

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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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;<sup>8</sup> that the story of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11) does not belong in the Bible;<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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,<sup>11</sup> and I mention only a few: the Gospels of Peter, Mary, Phillip, Thomas, and the Gospel of Truth.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Whether cast as Gnostic or other, “authority” lies at the core of canonization.<sup>15</sup>

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.’<sup>16</sup>

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,

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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.<sup>17</sup>

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* (κανών), which means a reed or a rod used as an instrument for measurement.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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. “κανών.”

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. “κανών.”

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> The second was discovered in 1985 on the island of Salamis, near Athens (Fig. 1.1a–b).<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.

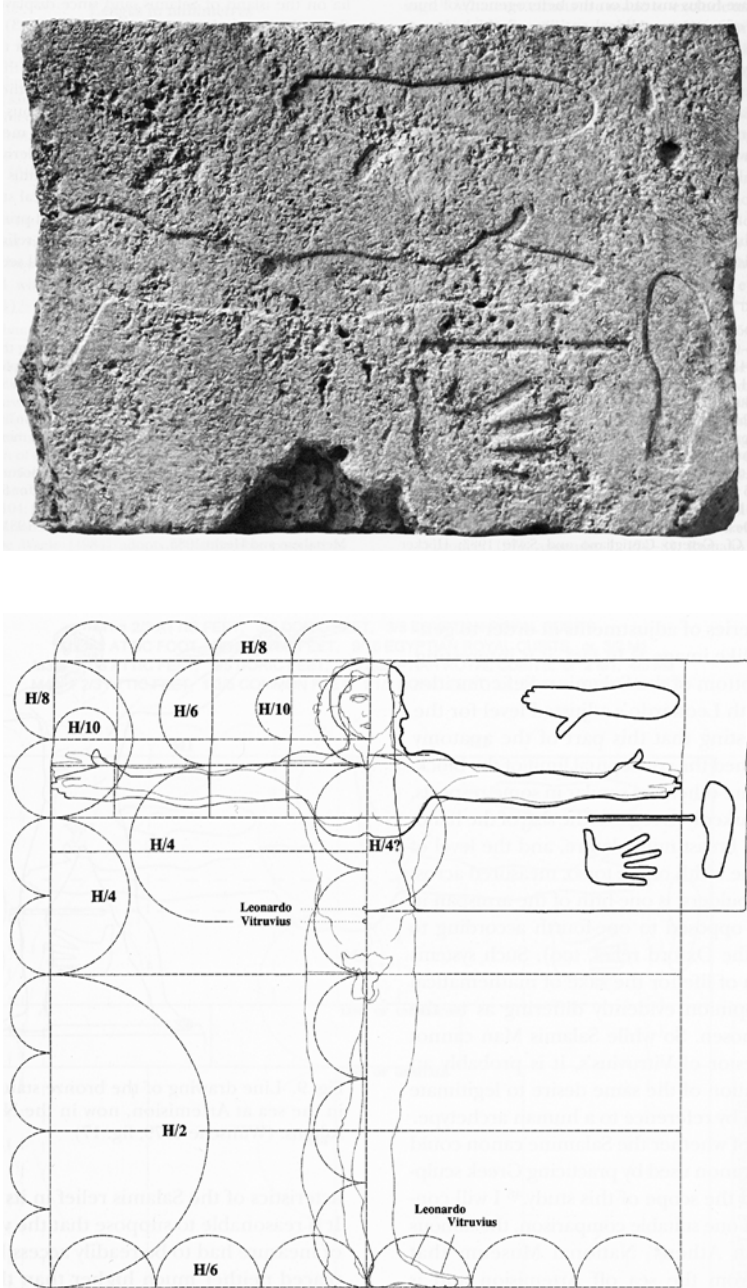


FIGURE 1.1 a) Metrological relief from Salamis, Greece, 4th century BCE, limestone,  $113.5 \times 79.3 \times 16.2$  cm; b) Diagram comparing Leonardo da Vinci's adaptation of Vitruvian Man (left) with Salamis Man (right). Scale 1:20, overlaid with the principal proportional relationships in terms of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

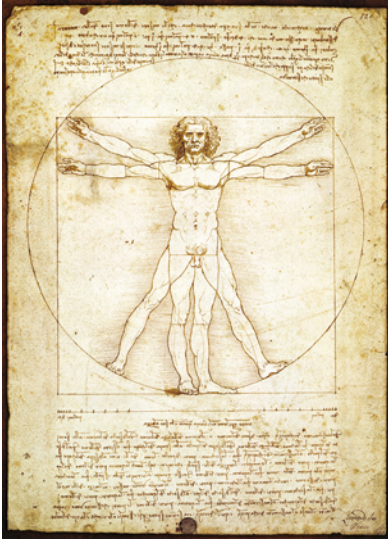


FIGURE 1.2  
Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man  
(Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo  
Vitruvio or L'Uomo Vitruviano), ca. 1490

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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> The Greek sculptor Polykleitos even wrote a treatise entitled *Canon*.<sup>32</sup> Most importantly, both the Egyptian and the Greek canons were, at their very roots, corporeal.<sup>33</sup>

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.

