

By the Books

Canon Formation among the Romans

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As presumptuous as it may seem for a classicist to be addressing the subject of canon with a group whose forerunners invented the very idea, still, I'm hoping we'll see the Romans had structures in their society and institutions which contributed, if not directly to the formation of the Christian and Jewish canons, at least to their ready acceptance.

It is sometimes supposed that "canon" in the strictly literary sense is the descendant of Greco-Roman usage, while the biblical use of "canon" is an altogether different beast.¹ But this paper will argue that, while the Romans were busy grouping high-culture writings in the Latin vernacular into literary genres and canons copped from the Greeks, they were also busily formulating canons to promote the doctrines of Empire.

Romans and Greeks

Rebecca Flemming summarizes quite elegantly the relationship between the Greeks and Romans on the threshold of Empire:²

By the end of the Mithridatic wars, Rome had acquired a vastly increased amount of Greek knowledge. This knowledge was accumulated in literary form in the libraries of great nobles like Marcus Licinius Lucullus; in the personal form of Greek scholars and teachers—slave, freed, and free—who now made the imperial capital their home in much greater numbers; and in the form of more material booty. The encounter between Greek learning and Roman power was accordingly intensified on both sides.

Although the Romans were in general enthusiastically accepting of Greek knowledge, with the work of Marcus Porcius Cato ("the Elder" "the Censor"; d. 149 BCE) and later of Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE) a movement arose

1. The word *κανών* in classical Greek was never used in the meaning ordinarily assigned it by today's literary critics. In pagan antiquity the word maintained the basic meaning "rule, model" from its use in ethics. The term "canon" for specific lists (a concept covered by the Greek word *πίνακες*, "indices") was first used in the early modern period by David Ruhnken in 1768. The word was employed by Christian writers such as Eusebius (the first reference we have) for the canon of scripture. See Pfeiffer, *Classical Scholarship*, 207.

2. "Knowledge and Empire," *Camb. Hist.*, 236.

to rival the written products of Greek imagination with native Latin works. This led to a codification of literary genres and styles and to what we might call the first treatises on comparative literature.³ The movement also led to such remarkable productions as Varro's *Disciplinae*, an encyclopedia, a canon we might call it, of all the knowledge a Roman of good class ought to have.⁴

In addition, Roman students were soon put to work imitating Greek masters and their genres.⁵ When under the Emperor Augustus a concerted effort was made to reproduce in Latin the literary "canons" of the Greeks, the Romans were primed with an exhaustive knowledge of original texts (such as Homer) and of the commentaries produced by centuries of studies of such texts (at the great Library at Alexandria, e.g.). Thus, when P. Vergilius Maro sets out to create a Roman Odysseus/Achilles in the form of the Trojan Aeneas, he has on hand: (1) his excellent knowledge of Greek; (2) his schoolboy experience imitating the Homeric style; (3) access to commentaries (by the librarians of Alexandria, e.g.) on Homer's works;⁶ (4) access to previous imitations of Homer's work, which are lost to us; (5) access to imitations of Homer's work written by librarians of Alexandria; and (6) access to early Latin epics in the style of Homer. And yet, with all that, Vergil's epic *Aeneid* proves to be something quintessentially Roman.

Let's contemplate for a moment what kind of work we think Augustus commissioned from Vergil: a work in a genre (traditional epic) currently out of vogue;⁷ a written imitation of what were (we now know) oral traditional works, with the full apparatus of orality, including formulaic repetitions;⁸ a self-conscious, erudite imitation of what were naïve traditional works; an upstart

3. We might mention in this connection the *περὶ ὑψους* (*De sublimitate*), a curious little treatise from about this period (although wrongly attributed to the rhetor Cassius Longinus), which is attempting to formulate a theory of greatness in literature which transcends genre, culture, and language. In service of his theory, the author (probably a Greek professor at Rome) praises, in addition to masterworks in Greek, works by Romans in Latin and "Let there be light" from Genesis.

4. Although this work is lost, we can reconstruct with some confidence its contents. For more information, see Flemming, "Knowledge and Empire," 237.

