156
- Attica 7
- Augustan Age 229, 235, 281
- Augustan Rome 290
- Augustine 264, 266, 267, 268, 269, 271, 272, 275
- Augustus 36
- Avesta 55
- Axial breakthroughs 54, 57, 58
- Aztec 12, 15
- Baal-Zephon 62, 63
- Babylon 85, 86, 92, 94, 108, 110, 112, 204, 206
- Babylonia 63, 83, 86, 87, 90, 91, 103, 110
- Babylonian
 culture 91
 cultures 96
 dynasty 91
 exile 45
 gods 87
 knowledge 85
 sanctuaries 96
 scholar 96
- Ben Sira 182, 185, 189
- Berosos 66, 118
- Bible 84, 86, 179
- Black Sea 65
- Boni 269
- Book of Job* 178, 202
- Book of Jubilees* 293
- Book of Nehemiah* 184
- Book of Proverbs* 189, 202
- Book of Psalms* 189, 202
- Book of Transformations* 145
- Borsippa 96, 105, 108, 113
- British Museum 113
- Bronze Age 131, 291
- Brooklyn museum 145
- Buddha 56
- Buddhist 36
- Byzantine
 age 218, 288
 period 161
 Thessalonica 293
- Byzantium 293
- Caecilius of Caleacte 219, 224, 229, 232
- Caesar 264, 272, 279, 280
- Callimachus 229
- Canon law 130
- Canon of the Ten Attic Orators* 218, 220, 221, 223, 225, 227, 229
- Canterbury Tales* 138
- Capitol 273, 280
- Cardauns 271, 273
- Carthage 65, 179
- Catalogue* 42, 43, 64
- Catholic
 church 39, 51, 130
 cult of saints 40
- Catiline 270
- Celts 65
- Ceres 266
- Chaeronea 155, 157
- Chaldeans 118
- Chasheshonqy (demotic author) 137
- China 35, 36, 55
- Chinese 36
 literature 147
 mandarinate 290
- Christian 36
 apologists 266
 authorities 292
 authors 267
 Bible 3, 17, 179
 canon 47
 culture 47
 New Testament 287
 Old Testament 287
 philosophies 135
 traditions 198, 288, 289
 west 135
 world 179
- Christianity 44, 46, 47, 58, 174
- Cicero 223, 228, 263, 264, 270, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 293
- Cicero's De Legibus* 276
- Cicero's Philippicae* 223
- City Dionysia 152, 154, 156, 164, 166, 167
- City of God* 266, 271
- Classic (phase of Egyptian literature) 131
- Classical 14, 57
 antiquity 28
 Athens 218, 239

- author(s) 23, 28
- canon 18
- Greece 47, 164
- Greek 238
- period 7, 27
- texts 28
- world 17
- Classics 17, 18
- Clement of Alexandria 143
- Confucius 55
- Conon 234
- Constantinople 289
- Corinth 218
- Council of Carthage 179
- Council of Hippo 179
- Council of Laodicea 179
- Council of Rome 179
- Council of Trent 40
- Counter-reformation 40
- Crete 61
- Critias 235
- Cross of Lothaire 135
- Cultural
 - biography 17
 - memory 69, 96
- Cybele 267
- Cyclades 245
- Cycladic figurines 9, 13
- Cyprus 61
- Cyrus the Great 110

- Daniël 182
- Daniel 289
- Dante 25
- Danube 65
- Darius I 110
- Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 131
- David Ruhnken 193
- De Architectura* 7
- Demetrius of Phalerum 235
- Demetrius 228, 233
- Demosthenes 218, 219, 221, 222, 225, 227, 232, 233, 235, 238
- Demosthenes' Philippicae* 223
- Demotic 130–135, 140, 142, 146–148
- Dendera, temple of 142
- Diadochi 114
- Dinarchus 218, 225, 226, 230, 235

- Dio of Prusa 219, 234, 235, 236
- Diodorus Siculus 7, 9
- Diodorus 253
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus 219, 221, 228, 232, 233, 235, 237, 238, 239
- Dionysus 152, 153, 243
- Doric 7