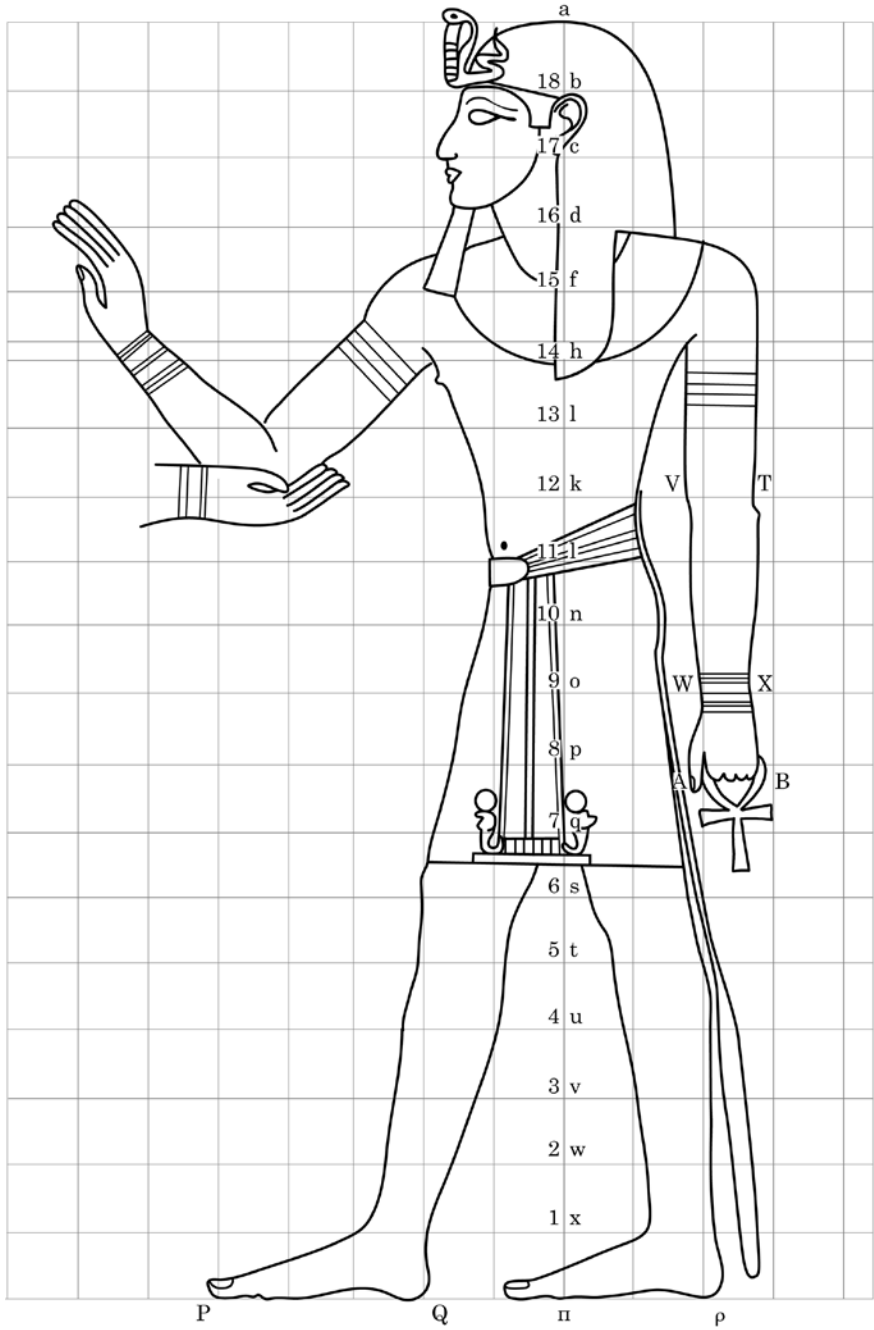


FIGURE 1.3 The first Egyptian canon



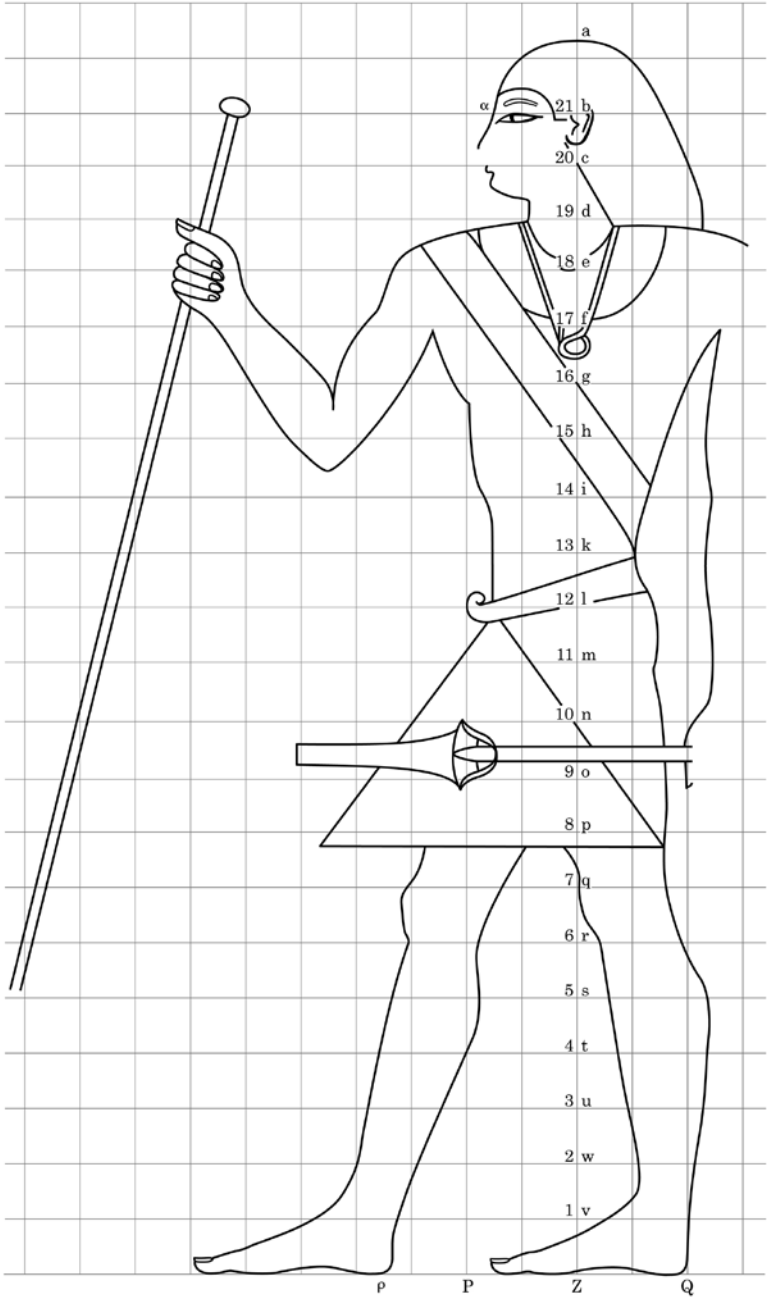


FIGURE 1.4 The second Egyptian canon

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

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.<sup>35</sup> 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).<sup>36</sup> 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).<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