5. Canons in Roman education, as a complex and well-documented topic, are outside the scope of this (small) paper; I will merely mention that canons of literary works in the Latin vernacular formed the hub of "higher" education for Romans of good class. The rhetorician Quintilian (d. ca. 100 CE), for example, once proposed that the entire school curriculum be keyed to Vergil's works.

6. Displayed by his knowledge of Ethiopian cooking, e.g.

7. Since the publication of *Aetia* of Callimachus (d. ca. 240 BCE; a scholar at the Library of Alexandria) and his anti-epic pronouncement *μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα κακόν* ("a big book is a big evil"), the *epyllion* ("little epic") had been the favorite. Callimachus had great influence on the development of Latin literature.

8. That the linguistic oddity of Homeric works had been a topic of study in this period can be illustrated by the *περὶ ὑψους*, which tries to explain away the differences between the two epics. See above, n. 3. Vergil imitates, rather half-heartedly, some of the formulae of the Homeric epics, but on the whole eschews this stylistic technique, which is so essential to traditional oral epic.

Roman work in the upstart language Latin, which dares to take on classics of a more prestigious culture that have thoroughly penetrated the hearts and minds of more than one culture; a sort of *histoire à clef* which, while set in the legendary past, celebrates Augustus' present and makes predictions about Augustus' future;⁹ and a tour de force which would put the Greeks (and others) in their place while coopting their cultural treasures.

I've begun this discussion with Vergil as an example because I intend to center this discussion on the long reign of the Emperor Augustus as a period that laid out enduring cultural definitions and set standards for other cultures and times.¹⁰

An Age of Canons

One of the reasons to focus on the Emperor Augustus as the father of canons, if we may call him that, is that the early Empire is particularly a time of the codification and emulation of ancient works of the Greeks, the prestige culture of this period. In fact, we now see many of the trends from the Augustan Age as fueling the full flowering of the Second Sophistic (from about 50 to about 230 CE), and many of the Christian writings as prototypical productions of the Second Sophistic.

What we seem to see in Augustus is a young and politically insignificant member of an undistinguished family whose remarkable great-uncle has thrust him onto the world's stage attempting to consolidate his family's grab for power by associating himself, his clan, his adherents, and his political machinations with the fabled actions of fabled Romans and the generative power of the gods. There is perhaps no artifact from Augustus' reign—not even the *Aeneid*—which illustrates his problems and his solutions to those problems more eloquently than the Temple of Mars the Avenger (Mars Ultor) he built. That this is the god he chose to honor is already indicative of his and his family's woes: he is doubtless thinking of the god as supporting him in avenging the death of Julius. The temple's pediment portrayed Mars with Romulus (first king of Rome) and Venus (ancestress of the Julian clan) on his left and with Fortuna (the Julians were fated to rule) and Roma (no Hellenizers here) on his right. Other sculptures include Aeneas (the last of the Trojans and ancestor of the Julian clan)

9. A technique borrowed perhaps from such works as Apollonius' epic *Argonautica* (third century BCE).

10. I don't know if we have to insist, with T. S. Eliot that, "Our classic, the classic of all Europe is Virgil" ("What Is a Classic?" *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 130), but I'm glad to see the notice of Dennis MacDonald's new book, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature*.

This is also, of course, a crucial period for the development of prototypes of the canons of Western law. That the Romans are imposing on the Empire written law codes may also speak to the development of Christian canons, but this, like the introduction of canons for Roman education, is a topic too large for this paper.

and Romulus, accompanied by kings of Alba Longa and Augustus' ancestors (the Julians were there from the beginning) and Republican heroes. Augustus, dressed as a triumphant general riding a four-horse chariot, faces the altar at the front.¹¹

The establishment of what we call the Empire under Augustus and his gang sends ripples of change across Italy and the Mediterranean, and it is tempting to see the grand nephew of the wily Julius Caesar as the puppet-master of all this cultural upheaval. Of course, it can be argued that Augustus was simply responding to, institutionalizing perhaps, cultural changes that were already well underway. In either case, Augustus, as has been long noted, is one of the models for the figure of Jesus, and Augustan political and cultural manipulations, we might argue, are models for the early Christian communities.¹² Thus, Augustus' re-creation of the history of Rome, which emphasizes not only the role played by one of his ancestors, Aeneas, but also the role played by a founding father from a culture older than the Greek (Aeneas, the last of the Trojans), permits the Romans to admire the Greeks and admit their cultural debt to them while asserting their own superiority. In an age of Greek cultural dominance across the eastern Mediterranean (because of Alexander) and across the western Mediterranean (because of Greek colonization and Roman conquest), many cultures must be learning from the Romans how to act out similar scenarios.

