



Previewing an essay on the shaping of the Lyric Canon in Athens

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The printed version of the essay that is mentioned in the title here is forthcoming as Chapter 4 in a book edited by Bruno Currie and Ian Rutherford, the title of which is *The Reception of Greek Lyric Poetry 600BC–AD400*, to appear in 2019. The title of my chapter for the book is “On the Shaping of the Lyric Canon in Athens.” Epitomized here is a pre-edited version of that forthcoming chapter. In this pre-edited version, which will be posted online sometime after the printed version appears, I numbered the paragraphs, §§1–46, and I have kept those numbers in the epitome here, even though most of those paragraphs will be skipped in the process of epitomizing the content—and even though no such numberings will appear in the printed version.



Head of Sappho (between 1896 and 1898). Located at Castello Ursini, Catania. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

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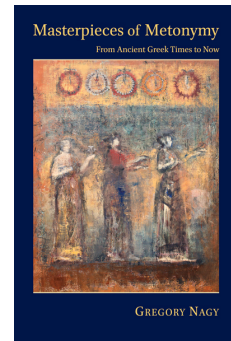
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Archives

Introduction, §§1–6

§1. The essay is about the Lyric Canon as studied by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1900) in his *Textgeschichte der griechischen Lyriker* (hereafter abbreviated as “W”—followed each time by the relevant page numbers). The nine poets of this canon were Alcman, Stesichorus, Ibycus, Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon, Simonides, Pindar, Bacchylides, as we read in *Greek Anthology* 9.184 and 9.571 (W 5–6); also in the *Scholia for Dionysius Thrax* (*Grammatici Graeci* 1.3 ed. Hilgard p. 21 lines 17–19) and in *Life of Pindar* texts (ed. Drachmann p. 11). I will hereafter refer to the canonical grouping of these poets simply as the Lyric Nine, paraphrasing the expression *ennea lurikoi* ‘nine lyric poets’ as used in the *Life of Pindar* texts (Drachmann pp. 10–11).

§2. The question is, how did such a canon take shape? Or, to say it in a more technical way, how do we trace the canon-formation here? In searching for an answer, we need to keep in mind the fact that the earliest historical context for such a canon can be located in Athens and dated to the classical period starting around the middle of the fifth century BCE. This fact needs to be contrasted with two other facts: (1) curiously, the poets known as the Lyric Nine were all non-Athenian, and (2) even more curiously, they were all non-classical, dating back to the so-called archaic period that ended around the middle of the fifth century BCE.

§3. The actual dates of the Lyric Nine extend from around 450 BCE as far back as 650 BCE or so. For classical Athens, then, the “classics” of their Lyric Canon were non-classical because they were pre-classical. And when I say “classics,” I have in mind songs that were not only well-known but also supposedly well-loved, as we see from some telling references in sources stemming from classical Athens, especially in comedies (W 12–14).

§4. On the basis of such evidence, then, for an Athenian reception of the Lyric Nine, the canon-formation of Lyric can be explained by arguing that it originated in contexts where lyric songs were reperformed for and by Athenian elites participating in private symposia (I cite here the relevant remarks in W 13, 18). To show just one example of such contexts, I quote the wording of Aristophanes F 235 KA, ἄσον δὴ μοι σκόλιόν τι λαβῶν Ἀλκαιοῦ κἈνακρέοντος ‘sing me some drinking-song [skolion], taking it from Alcaeus or Anacreon’.

§5. But the explanation we have considered so far, which concentrates on the idea of reperformances at private symposia in Athens, needs to be broadened. Another fact to consider, I argue, is that the songs of the Lyric Nine were also reperformed at public concerts organized by the Athenian State for the seasonally recurring occasion of a grand civic festival known as the Panathenaia. I propose that these public concerts, known as *mousikoi agōnes* ‘competitions in song’, were foundational for the creation of the Lyric Canon. (For background on the *mousikoi agōnes* at the Panathenaia, I recommend Kotsidu 1991.)

