Tradition, Writing and Canonisation

Structural Changes of Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann

Memory, Identity, and Time

The past exists only insofar as it is remembered. If this statement sounds like going too far in the direction of radical constructivism, it applies nevertheless perfectly well to the notion of the "formative past". In any case, a past can exert any formative impulses on a given present only insofar as it is referred to and in this sense "remembered" by the present. A formative past, then, is a question of memory. The same applies to the formation of the future. In the same way as the idea of a formative past is connected with or dependent on memory, the formation of the future is connected with or dependent on imagination. Imagination and memory, however, are closely interconnected.[1] Both memory and imagination are typically human faculties for travelling in time. They allow us not only to refer to the past and to receive its formative impulses but also to imagine the future and even to think about and beyond our death. Without memory, our imagination would presumably be paralysed under the spell of the present, and we would be unable to expect from the future anything other than mere duration.

In the same way as memory and imagination are related to time, they are related to identity, to the constitution of a remembering self. Imagination allows us to form mental images not only of everything in the world, but also of ourselves, and these mental images of ourselves are provided by memory. Memory allows us not only to relate to the past but also to inte-

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1. See especially Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 1998.

grate images and episodes of the past into a more or less coherent life-story and to build up what could be called a diachronic identity allowing us to stay the same yesterday, today and tomorrow or, inversely, to perform a radical change such as conversion. As far as orientation in time and self-awareness or autonoesis is concerned, imagination and memory cooperate in such a way that they may both be subsumed under a comprehensive concept of memory. If identity, as the sociologist Thomas Luckmann once stated, is made of the stuff of time,[2] memory-imagination is the organ that brings this synthesis of time and identity about. This holds good for individual as well as for collective life; it may even be argued that the connection between time, identity and memory becomes even more obvious and compelling on the collective level where the "remembered" past may extend back to creation and the imagined future to the end of the world.

In what follows, I want to extend some general reflections on the role of *media*, especially of writing, in the dynamics of this triangular relationship between memory, time, and identity. These reflections will be concerned only with the collective level of life and identity. On the individual level, the use of writing and the keeping of diaries and other means of recording such as photography and tapes may be more or less important, but it is never decisive and does not create a substantially different type of identity. On the collective level of cultural memory, however, the use of writing may lead to the creation of new types of community and culture. This, at least, is the thesis that I will try to substantiate in the following paper.

From "Pre-Writing" to "Sectorial Literacy"

As to the notion of "writing", let me start with some very general remarks. We human beings live in a world of symbolic articulation, which we have ourselves created through communication. Aristotle's two definitions of the human, as *zoon logon echon*, the animal that has language and reason, and as *zoon politikon*, the animal that lives in a community, go together. We possess language as a function of our dependency on, and capacity for, bonding; and we use language and other means of symbolic articulation in order to form social bonds and inhabit the world which we create. This space or world of symbolic articulation borders on the inarticulate, which we bear in

2. Luckmann, "Remarks on Personal Identity", 1983, 69.

us as the unconscious and which surrounds our world from without. It is in this space of symbolic articulation and communication that, 5–6000 years ago, the use of writing emerged at various places on earth, in very different forms and on different scales, and also with different cultural and social consequences. I understand writing as special kinds of symbols that provide visibility to the invisible, stability to the volatile and wide dissemination to the locally confined. Language uses sound-symbols that are invisible, volatile and locally restricted. Therefore, language is the classic sphere to which writing could be applied. In everyday language, we understand writing to mean "visible language". For other domains of the use of symbols for visibilisation, fixation and dissemination, such as music and mathematics, we speak of notation and not of writing. The closest parallel is musical notation, at least in German, which is often also called writing: *Notenschrift* is a common term in German.

First of all, we have to distinguish between *systems* and *cultures* of writing. Writing *systems* concern differences such as ideographic, logographic, syllabic, or alphabetic scripts; writing *cultures* concern functions of writing and forms of its social embedding. All the major scripts that are currently in use stem from two sources: the Chinese script and the scripts of the Ancient Near East, i.e. Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian cuneiform. Already this fact gives us an idea of the interconnectedness of cultural phenomena. India is a latecomer in this context. Its script (Devanagari) is probably a syllabic derivative of the Near Eastern alphabets. The invention of writing was indeed an event of global range, dividing the world into literate and oral societies. But it was not the invention as such that led to global transformations. This was merely the first step, and I will try to show that it was only the *third* step in the process of literacy that changed the world.