Media and Messages

What may have contributed to the interest in compiling of lists of appropriate works in the early Empire is the introduction of new technologies. The increasing use of the codex, instead of the papyrus roll, as the medium of copying and preserving literary works seems to have fed a passion for codification and the kind of information classification techniques more commonly associated with modern libraries.¹³ Thus, for example, not only does the codex put literary works in a more easily preserved form (since the frequency of use of the codex parallels the rise in the use of parchment, a more durable medium than papy-

11. For a complete description, see Lim, "The Gods of Empire," 269.

12. Or, at least the cult figure of Augustus, as presented particularly in the East, is a model for the cult figure of Jesus. See, e.g., the inscriptions quoted in the next section.

13. Although the codex was early adopted by the Christian communities and although Christian works were regularly copied into codices (apparently), while the majority of pagan works continued to be copied onto papyrus rolls, still the first mention of the codex is from a Roman author, Marcus Valerius Martialis (Martial; d. ca. 102–104 CE), who in 1.2 and 14.188, 190, 192 seems to be discussing codex copies.

Simultaneous with the increased use of the codex is the development of the poetic book, such as Vergil's *Liber bucolicon* (*Ecloues*), Sextus Propertius' *Monobiblos*, and Horace's *Liber sermonum*, all from the Augustan period and bearing the Augustan imprimatur. The emphasis on the book as a coherent unit comes to leave a mark on the content of individual poems, requiring them to echo another or balance another in the collection. This also may speak to issues in canon formation. See Zetzel, "Re-Creating the Canon," 89ff.

rus), it also makes it easier for librarians to classify and group works by providing a book spine as the location for titles and librarian-ish comments. Thus, the library shelf provides a quickly and easily assembled "top ten" list, as well as a kernel of "commentary"—another kind of sacred book (see below).¹⁴

Although the preference for the codex is particularly associated with the early Christian communities, the codex itself is often thought to be a variant of the Roman's portable personal notebook, which regularly consisted of several wooden tablets bound together—Julius Caesar had one. The word *codex* (in Republican Latin, *caudex*) itself suggests the wood of tablets, since it's commonly used for the trunk of a tree or a block of wood. Thus, we can think of this kind of information retrieval device as rising with the Roman Empire as well as with the spread of Christianity.

Another typically Roman medium, which may have contributed to the formation of canons, is the epigraphical inscription. Not all cultures write on stone, but the Greeks and Romans certainly do, and we have thousands of such inscriptions, the great majority mini-biographies from gravestones and votives. What can it have meant to the conquered peoples of the Near East to see, set up in a permanent medium, the achievements of Augustus?

Consider these examples, where Augustus is called:

the master of Europe and Asia, the star of all Hellas (Phylae);
 father of all the human race (Sardis);
 benefactor and savior of all men (Dionysopolis);
 the savior of the whole human race, whose foresight not only fulfilled but even went beyond the prayers of all. For land and sea are at peace and the cities flourish, well governed, in concord and harmony (Halicarnassus).¹⁵

Or, consider the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, those huge, lengthy (more than 2600 words) catalogues of Augustus' deeds carved in stone on whole walls of temples throughout the East.¹⁶ The permanence of the medium and the enshrining of the emperor's achievements on the walls of temples must have been a galling reminder of the triumphs of one culture over others, as well as providing a model for the catalogues of deeds of local notables. Moreover, such

14. Not to be envisioned as in modern libraries; books were laid flat on "library" shelves in antiquity.

15. See Tarn, "Alexander the Great," 123; *Monumenta Asiae minoris antiqua* 6 (1933) 292; *Ancient Greek Inscriptions in the British Museum*, 894; and Mashkin, "Eschatology and Messianism," 206–28.