- Ea 96, 98, 101
- Eastern Mediterranean 55, 63, 289
- Edfu 143, 144
- Egibatila 118
- Egypt 12, 63, 65, 88, 131, 144, 148, 194, 223, 243, 253, 294
- Egyptian 12
 - civilization 53
 - culture 134, 143, 148
 - deities 273, 274
 - god 62, 280
 - libraries 144
 - literature 62, 130, 131, 132, 134, 146, 245
 - temples 142
- Ekur-Zākir family 108
- El-Amarna 88
- El-Behnasa 26
- Elamites 91
- Electra* 160
- Elephantine 138
- Emar 88
- Emesal 109
- English 16
- Enlightenment 70
- Enlil 92
- Ennius 293
- Enuma Anu Enlil (work on astrology)* 102, 105, 107, 109
- Enuma Elis (foundation myth)* 92, 118
- Epic of Erra 96
- Epic of Gilgamesh 88
- Erechteus* 156
- Eridu 99
- Esagil 112, 115
 - library 113
 - temple 92, 110
- Esagil-kin-apli (Babylonian author) 94, 95, 96, 101
- Esagil-kinam-ubbib (Babylonian author) 94

- Esarhaddon (Assyrian king) 98, 103
 Esther 179, 289, 281
 Euhormos vii, x
 Euphrates 88
 Eurasia 55
 Euripides 18, 152, 153, 154, 155, 158, 160, 161,
 166, 167, 169, 170, 173, 30
 Eusebia 201
Ex Aegypto 248, 253
 Exegete 42, 43, 52, 58, 67, 158

 Flavius Josephus 192, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203,
 204, 205, 208
 Florence 170
Frogs 154, 157, 166
 Furrina 270
 Furrinalia 271

 Gabinius 273
 Galen 158
 Galli 268
 Globalisation x, 38, 58, 60, 64, 66, 67, 70
 Gorgias 230
 Greco-Macedonians 148
 Greco-Roman, vii 18, 36, 69
 Greece 12, 70, 118, 154, 157, 165, 194, 222
 Greek 12, 14, 16, 21, 26, 34, 37, 46, 48, 118,
 218, 293
 art 49
 authors 225
 colonization 63
 culture 49, 222
 literature 23, 49, 293
 orators 218, 220
 past 70
 rhetoric 221
 philosophy 49, 275
 speeches 218
 tragedy 152, 160, 165, 176
 Greeks 47, 64, 131, 246

 Hammurabi 86, 92
 Han China 69
 Han Empire 35, 68
 Harpocrates 273
 Harpocraton 227
 Hasmonean dynasty 194

 Hattusa 88
 Hebrew 293
 canonisation 66
 torah 46
 Hebrew Bible 178, 179, 180, 190, 196, 209
 Hegel 47, 56, 172
 Hellenistic
 age 27, 218, 222, 184, 188
 Alexandria 23
 civilization 46
 copies of letters 107
 Egypt 287
 eras 85
 kings 114, 292
 legacy 46
 past 70
 period 7, 45, 89, 109, 110, 112, 114, 131, 140,
 149, 158, 189
 power 110
 scholars 108, 219
 schools 218
 world 159
 Heliopolis 66
 Hephaistos 243
 Hermogenes of Tarsus 219, 221, 226, 227,
 228, 234, 235, 239
 Herodes Atticus 228, 229
 Herodotus 65, 238
 Hesiod 24
 Hieratic (traditional Egyptian cursive script)
 130, 134
 Hippone 179
 Historicity 54, 58, 65
 Hittites 63
 Homer 25, 27, 28, 29, 65, 156, 174, 237
 Homeric vii, 170
 Horace 265
 Hordjedef, (Egyptian author) 143
 Horus 244
 Huelva hoard 63
 Hyperides 218, 221, 226, 232, 233, 234, 235,
 238
 Hyspaosines, (Parthian king) 110

Iliad 25, 27, 63
 Imhotep (Egyptian author) 143
 Inaros cycle 137, 138

- India 55
- Indian 12, 14, 36
 - subcontinent 12
- Ingres, Jean-Auguste-Dominique 24, 25, 26, 29
- Inka 15, 16
 - kipu 15, 16
- Iphigenia in Tauris 167, 171
- Iran 88
- Irenaeus of Lyons 4
- Irenaeus 289
- Isaeus 218, 221, 226, 232, 233, 235
- Isis 243, 244, 249, 254, 273
- Iskaru* (Akkadian word) 101, 102
- Isocrates 218, 221, 226, 232, 233, 235, 238
- Israel 47, 63, 66, 191, 287
- Itti-Marduk-balatu, (descendant of Musezib) 110, 112

- Jaspers, Karl 26, 38, 53, 60, 291
- Jeremia 56
- Jeremiah 201
- Jerusalem 46, 204
- Jewish 36, 44, 45
 - culture 58
 - history 186
 - philosophies 135
 - torah 46
 - traditions 288
- Jews 207
- Judaism 48, 197, 198
- Judea 148, 149
- Justin Martyr 289