The first step, the invention of writing, led to the first stage of written culture, which I propose to call "sectorial literacy".[3] In this stage, writing is used exclusively in those sectors of cultural activity for whose needs it had been invented. In the case of Mesopotamia, this was the economy and administration. Also in Egypt, writing's central function was for the economy or bookkeeping, although it was also used for political representation, funerary monuments and cultic recitation. In China, writing seems to have originated in the context of divination. In Minoan and Mycenean Greece,

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3. The term corresponds more or less to what Havelock, *A Preface to Plato,* 1963 calls "craft literacy".

writing (Linear A and B) never transcended the realm of the economy (bookkeeping) and vanished with the end of the economic system (the palace culture) that needed it. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China, however, the realm of writing soon expanded into other fields of cultural practice.

From "Sectorial" to "Cultural Literacy"

The turn from "sectorial" to "cultural" literacy occurs when writing penetrates into the central core of culture that we (Aleida Assmann and myself) call "cultural memory".[4] This is a question not of a *system* but of a *culture* of writing. What matters here is not whether we are dealing with an alphabetic (consonantal or vocalised) script or with a syllabic, logographic, or ideographic system. The theories especially of the Toronto school (Harold Innis, Marshal McLuhan, Eric Havelock and recently Friedrich Kittler) put much too much stress on the Greek invention of the vocalised alphabet and are in my opinion mistaken in this point. The salient question is whether or not writing is used for the composition, transmission, and circulation of "cultural texts". This is the second step in the evolution of literacy. It occurred in Mesopotamia towards the end of the third millennium BCE, when the sagas of the Gilgamesh cycle were first collected into a continuous epic, and in Egypt at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, when the first truly literary texts were composed.[5]

"Cultural memory" is that form of collective memory that enables a society to transmit its central patterns of orientation in time and its construction of identity to future generations.[6] Cultural memory provides a kind of connective structure in both the social and temporal dimensions. It provides the kind of knowledge that enables an individual to belong, and since human beings need to belong, cultural memory serves this drive to belong by making it possible to acquire the relevant knowledge, which in German is called *Bildung*, in Greek *paideia*, in Hebrew *musar* and in Egyptian *sebaiit*. Cul-

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4. See, e.g., our contributions to Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, 2008 and A. Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", 2006.
5. For the notion "cultural text", see Poltermann, *Literaturkanon – Medienereignis – Kultureller* 1995. For Egypt, see my article "Cultural and Literary Texts", 1999.
6. See my book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 1992, and cf. A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 1999. Both books are translated into English: J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 2011; A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, 2011.

tural texts constitute not only a body of knowledge; they serve also as a foundation of identity. It is this latter aspect that enables us to interpret them as a form of shared memory, and all the more so since these cultural texts function as forms of collective self-thematisation. This function applies to all tribal myths but also to more complex compositions, such as the Homeric epics, or to most of the books that constitute the Hebrew Bible. Cultural memory may comprise a great variety of forms and media: rites, dances, images, buildings, town- and landscapes, significant objects, even dishes, in short all those phenomena which Pierre Nora and his team have collected with respect to France as *lieux de mémoire*.[7] There is no doubt, however, that "cultural texts" play the central role in cultural memory.

Let me explain in some detail the concept of "cultural texts". The term was coined by Clifford Geertz in a very broad sense, referring to repeated events, actions, performances deemed of central interest and importance in the frame of a given culture (Geertz's favourite example is the Balinese cock fight, thus something which is not normally called a "text"); however, I will use the term with reference to "texts" in the usual sense of the word as linguistic units which in a given culture fulfil the function of providing highly meaningful and important sense, often in repeated events.[8] In illiterate societies, cultural texts have to be performed in order to circulate and to be shared by the members of the society; festivals and rituals provide the necessary frames for such performances. This state of affairs extends well into later stages of literate societies; see, e.g., the many festivals of poetry and music still persisting and flourishing especially in the Arab world. What makes a text "cultural" is not its being written, but the importance it has acquired as a carrier of cultural identity. This acquisition is a matter of attribution and reception. Normally, texts are not created as "cultural"; they become so in the course of their reception history. By virtue of their reception, cultural texts are given an afterlife of hundreds, even thousands of years and may not only survive the decline of their original societies and civilisations but may even come to range far beyond the borders of language, religion and culture. For this to happen, however, writing (and similar media of recording, such as film, CDs etc.) and institutions such as scribal guilds, schools, museums, and cultural institutes of all sorts are indis-

7.   Cf. also the wide definition of "canon" applied in this volume, p. 30–32.
8.   See Poltermann 1995.

pensable. The latter are part of the media culture around cultural texts (and other cultural media).