16. The fullest copy remaining to us is likely to be the one on the Temple of Augustus and Rome in Ankara, Turkey (the Monumentum Ancyranum). The Members and Fellows of the Westar Institute will recall that John Dominic Crossan has spoken to the group on this inscription and illustrated his talk with photos. See also his *In Search of Paul*, 72–73.

On the proliferation of stone inscriptions in religious contexts in the Empire, regular attendees of meetings of the Westar Institute will recall the discussion of Steven J. Friesen's paper on "The Wrong Erastus: Ideology, Archaeology, and Exegesis" in spring 2011.

a monument would also canonize Roman preferences for the telling of such stories—that is, Roman-style history and “Lives to Live By” biography.

Top Four, Five, Seven, Ten, Twelve, Twenty-Four, Twenty-Seven Lists

Before we leave the subject of literary canons, we might stop for a moment at the phenomenon of “top [supply magic number here] lists” which we find playing a part in the Romans’ rivalry with Greek styles and genres. These lists function on one level pretty much as we would suspect, with one Roman innovation: the Romans are in essence inventing comparative literature by finding qualities of work and life which will let them compare ten Roman orators, for example, to ten Greek orators of comparable merit.¹⁷ Whether any of the lists can be dated back to Augustus’ reign or not, still we might pause here to comment on how significant numbers may have played a part in the formation of literary or magico-religious canons.

Most of the numbers connected with literary “best” lists have magical/symbolic associations: four represents the four corners of the earth, or the Empire; five and its multiples, the hand; seven, the five visible planets and the moon and the sun; twelve, signs of the Zodiac and months of the year; twenty-four, hours of the day; even twenty-seven has magical echoes, as the cube of three.¹⁸ The influence of magic number lists on canon formation is pretty obvious: you have to find ten Roman orators to match the Greek list; you have to find examples from the all the corners of the Empire to build a top four; you may have to throw in a work of dubious authorship so you can have a top seven collection of Aeschylus’ plays.¹⁹

Sleight of Hand: Magical Books and Their “Canonical” Contents

Of course up to this point we’ve basically been discussing canons of literary works—which may have some ritual or religious overtones, but are, at least

17. Although for the argument that there may never have been a canon list of the ten orators, see Douglas, “Cicero, Quintilian and the Canon” (he does concede that there were canon lists of other genres). For the Alexandrian canon lists, see Zetzel, “Re-Creating the Canon,” *passim*.

18. See Fowler, “The Number Twenty-Seven,” 211–12. Although he disagrees with Diels (*Sibyllinische Blätter*, 37–38) that twenty-seven is especially associated with the Sibylline prophecies, he gives a good survey of its pervasiveness as a magic number in Mediterranean cultures.

19. That the *Prometheus Bound* is likely not by Aeschylus has been argued persuasively by such commentators as M. L. West and Mark Griffith.

in the eyes of modern commentators, firmly in the secular sphere. But, for our purposes, the Roman canonization of sacred documents is of particular use, not only to see how the cultures of the East might have influenced Rome—and how Rome might have influenced the East—but also because study of Roman canons can perhaps contribute in some small way to our reconstruction of the history of the early Christian communities. The adoption of Christianity by Romans was likely facilitated by those elements in Christianity that seemed familiar to the convert, after all.

One of the first questions might be: what exactly is a canon of sacred books? What makes books and collections of books sacred? Is it the presence of sacred words, hallowed by great antiquity, long usage, mysterious injunctions, mystic symbolism, dead or forgotten languages, portents of future events? Is it the author who makes a book sacred? Is it the use of the book in sacred rituals, rituals that re-create the sacred origin of the book with every use? Do sacred book collections validate the specialness of a particular city or ethnic group? Are commentaries on sacred books or sacred collections themselves sacred—or, is sacredness somehow “catching”? Whatever your responses to these points might be, the Romans are likely to have had a book or collection in every category—so far as we can tell from the scanty information available.

