
The Libraries of the Neoplatonists edited by Cristina D’Ancona

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Here’s a statistic for you: of the nearly 11 million words of extant Greek philosophical texts now available in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, about 58% were written by Neoplatonists and another 13% were written by Alexander and Themistius. This means that much more than half of the directly extant Greek philosophical tradition consists in original works of Neoplatonists, Neoplatonist commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, and other late ancient commentaries on Aristotle. The Neoplatonists and commentators are mostly what remains to us of what one might call the Greek ‘philosophical library’.

I take this information from a delightful article by R. Goulet in the volume under review. His statistical analysis is open to various caveats. It only counts Greek and so leaves out such authors as Lucretius and Cicero. And it does not count all Greeks: the voluminously extant Galen does not figure in the tally, even though some of Galen’s works should be considered philosophical. Still, Goulet’s point is a telling one. Plato and Aristotle, with their relatively extensive and inexhaustibly fascinating writings—they make up respectively 6% and 9% of the total extant Greek—will always attract the most attention from readers of ancient philosophy. But there is a vast corpus of late antique philosophical literature which has only begun to be explored seriously in the past few decades. The corpus becomes even more vast when one looks beyond the late ancient Greek evidence and considers the Neoplatonic inheritance in Byzantium

* Though we do not usually solicit reviews from contributors to collections under review, we thought that the importance of this volume to the readers of *Aestimatio* and its almost exhaustive list of expert contributors warranted our asking Dr Peter Adamson, a contributor himself, to undertake a review for us. We are most grateful for his agreeing to do this.

and in non-Greek traditions. Among these the Arabic corpus is most extensive, but also important is the intermediary Syriac tradition. As one article here shows, Armenian literature too rewards study.

Obviously it would take a very large book by many scholars to do justice to this material; and that is just what we have here. Drawing on a research grant from the European Science Foundation, the editor Cristina D'Ancona and her collaborators staged a major conference in Strasbourg in 2004, of which these are the proceedings. The volume includes a substantial introduction by D'Ancona and 27 articles in a variety of languages (15 in French, 8 in English, 2 in Italian, 2 in German). The first 12 articles deal with the Greek tradition itself, focusing especially on the transmission of Greek texts and on the Byzantine reception; the second part, comprising 15 articles, is devoted the Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew receptions. The articles range from fairly general to extremely specific, and it would be the rare reader who finds that every piece commands their attention equally. But given the uniformly high standard, anyone with an interest in Neoplatonism will find the volume well worthwhile. (In my general assessment of the volume, I exclude one contribution which is by myself, and which I will leave others to evaluate.)

Goulet's aforementioned piece is a good place to start in approaching the first half of the book: he provides a useful overview of the cultural and material conditions for the transmission of Greek thought to the modern period. As he points out, no late ancient work is really 'preserved', except for the occasional papyrus scroll dug up from, say, Herculaneum or the sands of Egypt. Rather, ancient philosophy is *transmitted* to us, thanks to copying by hand. What survives in this way is only what has managed to avoid the perils of fire, water, lack of interest, and the upheaval caused by changes in the technology of writing and reading (e.g., from papyrus roll to the codex). In light of this, issues and problems surrounding textual transmission cannot be neatly separated from issues and problems of philosophical analysis. So it is useful that the first half of the volume devotes so much attention to transmission, and even more useful that a central case is given attention by several of the articles.

This is the case of the so-called 'philosophical collection', a set of now separated manuscripts that were produced in the Byzantine period, probably during the ninth century in Constantinople. The

opening article of the volume, by H. D. Saffrey, discusses the history of one manuscript from the collection held in Paris, which contains numerous works by Plato. This manuscript and the collection as a whole embodied the transmission of Greek works from Alexandria to Byzantium and beyond. The question of who collected these works in Byzantium and why is a vexed one, but G. Cavallo argues here [158] that it could have been the work of a group of learned scholars and scribes (as opposed to having been a top-down decision by the political elite, as recently argued by Marwan Rashed [2002]). What is in any case striking about the collection is, first, its precious and extensive evidence for the philosophical tradition—not only Plato and Aristotle, but also Theophrastus, Alcinous, Proclus, Damascius, Alexander and other commentators, and so on. And second, the inclusion of works we would consider non-philosophical: not only is Aristotelian science well represented, but one manuscript (now held in Heidelberg) collects geographical works, which is the subject of a piece here by D. Marcotte.

Apart from these treatments of the ‘collection’, this part of the volume also includes detailed textual studies by C. Luna and M.-O. Goulet-Cazè. Luna discusses the commentary of Syrianus on the *Metaphysics* and its textual history. She incidentally makes the point that an edition of this commentary needs to preserve the lemmata of the *Metaphysics* as Syrianus quoted them: with the lemmata, the often hostile commentary becomes a kind of dialogue between the Neoplatonist and Aristotle [124]. Goulet-Cazè’s attention is directed to the two sections of Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.7, which are not preserved in the direct tradition but are found in Eusebius. Though it has been thought that these derive from a pre-Porphyrrian ‘edition’ of the works of Plotinus, Goulet-Cazè argues that Eusebius may have had access to a more complete copy of Porphyry’s edition than we have [84, 89]. A final paper on the pre-Byzantine Greek tradition is by B. Reis. He argues that the roots of the Neoplatonist curriculum of reading Plato’s dialogues are to be found earlier, among the ‘Middle’ Platonists. The first moves towards a thematic division of the dialogues may have been made in order to counter an Aristotelian accusation that Plato was insufficiently systematic.