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 Banerjea 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

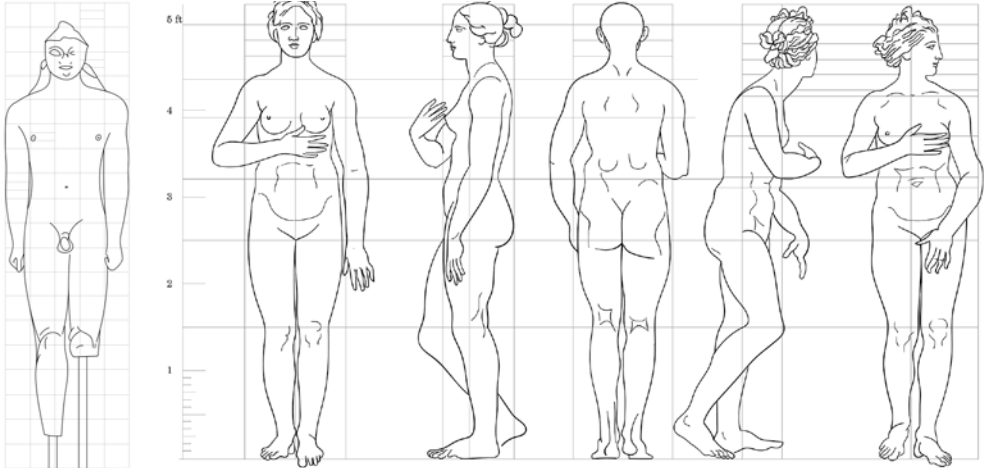


FIGURE 1.6 a) Sketch of the kouros of Samos, a 6th-century BCE Archaic Greek statue now in the Archaeological Museum of Vathi in Samos. The length of a square of the grid corresponds to a Samian half cubit; b) Johann Gottfried Schadow (German, 1764–1850), drawing of the Venus Medici, 1834