The first forms of human storing, transmitting and performing of cultural texts were mnemotechnique and orality. For most of the time, oral mnemotechniques were found to be much more efficient and also more accessible than the early forms of writing. There were many reasons for this. First, the contents of the cultural memory, such as the great myths about the origin of the world, the tribe and its central institutions, moral norms and similar cultural texts, are, so to speak, "mnemophilic". They stick in the memory because of their poetic form and their identity-supporting relevance. We must not forget that writing was invented to record the non-mnemophilic, the contingent data from the economy and administration that no human memory can retain for a long period of time. Secondly, the original cultural texts are multimedial and involve, in addition to language, pantomime, music, dance, and ritual. Thus, they may not easily be reduced to that one stratum of symbolic articulation that lends itself to transcription into writing. For this reason, it took the Mesopotamians and Egyptians more than a millennium to take this step. When writing is introduced into this domain, however, there is a high degree of probability that it will lead to dramatic cultural transformations.

Implications of Cultural Literacy

1. The idea of Antiquity as a Formative Past

With the literarisation of significant parts of cultural memory, a writing culture changes from "sectorial" to "cultural" literacy. The emergence of written cultural texts or "literature" leads necessarily to the formation of structures of the centre and periphery. Some texts establish themselves over time as more central than others and acquire the status of "classics". This structure is regularly connected with the idea of a formative past. The cultural memory becomes two-tiered, divided into the new and the old, modernity and antiquity.[9] An important factor in this development is linguistic change. The older texts that are validated as "classics" preserve a linguistic stage that no longer corresponds to the spoken language of the present. At a cer-

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9. For Egypt, see my book *The Mind of Egypt*, 2003, part IV, chapter "Changing the Structure of the Past".

tain point, this distance between the "classical" and the vernacular idiom becomes so great that the classical language has to be learned specifically. In such a case we are dealing with cultural diglossia. The stage of cultural diglossia is reached where and when the *cultural* texts of collective self-thematisation that form the diachronic backbone or connective structure of a society are written in a language that differs considerably from the vernacular. This stage of cultural evolution characterises the Cassite Age in Mesopotamia (1550–1150 BCE) and the Ramesside Age in Egypt (1300–1100 BCE). [10]

The construction of a classical, heroic or "golden" age, an "antiquity", as a formative past to look back at for models of behaviour and literary production, means a first step in the direction of canonisation. This cultural split into antiquity and modernity introduces into a given culture an element of critical distance and reflexivity.[11] Canonisation, in this first stage, means the collection of cultural texts of the past to form an obligatory syllabus of cultural knowledge, to be learned by heart and to be referred to as authoritative in critical discussions and situations. At a certain stage, every literate culture enters the stage of a split culture, divided into the old and the new, and it is writing in the form of cultural literacy that brings this split about. Since this split is dependent on linguistic change and finds its typical expression in the distinction between classical and vernacular language, and since linguistic change is a largely unconscious and uncontrolled process, we may even speak here of evolution. The cultural and social consequences of this split, however, depend on cultural decisions and institutions.

2. The Distinction between Myth and History

A typical example of critical distance and reflexivity as fostered by the use of writing is the rise of historical consciousness. The existence of written sources about the past makes it possible to draw the distinction not only between the old and the new, but also between myth and history. The use of

10. This situation was already typical of Mesopotamia in the third millennium, where Sumerians and Akkadians lived together speaking two completely different languages, and where the Sumerian language stayed in use for liturgical purposes until the age of Hellenism. With respect to the restricted use of Sumerian in this culture, we may speak of sectorial diglossia, which is a very wide-spread phenomenon.

