

## Byzantine Perspectives on Neoplatonism

# **Byzantinisches Archiv – Series Philosophica**

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Herausgegeben von  
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Munich, January 2017

Sergei Mariev



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Sergei Mariev

# Neoplatonic Philosophy in Byzantium

## An Introduction

Unresolved tension between Platonic heritage and Christian doctrine is one of the hallmarks of the history of Byzantine philosophy. On the one hand, Byzantine scholars from all periods showed significant interest in the doctrines of Plato and the Platonists. On the other hand, many of them perceived these doctrines as a source of error and even as the root of all heresies. In consequence, they frequently made attempts to harmonize Neoplatonic doctrines with Christianity, but also criticized, refuted and even condemned them. These attempts at harmonization, criticism, refutation and condemnation with regard to Neoplatonic texts and authors constitute a fascinating chapter in the history of Byzantine civilization. The following pages do not pretend to offer an exhaustive overview of the history of the reception of Neoplatonic philosophy in Byzantium. The objective is to sketch a general “map” of this vast “territory”, which is still being discovered by modern scholarship, by identifying the most important figures and texts that can be seen as “boundaries” and “milestones”. The individual contributions collected in this volume will then provide a more detailed account of some specific episodes and figures on this “map”, and thereby continue this ongoing process of discovery.

The end of the 5th century is the most probable date for the historically enigmatic figure of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite,<sup>1</sup> “who transposed in a thoroughly original way the whole of Pagan Neoplatonism from Plotinus to Proclus, but especially that of Proclus and the Platonic Academy in Athens, into a distinctively new Christian context”.<sup>2</sup> Ps.-Dionysios was a figure of considerable authority for many Byzantine scholars, not least because the pseudonym chosen by the otherwise unknown author of the *Corpus areopagiticum* identified its author as Dionysios the Areopagite, an Athenian citizen converted to Christianity by the apostle Paul, as reported in the *Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>3</sup> The apostolic age of these writings, so established, was one of the decisive factors in cementing their authority in Byzantium. The link between Proklos and Ps.-Dionysios was thus reversed: the “holy” Dionysios was believed to be the teacher

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<sup>1</sup> An impressive list of ca. 21 hypotheses with regard to the historical identity of the author of the *Corpus areopagiticum* – possible candidates include Severos of Antioch, Peter the Fuller, Peter the Iberian, Sergios of Resh’ayna – is assembled in Hathaway 1969, 31–35. On the relationship between Platonism and Christianity in the writings of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite cf. Saffrey 1982, Perl 2007, Dillon and Wear 2007, Dillon 2014a, Beierwaltes 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Corrigan and Harrington 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Acts*, 17, 16–34, esp. 32–34.

and not the pupil of Proklos. As the lemma “Dionysios the Areopagite” in the *Suda*, a massive 10th-century Byzantine encyclopedia, demonstrates, for the Byzantines it was Proklos who appropriated some of the teachings of Dionysios and not Dionysios who transposed Neoplatonic teachings into a Christian context.<sup>4</sup> Some Byzantine authors even went so far as to accuse the “Athenian philosophers” of having hidden the works of Dionysios in order to be able to present some of his teachings as their own.<sup>5</sup> A manuscript containing the writings of Ps.-Dionysios, which is most probably to be identified as Cod. par. gr. 437, arrived from Byzantium in the West in September 827 as a present from the Byzantine emperors Michael II and Theophilos to Charlemagne’s son and successor Louis the Pious,<sup>6</sup> thus initiating the rich history of reception of this author in the Latin World.

In contrast to Ps.-Dionysios, the “Gaza n Christians”,<sup>7</sup> and in particular Aineias of Gaza,<sup>8</sup> Prokopios of Gaza<sup>9</sup> and Zacharias (the Rhetor),<sup>10</sup> attacked the Neoplatonists and their idea of the eternity of the world.<sup>11</sup> Their arguments – in a significantly less sophisticated and systematic form – anticipated some of the arguments that John Philoponos formulated in his treatise *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*.<sup>12</sup>

John Philoponos (ca. 490–575), himself a student of the Neoplatonic philosopher Ammonios Hermeiou (ca. 435–517), wrote a large number of works on different subjects, including commentaries on Aristotle and medical, astronomical and grammatical treatises.<sup>13</sup> Arabian scholars, who were mainly interested in Philoponos’ commentaries on Aristotle, first noticed a number of contradictory opinions in his writings and sought to explain them by hypothesizing that Philoponos had written his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* either in order to defend himself against the Christians who had been threatening him or because the Christians had offered him money in exchange for the composition of this work. Towards the beginning of the 20th century, Gudemann and Kroll formulated a biographical hypothesis that distinguishes two periods in John Philoponos’ life, namely an initial pagan and, following a supposed conversion to Christianity, a later Christian period. They assigned a large number of com-

<sup>4</sup> *Suda*, d 1170 Διονύσιος ὁ Ἀρεωπαγίτης, ed. Adler 1928.

<sup>5</sup> Makris 2000, 9f.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. McCormick 1987.

<sup>7</sup> On Christian culture in Gaza during the late fifth and early sixth centuries cf. Champion 2014, Watts 2005, Hevelone-Harper 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *PLRE* II, “Aeneas of Gaza 3”, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *PLRE* II, “Procopius of Gaza 8”, pp. 921–922.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *PLRE* II, “Zacharias (the Rhetor) 4”, pp. 1194–1195.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sorabji 2012, VII: “The main subject of the *Theophrastus* [by Aeneas of Gaza] was the human soul [...]. But it overlapped in one part with the subject of the other two Christian texts, the Christians’ creation of the world from a beginning, as opposed to the Neoplatonists’ eternal creation of the world”.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sorabji 2012, VIII.

<sup>13</sup> A comprehensive list, including less easily accessible publications, is found in Scholten 1997, vol. 1, 35–43.

mentaries on Aristotle to the first, pagan period, and the *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* and some other, mostly theological treatises to the second. However, reliable biographical details about John Philoponos' life are scarce in the extant sources, while the name John seems to suggest that he was born to a Christian family, and so Gudemann and Kroll's hypothesis found little acceptance in subsequent scholarship.<sup>14</sup> In *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*, which can be securely dated to 529, John Philoponos mounted a vigorous attack on Proklos, rejecting the idea of the eternity of the world and proposing instead a system based on the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* of the world and of matter.<sup>15</sup>

The composition of *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* is not the only milestone in the rich history of the reception of Neoplatonic philosophy during the 6th century. Writing around 540, John, who was the bishop of Scythopolis in Palestine, became one of the first Byzantine scholars to write a commentary on the works of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite. His scholia, or marginal commentaries, containing theological and philosophical observations on Ps.-Dionysios' text, enhance our understanding of the ways in which Byzantine theologians received the ideas of Proklos through the mediation of Ps.-Dionysios.<sup>16</sup> In addition, his scholia constitute one of the first instances of the reception of Plotinos in Byzantium.<sup>17</sup>