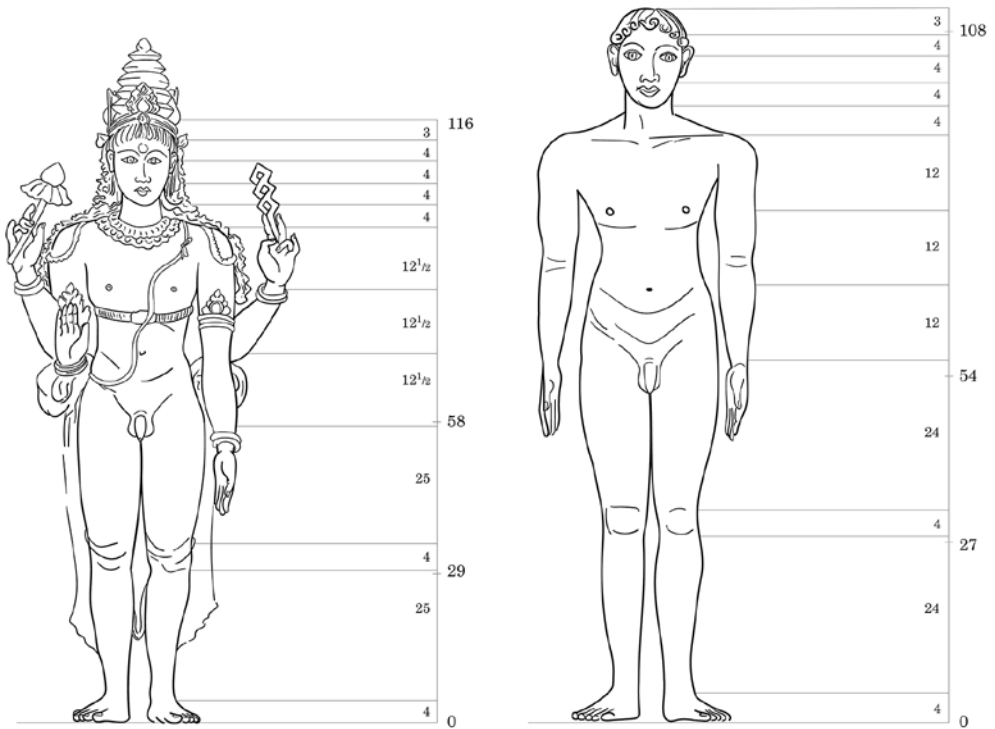


FIGURE 1.7 An Indian canon

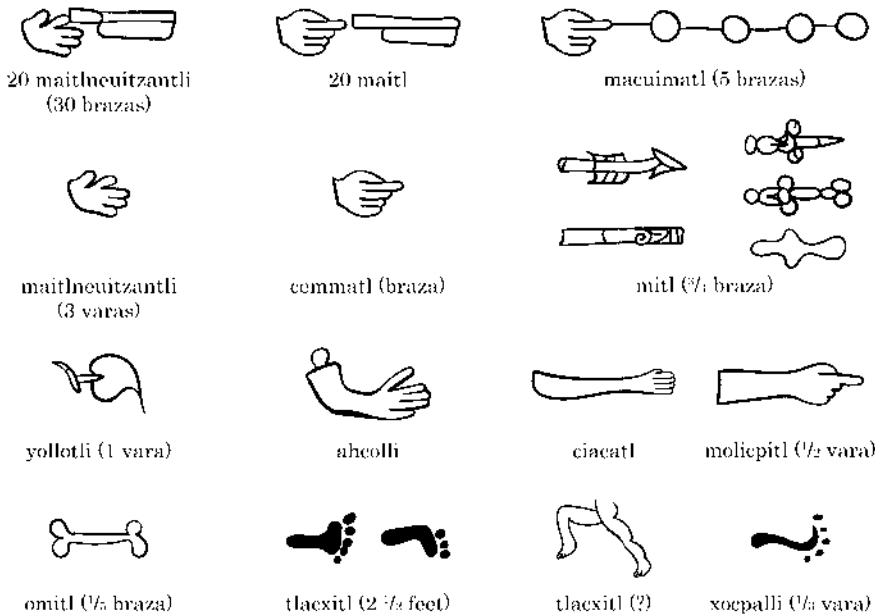


FIGURE 1.8 Aztec units of measure referenced primarily by elements of the human body, including hands, arms, feet, steps (indicated by legs), and even bones and the human heart, but also other symbols, like arrows or darts

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 cords<sup>39</sup> – 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.

