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Canones: The Art of Harmony

I

The so-called canon tables of the Christian gospels are a remarkable feature of the early, late antique, and medieval Christian manuscript cultures of both the East and West. They were devised in the scholarly Christian milieu in Caesarea in the first decades of the fourth century CE. By the third century CE the Palestinian harbour town had become a centre of Christian learning and scribal culture, with its importance exemplified by the work of Origen.[1] This stimulating context brought the canon tables into existence early in the fourth century. They are commonly attributed to Eusebius, who had become bishop of Caesarea around 314.

The problem arising from the one and divine truth being conveyed fourfold via four different gospels posed a considerable challenge to the early Church resulting in attempts to harmonize the four gospels.[2] The *Diatessaron* (*c*.170 CE) by Tatian that transformed the four texts into a single, continuous narrative is well known.[3] Eusebius, however, chose to solve the problem of harmony in a different manner. By inventing the canon tables he sought to preserve the integrity of the four different gospel texts and demonstrate their harmony. The tables also functioned as a technical device for structuring, organizing, and navigating the four gospels and uniting them via a single codex. As a result, they also became an instrument of theological and literary scholarship. Eusebius was clearly particularly interested in instruments of indexing and structuring, not only in his canon tables, but also in other works in which he developed the potential of the Codex format more fully.[4] It is not an exaggeration to say that canon tables are a crucial step toward the history of lists, indices, tables of contents and registers that is yet to be written.

Eusebius divided the text of each gospel into more than two, or even three hundred consecutively numbered sections. The sections were marked by numbers that were written down as marginal notes next to the gospel text. Eusebius's second step was to collate the numbers in ten tables he named *canones*. The *canones* are lists containing the section numbers, laid out in grids of four, three, two or just one column. Each column contains the section numbers of one gospel, and each section number in a column corresponds to those in the other columns to its right and left, i.e. with those in the other gospels. This system enabled the user to find parallels between the four gospels and to identify passages of text used by all four of the evangelists, or by just three or two and those found only in one place in one gospel. It is quite likely that the canon tables were architectural in design from the outset, its columns dividing the grid of tables by means of arches and pediments.

When, in the sixth century, Victor of Capua devised an astonishing experiment, combining a variant of Tatian's *Diatessaron* with the Eusebian *apparatus* (see Matthew Crawford's contribution to this volume), it became patently clear that Eusebius's main concern had been the harmony of the gospels. Eusebius himself stated the aim of his invention and the functioning of the canon tables in a letter, dubbed the *Ammonius quidem*, addressed to a scholar named Carpianus. Here he explains how he created his system of *canones* as an alternative to the harmony of Ammonius's gospel.[5] Insisting that Ammonius's assemblage of the four gospels into a single text destroyed their order and style he announces how he has replaced Ammonius's system with the canon tables, and in so doing maintained the precious body or text of the gospels. This, he claims, means he has invented a form of harmony that preserves the integrity of each of the four gospel texts while simultaneously working out a form of synopsis and a tool of text indexing—an art of harmony in itself.

It is fair to assume that the production of gospel books uniting the four gospels into a single codex began on a larger scale in the fourth century. Eusebius himself was instructed by Emperor Constantine in his famous letter of 332 to produce books of the Holy Scriptures for the liturgy in the churches of Constantinople.[6] This perhaps was also the actual date of birth of the canon tables, as Nordenfalk

1 Grafton/Williams 2008; Hollerich 2013, 630–632.
2 Merkel 1971; Watson 2013.
3 Wünsch 1982, 627–629; Petersen 1994.
4 Grafton/Williams 2008, 133–232; Wallraff 2014.
5 Crawford 2015.
6 Eusebius, *De vita Constantini*, 4.36. Hollerich 2013, 632.

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has assumed.[7] At any rate, they became an integral and fixed part of all manuscripts containing the four gospels as the Sacred Scripture of the Christians. Moreover the canon tables represented a certain form of text comprehension and established a form of thinking that was to become decisive for the structuring of image programs in illuminated gospel books (see Beatrice Kitzinger's contribution in this volume). As a purely pictorial form, as a table with arcades, canon tables were also used later for completely different purposes and motifs, without always losing their original meaning (see Susanne Wittekind's contribution in this volume).

Canon tables can be seen as exemplifying a specifically Christian manuscript culture that formed, developed and spread across the East and West between 300 and 800 CE, not least because, as it is often mentioned, they are closely linked to the codex format, the medium preferred by Early Christians.[8] It is the codex that enabled the four gospels to be combined into one material unit, a single book, for the first time. This was of great import as the amount of text that fitted on a scroll was extremely limited by the material conditions of the latter.