11. For the invention of "antiquity" in various cultures, see Kuhn and Stahl, *Die Gegenwart des Altertums*, 2001.

written records creates history in the sense of a critical discourse, separating mythical tales about the past from reasoned accounts of documented history. This step seems to be a Greek achievement, but the Greeks themselves attributed it to the Egyptians, contrasting their own mythical form of historical consciousness to Egyptian history that is based on written records. Typical examples of this intercultural comparison are Herodotus' account of the visit of Hecataeus of Miletus with the priests of Amun at Thebes[12] and Plato's account of Solon's visit with the priests at Sais.[13] Both Hecataeus and Solon present the Egyptian priests with Greek traditions about the past. Hecataeus recites his own genealogy, which leads after 15 generations to a god as the ancestor of the family, and Solon tells the Greek version of the story of the flood, the myth about Deukalion and Pyrrha. Both are then presented by the Egyptian with their own records. Hecataeus is led into the temple where he is shown 341 statues of high priests, each one the son of the other and no god intervening, documenting 11,340 years of purely human history. Solon is shown the Egyptian annals stretching back over more than 9000 years, where the memory of Athen's glorious past is preserved, e.g. their victory over Atlantis, which in Greece itself was destroyed and forgotten. All this is, of course, pure fabulation, but it illustrates the principle of critical history with its distinction between myth and history, brought about by the use of writing for chronological bookkeeping which, in the form of annals and kinglists, was one of the first and most important applications of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In this sense of a documented past and its critical verifiability, it was writing that produced history and dispelled mythology. Writing caused history to take over the cultural space previously occupied by myth, because it documented conditions in which not gods but human kings reigned and humans were responsible for their actions. Writing bestows on historical memory the quality of verifiability and adds a truth-value to its accounts about the past which myth, in spite of its truth claims, is lacking. This is not to categorically deny that a critical attitude to tales about the past may be possible even among illiterate societies, but the introduction of writing makes the critical mode the far more obvious and predominant option.

12. Herodotus, *Historiae* II ch. 143.
13. Platon, *Timaios* 22b.

From Cultural Literacy to "Secondary Canonisation"

At this point in our reflection on the consequences of writing for the dynamics of cultural memory, let me briefly recapitulate our steps. The first step concerned the distinction between the organisation of cultural memory before and after the invention of writing, including the distinction between notational systems of "pre-writing" and writing proper. The second step was the distinction between "sectorial" literacy – the first stage of written culture, when writing was restricted to certain domains of culture such as the economy, administration, or cult, and cultural memory was still committed to oral transmission and performance – and "cultural" literacy, when writing became applied to cultural texts as well. The hallmark of this second stage of written culture is the split into the old and the new and the association of the old with normativity and timeless validity. With reference to the title of this collection of essays, we may define "antiquity" as the notion of a normative and formative past.

Up to this point we are dealing with evolutionary stages that typically occur in every writing culture. The third stage of written culture, however, which I propose to call "secondary canonisation", is a very different matter. This step has only rarely been taken, but where it has occurred it has brought about a change of truly fundamental range and global significance.

The hallmark of secondary canonisation is the rise of commentary and exegesis. In the stage of "primary canonisation", the texts recognised as classics exist in a form which the Medievalist Paul Zumthor called *mouvance*.[14] The compositions were constantly reformulated, amplified or substituted by other texts in order to accommodate them to the changing conditions of understanding. Their "surface structure" was sacrificed in order to save at least part of their meaning. This is why even written texts tend to exist over a longer stretch of time in many different versions. The continuous growth of the book of Isaiah, first into Deutero-Isaiah and then into Trito-Isaiah, is a typical case of how a cultural text changes in what the Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim called "the stream of tradition".[15] The Epic of Gilgamesh developed over the course of its transmission and editing from a cycle of sagas into the "twelve-tablets composition" known from the Neo-

14. Zumthor, *Introduction à la poesie orale*, 1983, 245–261, cf. also A Assmann, "Schriftliche Folklore", 1983.
15. Oppenheim 1968.

Assyrian library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh. In a similar way, the Egyptian Book of the Dead developed from just a pool of unconnected spells out of which every individual funerary papyrus picked its own specific selection into a real book with a fixed selection of 167 spells in a fixed order. Written texts, in this "stream of tradition", are to a certain degree still characterised by the hallmarks of oral cultural texts.