Maximos Homologetes or Confessor (580–662) was certainly one of the most outstanding intellectual figures of the 7th century. He was a prolific author whose theological works were widely read throughout the entire Byzantine period. The authority he wielded and the reverential awe with which his writings were read can be compared only to the renown that Ps.-Dionysios enjoyed during the Middle Ages in the West. Maximos' voluminous writings, for many of which there are still no reliable modern critical editions, amount to – as von Balthasar aptly characterized them – a “monumental synthesis” of the theological and philosophical traditions

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. the opinion of Scholten 1997, vol. 1, 30f. who pointed out that contradictory opinions identifiable across many of Philoponos' works do not constitute a reliable basis for postulating different phases in the author's life, especially since the commentaries as a genre were not meant to serve as a vehicle for the author's opinion but rather to propagate common and widespread views. Verrycken 1990 prefers to group Philoponos' works into two categories, which he simply labels “Philoponos-1” and “Philoponos-2”, explicitly refraining from any attempt to assign the works from either group to a period in Philoponos' life. The group “Philoponos-1” contains works that show traces of Neoplatonic views, especially those taught in the Alexandrian school, while works belonging to “Philoponos-2” are clearly Christian in character.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Verrycken 2010, with bibliography on pp. 1143–1147. On Philoponos' Byzantine legacy, cf. Bydén 2012, esp. 82–85.

<sup>16</sup> Parry 2006b, 224.

<sup>17</sup> On the use of the *Enneads* of Plotinos in John of Scythopolis' scholia to the *Corpus dionysiacum*, cf. O'Meara 1992b, 56. Cf. also Podolak 2007, Rorem and J. C. Lamoreaux 1998b, Frank 1987, Beierwaltes 1972a and Beierwaltes and Kannicht 1968.

of his times.<sup>18</sup> Within this “synthesis” Maximus found a place for some central Neoplatonic concepts<sup>19</sup> that were familiar to him mostly but not exclusively through the mediation of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite,<sup>20</sup> by adapting Neoplatonic concepts to the exigencies of his own, Christian perspective.<sup>21</sup>

John of Damaskos (ca. 650 – after 754) was born to an influential Arabo-Christian family, the Mansur, whose members had held important posts in the financial administration under the Umayyad dynasty. He lived his entire life outside the political boundaries of the Byzantine empire, but, as a Christian, took an active part in the religious and intellectual life of Byzantium. The first half of the 7th century was a turbulent period in Byzantine history. Arab invasions, the constant Bulgarian menace, internal political disruptions such as the revolt of Artabasdos, and, most importantly, the first phase of the conflict over the veneration of images (ca. 726 – 787) were some of the events that dominated the political and religious life of Byzantium. It is difficult to determine with precision which of his works were known in Byzantium during his lifetime. That his name was indeed well-known within the boundaries of the empire during this period is beyond any doubt. As a defender of veneration of religious images he was anathematized by the iconoclast Council of Hiereia in 754. The fact that an ecclesiastical council convened by the Emperor Constantine V directed this highest form of ecclesiastical censure at him can be taken as a reliable indication that at least some of his writings were not only read but also exercised significant influence during the time leading up to the council. John of Damaskos was certainly

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. von Balthasar 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Cvetković 2015 and Pereira 2011. For a reconstruction of the ways in which Maximus received and transformed Neoplatonic concepts within his own perspective cf. Gersh 1978b, 204–260.

<sup>20</sup> Louth 2008, 590 observes that “The attribution of the scholia on the Dionysian writings to Maximus once made it seem that Maximus had been a close student of Dionysius. However, the recent discovery (first by Hans Urs von Balthasar, and now confirmed by the research of Beate Suchla) that most of the scholia were compiled by John of Scythopolis [...] has changed the terms of the debate. [...] The influence of Dionysius on Maximus is, however, manifest, even if we discount the few scholia that may still belong to Maximus.” Cf. Tatakis 2003b, 65: “to Maximus belongs the honor of having introduced into Christian thought the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysios and, more importantly, his doing so without sacrificing the substance of Christianity, that is, its historical image”. On the relationship between Maximus and Ps.-Dionysios, cf. de Andia 2015, Louth 1993, Völker 1961, von Balthasar 1988, 110–122, Sherwood 1957.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Törönen 2007, 16. On the thorny question of the sources of Maximus Homologetes cf. Van Deun and Mueller-Jourdan 2015. In the conclusion of his study, Mueller-Jourdan 2005, 193 pointed towards “une certaine familiarité du Confesseur avec le vocabulaire et les idées de la tradition jamblichéenne telle qu’elle a été reformulée dans l’Ecole philosophique d’Athènes où dominant incontestablement les figures de Proclus, de Damascius et de Simplicius”, admitting that “la fréquentation des textes nous a souvent poussés à nous demander si la médiation du Corpus dionysien relativement bien admise ne devait pas être foncièrement révisée”.

acquainted with the Christian Neoplatonism of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite.<sup>22</sup> In his preface to the *Fountain of Knowledge*, John sets himself a threefold objective:<sup>23</sup>

(a) to set forth what is most excellent among the wise men of the Greeks, knowing that anything that is true has been given to human beings from God, [...] gather together what belongs to the truth and pick the fruits of salvation from the enemies, and reject everything that is evil and falsely called knowledge. (b) Then [...] set forth in order the chattering nonsense of the heresies [...], so that by recognizing what is false we may cleave the more to the truth. (c) Then, with the help of God and by his grace, set out the truth.<sup>24</sup>

In the first part of the *Fountain of Knowledge*, he introduces his readers to some fundamental logical concepts that had been elaborated by the pagan philosophers.<sup>25</sup> In this text he repeatedly contrasts the teachings of the “outer philosophers” with those of the Holy Fathers, rethinking the very same concepts in a Christian sense.<sup>26</sup> In the second part (*On Heresies*), he offers an exposition of the ancient heresies. In this context he identifies “Hellenism” as one of the four “mothers” of heresies and includes Platonists in the list of heresies that had sprung from it:

There are four mothers and archetypes of all heresies: first, Barbarism; second, Scythianism; third, Hellenism; fourth, Judaism from which all other [heresies] spring up. [...] Thereafter, Hellenism brought forward the heresies of later times, namely the heresies of the Pythagoreans, Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Accurate Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (the third part of the tripartite treatise *Fountain of Knowledge*), he presents in a systematic fashion the Christian view of the world, and, in order to achieve this goal, draws on Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite. Viewed as a whole, the writings of John of Damaskos, with their opposing tendencies of both assimilating and rejecting Neoplatonic views, illustrate the tension between Platonic heritage and Christian doctrines that is so characteristic of the entire history of Byzantine philosophy.

The end of Iconoclasm in 843 and the ascent to the Byzantine throne of Basil I, the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, in 867, following the assassination of his predecessor Michael III (842–867), mark the transition to a period of relative political stability that would continue for the major part of the Macedonian era (867–1056). Photios,

<sup>22</sup> Rorem 1993, 170–171; 215 and de Vogel 1985, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ierodiakonou and Zografidis 2010, 858.