The purpose of the tables is to enable the reader to look up individual text passages and compare them by means of the numbering system. Thus they focus precisely on a central property of the codex and the advantage of this new medium.[9] Structuring the text by numbered and marked sections is a means of visually organizing the text and also works as an aid to navigate through the codex. This means the tables refer to the three-dimensionality of the book as an object and update its spatial quality that may be also be accentuated by the architectural form of the tables or their relation to the tradition of the 'prefatory architecture' of ancient books (see Ján Elsner's contribution in this volume).[10] Above all this space is made accessible by the numbering system. This system defines and makes identifiable certain places, i.e. text passages in the book space, and structures the reader's movement in this space as he or she turns the pages back and forth.

It should be added that the visual organization of the canon tables themselves was apparently conceived with the codex format in mind. It was not left to the individual choices of writers and painters but obeyed a fixed scheme in which the guiding principle was the individual codex page or double-page. Almost always the ten *canones*, very different in scope, appear according to a fixed scheme on seven, eight, ten, twelve or sixteen pages.[11] In doing so Canon tables and their cross-reference system had a strong visual dimension. In his *Letter to Carpianus*, Eusebius himself mentions the figures indicating in the margins that the table in question should be written in red. Moreover, in the tables themselves the order of the sacred text is represented by numbers within the geometric grid, which makes the parallelism of the sections visible. The geometry, the number of ten canons and the numerical order of the text contained in them recall the divine *ordo* and the perfection of the Holy Scripture.[12] And last but not least, the tables are a place of images, of columns, plants and birds, as well as biblical scenes or portraits of the evangelists at times. In some early medieval canon tables, images are connected with the renewed interest in antique scholarship of the time, particularly with concepts of nature (see Stefan Trinks' contribution in this volume).

The remarkable visual quality of the canon tables draws attention to the fact that they are not only a pragmatic instrument of indexing, but also represent symbolically the unity and harmony of the divine word. It can be assumed that in the fourth century, creating a unity of the gospels materially through the new medium of the Codex was a highly welcome and ground-breaking innovation. This apparently created an even greater need to emphasize the harmony of their contents. Eusebius reacted to this with his *canones*. Therefore, the pages with the sequence of canon tables, which open nearly every gospel book can be understood as the visual equivalent of the material unity of the gospels. The tables represent the entire gospel text by numbers, assembled in a uniform architecture and thus visually presenting one unit that spans four parts.

As already mentioned, the often lavishly decorated canon tables and the later so-called *Eusebian apparatus*, that is to say the canon tables, the *Letter to Carpianus* and the marginal section numbers, became a fixed part of gospel books from the very Early Christian period up to the high Middle Ages. This fact is by no means self-evident, particularly when one bears in mind that on the one hand, the precise copying of thousands of numbers and marginal notes required immense effort and on the other, that canon tables are of no importance to the liturgy.[13]

This leads to the question of the function and use of gospel books, and answers regarding the Early Christian

7 Nordenfalk 1938, 50; Crawford 2015, 18.

8 Roberts/Skeat 1983, 38–66; Gamble 1995, 42–81; Hurtado 2006, 43–93; Parker 2008, 13–29; Seeliger 2012 with exhaustive bibliography 564–570; Wallraff 2013, 8–25.

9 Reudenbach 2019, 263.

10 Klauser 1961; Nordenfalk 1982, 30; Reudenbach 2009.

11 Nordenfalk 1938, 53, 65–72, 148–152, 171–173, 208–211, 228–230, 289–297.

12 Nordenfalk 1982, 29–30; Crawford 2015, 25–26.

13 Nordenfalk 1938, 49; Reudenbach 2019.

period may be different than those regarding the centuries of the Middle Ages (see Jeremiah Coogan's contribution in this volume). Canon tables are not just elements that show the continuity of Christian book culture. No doubt there are examples from the Middle Ages in which the nature of the *Eusebian apparatus* was misunderstood, forgotten or where it had fallen into disuse. It must be emphasized here that the *Eusebian apparatus* did not remain unchanged and homogeneous over many centuries and in different manuscript cultures. The special Syriac version of the apparatus was already accentuated by Nordenfalk.[14] But in the Latin West, variants and even extremely individual forms have also emerged repeatedly (see Lynley Anne Herbert's and Elizabeth Mullins's contributions in this volume) without, of course, changing the basic structure.

Why, then, were canon tables regularly included in liturgical books for many centuries, and why were they often a preferred place for artistic decoration? The answers may lie in the fact that the canon tables were not simply a tool for indexing the gospel texts, but that they also had their own symbolic dimension. The pragmatic function of the Eusebian canon system were apparently often less important and later even meaningless. Rather, their significance depended on what Eusebius himself had already emphasized, on the harmony of the gospels, on the unity of the divine revelation of words, which is visually conveyed in the canon tables and transmitted fourfold in the gospels. Connected with the gospel book from the very beginning, equipped with the authority of the early Christian scholars Eusebius and Jerome, the tables became an integral part of the Holy Scripture and therefore they participated in the sacred aura of the gospel book. Thus, they became indispensable and remained intact, even when their pragmatic function receded or was completely lost.