- Kaduha (Cygnus) 117
- Kalhu 94
- Kallimachos of Kyrene 23, 24
- Kassandraia 245, 247, 251
- Kassite dynasty 86, 87, 89, 91, 92, 117
- Ketuvim 178, 181
- Khaemweset, (Egyptian author) 143
- King James Bible 4
- Kouroi 12
- Kouros of Samos 14

- Laotse (Chinese philosopher) 56
- Larsa 86
- Late Babylonian period 97, 107, 112
- Late Bronze Age 62
- Late Old Babylonian period 86, 117
- Late Republican period 263
- Latin 23, 293
 - authors 225
 - texts 22
- Lenaia 168
- Leonardo da Vinci 7, 8, 9
- Libraries of Assurbanipal 98
- Life of the Ten Orators* 154
- Livy 278, 279
- Longinus 228
- Louvre 19
- Lucretius 22, 27
- Lycurgus 152, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 175, 218, 226, 232, 233, 234, 235, 289
- Lysias 218, 221, 226, 232, 233, 235, 237, 238

- Maccabees 180, 185
- Macedonia 155, 245
- Manetho 66
- Marcion 3, 288
- Marcus Aurelius 174
- Marduk 92, 96, 101, 112
- Marone 252
- Marx, Karl 47
- Maurya Empire 69
- Medea 167
- Medieval Latin 130
- Mediterranean vii, 61, 65, 70, 292
- Megiddo 88
- Memoire volontaire* 34, 35, 36
- Memphis 141, 244, 248, 250, 252
- Memphite Theological Document* 141
- Menkheperre, (king of Upper Egypt) 142
- Mesoamerica 12
- Mesoamerican 12
- Mesopotamia 65, 83, 87, 194, 287
- Metellus 269, 270
- Michelangelo 25, 50
- Middle Babylonian
 - ductus 97
 - period 84, 85, 86, 117
- Middle Egyptian 142
- Middle Kingdom 131
- Mitanni 88

- Modern Europe 176
 Moïse 204
 Molière 25
 Mouseion 159
 Mozart 25
 Muslim
 philosophies 135
 world 135

 Nabonassar 113
Nabonidus chronicle 115
 Nabonidus 114
 Nabû-ahhe-eriba (astrologer) 106
 Nabû-zuqup-kenu (Neo-Assyrian court scholar) 116
 Nabû 105
 Nazi-maruttas 89, 90
 Near East 55, 61, 85, 88, 131, 291, 294
 Nebuchadnezzar I 92, 94
 Neo-Assyrian
 catalogue 88
 cities 107
 court 83
 empire 64, 105
 kings 93
 period 113
 scholars 85
 scribes 92
 state 107
 royal libraries 105
 Neo-Babylonian dynasty 108
 Nevi'im 178, 181
 New Kingdom 131, 136
 New Testament 3, 4, 5, 22, 49, 179, 288, 289
 Nicolas de Tolentino 39
 Nietzsche 171
 Nile Valley 61
 Nineveh 83, 98, 100, 102, 104, 105, 108
 Ninurta-aha-iddina (Assyrian scribe) 83
 Nippur 86, 93, 108, 116
 North Africa 61, 65, 131
 Numa Pompilius 278, 279
 Nysa 243

 Octavian 281
Odyssey 25, 27, 65, 160
Oedipus Coloneus 160, 166

Oedipus Rex 160, 167
 Oedipus 172
 Old Babylonian
 ductus 97
 period 85
 Old Kingdom 7
 Old Testament 3, 292
Oresteia 160
 Orestes 167
 Osiris 143, 243, 244, 254
 Ounas 143
 Oxford 7
 Oxyrhynchos 26

Papyrus Insinger 140, 145
 Parmenides 56
 Parthenon 50
 Parthian
 empire 70
 eras 85
 period 108
 Pentateuch 287
 Pericles 222
 Perikles 24, 26
 Persia 55
 Persian 37, 66, 112, 131, 287
 empire 183
 Persians 45, 118, 148, 186
 Pharaoh 138
 Pharaonic regime 159
 Pheidias 24
 Pherecydes of Syros 55
 Phillip II of Macedon 155
 Philo of Byblos 66
 Philostratus 227, 229
 Phoenicia 66
 Phoenician
 colonization 63
 Photius 228
 Pindar 24
 Plato 18, 24, 222, 238
 Pleiades 103
 Plutarch 22, 154, 155
 Plution 234
Poetics 159, 167
 Poggio Bracciolini 23, 27
 Polyclitus 219, 222