§6. (skipped here)

Citharodes, aulodes, and rhapsodes, §§7–8

§7. At the seasonally recurring festival of the Panathenaia, there were separate competitions of *rhapsōidoi* 'rhapsodes', of *kitharōidoi* 'citharodes' (= *kitharā*-singers), of *aulōidoi* 'aulodes' (= *aulos*-singers), of *kitharistai* 'citharists' (= *kitharā*-players), and of *aulētai* 'auletes' (*aulos*-players), as we learn from an Athenian inscription, IG II² 2311, dated at around 380 BCE, which records Panathenaic prizes. (The portion of the inscription that deals with rhapsodes is lost, but it is generally accepted that rhapsodic competitions were mentioned in this missing portion; I refer here to Shear 2001:367.) We learn about these categories of competition also from Plato's *Laws* (6.764d–e), where mention is made of rhapsodes, citharodes, and auletes—and where the wording makes it clear that the point of reference is the Panathenaia. At this festival, the competing rhapsodes were performing epic while the competing citharodes and aulodes were performing lyric. From here on, I concentrate on the citharodes and the aulodes, keeping in mind the rhapsodes as a point of comparison.

§8. Whereas the Lyric Canon was purely a textual tradition for Wilamowitz, for me such a Lyric Canon was also a performative tradition, both citharodic and aulodic, stemming from the repertoire of citharodic and aulodic competitions of the *mousikoi agōnes* held at the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens. And, in terms of my overall argumentation, there existed separate categories of competition in performing citharodically and aulodically.

[A transition from Athens to Alexandria, §§9–12](#)

§9. For the moment, let us take as a given my argument that the *mousikoi agōnes* 'competitions in song' at the Panathenaia in the classical period involved performances of songs from the Lyric Canon in separate competitions among citharodes and among aulodes. This argument, as we will now see, can help us make more sense of what happened to the Lyric Nine in the Hellenistic period. Our starting-point is the well-known fact that the texts of these nine poets were preserved and edited by learned experts at the Library of Alexandria, founded in the late fourth century BCE near the beginning of the Hellenistic period (W 16–17). It is thanks to these Alexandrian experts that we even know about the term *ennea lurikoi*, or Lyric Nine, as preserved in *Life of Pindar* texts (pp. 10–11 ed. Drachmann). So, given this fact, the question is: how will my argumentation account for the transition of the Lyric Canon from classical Athens to Hellenistic Alexandria?

§10. I start with the cumulative testimony of Aristotle and his Peripatetic followers Dicaearchus and Chamaeleon in the fourth and early third centuries BCE. This testimony shows that the Peripatetics were already working on texts of poets belonging to the Lyric Nine, such as Sappho and Anacreon (W 15).

§11. In general, it can be said that the work of researchers in Athens during the fourth and the early third centuries BCE extended into the work of the Alexandrians on the "classic" texts of the Nine. And such research in Athens involved the texts of other "classics" as well: an important example is the editorial work of the Peripatetics on the texts of two epics, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Nagy 1996 ch. 7). Another similarly important example in the late fourth century was the initiative taken by the statesman Lycurgus in actually legislating the massive project of producing new editions, to be stored and consulted in the state archives, of the tragedies composed by the canonical triad of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—only those three ([*Plutarch*] *Lives of the Ten Orators* 841f; commentary in Nagy 1996:175).

§12. In the case of all these examples, I posit a continuity of transmission from classical Athens to Hellenistic Alexandria. What would be most remarkable about such a posited continuity between Athens and Alexandria is that the Athenian side of the continuum would still have had access to the performance traditions that had led to the text traditions, whereas the Alexandrian side had direct access only to the text traditions.

[On the testimony of Aristotle's Poetics, §§13–15 \(skipped here\)](#)

The essentials of my argument here can be found in [Nagy 2008|20093](#) §§18–19 (I now cite also Rotstein 2004).].

[Primary venue, secondary venue, §§17–18](#)

§17. At this point, we come to a vital convergence of epic and lyric traditions. In terms of my overall argument, the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens was the primary venue for the traditions of performing both Homer and the Lyric Nine, and it was from these performance traditions that the text traditions of the Epic Canon and the Lyric Canon were derived.

§18. Considering the centrality of the Panathenaia in the public life of Athens, I have argued so far that this festival was the primary "locus of diffusion," as linguists would call it, for the songs of the Lyric Nine as performed in the classical period. And here I return to the second part of my argument, introduced already at the beginning of this essay: correspondingly, the performances of these songs at private symposia would be only a secondary "locus of diffusion." In other words, from the standpoint of my overall argument, the texts of the Lyric Nine as edited in Alexandria would have originated primarily from a centralized reception in contexts of public performances at the Panathenaia and only secondarily from a decentralized reception in contexts of performances at private symposia.