<sup>24</sup> John of Damaskos, *Philosophical Chapters*, proemium 43–57; transl. Louth 2002, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Richter 1982, 76–80 for discussion of the collections of material on which John of Damaskos drew when composing his *Dialectics* and for an account of the relationship between, on the one hand, the *Dialectics* and, on the other, the Neoplatonic commentaries on the *Categories* of Aristotle and the *Eisagoge* of Porphyrios.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Richter 1982, 80 and John of Damaskos, *Dialectics*, 48, ed. Kotter. Cf. also Kontouma 2015, V, 3–5.

<sup>27</sup> John of Damaskos, *De haeresibus*, I, proem and 2, 21–3, 2, ed. Kotter.

the nephew of the patriarch Tarasios who had played a key-role in the abolition of the iconoclast policy in 843, at a young age already held a high position within the bureaucracy of the Byzantine capital. He participated in an embassy to the Arabs (in 838, 845 or 855) and held the office of *protoasekretis*, the chief of imperial chancery. Under Michael III, Photios was appointed patriarch. After his ascension to the throne, Basil I banished and condemned Photios with the help of an ecclesiastical council of 869/870. Later, following the death of Photios' rival Ignatios, Photios was restored to the patriarchal throne. In Basil's conflict with his son Leo VI, Photios sided with the father and so Basil's sudden death and Leo VI's accession in 886 put an end to Photios' career. Together with Arethas and Leo the Mathematician, Photios is commonly considered a representative of the "first Byzantine renaissance", that is to say, a period of Byzantine cultural history that witnessed a particular intensification of "contacts" with antiquity.<sup>28</sup> In addition to his famous *Bibliotheca*,<sup>29</sup> a description or survey of 386 books by both pagan and Christian authors which Photios and his circle of close friends and associates had read, Photios was also the author of the first Aristotelian commentary produced in a post-iconoclast Byzantium. It is found in the *Amphilochia*, a series of answers addressed to Amphilochios, the metropolitan of Kyzikos, which treat a number of philosophical and theological subjects. In questions 137–147,<sup>30</sup> Photios formulated criticism of the Aristotelian concept of substance.<sup>31</sup> This commentary

**28** A number of issues that need to be considered when applying the term "renaissance" to Byzantium are discussed in: Schreiner 1989, Treadgold 1984, Runciman 1970 and Heisenberg 1926.

**29** Cf. Treadgold 1980.

**30** On question 145 cf. Schamp 1996; on question 142, cf. Ierodiakonou 2005b; on question 138, cf. Anton 1994 and especially Bydén 2013.

**31** Cf. Bydén 2013, 15: "Especially, he contends (in sect. 5) that primary substances, i.e. individuals, and secondary substances, i.e. universals, did not obtain the name of Substance synonymously"; cf. Bydén 2013, 23: "His central argument seems to be that in order for all substances to belong to the same genus, they cannot, as Aristotle claims, have different degrees of substantiality. [...] Either, then, (a) all universals on all levels have to be put on a par with individuals, or (b) all universals on all levels have to be eliminated [...], or (c) the individuals plus all universals on all levels but one must be eliminated. But (a) is impossible, since individuals and universals on different levels are after all not equally expressive. In the choice between (b) and (c) it seems that Photios, on the authority of the Fathers, opts for (c)".

shows traces of the influence of Neoplatonic commentaries.<sup>32</sup> Some other questions show evidence of Photios' reception of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite.<sup>33</sup>

The end of the 9th and beginning of the 10th centuries witnessed the activities of Arethas, bishop of Caesarea, who was born in Patras towards the mid-9th century and died after 932. He commissioned a copy of Plato's works, which is preserved as Cod. bodl. gr. E. D. Clarke 39.<sup>34</sup> It is now the oldest extant manuscript, discounting papyrus fragments, for about half of the dialogues of Plato (*Tetral.* I–VI, comprising 24 dialogues). The once common opinion that it was Arethas who added scholia in a tiny uncial hand in the margins of this manuscript (*schol.* B<sup>1</sup>)<sup>35</sup> is no longer tenable.<sup>36</sup> He also compiled commentaries on the *Eisagoge* of Porphyrios and the *Categories* of Aristotle that demonstrate influence of Neoplatonic commentaries.<sup>37</sup> His commentary “shows clearly that Arethas was using Aristotle's text primarily to expound within its framework a Neoplatonist ontology”.<sup>38</sup>

Michael Psellos is a central figure in the history of Byzantine philosophy in general. He also played a particularly important role in the history of the reception of Neoplatonic philosophy in Byzantium. He was born in 1018 in Constantinople, received a traditional, that is predominantly literary, education (he was already studying grammar at the age of five and later learned rhetoric with the help of John Mauropous) and began at a relatively young age a career in the civil administration of the empire, in the course of which he served under eleven emperors and empresses and either played (or somewhat exaggeratedly claimed to have played) an important role at the court during the reigns of Constantine X, Romanos IV and Michael VII. In 1054 he was forced to resign and became a monk on Mt. Olympos. It was at this point in his life that he exchanged his baptismal name Constantine for the monastic name Michael. The date of his death (at any rate after 1076) remains disputed.<sup>39</sup>

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**32** On Photios' knowledge of philosophy and in particular his familiarity with pagan Neoplatonic philosophy, cf. Westerink 1986–1991, v. I, LXXVIII and Treadgold 1980, 8. Treadgold was able to recognize in the *Bibliotheca* traces of Photios' intense interest in philosophy. Christov, however, is skeptical regarding the claim of any interest in philosophy evinced in the *Bibliotheca* and points out that if philosophical interests can be discerned in the *Bibliotheca*, then it is an interest in Alexandrian Neoplatonism (Christov 2015, 301). However, Christov recognizes clear traces of Neoplatonic influence, and in particular that of Simplicios, in the Commentary on the *Categories* of Aristotle (Christov 2015, 302). On the transmission of philosophical texts in Byzantium during the 9th century cf. Martone 2008, 228–238; cf. also Westerink 1990, Dain 1954, Wilson 1996a. Cf. also the recent studies by Menchelli, e.g. Menchelli 2015.

**33** Cf. Alexopoulos 2014 and Christov 2015, 306.

**34** On this manuscript cf. Whittaker 1991, Irigoin 1985–1986, 154–156, des Places 1957, Bidez 1954, Gifford 1902, Burnet 1902.