This brings us to four papers on the Byzantine tradition. A useful general piece by M. Cacouros sets the scene by explaining the continuities, and lack thereof, between the late ancient and Byzantine

philosophical ‘libraries’. In general, the continuity is more striking than the discontinuity. As Cacouros puts it, ‘le nèoplatonisme était avant tout présent’ in Byzantine philosophical literature [179]. But, like those who used Greek texts in Syriac and Arabic, Byzantine readers could be selective: they devoted much attention to the logical corpus and often to only the early parts of the *Organon*. It must be said that this too can be traced back to the late ancient period. Neoplatonists started their students on the *Isagoge* and *Categories*, which assumed a disproportionate importance in teaching contexts, with predictable results for what commentaries were written and were deemed useful enough to survive. It must also be said that the next three pieces, interesting though they are, do not exactly amount to a strong case for intellectual innovation among Byzantine authors. E. Delli discusses the topic of the pneumatic vehicle in Psellos, showing his treatment to be derived largely from Philoponus, albeit with some small changes. Yet, even some of these changes seem to be steps backward: note, for instance, Psellos’ insensitivity to the role of this vehicle in mediating between the physical and intellectual worlds [216].¹ A. Papamanolakis similarly discusses sources, but there is not much in the way of new philosophical insight regarding schemes of the virtues in Psellos and Eustratius; they draw on schemes found already in Plotinus and Porphyry (interesting here is a discussion of how the scheme of virtues may have been used to structure Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*). Finally, P. Golitsis discusses Nicephorus Blemmydes (13th century) and his use of Simplicius’ commentary on the *Physics*. This section as whole certainly shows that Byzantine texts are important, if only because their quotations can help us to establish a better text for the Greek sources they cite. But it would be interesting to see more in the way of distinctive philosophical ideas in the Byzantine tradition. We do get occasional hints of how such ideas could have emerged from the need to reconcile Neoplatonism with Christianity [e.g., 226, 250–251].²

The reconciliation between revealed religion and pagan philosophy becomes something of a *leitmotif* in the second part of the volume. Of course, the process of reconciliation had begun already in late antiquity with the first generations of Christian commentators

¹ On this point, see recently Zambon 2005.

² On the general topic, see Ierodiakonou 2004.

on Aristotle. These commentators, often difficult to distinguish from pagans like Ammonius and Simplicius in terms of their approach to Aristotle, included most famously John Philoponus but also such figures as David ‘the Invincible’. The latter loomed much larger for the later medieval traditions than he does for us. C. Ferrari mentions in her piece on Ibn al-Tayyib, an 11th century Christian Arabic commentator, that his commentary on the *Categories* is closer to that of David or Elias—the attribution is disputed [270ff]—than to any other Greek author [472]. The Armenian tradition produced several translations of David, and this evidence is discussed by V. Calzolari. As in Byzantium, philosophy in Armenian was strongly influenced by the late ancient Neoplatonic curriculum; but there are interesting divergences. Of these the most striking to me is the selection of Plato’s dialogues that were chosen for rendering into Armenian, which included the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Minos*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* [262].

Equally new for most readers will be the Syriac tradition, which is well served here with pieces by H. Hugonnard-Roche, S. Brock, and V. Berti. Hugonnard-Roche, probably the leading figure on Syriac philosophical literature, supplies a general discussion of the extant Syriac evidence, which like the Byzantine tradition leans strongly towards the Aristotelian logical corpus and within that, towards the first few texts of the *Organon*. On the other hand, Berti’s very interesting treatment of Timothy, patriarch of the Syrian Church in the eighth to ninth centuries, mentions his interest not only in the *Topics* but also the *Poetics*. (The Syriac tradition, as the Arabic tradition, followed late ancient authors in including the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* as part of the *Organon* [see [Black 1990](#)].) Brock, another leading Syriacist, takes up the question of whether there was a Syriac version of the works of Plotinus which stands behind the Arabic version of parts of the *Enneads* and thus behind what, notoriously, became known as the *Theology of Aristotle*. Brock agrees with an emerging consensus that the Arabic Plotinus was translated directly from Greek, not *via* Syriac, but points out that Plotinus was known to some extent in Syriac [296] and that the intellectual culture of Syriac-using monasteries may have been an influence on those who produced the Arabic Plotinus [305]. This is certainly plausible, given that the translator hailed from Syria.³

³ For a similar recent assessment, see [Bucur and Bucur 2006](#).