Although there are many examples of magical writings in the Mediterranean—the magic papyri, the Books of the Dead, the Orphic Hymns, the Etruscan books of prophecy, Samnite ritual books—one example might stand for all: the so-called Sibylline Books. In Roman lore, the Sibylline Books were acquired by the last king, Tarquinius Superbus, in this way: an old woman (the Sibyl from the Romano-Greek city of Cumae near Naples) appeared one day, with a collection of nine books for sale. She offered the books to Tarquinius who ridiculed the high price she asked for them. She immediately before his eyes burned (in a sacred, ritualistic manner) three of them. She asked him for the same ridiculously high price for the remaining six. He again scoffed at her offer. She burned three more books and asked for the same price for the last three as for the original nine. Realizing himself to be in the presence of the magical divine, Tarquinius paid her. The three books proved to have prophecies invaluable to the success of Rome and its armies.²⁰

The Sibylline Books were kept in a sacred repository under the temple of Jupiter, Aulus Gellius tells us, until 83/82 BCE when the temple was razed by a fire. The books, however, somehow survived to be resuscitated by sleight of hand of Augustus, who declared them to be the only valid prophetic books in Greek or Latin and placed them in two gilded containers under the statue of

20. For the tale, see, e.g., Aulus Gellius (b. ca. 125 CE), *Noctes Atticae* 1.19; Dionysius of Halicarnassus (d. after 7 BCE), *Roman Antiquities* 6.2.

Palatine Apollo.²¹ Historical references to consultation of the Sibylline Books abound, particularly from the period 218–167, for which we have Livy to thank.²²

The Sibylline Books represent a classic example of the amalgam of cultures the Romans had put together by the early Empire. The books were written in Greek, but interpreted by a college of priests (the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* “fifteen men for the performance of sacred rites” increased from ten, the *decemviri*, in the late Republic, perhaps by Sulla, and from two, the *duumviri*, in remote antiquity). Although the books were thought to have been passed on to Tarquinius by the Sibyl of the Greek city of Cumae, Romans (apparently) believed that there were ten Sibyls and that the Sibylline Books had most likely be imported from the East.²³ Since these *libri fatales* (“Books of Fate”) were particularly consulted on occasions when the Romans were considering admitting foreign deities to their pantheon, consider the ironies: the Romans were using a collection of prophecies, written in a language not their own, some of which may have originated in the East in the service of Eastern religions, to determine whether Eastern cults (perhaps the very Eastern cults which had originated some of the prophecies) should be officially recognized by Rome.

Although Augustus has had a role in the handling of the prophecies (see below on “Canon Fire: Burning Books”) and, in reconstituting the books after the fire of 83/82 BCE, may have, for all we know, fabricated prophecies more suitable to his political ends, still that ordinary Romans may have come to believe that the fate of their society and of themselves and their children might be determined by prophecies from subject cultures is a remarkable development. John Scheid in a 1995 article argues that the Romans had a long tradition of “open city” politics, which made a virtue of the city-state’s acceptance of

21. Suetonius, *Augustus* 31 has Augustus sending to the ends of the Empire for individual prophecies to be recollected into the books lost in the fire; see below, under “Canon Fire: Burning Books.”

22. The standard text on the subject remains Sackur’s *Sibyllinische Texte*. For more recent discussions, see Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek*; Scheid, “Graeco Ritu,” 25–26; *Class. Trad.* s. “Sibyls.”

Some references from Livy (Titus Livius Patavinus) demonstrating the range of problems on which the books were consulted: 3.10.6, 42.2.6–7 (natural disasters or prodigies); 5.14.4, 7.27.1 (plague); 22.9.8 (how to appease the gods in the midst of a military disaster); 29.10.4–5 (the importation of a foreign god to avert a military disaster). Livy is, of course, one of Augustus’ propagandists, even if a reluctant one, and his “histories” are to be interpreted in that light.

A consultation of the Sibylline Books by the *quindecimviri* was also made, on order of the Roman Senate, in the foundation of temples (e.g., the temples of Apollo, Aesculapius, Venus Erycina, Mens, Magna Mater, Venus Verticordia). See Hekster and Rich, “Octavian and the Thunderbolt,” 155ff.