**35** This is the siglum adopted in Cufalo 2007, XXXVIII.

**36** The arguments can be found in Luzzatto 2010, esp. 96ff.

**37** Cf. Anton 1997, 294.

**38** Anton 1997, 295. Anton's opinion is taken up in Matula 2011, 98.

**39** Cf. Kaldellis 2011, who rehearses the entire scholarly debate on this question.

Psellos was a polymath who bequeathed to posterity an enormous literary heritage. Scattered among more than 1500 manuscripts, his oeuvre comprises texts of almost every genre, including historiography, rhetoric, philosophy and law, as well as a collection of letters.<sup>40</sup> Psellos was an initiator and a driving force behind a cultural project of impressive dimensions.<sup>41</sup> His declared intent was to rediscover the treasures of Hellenic, that is pagan, culture and to find place for this rediscovered wisdom at the very heart of the Byzantine *paideia*. In 1047, or slightly earlier, Constantine IX made Psellos *hypatos ton philosophon*, literally a “consul of the philosophers”, that is to say a president over the teachers of philosophy or an overseer of philosophical education in Byzantium. This title was introduced for Michael Psellos; his most renowned successors included John Italos and Theodoros of Smyrna. It is against the background of Psellos’ implementation of this cultural and educational project that his interest in Neoplatonic sources must be viewed and evaluated. Psellos was an avid reader of Plotinos, Porphyry, Iamblichos, Syrianos, Proklos, Simplicios, John Philoponos and Olympiodoros.<sup>42</sup> He quoted extensively from the *Enneads*<sup>43</sup> and made compilations

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Moore 2005c for orientation in the primary and secondary material pertaining to Psellos.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. Duffy 2002a.

<sup>42</sup> On Psellos and Plotinos, cf. Westerink 1959 and F. F. Lauritzen 2014 (to be used with caution, see below note 43.); on Psellos and Proklos cf. in particular O’Meara 2014a; Cf. Parry 2006b, 228; Jenkins 2006a; Cacouros 2000a, 592–593; Benakis 1987a, 252–253; Chrestou 2005a and Chrestou 2005c. On Psellos and Iamblichos, cf. Sicherl 1960; on Psellos and Damaskios, Maltese 1987, 66. On Psellos and commentators on Aristotle, cf. e.g. Ierodiakonou 2002c.

<sup>43</sup> F. Lauritzen has recently examined a number of *opuscula* in which Psellos quotes extensively from Plotinos. In particular, he examines the famous *Op.* 33, in which Psellos addresses the much-debated and particularly thorny question of the ideas. F. Lauritzen is of the opinion that in this *Opusculum* Psellos distances himself from the conception of the ideas that had been elaborated in Middle Platonism, for example by Alkinoos. F. Lauritzen maintains that Psellos, against the idea of “Alcinous who claims that the ideas pre-exist the cosmos itself, and also pre-exist being itself” tries to advance “a neoplatonic view of the ideas as beings, and therefore acceptable both to the neoplatonists and the ecclesiastical authorities” (F. Lauritzen 2014, 61). *Op.* 33 does not in fact aim at a clarification of the question of whether or not the ideas are pre-existent with respect to the sensible cosmos. Neither does the pre-existence of the ideas with respect to the sensible cosmos imply the pre-existence of the ideas with respect to the “being itself”, given that one of the fundamental theses of Neoplatonism proclaims that there is a being that is proper to the ideas and that this being is much more original and authentic than the being of the sensible things. The problem that Psellos actually addresses in the *Opusculum* is an attempt to clarify the ontological standing of the ideas with respect to the Intellect / Demiurge: are they only thoughts of God? Or do they subsist by themselves and outside of the Demiurge? Psellos does make reference to Middle Platonism, but only insofar as he takes up the Middle-Platonic concept of ideas as thoughts of God (on this cf. Alkinoos, *Didaskalikos*, *Lehrbuch der Grundsätze Platons*, ed. by O.F. Summerell/Th. Zimmer, Berlin 2007, 23; cf. Ferrari 2011, 237). It is well known that Plotinos had travelled along and left behind him the path of those philosophers who understood ideas as thoughts of God (cf. Linguisti 2011, 248) and arrived at an original conception according to which 1) the Intellect does not think anything that is external to itself and precedes itself, but is what it is and thinks what is in it (cf. *Enn.* V 9, 5.14–16); 2) the object of its thought, i.e. every single idea, is itself Intellect (cf.



of excerpts from Proklos' works. Some of Proklos' works used by Psellos are still extant<sup>44</sup> and others are lost.<sup>45</sup> Even though Psellos was very interested in and had profound knowledge of Neoplatonic ideas, he frequently distances himself from them. On some occasions he points out the views that are unacceptable for a Christian, stressing the absolute authority of Christian doctrine. On other occasions, on the contrary, he insists on including references to pagan doctrines even when commenting on and explaining Christian texts and does not hide his own conviction that Hellenic doctrines contain grains of truth and that familiarity with these doctrines can advance the understanding of Christian truth. The attitudes Psellos reveals towards Neoplatonic sources inevitably bring up the question of how Psellos viewed, or, in more radical terms, how Psellos lived the relationship between pagan philosophy and Christian faith. Was Psellos a good Christian who resorted to a pagan and, more specifically, Neoplatonic heritage in order to uphold and advance Christian truth? Did he favour the synthesis of Hellenic wisdom and Christian faith without questioning the necessity of making Hellenic heritage subordinate to Christian orthodoxy<sup>46</sup> or was he a neo-pagan,<sup>47</sup> hiding behind apparent and openly professed Orthodox beliefs in order to spread dissent and disseminate Neoplatonic wisdom? These questions are not easy to answer. A more subtle and, in my view, more productive approach to Psellos as a philosopher should leave behind these rather crude alternatives "Was Psellos a true Christian or was he a [crypto-] neopagan?", and seek instead to understand the complexity of Psellos' attitude towards Neoplatonic philosophy, and to view his at-

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*Enn.* V 9, 8.3–4); 3) the ideas are not only thoughts of the Intellect (*Enn.* V 9, 7.14–18), in the sense that the Intellect "comes to think of the particular Ideas which first then and thereby come into existence. The Ideas are internal to it, as it were from the very beginning" (Emilsson 2007, 156, n. 23). As a number of scholars have already demonstrated, in *Op.* 33 Psellos, on the one hand, rehearses the thesis of the Middle Platonists according to which the ideas are thoughts of God (even though he specifies that making them ideas does not mean that they are conceived as non-constituted principles and without substantial existence (cf. *Michaelis Pselli philosophica minora*, vol. 2., Leipzig 1989, ed. D. O'Meara, 112,7–8). On the other hand, he proposes the Plotinian theory of identity between the Intellect and the ideas (113, 13–14), having compiled the third part of the *Opusculum* from *Enn.* V 9 (113, 22ff.; cf. Westerink 1959, 10; Benakis 2002, 412–413; cf. Lagarde 2002; del Campo Echevarría 2012, 204–213).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. O'Meara 2014a, Bidez 1905, O'Meara 2013.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Proklos' *Commentary on the Enneads* or his *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles* (cf. O'Meara 2014a, 169).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Maltese 1994a and F. Lauritzen 2010a.

<sup>47</sup> As Siniosoglou 2011, 71–85 portrayed him.

titude as a reflection of an ultimately unresolvable tension<sup>48</sup> between the heritage of antiquity and Christian faith that was predominant in Byzantium.