- Pompeians 272
 Pope 130
 Prince Setne Khaemweset 144
 Protestant 39
Proverbs 178
 Pseudo-Acro 265
 Pseudo-Plutarch 220, 228, 235, 239
 Ptah 244
 Ptolemies 249
 Ptolemy II 249
 Ptolemy III, king 158
 Pythagoras 55

 Qin dynasty 91
Qohéleth 178, 181, 202
 Quintilian 23, 24, 219, 221, 225, 228, 229, 233, 235, 236, 237, 239, 263
 Quran 188

 Racine 25
 Raphael 25, 29, 50
 Reception studies 17
 Reflexivity 54, 58, 65
 Reformation 39, 40
 Renaissance 18, 136
 Republican age 268
 Roman 37, 131
 age 218
 calendar 281
 canonisation 70
 citizens 268
 deity 271
 Egypt 287
 Empire 36, 69, 70, 159, 175, 203, 204, 208
 identity 280
 pantheon 274
 period 134, 144, 147, 161
 religion 265, 268, 272, 273, 275, 281
 religious heritage 267, 268, 281
 religious law 276
 republic 68, 267
 schools 218, 219
 state 278
 tradition 265
 Romans 23, 47, 68, 148, 263, 264
 Rome 19, 70, 118, 170, 179, 221, 239, 263, 268, 271, 276, 281, 288

 Russia 65
 Ruth 179, 181, 201

 Sagenkreis 137
 Said, Edward 18
 Sais 138
Sakikku 94, 95, 96, 117
 Salamis 8
 Samas-sum-ukin (Babylonian king) 104
 Samas 101
 Samian
 foot 7
 half-cubit 14
 Samos 14
 Samsu-iluna 86
 Sanskrit 12
 Sappho 24, 25
 Sargonid dynasty 97, 100
 Schlegel 171
 Second dynasty of Isin 91, 96, 97, 117
 Second Temple 181, 182, 183, 186, 188, 192, 195, 196, 197, 209
 Seleucid
 empire 66, 115
 Seneca 174, 270
 Sennacherib (king of the Neo-Assyrian empire) 93
 Sentinus 272
 Septuagint 46, 48
 Serapis 273
 Servius Danielis 266
 Servius 266
 Seth 62, 63
 Shakespeare 25
 Sicily 18, 22
 Sin-leqi-unninni 88, 90
 Sippar 108
 Sokrates 24
 Sophocles the Younger 166
 Sophocles 18, 15, 152, 153, 154, 158, 160, 161, 166, 169, 170, 173, 222, 230
 Southern Italy 18, 22
 Soviet Union 294
 Spain 65
 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 18
 Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh 103
 Stele of Kyme and Diodorus 244, 253

- Stoic 174
 Stoicism 174
Story of Petese, son of Petetum 138, 140
 Stroumsa, Guy 44
 Subsī-mesre-Sakkan 90
 Suda (Byzantine encyclopedia) 224, 228
 Sumer 86, 93, 98, 104
 Sumerian 88
 Sumero-Akkadian
 culture 115
 kingship 96
 literature 96
 royal culture 112
 scholars 110
 tradition 89, 108, 113, 118
 Summanus 271
 Suteans 91, 96
 Syracusans 22
 Syracuse 218
 Syria 62, 88

 Tebtunis library 147
 Tebtunis, herbal of 140
 Telekles of Samos 9
 Tell el-Dab'a 62
 Telmessos 248, 251
 Temple of Ptah 141, 248
 Terence 293
 Tertullian 266, 273
 Tetralogy 165
 Thapsus 264
 Theodoros of Samos 9
 Theodorus 234
 Thessaloniki 170, 245
 Thirty Tyrants 235
 Thot 143, 144

 Thucydides 237
 Thutmes III 143
 Titus Tatius (Sabine king) 272
 Torah 66, 178, 180, 182, 190, 195
 Troy 269
 Tukulti-Ninurta I, (Middle Assyrian king)
 104
 Tyrtæus 156

 Ugarit 88
 Umberto Eco 23
Ummānu 89, 111
 Ur 86
 Uruanna 102
Uruk list of Sages and Kings 110
 Uruk 86, 89, 94, 108, 113, 116

 Vacuna 265
 Varro 263, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 272,
 273, 274, 275, 277, 279, 280, 281, 288, 293
 Venus de Milo 50e
 Venus Medici 14
 Venus 266
 Virgil 24, 25, 153, 293
 Vitruvius 7
 Vitumnus 272

 Weber 57, 60
 Western Middle Ages 288
 Wilbour papyrus lot 145

 Xerxes 110

 Zagros Mountains 87
 Zarathustra 55
 Zeus-Ammon 248