This flexibility or *mouvance* is categorically stopped and excluded by the process of secondary canonisation.[16] Secondary canonisation means the combination of strict fixation of surface structure typical of sacred texts and complete semantic transparency typical of cultural texts. In sacred texts such as hymns, incantations and ritual spells, not a syllable must be changed in order to secure the "magical" power of the words to "presentify" the divine. In this context, what governs the preservation and use of the text is not the understanding of its semantic contents, but rather the need to preserve the correctness of pronunciation, ensure the ritual purity of the speaker, and fulfil other requirements concerning proper circumstances of performance. Sacred texts are not necessarily cultural texts, since they may be known only to specialists and withheld from public circulation. Cultural texts, on the other hand, must also be known and understood by every member of the community. Cultural texts that undergo the process of secondary canonisation must not be changed, they must be understood. On the one hand, they are treated like verbal temples enshrining divine presence, and on the other hand they require understanding and application in order to exert their formative and normative impulses and demands. The solution to this problem is exegesis.[17] Exegesis or hermeneutics is the successor of *mouvance*. In the *mouvance* stage of literate transmission, the commentary is being worked into the fabric of the text.

16. Cf. A. and J. Assmann, *Kanon und Zensur*, 1987.
17. The case of India, where the sacred texts were not written down but memorised by specialists – the Brahmin – seems to contradict this reconstruction, because even here, in the context of oral tradition, we meet with secondary canonisation and traditions of exegesis. However, the techniques of memorisation have been brought to such a degree of perfection here that human memory could very well fulfil one of the main functions of writing, which is stabilising the text. The decision to withhold the sacred texts from being written seems to have been common to several Indo-European religions, such as Zoroastrianism and the Celtic Druidism. It is usually explained as a way of avoiding the mistakes of copyists, but the main motive seems rather to have been the fear of unwanted dissemination, which is also one of Plato's arguments against writing. Stabilising the text can be achieved either by writing or by an elaborate mnemotechnique. The latter usually requires a very strict poetic formalisation of the text.

This method has been shown by Michael Fishbane to be typical of the biblical texts in their formative phase.[18] They are full of glosses, pieces of commentary which later editors have added to the received text. Only with the closure of the canon is this process stopped, and exegesis then has to take the form of a commentary that stays outside the text itself.[19]

The step towards secondary canonisation seems to have been taken *independently* only two or three times[20] in the world, in much the same way as writing itself, which has been invented independently only two times, in Mesopotamia and in China. For secondary canonisation, the places of origin are Palestine and India, where during the fifth through second centuries BCE the Hebrew Bible and the Buddhist Pali Canon originated, both giving rise to emulating canons such as the Christian and Muslim canons in the West and the Jain, Confucian and Daoist canons in the East, all surrounded by huge corpora of commentaries, and commentaries on commentaries.[21]

Exegesis and the Shift from Ritual to Textual Continuity

In the Jewish tradition this split into, and relationship between, text and commentary typical of secondary canonisation finds its earliest expression in the concept of a "written Torah" and an "oral Torah" (*torah she be'al khitav* und *torah she be'al pe*). In this tradition, commentary has to be oral in order not to violate the space of writing that is exclusively reserved for and occupied by sacred scripture. The oral Torah is a collection of oral debates and commentaries on the written – Torah, and became codified itself in the Talmudic and Midrashic traditions. It is believed to go back via an unbroken chain of "reception" (*shalshelet ha-qabbalah*) to Moses himself.

The oral exegesis of a sacred text accompanying its public recitation seems indeed to date back to the beginnings of canonisation. Nehemiah reports on a public reading of the Torah, where Ezra read the text and several of the Levites gave a commentary:

18. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 1985.
19. Cf. J. Assmann and Gladigow, *Text und Kommentar*, 1995. See also Stordalen's article on canonical commentary p. 136–143.
20. Depending on whether we interpret the Confucian canon as an autonomous development or as a reaction to the Buddhist canon, which entered China by at approximately the same time.
21. See A. and J. Assmann 1987.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Neh 8:5–8)