The relationship between Hellenic and, more specifically, Neoplatonic philosophy, on the one hand, and Christian Orthodoxy, on the other, became a major issue for Psellos' disciple John Italos, who faced trial for heresy. The entries in the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* that deal with his case create an image of John Italos accused of believing in the truth of Greek philosophy and of giving preference to Greek philosophy over Christian Orthodoxy, and even of denigrating Christian doctrines openly and deliberately. Furthermore, the accusations brought against him appear to be as follows: first, illicitly applying philosophical principles to the understanding of Christian dogma and, second, admitting as true the impious opinions of the Platonists concerning the soul and the universe, in particular the idea of the eternity of the universe and the view that matter, conceived as self-constituted and coeternal with the Demiurge, receives form from the ideas.<sup>49</sup> In his corpus of writings<sup>50</sup> we find indeed countless references not only to Aristotle, but also to Neoplatonic doctrines. The references to the Neoplatonists are fully integrated into John Italos' own argumentation. These references, however, do not necessarily imply that John Italos was an adherent of Neoplatonic philosophy, pursuing a subversive agenda of bringing pagan wisdom back to life to the detriment of Christian orthodoxy. Quite the contrary, John Italos frequently uses references to Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines within demonstrations of Christian theses<sup>51</sup> and on many occasions acknowledges the incompatibility of Christian

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**48** It is this unresolvable tension in Psellos' work that O'Meara 1998a, 439 has in mind, when he asks the following question: "Dans le traité n. 45, Psellus fait référence (p. 159,1) à des philosophes 'intermédiaires', c'est-à-dire des philosophes qui s'inspirent à la fois de la pensée grecque et de dogmes chrétiens. Psellus se distancie par rapport à de tels penseurs, se situant clairement du côté de la doctrine chrétienne. Mais ne pourrait-on pas le décrire comme étant lui-même plutôt un de ces philosophes 'intermédiaires' ?".

**49** Cf. Gouillard 1967, 56–61, 188–202. Gouillard 1967, 195 points out that "l'oeuvre d'Italos ne justifie pas ces imputations". Cf. also Gouillard 1985a.

**50** The *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, the main work of John Italos, is not only a collection of the answers that Italos provided to various questions formulated by important personages of the time or to particular *aporiai*, but it also contains drafts of lessons for his students and transcriptions of John's lessons made by those students, which makes it difficult to establish precisely where the personal doctrine of Italos begins and where a simple exposition or interpretation of the teachings of Greek philosophers ends. Cf. Stephanou 1949a, 81–85.

**51** In treatise 89, entitled "How should we understand what is said about matter, that it will suffice for the resurrected men", Italos aims at solving a difficulty connected with the idea of resurrection. In this passage Italos does not mention the name of Proklos, but merely refers to the *philosophoi* without further specification; nevertheless, he takes up the Proklean idea that matter derives from the first unlimitedness. He states: "one could be at loss about how it is possible that one and the same matter underlies a great number of forms not one time after the other but at one and the same time. In response to this one would say that even by the philosophers themselves matter is called 'something great and small' and, in addition, 'unlimited', because it is called by them 'begotten of the Father' and

doctrine and Platonic wisdom.<sup>52</sup> In some treatises he openly takes a position against the Ancients. For example, in treatise 92 of his *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, Italos characterizes as nonsensical the “Platonic” opinion that matter is something simple and incorporeal, ungenerated and incorruptible and coeternal with the Demiurge.<sup>53, 54</sup> John Italos even takes up the arguments whereby Proklos had confuted Plotinian identification of matter with evil and uses them to demonstrate that matter could not have been created by God directly.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, he uses references to principles of Proklean metaphysics in order to rule out that matter, which was conceived also by Proklos as something simple, could have been mediately created by God. Finally, he uses a reference to the Neoplatonic idea that matter is the uttermost being in order to demonstrate the weakness of the last option, namely that matter is generated by itself (for if this had been the case, matter would have been the first being and not the last, as he argued). In this way Italos, taking as his point of departure the principles of Neoplatonic philosophy and using the arguments of some Neoplatonic philosophers

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‘not produced by some other causes’; for the unlimited thence derives from the first unlimitedness. Because it is unlimited and belongs to the first unlimitedness, it is obvious that it is not impossible for it to underlie unlimited [forms]; if this is so, then it is not impossible for it to underlie finite [forms] as well; and the unlimited is dissolved and we will face no difficulty” (Ital. q. 89 CK 216.37–217–6). When Italos speaks of matter as “begotten of the Father”, he clearly refers to Psellos’ teachings on the Chaldean Oracles and to the monistic cosmology of the Oracles themselves (cf. Michael Psell. ὑποτύπωσις κεφαλαιώδης τῶν παρὰ Χαλδαίοις ἀρχαίων δογμάτων, in *Opuscula psychologica, theologica, daemonologica*, ed. D. O’Meara, p. 151.9: “ἡ μὲν ὕλη πατρογενής ἐστὶ” (cf. S. Lanzi (ed.), *Michele Psello. Oracoli Caldaici*, Milano 2001, p. 66f.). Cf. R. Majercik (ed.), *The Chaldean Oracles. Text. Translation and Commentary*, Leiden 1989, fr. 34, p. 61). In treatise 71, Italos describes matter as “something changeable and flowing and the primary evil, as some think, and poverty and truly privation”; here Italos combines the Plotinian doctrine of matter as primary evil and truly privation (cf. Plot., *Enn.* II 4,14; *Enn.* I 8,14) with the idea of matter’s mutability and instability and even corruptibility, and so he concludes that, since matter is changing and fluid and corruptible, also the form of the universe, inasmuch as it is enmattered, cannot be exempt from the process of corruption that concerns matter: “Because the form of the universe is also enmattered, which always perishes and is moved in all kinds of ways, as has been said, why is it not unreasonable to think that matter is subject to corruption and the universe, which is in matter/enmattered, instead persists?” (Ital. q. 71; CK 194. 15–28). Thus Italos integrated the reference to Plotinos’ doctrines into his own argumentation, which aims at demonstrating Christian theses (i.e. the corruptibility of the world). It is worth noting that according to Plotinos matter is primary evil and truly privation, but it does not change and cannot be corrupted; for Plotinos matter is “a tendency towards substantial existence; it is static, without being stable [...] a phantom which does not remain and cannot get away either” (*Enn.* III 6, 7.13–18), but, insofar as it is matter, it cannot be altered (cf. Plot., *Enn.* III 6,10 and II 5,5) and it is incorruptible (cf. Plot., *Enn.* III 6, 8).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gouillard 1976a, 313, note 64. The views of Gouillard have been recently taken up by Michele Trizio (cf. Trizio 2014a, 190).

<sup>53</sup> The anathema was pronounced because such a conviction implies contradiction of “the free will of God who has brought into being all things out of nothing and as creator has freely and sovereignly established for all things the beginning and the end” (Gouillard 1967, 59.220–224).

<sup>54</sup> Ital. q. 92 CK 227.17–30.