The Arabic Plotinus is also the subject of a promising piece by D. Gutas, who announces the project of re-editing this material and already makes numerous suggestions for emending the text. He points out that our best manuscript for the *Theology* is the one in Istanbul—this was already noted by G. Lewis [1957, 298] in a review of Badawi's edition [1955]—and provides a useful (if 'provisional') stemma [379] for the whole Arabic Plotinus tradition down to some manuscripts of the short version. The Arabic Plotinus was produced within the so-called 'Kindi circle', a group of translators gathered around the philosopher al-Kindi in the ninth century. G. Endress, whose seminal study, *Proclus Arabus* [1973], did so much to clarify the achievements and methods of this translation circle, offers an overview of the Greek sources known to al-Kindi. This provides a good entry to the volume's section on Arabic, which includes numerous studies of Greek works in Arabic translation. In addition to the *Theology*, which is discussed by Gutas, the volume covers translations, re-workings or commentaries of Aristotle's *De anima*, his *Categories*, Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, and of Palladius on the Hippocratic *Aphorisms*.

To take these in reverse order: H. H. Biesterfeldt discusses the Arabic version of Palladius, an important text not only for what it tells us about the Arabic translation movement but also for the more basic reason that this commentary is lost in Greek [386]. While this topic may seem out of place in a volume on Neoplatonism, it's important to remember the close ties between medicine and philosophy in both the Greek and Arabic traditions. An indication of this is that commentaries on medical works use the same set of opening questions about title, topic (*skopos*) and so on, as the commentators used for Plato and Aristotle [391–392]. More obviously relevant to Neoplatonism are the fortunes of Proclus' *Elements*, which was reworked to become the so-called *Book of the Pure Good* in Arabic, the basis for the influential Latin *Liber de causis*. Here E. Wakelnig discusses another version of the *Elements* written by the 10th-century Platonist al-^cAmiri. After discussing the complex set of Proclean materials now extant in Arabic, she sets out a claim defended at greater length by Wakelnig [2006] that there must have been a larger 'Ur-*Liber de causis*' which is now lost, and which spawned several incomplete versions. As for Aristotle, M. Sebti announces the important discovery of a new manuscript for a paraphrase of the *De anima*, which was

edited and discussed in an extraordinary study by R. Arnzen [1998]. And C. Ferrari discusses the handling of the category ‘relation’ in Ibn al-Tayyib’s massive commentary on the *Categories* [see Ferrari 2006].

The cultural and intellectual reception of Greek philosophy in Arabic is also treated in several offerings. In my own piece, I discuss what I refer to as the ‘Kindian tradition’, a line of Neoplatonic authors associated with the aforementioned al-Kindi. This tradition is well represented in a fascinating manuscript held in Oxford, Bodleian Or. Marsh 539, discussed here by E. Cottrell. It contains, among other things, bits of the Arabic Plotinus, sayings of other ancient philosophers, and remarks by Neoplatonists writing in Arabic such as Miskawayh and al-‘Amiri. I was particularly struck by Cottrell’s argument that the manuscript provides evidence for comments on the *Theology* by al-Kindi’s student, Abu Zayd al-Balkhi [438–440]. This is more evidence for an abiding fascination with the Neoplatonic translations among the Kindian authors. But works like the *Theology* also had influence beyond these Kindians: they had, for instance, a major impact on the Shiite tradition. Here a useful overview by D. De Smet discusses the use of Greek philosophical literature by the Ismailis. And J. Montgomery suggests that authors and patrons with Shiite tendencies may have been involved with numerous works of the Graeco-Arabic tradition, including several anonymous or pseudonymous works like the *Opinions of the Philosophers* of pseudo-Ammonius [455]. Montgomery’s excellent discussion, taking off from al-Jahiz, is an important reminder of the wider cultural and political forces that motivated and shaped the reception of Greek philosophy in the Arabic-speaking world.

The book concludes with a final survey piece by S. Harvey, who looks at the question of which Greek works (and in what versions) were known to Jewish authors. Among other things, Harvey emphasizes the close links between the Jewish and Muslim philosophical traditions. As he says, ‘the Jewish Aristotelians knew Aristotle very well, but their knowledge for the most part came from Averroes’ commentaries’ [504].

As this dash through the volume shows, D’Ancona has brought together an impressive group of scholars to deal with an extraordinary range of authors, texts, and linguistic traditions. One is hard pressed to think of another volume which tackles such a large swathe

of the Neoplatonic tradition. Inevitably, the resulting book ranges widely in terms of theme, approach, and level of specificity; yet, from it all emerges a sense that we are indeed dealing with a single tradition here. Of course, seventh century Christian authors writing in Armenian, 10th-century Muslim authors writing in Arabic, and 13th-century Jewish authors writing in Hebrew had access to different texts from the Greek corpus, read these texts once they had been translated into different languages, and approached them with different preoccupations in mind. Yet, it is striking how many things remain constant throughout, ranging from fundamental Neoplatonic metaphysical convictions to strategies for reading Aristotle and organizing his corpus. D'Ancona is to be congratulated for her success in the appropriately Neoplatonic task of bringing some degree of unity to a bewildering multiplicity of sources and problems, many of which are rarely discussed at all, never mind together in one place.

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