23. Lactantius (1.6.10–11, ca. 300 CE) has Varro give the number as ten. The Christian and Jewish Sibylline Oracles have no relation to the Roman Sibylline Books, beyond the name, but the legend of the ten Sibyls, from all over the Mediterranean, does create a kind of multicultural prophetic network which influences medieval and renaissance thought (see, e.g., Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel).

foreigners and foreign cults.²⁴ On the other hand, Augustus also has an interest in establishing a stable and secure state in which Romans and Italians can feel their place has not been usurped by the hordes pouring into Rome from the conquered corners of the Empire. The tensions between these two points of view shape the discussion in Augustus' time and into the Second Sophistic.

Canon Fire:²⁵ Burning Books

One method of determining the principles of canon formation among the Romans would be to examine the cases of book burning in the early Empire. Thus, for example, we see Augustus not only taking positive action in attempting to develop Roman religious canons but also using the suppression of religious writings as a means of promoting the prestige of his canon. That he is squelching other ideas may be almost as telling as what other ideas he's decreed unacceptable.

As we mentioned above and as Richard Lim puts it, "the Roman state and private religion were both in fact quite dynamic and open to innovation."²⁶ Yet it seems to have been a vital element of Augustus' campaign of moral and religious renewal that the syncretizing energy of Roman politics and religion be controlled and slowed somewhat, in the guise of returning the Romans to some purer Ur-state. Thus, when Augustus is restoring old sanctuaries (and he restores eighty-two, according to the *Res Gestae*) and re-establishing old rituals, he is also reasserting the originality of Roman and Italian culture in the face of the inroads of Hellenization.²⁷ There are political overtones here as well; his great rival Mark Antony is a well-known Hellenizer and will, of course, ultimately be charged with going native in Cleopatra's Egypt.

When he has such a stake in the matter, then, it should probably not surprise us that Augustus burns some 2,000 copies of Greek and Latin magic prophecies, according to Suetonius.²⁸ Given that the Sibylline Books are the only prophetic

24. "Graeco Ritu"; see above, n. 21. Whether this tradition was true to the realities of life in early Rome is irrelevant here. By the time of Augustus, we can see propaganda-makers extolling a multicultural polyglot as the crucible of the Roman ethos. See, e.g., Vergil's *Aeneid*, Books 7–12.

25. Yes, I made this joke. I'm not proud of it.

26. Lim, "The Gods of Empire," 269.

27. For a complete discussion, see Lim, "The Gods of Empire," 268–73.

28. *The Twelve Caesars* 31. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, of course, was born just after the death of Nero, the last of the five Julio-Claudian emperors.

This is not the only burning of prophecies in Roman history, at least according to Livy. Several times before the second century BCE Roman magistrates had been required by the Senate to burn prophetic books (Livy 39.16.8). And, in a tale told by both Livy and Varro (b. ca. 116 BCE), books of King Numa (forgeries likely), in Greek and dealing with Pythagorean precepts, were burned on orders of the Senate in 181 BCE. In the act of burning these prophetic books, Augustus is acting out the role of a pious Roman of the old school. This, we might cynically propose, may be his only reason for burning the books.

volumes he keeps, it is perhaps worth noting that the Sibylline Books were burnt in their original home in the fire of 83/82 BCE. Augustus is represented as a rather superstitious and religiously jittery character by Suetonius (*Augustus* 90–93), and, of course, it is difficult for post-Enlightenment critics to plumb the mindset of the ancients, but is it possible Augustus is inflicting on the texts of others the punishment the gods have apparently meted out to the Roman sacred books?

I might digress here for a comment on prophecies and their place in the political machinations of complex societies. Since we scoff at what appears to be the gullibility of the ancients and gasp at the wealth accumulated at a place like Delphi, where for millennia a poorly-educated middle-aged village woman raved out answers to complex questions under the influence of ether-ish (ethylene) inhalations, it may be difficult for us to understand prophecy as a tool for smoothing over what appear to be irreconcilable political differences. And yet, as Republicans attempt for the forty-first time to forestall the implementation of President Obama's health plan, consulting at random a magic book for an answer sanctioned by the gods and settling the question quickly and with a minimum of hostile repercussions seems a model of peaceful conflict resolution.