<sup>55</sup> Trizio 2014d.

against others, demonstrates that matter as it was conceived by Plotinos and Proklos does not exist.<sup>56</sup> He considers various definitions of matter provided by the ancient philosophers and proceeds to examine the implications of each one of them in order to demonstrate that they are all untenable and that matter – the way the Greeks speak of it – does not exist, being merely a groundless phantasy.<sup>57</sup> In treatise 93, John Italos takes as his point of departure the definitions of nature provided by Aristotle (namely, nature as the immanent principle of movement and rest) and by the Platonic philosophers (namely, the idea of nature as the last demiurge, as uttermost life and as an instrument of God) and shows how these definitions lead to absurd consequences. In the end, he proposes a definition of nature that was given by the Fathers of the Church and asserts its validity. It is, of course, far from certain whether this *opusculum* of John Italos is indeed representative of his philosophical views and not merely a school exercise. And yet this question applies to the entire corpus of John Italos' writings, given the numerous ambiguities it presents.

This ambiguous attitude towards the Neoplatonic heritage was further exacerbated in the works of John Italos' disciple Eustratios of Nikaia, who also faced an accusation of heresy. In his theological writings, in particular those that treat Christological questions, he makes use of Neoplatonic doctrines. In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he also makes frequent references to Proklos<sup>58</sup> and even in a certain sense identifies with Proklos' thought, presenting as his own points of view some Proklean doctrines.<sup>59</sup> The doctrines of the Neoplatonic philosophers (not only Proklos,<sup>60</sup> but also Plotinos<sup>61</sup> and probably Damaskios) clearly influenced the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* written by Michael of Ephesos. Echoes of Neoplatonic doctrines are also discernible in the text of the *Epitome* written by Theodoros of Smyrna, another bearer of the title "consul of the philosophers".<sup>62</sup> The widespread interest in Neoplatonic, and specifically Proklean, philosophy during this period<sup>63</sup> also encompasses the resentment towards these doctrines that pervades

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<sup>56</sup> Trizio 2014a, 187.

<sup>57</sup> Ital. q. 92, CK 228.26–27. Cf. Ioannou 1956, 72–73.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Steel 2002a, 53.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Trizio 2014a, 197: "Most Proklean doctrines discussed in Eustratios' commentary on book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – and presented by him as Platonic – are reiterated as Eustratios' own views in his commentary on book VI of the same work". Cf. Trizio 2009a.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Steel 2002a, 55–56.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Steel 2002a, 54. Cf. also Mariev 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Theodoros makes reference to e.g. a classic distinction between the "causes properly so called" and "by-causes", even if he makes this distinction "anonymously and as a commonly accepted view in antiquity" (cf. Trizio 2012, 85).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Podskalsky 1976b, 509. Cacouros 2000a, 594 rightly pointed out that these texts are reflective of a more widespread interest in Proklean philosophy, which is in turn part of a larger framework of a dispute about the relationship between theology and philosophy.

the *Refutatio* of Nicholas of Methone.<sup>64</sup> This work was motivated by Nicholas of Methone's preoccupation with the fascination that Neoplatonic philosophy exercised over his contemporaries and by his desire to lead them back to the simplicity of the true faith.<sup>65</sup> By examining the propositions of the *Elementatio theologica* one by one, Nicholas aims to identify in every one of them those teachings that contravene Christian doctrines and thus to expose the deception that – in his view – was lurking behind the fascinating complexity and pernicious refinement of Proklean thought.<sup>66</sup> In this way, his treatise becomes a harsh critique of Proklos.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Isaak Sebastokrator (11th century), whose treatise *On providence* was a compilation of Proklean texts into which he interpolated material from the Christian theologians Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite and Maximos Homologetes<sup>68</sup> in order to dissimulate the true origin of his work and to “christianize” Proklos, Nicholas of Methone contrasted Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite with Proklos and used Ps.-Dionysios to rectify Proklos' supposed “deviation”.<sup>69</sup> Nicholas also postulated a relationship between the philosophy of Proklos and some Christian heresies.<sup>70</sup>

During the 13th and 14th centuries, after the watershed in Byzantine history created by the trauma, as Byzantines viewed it, of the capture of Constantinople by the Latins, Neoplatonic philosophy continued to exercise significant influence. Nikephoros Blemmydes (1197–1272) was the author of an *Epitome Physica* that shows the influence of Simplicios.<sup>71</sup> Blemmydes copied entire passages from Simplicios' *Commentary on the Physics*, slightly modifying them and making some attempts to free them from pagan implications.<sup>72</sup> In the end, he successfully adopted a number of Neoplatonic theses (for instance, the idea of nature as an instrumental cause).<sup>73</sup> George Akropolites, who was a disciple of Nikephoros Blemmydes, admitted that he had sufficiently understood some passages of Gregory of Nazianzos

64 Cf. Trizio 2014a, 202–203 and the contribution of Joshua Robinson in the present volume.

65 Cf. Angelou 1984d, LVIII.

66 Cf. Nicholas of Methone, *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, ed., with intro. by A.D. Angelou, Athens/Leiden 1984, 1.15–2.12.

67 Cf. Niarchos 1983–1984; Niarchos 1985; Terezis 1995; Terezis 1997; Tempelis 1999.

68 Cf. Steel 1982. On the identification of this Isaak with the brother of Alexios I cf. Steel 1982, 373. On the identity of Isaak cf. Steel and Opsomer 2003, 48.

69 Nicholas of Methone considered Ps.-Dionysios to be the teacher and not the pupil of Proklos. According to Nicholas, Proklos had departed from the teachings of Dionysios and corrupted them. As shown by Alexidze 2002a, 117, Nicholas frequently contrasts Proklos with Dionysios in a forced and groundless way, i.e. in those cases where similarities between the two philosophers prevail over the differences.

70 Cf. the contribution of Joshua Robinson in the present volume.

71 Cf. Golitsis 2007. On Blemmydes' life and works cf. Stavrou 2007. On the influence of the *Dialectica* of John of Damaskos on the *Epitome Logica* cf. Conticello 1996.

72 Golitsis 2007, 244 and 254–255.

73 Cf. Golitsis 2007, 250.

only after having studied Plato, Proklos, Iamblichos and Plotinos.<sup>74</sup> It was George Pachymeres (1242–1307), however, who demonstrated profound interest in Proklos, whom he studied very intensively during the years 1280–1300.<sup>75</sup> He made a copy of Proklos' *Commentary on the Parmenides* that was “actually an edition of Proclus' commentary, comprising many corrections, philological conjectures and philosophical interventions”.<sup>76</sup> An important place in Byzantine reception of the Neoplatonic heritage belongs undoubtedly to Nikephoros Chumnos (1261–1327), who wrote, *inter alia*, a polemic essay against Plotinos (“On the soul, against Plotinos”).<sup>77</sup> In this treatise he criticizes in particular two Platonic, and more specifically Plotinian, ideas, namely the pre-existence of souls<sup>78</sup> and metempsychosis. Chumnos took up a number of theses that had been formulated by Gregory of Nyssa and demonstrated that, contrary to Plotinos, the soul is not pre-existent with respect to the body, does not descend into the body and does not transmigrate from one body into another. Against the idea of the pre-existence of the soul and its descent into the body, Chumnos argues in favour of the Christian idea of the simultaneous creation of the soul and the body. Against the idea of metempsychosis, Chumnos maintains that the soul does not transmigrate from one body into another, but is connected to the body that came into being with it and desires to return to that body after the body dies and the soul is left by itself.<sup>79</sup> As Gregory of Nyssa had previously asserted, Chumnos also maintained that an indissoluble bond ties the soul to its body and that this bond cannot be broken

