

Canonisation as Innovation

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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'Arétologie 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 ΟΙΚΟΣ, 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 OIKOS, 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 Iversen 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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