Much later, after the destruction of the second temple and the expulsion of the Jews from Palestine into the diaspora, the "oral Torah" became codified and canonised in the form of the Talmud. The Talmud, however, is careful in preserving the character of oral disputation and avoiding the features of proper textuality in order not to compete with the only real book, the Torah. In a similar way, the interpretive traditions which evolved around the early Qur'an were later codified and canonised as the Hadith. In the Christian world, the writings of the fathers of the church, known as the Patrologia Graeca and Latina, may be looked on as such a secondary canon.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing before the origin of the Mishnah and Talmud, still testifies to the custom of oral commentary when he contrasts Jewish and Greek religion:

Can any government be more holy than this? or any Religion better adapted to the nature of the Deity? Where, in any place but in this, are the whole People, by the special diligence of the Priests, to whom the care of public instruction is committed, accurately taught the principles of true piety? So that the body-politic seems, as it were, one great Assembly, constantly kept together, for the celebration of some sacred Mysteries. For those things which the Gentiles keep up for a few days only that is, during those solemnities they call Mysteries and Initiations, we, with vast delight, and a plenitude of knowledge, which admits of no error, fully enjoy, and perpetually contemplate through the whole course of our lives.[22]

In the Jewish world as depicted by Josephus Flavius, the permanent presence and circulation of the cultural memory is granted first by the canon of

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22. Josephus Flavius, *Contra Apionem* ch. 22, transl. Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, London 1738–41, I 192f.

sacred scripture (which Josephus describes in another passage of his book) and secondly by constant "public instruction", i.e. the oral commentary supplied by the priests.

It is obvious that Josephus in this polemical passage does not do full justice to the Greek organisation of cultural memory. He ignores the classical canon, the traditions of scientific discourse and the various forms of exegesis practiced in the schools of philosophy, medicine and other branches of knowledge. He focuses only on religion and contrasts the Jewish institutions of religious instruction and the Greek mystery cults. Arbitrary and highly selective as this comparison may be, it illustrates a very important distinction: the distinction between ritual and textual continuity.[23]

In spite of their extensive use of writing, ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and other civilisations at the stage of cultural literacy and primary canonisation were still relying on ritual continuity. In the world of ritual continuity, the public has indeed to wait for the next performance in order to get access to the sacred texts of cultural memory. Textual continuity is only achieved with secondary canonisation, when institutions of learning and exegesis are established that keep the ancient texts constantly present and semantically transparent.

Globalisation, Universalism and the "Axial Age"

The transition from ritual to textual continuity meant a complete restructuring of the cultural memory and temporal orientation. In the introduction, we have defined cultural memory as the means a society uses to orient itself in time and to develop a kind of diachronic identity that is kept alive and evolving by means of reconnecting to a formative past. The original means of reconnecting to a formative past are ritual and festive performance, all of which Josephus subsumes under the term "mysteries". With secondary canonisation, the privileged means of reconnecting shifts to reading, learning and interpreting the canonical texts. This reorganisation concerns not only cultural memory but identity as well. With secondary canonisation, new forms of translocal, transnational and even transcultural identities arise. The step to secondary canonisation meant making the transition from the ethnically and culturally determined religions of the Ancient World to the

23. For this distinction see my book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 1992, 87–103.

new type of transcultural and transnational world religions, which amounts to a totally new construction of identity. With Judaism, this shift in identity was blocked by the still-prevailing stress on ethnicity, but all other world religions separated their conditions of belonging from ethnic, national or cultural definitions. The canon, in a way, functioned as a new trans-ethnic homeland and as a new trans-cultural instrument of formation and education.