[Positing four phases of transmission, §19](#)

§19. For the transmission of the Lyric Nine, I posit four phases, extending from the sixth century to somewhere around the middle of the fourth. "Phase 1" is the era of the Peisistratidai, retrospectively described as tyrants who dominated the civic life of Athens in the sixth century. "Phase 2" is the preclassical era of the early democracy in the first half of the fifth century. "Phase 3" is the classical era of

Athens as exemplified by Pericles. And "Phase 4" is the postclassical era, starting around the first half of the fourth century.

Phase 1, §§20–28

§§20–27. To illustrate "Phase 1," I use primarily a text about Hipparkhos, son of Peisistratos. The text is taken from "Plato" Hipparkhos 228b–c. In §20, I quote and translate this text, and then I comment on it in §§21–27. Then I summarize in §28. In the epitome here, I skip §§20–27 and confine myself to the summary at §28. In other work, I have already quoted, translated, and commented on "Plato" Hipparkhos 228b–c. Here is a link: [Nagy_2009|2010|§§49–52](#).

§28. In terms of the narrative in "Plato" Hipparkhos 228b–c, there are two parallel accomplishments being attributed to Hipparkhos: through his initiatives, it was not only the poetry of Homer that could now be performed in public concerts at the Panathenaia in Athens but also the Ionian lyric songs of poets like Anacreon of Teos and the Dorian lyric compositions of poets like Simonides of Keos.

Phase 2, §§29–38

§29. Moving now from "Phase 1" to "Phase 2" of the Panathenaia in Athens, we come to the era of the early democracy in the first half of the fifth century BCE. In this era, the songs of Anacreon were evidently well-known in Athens, as we see most clearly from the evidence of vase paintings that show Anacreon himself (the adjacent lettering identifies him) in the act of singing while accompanying himself on a string instrument that is pictured as a barytone lyre or barbitos and occasionally as a concert lyre or kitharā. For an admirable analysis of this iconographic evidence, I recommend the relevant comments in a book by Timothy Power ([2010:413, 466, 470, 510](#); also recommended in general is Price 1990).

§30. While the Anacreontic paintings point to the symposium as the immediate context to be visualized for the singing of songs attributed to Anacreon, both during and after his lifetime, I argue that the ultimate context would be the re-enactment of such sympotic singing in the context of public concerts at the Panathenaia, where the kitharōidos 'citharode' who re-enacts Anacreon would accompany himself either on the barbitos or on the more conventional kitharā.

§31. I also argue that the songs of Sappho, as channeled by the singing of Anacreon almost a century later, could likewise be re-enacted not only in a stylized symposium but also in a spectacular Panathenaic setting. The rest of the original paragraph is skipped here. I offer relevant argumentation in [Nagy_2007:233–237, 246–252, 255–260](#), citing also some relevant comments by [Power_2010:413n275](#).

§32. Taking a broader look at the citharodic medium, I need to make a disclaimer at this point. I do not mean to say that all songs attributed to figures like Sappho or Anacreon would at all times be formally suitable for inclusion in the repertoire of citharodic songs to be performed at the Panathenaia. From reading carefully the book of Power ([2010](#)) on the evolution of citharodic performances at the Panathenaia and at symposia, I have learned to be more consistent about keeping in mind this basic argument as advocated in that book: not all lyric forms were necessarily compatible with the citharodic forms that eventuated in the context of the Panathenaia. Accordingly, I heed the reservations of [Power_2010:262–263n187](#) concerning the historical possibilities of fitting lyric forms into a citharodic medium. As we trace the citharodic medium forward in time, it seems that the metrical and the melodic formalities of this medium became increasingly constrained, so that we cannot in the end expect all lyric forms to fit into the narrower frame of the citharodic medium. That said, however, I maintain that this citharodic medium had been far more flexible in earlier stages of its evolution. And I think it was at such an earlier stage that lyric forms first made their massive entry into the citharodic medium as it evolved in the context of the Panathenaia. Most accommodating, in any case, were lyric forms that could readily convert from frames that were stanzaic to frames that were stichic (verse-by-verse), since the evolution of citharodic forms evidently gravitated away from strophic configurations. In the case of monodic songs attributed to Sappho, the composition known as The Wedding of Hector and Andromache (F 44) is an ideal example of a lyric form that suits the narrower requirements of the citharodic medium in its later configurations. I might add that, in terms of my argumentation, this kind of composition could readily be expanded in length, and such a formal capacity for expansion would be another feature that made such monodic singing especially suitable for citharodic performance.