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Georgii Acropolitae *In Gregorii Nazianzeni Sententias*, in *Opera*, II, Leipzig 1903, 71, 1–13.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Cacouros 2000a, 596. Cacouros suggests that interest in Proklos among the Byzantines during the period after the reconquest of Constantinople from the Latins in 1261, as manifest in the writings of Pachymeres, “est dû au fait que, déjà dans l'empire de Nicée, l'*Hypotypôsis* de Proclus avait été introduite dans le cursus des études astronomiques relevant du *quadrivium*. Ce bref texte a dû servir de ‘passeport’ pour l'œuvre philosophique de Proclus sous les Paléologues” (Cacouros 2000a, 626). It is worth noting that George Pachymeres produced a paraphrase of the Ps.-Dionysian corpus. Cf. Aubineau 1971; Rigo 1997, 519.

<sup>76</sup> Steel and Macé 2006a, 77.

<sup>77</sup> An overview of its content is found in Benakis 1997.

<sup>78</sup> At the same time, Chumnos harshly criticizes the theory of anamnesis that Plotinos had used to corroborate his theses of the pre-existence of souls with respect to bodies. Chumnos denies that the soul according to the intellect has a perfect knowledge *before* it descends into the body, and he maintains that the soul is generated together with the body and is provided with perfect knowledge from the very beginning of its constitution. The soul, which is joined with the organic body from the beginning, is perfect in itself and possesses perfect knowledge, but requires equally perfect organs in order to unfold its own faculties in conjunction with the body and its activities in the sciences. Cf. Bydén 2003, 338: “his own view posits innate complete knowledge implanted by the Creator, which, although not forgotten, is in the cases of some branches of knowledge (*inter alia* natural philosophy, no doubt) obscured to the intellect and only clarified by the help of the organs of the soul (the four lower soul faculties)”.

<sup>79</sup> To be more precise, he conceives the intellectual nature as twofold: on the one hand, there is a soul that subsists only by itself and does not tend toward a union with the body; on the other, there is a soul naturally united with the body that does not desire to separate itself from it, to the extent

and on the account of it the soul, once it is freed from the body that was born with it, tends to return to the body which it had to abandon.<sup>80</sup> Nikephoros Chumnos was involved in a harsh dispute with Theodoros Metochites, who had been his friend but later became his rival and even antagonist. Their dispute revolved around questions of literary style, astronomy and, in particular, the superiority of astronomy over physics. As demonstrated by Ševčenko,<sup>81</sup> and more recently by Bydén,<sup>82</sup> Theodoros Metochites made use of the *De communi mathematica scientia* of Iamblichos both in his *Logoi* 13 and 14 (directed against Nikephoros Chumnos) and in his *Stoicheiosis astronomike*. Polemis has recently argued in his edition of Metochites' *Carmen* 10 that in this text Metochites also used some additional Neoplatonic material and in particular Proklos.<sup>83</sup> What is important, however, is that Theodoros Metochites not only made use of the texts written by Iamblichos and Proklos, but also seems to adhere in his conception of the mathematical entities to their projectionist point of view.<sup>84</sup>

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that, once it becomes separated from the body, it tends to return to that body which it had to abandon, which means that the resuscitated body is identical with the earthly body.

**80** Cf. Greg. Nyss. *De an. et resurr.* 76.46–77.23. On Chumnos' debt to Gregory of Nyssa cf. Amato and Ramelli 2006, 29–30: “la polemica stessa sviluppata da Cumno contro Plotino e la dottrina della preesistenza delle anime e della loro trasmigrazione di corpo in corpo era già ben presente ed esplicita nel *De anima et resurrectione* del Nisseno, opera che Niceforo mi sembra conoscere bene e alla quale pare alludere”.

**81** Ševčenko 1962, 68–87.

**82** Bydén 2003, 342–344.

**83** I. Polemis 2006, 190: “However, Iamblichus is not the only source of Metochites. In all probability, Metochites also made use of Proclus, for he quotes a passage from an unspecified work of Aristotle dealing with the level of accuracy encountered in various sciences, which is also quoted by Iamblichus anonymously. The same passage is to be found in Proclus's commentary on the *Elements* of Euclid, explicitly attributed to Aristotle. The fact that Metochites drew this passage from Proclus is demonstrated by the fact that the introductory phrase of the quotation, which is common in both Proclus and Metochites, is absent from the treatise of Iamblichus”. Polemis repeats these arguments in his recent edition of the *Carmina* (cf. Theodori Metochitae *Carmina*, edidit I. Polemis [Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca 83], Turnout 2015, XCIX).

**84** Bydén 2003, 291 was of the opinion that Metochites “is concerned to emphasize the separability of mathematical objects from sensible ones, but he does not ascribe to the former an absolutely separate mode of being”. Bydén 2003, 295 stressed Metochites' adherence to the abstractionist point of view: “In spite of Metochites' emphasis on the separability of mathematical objects, the abstractionist point of view is in fact consistently upheld throughout *Stoicheiosis* 1:2–5”. I. Polemis 2006, 191, noted, *contra* Bydén, that “Bydén's is surely refuted by some passages in Poem 10, where it is affirmed that mathematical objects come before matter, though they sometimes give the impression of coming after it”. Bydén 2011, 1268 has recently modified his position, “In his *Poem 10 (On Mathematics)*, he describes mathematical objects as being only apparently the products of abstraction from sensibles, and actually unconsciously preexisting in reason (or ‘mind’), in a way that suggests that he aligned himself with the ‘projectionism’ of Iamblichus and Proclus.” On the difference between the projectionist and the abstractionist point of view cf. Bydén 2003, 293 ff.