We must not forget, however, that these transformations in cultural memory and identity took place in a changing political world which grew closer and closer through a process that may somewhat anachronistically be described as globalisation. This process, too, proceeded in several stages which roughly corresponded to the evolutionary stages of written culture. The first stage may be termed "internationalism". It was achieved when all of the more important states of the then-known "Ancient World" formed a network of interconnected political units. This stage was reached in the Late Bronze Age (fifteenth through twelfth century BCE). Until then, the ancient civilisations considered themselves coextensive with creation, regarding other people as manifestations of chaos. Now, they had to realise that they shared the created world with other states like their own, worshipping gods (more or less) like their own. Dealing with these states and empires was no longer a matter of exclusion and negation, but of warfare and diplomacy. This change of political and mental orientation was accompanied by the rise of the first universalist concepts, such as, above all, the idea of a creator who created the whole world in its differentiated variety, including the multiplicity of languages and skin colours, and the different ways of nourishing the fields, by rain and by inundation, ideas that in Egypt appear as early as the fifteenth century BCE. This stage of globalisation corresponds, very roughly indeed, to the second stage of written culture: cultural literacy and primary canonisation, which started earlier, at the beginning of the second millennium, but reached its apex in Mesopotamia and Egypt during the Late Bronze Age. The relation between these two developments – the cultural development on the one hand, leading from sectorial to cultural literacy and the formation of a normative past as the focus of cultural identity, and the political development on the other hand, leading from a patchwork of more or less isolated civilisations to a network of states related to each other by diplomatic and commercial ties as well as by military conflicts – seems not easy to establish and is certainly not to be interpreted in terms of causality. A relation, however, there is, because the diplomacy connecting this world

used Babylonian as a lingua franca and cuneiform as a script for interstate correspondence, and some important Babylonian myths which, without any doubt, fulfilled the role of cultural texts have been found in Egypt on cuneiform tablets inscribed by an Egyptian scribe.

The end of the Bronze Age – corresponding to the end of the second millennium BCE – marks the end of internationalism and the advent of imperialism, the second stage of globalisation. The main instrument of globalisation was now seen in conquest and political unification. The Assyrians were first on the list of empires of the new, imperialistic type. They were followed by the Babylonians, the Persians, Alexander the Great and his successors, and the Roman Empire. This is the advent of what Eric Voegelin dubbed "the Ecumenical Age".[24] I find it, though, more correct to include the Late Bronze Age in this concept and to distinguish within it the two phases of internationalism and imperialism.

The formation of the biblical canon is closely linked to the Age of Imperialism in all of its stages, the beginnings of legal codification coinciding with the Assyrian and Babylonian oppression and the first edition of the Torah under Ezra, coinciding with the Persian Empire. The Hellenistic Age saw the simultaneous formation both of the comprehensive Jewish canon (the Septuagint) and the Alexandrine canon of Greek classics. The formation of universalist concepts, such a the biblical idea of true monotheism as first articulated by the late prophets, especially Deutero-Isaiah, and the Greek concept of metaphysical truth as articulated by Parmenides and Plato, among others, must not be too strictly severed from what was going on at the political level in terms of political unification.

The destruction of traditional borders of identity such as ethnicity, nationality, language, culture, territory, political sovereignty etc. that is typical of world religions is to be seen in the context of these processes of imperialist globalisation. It is, however, accompanied by the erection of a new border which is much harder to permeate: the border between Jews and gentiles, Christians and pagans, Muslims and unbelievers. Such a sense of border is, in the last instance, based on a new concept of absolute truth and the distinction between truth and falsehood. The new universalistic perspective that distinguishes world religions from traditional religions implies the idea of universal truth, a truth that is enshrined in the texts that formed the secondary canon and ensured their unsurpassable authority. This is the goal of

24. Voegelin, *Order and History*, 1984.

incessant interpretation and exegesis. It is at the same time a matter of a for-
mative past, the time of revelation connected with Abraham, Moses,
Zarathustra, Jesus and Mohammed, or, in a much different sense, with
Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Buddha, Confucius, Mencius and Laodse, and a
matter of timeless validity. Secondary canonisation not only means the cre-
ation of new ways of relating to a formative past, but also of promoting the
past to the status of timeless present in the way that we are still living in the
intellectual and religious world of texts codified 2,500 years ago.

It was precisely this impression of sharing a common spiritual world
with authors who lived up to three millennia before our time, whose texts
we are still reading and with whose protagonists we still identify, that
brought the philosopher Karl Jaspers 60 years ago to form his theory of the
Axial Age.[25] For Jaspers, the centuries around the middle of the first millen-
nium BCE constitute an axis that divides the intellectual history of mankind
into "before" and "after". This was the time when, in his words, the human
being as we know it and with whom we are still living made its first appear-
ance. He never took into consideration the idea that these changes might
have anything to do with the development of writing and those cultural tech-
niques that we subsumed under the notion of secondary canonisation. More-
over, he made no distinction between the creation of these fundamentally
formative texts and their canonisation in institutions of copying, reading,
learning and interpretation. Nobody knows how many texts of potentially
comparable importance were composed in earlier times that did not survive
until the stage of secondary canonisation. That we are still living with cer-
tain ancient texts and that we are still receiving their formative impulses is
not only due to their timeless propositional power (*ewige Sagkraft* –
Gadamer) but also to the cultural techniques of secondary canonisation and
the transition from ritual to textual continuity.