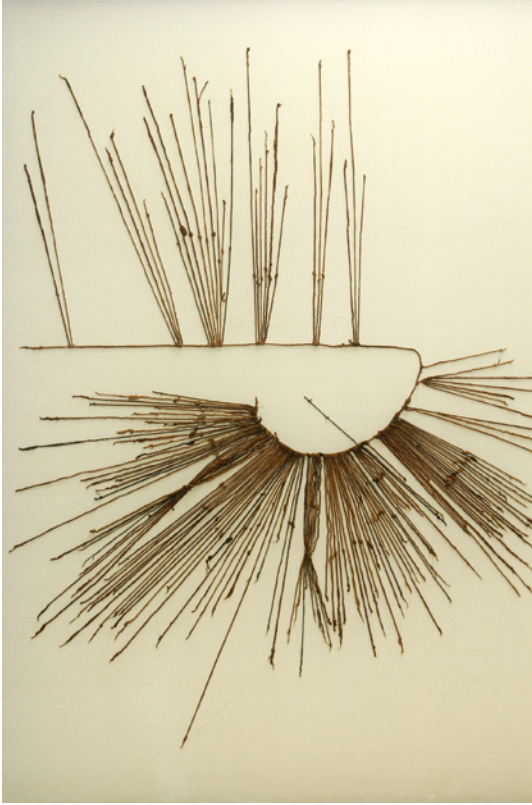


FIGURE 1.9  
Inka khipu, Centro Mallqui,  
Leymebamba, Peru

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.”<sup>43</sup> 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?<sup>44</sup>

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

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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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

It has long been known that the reputations of many writers and artists have risen or fallen through the ages.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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*, *Philoctetes*, *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 *Oinomaios*? 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.<sup>51</sup>

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 '*hypotheseis*' (prefaces).<sup>52</sup>

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

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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.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.

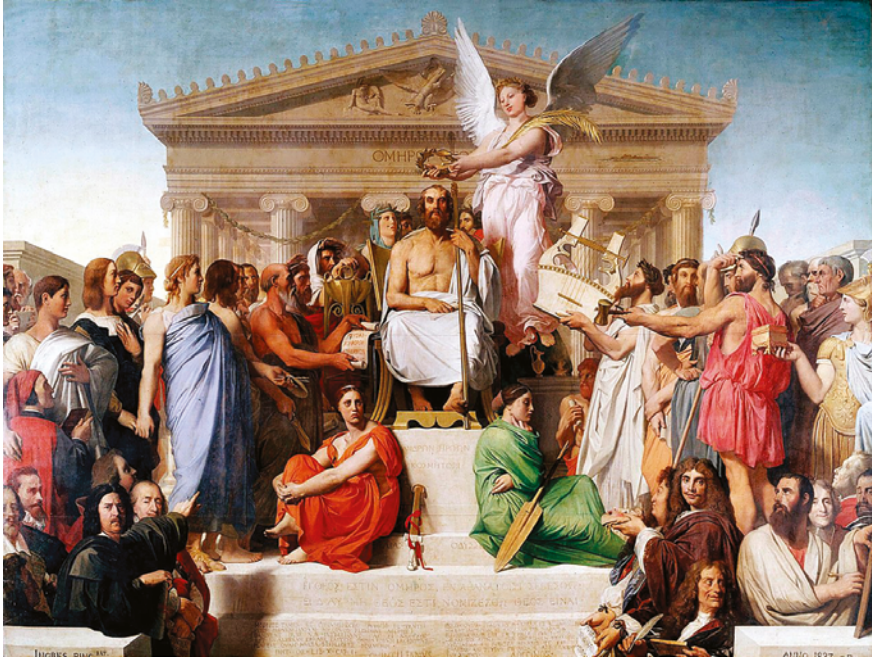


FIGURE 1.11 The Apotheosis of Homer by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1827

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

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?<sup>58</sup> 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."<sup>59</sup> 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*,<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup>

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.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup>

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.”<sup>64</sup> 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

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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.<sup>65</sup>

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).<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

#### 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.”<sup>69</sup> 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

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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.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Assmann 1997, 9.

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