§33. I started my overview of "Phase 2" by arguing that the songs of Anacreon, who was personally brought to Athens by Hipparkhos, were integrated into the canonical repertoire of citharodic performances at the Panathenaia. Now I turn to the songs of Simonides. He too, as we saw in the same passage that mentioned Anacreon, was personally brought to Athens by Hipparkhos. And now I will argue that the songs of Simonides were likewise integrated into the repertoire of performances at the Panathenaia. In this case, however, at least some of his songs were integrated into the repertoire of aulodic rather than citharodic performances.

§34. Here I return to a specific argument I presented at a conference of the Network held in the summer of 2012 in Washington DC, on which occasion I proposed that the Plataea Elegy of Simonides (F 11 ed. 2 West), celebrating the victory of the Hellenes who fought the Persian forces at the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE (on which see Boedeker and Sider 2001), had become part of the repertoire of the Lyric Canon. In support of my proposal, I cited the work of Ewen Bowie (1986) on the performative traditions of archaic Greek elegy, expressing my agreement with his view that (1) elegiac compositions in the archaic and classical periods were conventionally sung to the accompaniment of the aulos 'reed', and (2) there were two basic social contexts for the singing of elegy by men, namely, the symposium and the public festival (Bowie 1986:14–21, 34; also [Nagy_2010:38](#)). Accordingly, I argue that the performing of elegy at

the Panathenaia belonged to competitions in the category of aulōidiā 'singing to the accompaniment of the aulos'.

§35. This is not at all to say, however, that elegy was the only form of aulōidiā to be performed at the Panathenaia. Besides the stichic form of elegy, I leave room for the possibility that non-stichic forms of aulōidiā also existed in at least the earlier phases of the Panathenaia, just as I have left room for non-stichic forms of kitharōidiā 'singing to the accompaniment of the kitharā'.

§36. I must also note here the possibility that aulodic performances could be interchangeable with citharodic performances, as well as the other way around. A case in point is *Women at the Thesmophoria*, a comedy by Aristophanes. Here the tragic poet Agathon is depicted as wearing a turban and a woman's khitōn—costuming that matches the costume of the lyric poet Anacreon as depicted by the Kleophrades Painter (Copenhagen MN 13365; Price 1990:169, with further bibliography.). In the comedy of Aristophanes, the stage Agathon even says that his self-staging replicates the monodic stagings of Ibycus, Anacreon, and Alcaeus (verses 159–163). This reference suggests, I argue, that Agathon as a master of tragic poetry was strongly influenced by the monodic performance traditions of lyric song, both citharodic and aulodic, as performed at the Panathenaia. (Nagy 2007:245–246, following Bierl 2001:160–163; on Agathon as a stage Anacreon, I cite Bierl p. 158 n137, 165.)

§37. I should emphasize in this context the fact that aulodic compositions were appropriate not only for performance at the competitions of aulodes at the Panathenaia but also for the competitions of choruses who were singing and dancing in the dramas of Athenian State Theater at the City Dionysia and at other dramatic festivals, since the singing and dancing of the songs of drama was conventionally sustained by the accompaniment of a single aulos. So, my point about Agathon is that he was experimenting with compositions in his dramas that would have sounded like aulodic performances by aulodes competing with each other at the Panathenaia. And, going even further, Agathon experimented even with citharodic compositions in his dramas.

§38. In short, I propose that the compositions of the Lyric Nine were suitable for both citharodic and aulodic performances at the mousikoi agōnes in at least the earlier phases of the Panathenaia.