What may be sparking this Augustan age of religious canon formation—and what may also be affecting canon formation in Jewish communities in the East—is that much of prophecy has moved from its traditional modes of delivery, that is, you, the questioner, show up at Delphi at certain times of the year on a certain day of the month; you purify yourself in the sacred spring; you present your question and a special cake to the sanctuary staff; you sacrifice a goat or sheep; you sleep overnight in the sanctuary; you are ushered into the sacred corner of the Temple of Apollo where the entranced priestess (the Pythia) utters a mysterious answer from a tripod placed over a hole from which emanates a gas which makes you happy and receptive; the priests interpret the priestess's ravings in verse and send you tipsily on your way. Writing in this kind of system is confined to gnomic inscriptions on the sanctuary walls and records of prophecies given.²⁹

The move to prophetic books which not only record past prophecies but also detail predictions of future events—or in which past prophecies connected to an earlier event can be re-invoked for present circumstances—can lead to the kind of rancorous disagreements which the on-the-spot prophecies of the past sought to obviate. Although books of prophecy had been readily available in some parts of the Mediterranean for millennia (see the discussion above), still the wholesale exclusive use of written prophetic works in some cultures strengthened the need for a canon of approved texts. Moreover, in recycling

29. In general, our knowledge about the exact procedures at Delphi is fuzzy because our sources are late and often contradictory. For a recent popular treatment of the cult at Delphi, see Broad, *The Oracle, passim*. See also the report of the researchers into the ether-like gasses, Hale and de Boer, "Questioning the Delphic Oracle," 66–73.

written prophecies applicable to a hallowed past for an uncertain future, it became necessary to develop a glossary of symbolic terms to interpret and adapt prophecies for the present situation. Thus, the prophetic commentary was born—and was soon itself canonized.

In the case of Augustus and the burning of more than 2,000 copies of prophecies in Greek or Latin, we have to argue that the introduction of books of prophecy, books which might be kept in public places or—heaven forbid!—the libraries proliferating throughout Rome (twenty-eight private libraries, we're told) rendered the whole process much less easy to control than predictions generated in the whispered conferences of politically savvy priests at Delphi we usually imagine. Book burning can have its uses.

History as Prophecy

The Romans became expert at generating literary texts, which, in addition to their other objectives, could serve as books of prophecy, books of prophetic commentary, textbooks for prophecy-creators, and textbooks for prophecy commentators. These are books in the genres we often argue are distinctively Roman: history (particularly Livy-style history) and "big man" biography. Again, no matter what other purposes these works serve, they are usually compendia of fulfilled prophecies and omens. Thus, for example, in just four chapters of his "history" of the twelve Caesars (*Augustus* 94–98) Suetonius mentions: seven fulfilled omens about the birth of Augustus, including two borrowed from the birth of Alexander; four prodigies from Augustus' childhood; prophetic dreams, prophecies, encounters with soothsayers, etc., etc. More than one of these have been "recycled" since they originally applied to Alexander, that is, they were earlier prophecies reinterpreted to apply to Augustus and, thus, were made available to be reapplied and reinterpreted again and again. Suetonius publishes the prophecies, interprets them, and teaches budding prophecy-makers how to reapply and reinterpret them.

Thus, as we can see in this example, literary canons and magico-religious canons are not so far apart; literary works among the Romans have their own kind of magic. History, in particular, functions on another magical level: by showing how the Romans or certain Romans were prophesied to win this battle or conquer this people or relive Alexander's conquests, it reinforces the idea that Rome deserved, earned her Empire, that the very gods had conspired in making her queen of the Mediterranean, that it was as futile to fight her in the future as it had been in the past.

It is curious to note in this connection how much these ideas linger in our own day. How many of us have not said "history repeats itself" without a thought to the absurdity of the statement? Haven't we, in fact, with the ancient Romans, just asserted that the events of the past portend the future? Aren't we ourselves thereby reading history as prophecy?

Conclusion

Augustus and his cohort in the early Empire grappled with a variety of problems: how to remain close to and yet apart from an older and more prestigious culture; how to create a literature which would foster an independent cultural identity while using models and tools borrowed from other cultures; how to validate a new, illegal regime by appeals to an older time; how to convince their fellow citizens that one-man rule, a political system banished so long before, was, in fact, the salvation of the state; how to make the new old, peace through war, Greeks and Trojans both Romans. In the search for solutions, the culling of ideas through canons often fit the bill.

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