The cultural memory of the West seems to be unique in that it is based
on two quite different corpora of secondary canonisation: the sacred canon

25. Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 1949. The debate on the "Axial Age"
    continued in the 1970s in the American journal *Daedalus,* whose most important issue
    appeared in 1975 under the beautiful title "The Age of Transcendence". Since then,
    Shmuel N. Eisenstadt organised a series of conferences published in Eisenstadt, (ed.),
    The Origin and Diversity of Axial Civilizations, 1986; see further Eisenstadt, *Kulturen
    der Achsenzeit,* 1987; *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II,* 1992. See also Árnason, Eisenstadt,
    and Wittrock (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History,* 2005; and further Schluchter,
    Religion und Lebensführung, 1988.

of the Christian Bible and the secular, humanist canon of classical Greek and Latin literature and philosophy. Both gave rise to large traditions of study, exegesis, commentary and meta-commentary, but they are radically separated from each other through the distinction between the sacred and the secular. Despite this seemingly unbridgeable divide, there are some striking connections between these two projects of canonisation. Both took place not only roughly at the same time but also in the same place: the city of Alexandria under the early Ptolemies, when and where not only were the Greek classics selected but also the Hebrew texts were collected and translated into what became transmitted as the Septuagint. It is, therefore, more than probable that both projects were not totally independent from each other. The significance and result of both canonisations, however, could not have been more different. The sacred canon is based on ideas such as revelation and inspiration; these texts derive their ultimate authority from the concept that they originate from God and codify his will. The classical canon, on the other hand, is based on the idea of being a model both of artistic or scientific production and of human behaviour and a decent society. In both canons, the idea of authority is paramount, but in the religious canon the source of authority is God, whereas in the classical canon it is artistic, linguistic, scientific or philosophical eminence. As far as the techniques of exegesis and commentary are concerned, the Alexandrinian *philologoi* may even seem to have led the way. They introduced into their collection of ancient writings the distinction between *hoi prattómenoi* and the rest; *prattómenoi* literally means those to be treated, the classical texts worthy of exegetical treatment, i.e. a commentary.[26] The Latin author Aulus Gellius compared this textual elite to the highest class of Roman tax payers called *classici*.

It comes close to a miracle that not only the Christian canon but also considerable parts of the Classical canon survived the collapse of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilisations. This was mainly due to the generous decision of Christian monks at the eastern and western periphery of the Christian world – Constantinople and Ireland – to include in their huge assignment of manuscript production the copying of not only religious but also pagan literature. Unlike the biblical texts, the classical texts, therefore, underwent three stages of canonisation: the first stage in Hellenistic Alexandria; the second stage in the late antique and early medieval scriptoria of

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26. Cf. Schmidt, "Historische Typologie der Orientierungsfunktionen von Kanon in der griechischen und römischen Literatur", 1987, 246–258.

Christian monasteries; and the third stage in the Renaissance, which meant a huge release of their formative impulses which restored to ancient Athens and Rome the function of a formative past. This last stage coincided with the invention of yet another medium – the printing press. This medium was also enormously influential in restructuring the cultural memory in terms of reconnecting with the formative texts of the past, by creating new channels of circulation and new modes of personal access. It is well known, so will not be expounded on here, the degree to which the same invention also revolutionised the cultural memory of the West in its religious aspects. The Reformation was to a large degree a revolutionary recourse to the formative past of Early Christianity through the sacred texts, which now became accessible to everybody through translation and dispersion in printed copies of the Bible. I do not want to reduce the religious and intellectual history of the West to a question of media and institutions, but I do want to emphasise the enormous importance of these factors in all aspects, dimensions, and dynamics of cultural memory.

If the past exists only so far as it is remembered, either consciously or unconsciously, either individually or collectively, the possibilities of remembering the past and reconnecting with its formative impulses is to a large degree dependent on the media in which this memory is preserved and the institutions using and curating these media.