Lyric Poetry (1896). Henry O. Walker (1843–1929). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

Phase 3, §§39–43

§39. Moving now from "Phase 2" to "Phase 3" of the Panathenaia in Athens, we come to the classical era of Athens, by which I mean the age of Pericles as a prime promoter of both the democracy and the so-called Athenian Empire. I pose here a most relevant question: where in this era did the competitions of kitharōdoi 'citharodes' and aulōidoi 'aulodes' take place on the occasion of the Panathenaia? The question extends of course also to the performances of the non-singing instrumentalists who likewise competed at the Panathenaia, namely, the kitharistai or 'citharists' and the aulētai or 'auletes'. And, more importantly, the question extends even to the performances of the rhapsōidoi or 'rhapsodes', who were competing as well as collaborating with each other in the act of reciting Homeric poetry at the same mousikoi agōnes of the Panathenaia. And here is the answer: the venue for the mousikoi agōnes of the Panathenaic festival in this era was the Ōideion 'Odeum' of Pericles, built probably between 447 and 443 BCE. Relevant to my essay here is work done by Athanassaki 2012 concerning references to the Odeum in the *Ion* of Euripides. Such references, as collected and analyzed by Athanassaki, shed light on the evolution of the Lyric Canon.

§40. I draw special attention to some surviving details about the building of this Odeum, since they are relevant to what we know about the organization of an agōn 'competition' at the Panathenaia in the context of the Odeum as the setting for this competition. At this point in the original essay, I quote and translate and comment on a most relevant text from Plutarch *Pericles* 13.9–11. An earlier version of my comments was published in Nagy 2008|2009 4§§174–176.

§41. As I infer from this text of Plutarch, Pericles in the fifth century BCE initiated legislation reforming the mousikoi agōnes at the Panathenaia, including the competition of citharodes and aulodes. Plutarch leaves it unspecified whether the agōnes 'competitions' included rhapsodic performances, but we do see a specific reference attested in the ancient dictionary ascribed to Hesychius. In this dictionary we read under the entry ōideion 'Odeum': ὠδεῖον· τόπος, ἐν ᾧ πρὶν τὸ θέατρον κατασκευασθῆναι οἱ ῥαψῳδοὶ καὶ οἱ κιθαρῳδοὶ ἠγωνίζοντο 'Odeum: the place where, before the Theater [of Dionysus] was configured for this purpose, the rhapsodes and the citharodes used to engage in competition [agōnizesthai]'. (On the use of the Theater of Dionysus for Homeric performances in the late fourth century BCE, see Athenaeus 14.620b–c and my relevant commentary in Nagy 1996:158–163.) It follows that Plutarch's elliptical reference to 'aulos-playing, singing, and kitharā-playing' does in fact include the 'singing' of rhapsodes (Nagy 2008|2009 4§175).

§§42–43. (further comments on the Odeum of Perikles, skipped here)

Phase 4, §§44–46

§44. Moving now from “Phase 3” to “Phase 4” of the Panathenaia in Athens, we come to what I have already described as the post-classical era. By now we see a drastic decrease in evidence for any continued existence of a Lyric Canon as performed and then textualized in Athens. And, conversely, we begin to see a marked increase in evidence for the textualization of this canon in Alexandria.

§45. By now the repertoire of performable lyric songs in the mousikoi agōnes of the Panathenaia may have become so restricted in scope as to exclude most kinds of song that may have been transmitted in earlier phases of the performance traditions that had evolved in the context of this festival. In both the citharodic and the aulodic competitions, the repertoire could have been narrowed down to stichic songs that were readily expandable in length. In the case of the citharodic competitions, the form of monodic singing was known as the kitharōidikos nomos or ‘citharodic nome [= song sung to a tune]’, the generic protocols of which are admirably documented in the book of Power (2010). And, in the case of the aulodic competitions, the corresponding form would have been the elegiac couplet as analyzed in the article of Bowie (1986).

§46. Meanwhile, lyric songs composed in a far greater variety of meters and tunes would have survived as texts already in Athens, thanks especially to the Peripatetics, and the proliferation of such texts would have led to a large-scale project of collecting and editing as undertaken by the researchers working at the Library of Alexandria. Further, the impetus for finding texts of the Lyric Nine would easily have led to a widening in the scope of inquiry. That is how the Library of Alexandria acquired a vast array of lyric texts that had never been part of the textual tradition for the original Athenian Lyric Nine. A prime example, I suggest, is the case of Corinna. While retaining the nomenclature of ennea lurikoi ‘nine lyric poets’, the Alexandrians added her as a tenth poet, as we see in the Scholia for Dionysius Thrax (p. 21 line 19; see also W 21), where Corinna of Boeotia is described as the dekatē ‘tenth’. She was not a member of the original Lyric Nine because her songs were not part of a Panathenaic repertoire.

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