II

In 1938 the Swedish art historian Carl Nordenfalk published the first comprehensive and systematic study of canon tables (see the contribution of Ewa Balicka-Witakowska in this volume).[15] In his path-breaking book that has remained the basis of all research on canon tables to this day, Nordenfalk collected and made a detailed analysis of the earliest examples of canon tables in Greek, Latin and Syriac gospel books and also took into consideration samples from other Eastern Christian traditions. As an art historian Nordenfalk was especially interested in what he called 'Rahmenwerk', the framing of the canon tables by columns and arches, ornaments, images and figural motifs such as plants and birds. In addition, however, he also gained fundamental insights into the functioning, the origin and the early history of the transmission of the canon tables and their wide distribution in the East as well as the West.

In 1950 Paul Underwood's systematic survey completed and integrated Nordenfalk's contribution regarding the motif of the Fountain of Life, the architecture of which is closely related to that of the canon tables (see Jacopo Gnisci's contribution in this volume).[16] Since then, many individual contributions have been published, especially on the canon tables of individual gospel books or on regional and, in particular, oriental Christian traditions. Concerning the medieval Western tradition, there have been numerous art-historical studies and monographs on specific gospel books dealing in each case with canon tables, however with their focus largely confined to style analysis and iconography. As a consequence the history of the medieval afterlife of the Eusebian *apparatus*, that is to say a continuation of Nordenfalk's book, whose period focused on the fourth to the seventh centuries, remains to be written.

Aside from a few case studies there has been no comprehensive analysis of the parallels that Eusebius constructs or of the theological intentions he pursues with these parallels. Not only does he note verbal repetitions but reveals correspondences in time, place or meaning.[17] Little or nothing is known about whether or not, in particular manuscript cultures and in more recent theological contexts, the original division of the gospel text into sections and its respective synopsis presented in tables conceived by Eusebius were always adopted unchanged. If they were altered, what was changed and why? It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to answer these questions, for even up to the present day there is still no critical edition of the *apparatus*, a fact Nordenfalk lamented eighty years ago.[18]

For the last decade and a half or so, there has been renewed and increasing interest in the canon tables, not initiated by the history of art in this instance, but rather by other disciplines such as the history of theology or New Testament studies.[19] Last but not least, the re-dating of

14 Nordenfalk 1938, 223; Wessel 1978, 936–942; Sevrugian 2004, 38–39; see also already Gwilliam 1890 and 2006.

15 Nordenfalk 1938.

16 Underwood 1950; McKenzie/Watson 2016, 121–140.

17 O'Loughlin 2010, 3–4.

18 Nordenfalk 1938, 51.

19 Coogan 2017; Crawford 2015, 2019; O'Loughlin 1999, 2010, 2014, 2017; Wallraff 2013.

two Ethiopian Four Gospels codices to Late Antiquity and the rich and seminal book by Judith McKenzie and Francis Watson on the Garima Gospels provided an impulse to re-ignite the scholarly interest and research on canon tables.[20]

In May 2018, '80 years since Nordenfalk', the *Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures* of the University of Hamburg hosted a conference bringing together art historians with scholars of other disciplines to consider the canon tables once more. The papers of this conference have been collected in this volume. Unfortunately, it was not possible to consider all relevant manuscript cultures at this conference and we most particularly regret the lack of contributions to Syriac and Armenian manuscripts.[21] We are deeply indebted to the authors of this volume for their lively and enormously inspiring discussions at the conference, and for making their contributions available to us so rapidly. We are also very grateful to Cosima Schwarke for her invaluable assistance in editing this volume, as well as her almost infinite patience and good humour, and to Astrid Kajsa Nylander for producing the layout, brilliantly accommodating the art historians' special requests and demands. Last but not least, we would like to thank Darya Yakubovich and Friederike Quander, who had the honourable but arduous task of preparing the index for this volume dedicated to what is arguably one of the great indexing projects in history.

20 We have to mourn deeply the passing away on 27 May 2019 of Judith McKenzie, whose paper summarising the outcomes of her magnificent publication was presented at the 2018 Hamburg conference by Fotini Spingou.

21 For the Syriac tradition see for example Bernabò 2014 and note 14 above. For the Armenian tradition see Mathews/Sanjian 1991, 166–176; Kouymjian 1996, 1025–1042; Sevrugian 2004; Amirkhanian 2008–2009. To the particularly rich Armenian tradition of commentaries on the canon tables was dedicated the paper presented by Varduhi Kyureghyan at the 2018 Hamburg Conference, that could unfortunately not be included in the present volume.

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