Nikephoros Gregoras (1260–1358/61),<sup>85</sup> a pupil of Theodoros Metochites, is remembered in the history of Byzantium not only as the author of the voluminous *Historia Rhomaike* and a staunch leader of the anti-Palamite movement, but also for his polemics against Barlaam of Calabria. Shortly after the deposition of the Emperor Andronikos II by his grandson Andronikos III, Theodoros Metochites and Nikephoros Gregoras fell out of favour on account of their close ties to the deposed emperor. After the death of Theodoros Metochites, Nikephoros Gregoras made several attempts to return to play an active role in the intellectual life of the Byzantine capital. It was with this objective that he composed his famous dialogue *Phlorentios or about Wisdom*. In this dialogue Nikephoros Gregoras criticized a number of Aristotelian points of view, which a certain Xenophanes, an avatar of Barlaam of Calabria in the fictional setting of the dialogue, supposedly defended. The fictional debate between Xenophanes, that is Barlaam of Calabria, and Nikagoras, the literary persona of Nikephoros Gregoras himself, concerns not only questions of natural philosophy, but also of logic. With regard to Aristotelian logic,<sup>86</sup> Gregoras demonstrated that neither the dialectical nor the scientific syllogisms constitute science. In his opinion, the syllogistic *technē* is not a science at all, but merely a pedagogical instrument for the use of those who are by nature incapable of beginning from what is first. Importantly, in formulating his criticism Gregoras used some theoretical elements taken from Plotinos and even made verbatim quotations from the Plotinian treatise *On Dialectics*.<sup>87</sup> Gregoras' interest in ancient Platonism<sup>88</sup> is also evident in his *Explicatio in librum Synesii De insomniis*. As Bydén has pointed out, the *De insomniis* "is consistently treated as the work of a pagan Platonist", while "Gregoras is careful to point out [...] which of Synesius' views are distinctly pagan, but never descends to polemic or apologetics".<sup>89</sup> In a passage

<sup>85</sup> On his life and the problems of dating cf. Beyer 1978.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ierodiakonou 2011b, 696, "during the first half of the fourteenth century, Nikephoros Gregoras argued that logical studies should be altogether dismissed and logical theory should be regarded as completely useless. His contemporaries, however, Barlaam of Calabria and George Palamas, claimed that logic is indeed useful in defending Christian belief, but they disagreed between them as to its precise use".

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Mariev 2016. On the subject of Plotinian influence on Gregoras cf. Guiland 1926, 204; Ierodiakonou 2002d, 222–224. Gregoras cites a number of Plotinian passages in his letters, cf. Nicephori Gregorae epistulae, edidit Petrus Aloisius M. Leone; accedunt epistulae ad Gregoram missae Martino, 1982, Vol. II, 22.74–80; 23.91–95; 96–106; and in his *Historia Rhomaike*, ed. L. Schopen, Bonn: 1830, 1088,1–1089,4; 1090,12–16; 1090, 16–18; 1090, 18–20; 1092, 11–14; 1092, 14–17; 1092, 17–19; 1092,19–1093,9.

<sup>88</sup> Bydén 2014a, 169 points out that "some of Synesius' philosophical views were bound to strike a chord with men like Metochites and Gregoras, who both had a strong predilection for late antique Platonism – as did many other Byzantine intellectuals from Michael Psellos to George Gemistos Plethon".

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Bydén 2014a, 173. Bydén observes that Gregoras inserts examples and parallels from the Bible "for many of the views and practices referred by Synesius" in order "to placate suspicious Christian minds" (p. 173). In some places, Gregoras "tends to play down some of the apparent differences between these views and practices and those adhered to by Gregoras' contemporaries" (p. 173).



of his *Historia Rhomaïke*,<sup>90</sup> Gregoras attacks Gregory Palamas, his intellectual adversary against whom he fought during the entire second half of his life, and in particular Palamas' *distinctio realis* between God's "essence" and "energies". In his criticism of Palamas, Gregoras highlighted a subtle and yet undeniable theoretical proximity between Palamas and Proklos, suggesting that Palamas had merely appropriated Proklean teachings according to which the unparticipated (ἀμέθεκτον) precedes the participated (μετεχόμενον), and the participated precedes the participant (μετέχον), that is to say the doctrine that the henads, which are above being but are capable of being participated, function as mediating entities between the participant entities and the unparticipated One.<sup>91</sup> Gregoras' observation should obviously be read with extreme caution. However, it is important to understand that not only do some of Palamas' theses point towards what can be characterized as "unconscious" Neoplatonism,<sup>92</sup> but, as Demetracopoulos maintains, Palamas also quite consciously adopted some typically Neoplatonic, and more specifically Proklean,<sup>93</sup> theoretical elements. It is probable that he did so because he thought that Proklos was a quasi-Christian author, whose authority derives from the indisputable authority of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite.<sup>94</sup> The influence of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite on Palamas has been extensively studied and is universally recognized. The details are much disputed, especially with respect to Meyendorff's thesis that Palamas "corrected" Ps.-Dionysios,<sup>95</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Nicephori Gregorae, *Byzantina Historia* XXIII, ed. L. Schopen, Bonn 1830, 1100.10–1101.11. Cf. Procl. *El. Th.* § 24 Dodds. Cf. Demetracopoulos 2011b, 898: "He likewise attacked Palamas' *distinctio realis* between God's 'essence' and 'energies' as being just a Christian adjustment of Proclus' metaphysical doctrine of 'henads'".

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Demetracopoulos 2011c, 277: "As Gregory Acindynos and Nicephoros Gregoras (1293–1361) noticed in Palamas' own time, Palamas' explicit distinction between 'lower deity' and 'God's transcendental essence' as well as his plural use of θεότης is redolent of Proclus' metaphysical tenet that each level of the hierarchical structure of beings derives its ontological grade from its essence, whereas it produces the lower level by granting, in terms of its superior, existence, substance, qualities, and energy to its inferior." With regard to Gregoras' criticism, Demetracopoulos 2011c, 278 remarks that "the passages they invoked do not correspond with concrete passages in any of Palamas' writings. Still, the Palamite terms 'lower deity' or 'deities' and 'God's transcendental essence' do appear in Proclus' writings, and are used by Palamas in a non-Dionysian, if not anti-Dionysian, way."

<sup>92</sup> von Ivánka 1964.

<sup>93</sup> Demetracopoulos 2011c, 278 and 356.

<sup>94</sup> Demetracopoulos 2011c, 356, n. 293 remarks: "Palamas, just like Barlaam the Calabrian and many other Late Byzantine thinkers, allowed themselves to draw freely upon Proclus because they believed him to be a semi-Christian or sympathetic to Christianity, inasmuch as he had heavily drawn on what they thought was the literary production of Paul's disciple, Dionysius the Areopagite".

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Meyendorff 1959. Ritter 1997, 579 accepts Meyendorff's thesis as incontestable. This hypothesis was characterized as a "mere illusion" by Golitzin 2007, 86. Louth 2008, 597 stresses that "it is not clear, however, that this [the correction] is necessary, for Dionysius's understanding of hierarchy does not interpose the hierarchies between God and humankind, with ascent to God entailing ascent through the hierarchies".

with a view to neutralizing Neoplatonic tendencies discernible in his writings.<sup>96</sup> The corpus of Ps.-Dionysios also played an important role in the dispute between Palamas and Barlaam,<sup>97</sup> influencing the way in which each of them assimilated Proklean theoretical elements.<sup>98</sup>

The last century in the history of Byzantine philosophy was dominated by the figure of Georgios Gemistos (Plethon). Much has been written about his fascinating biography,<sup>99</sup> and about the fate of his main philosophical work, the *Laws*, which was burned by his intellectual adversary Georgios (Gennadios) Scholarios,<sup>100</sup> and this story need not be rehearsed here in detail. Plethon is rightly considered “the fountain-head for the Neoplatonic revival of the later Quattrocento”.<sup>101</sup> He was convinced that the salvation of the Byzantines depended on the success of a political and spiritual renewal and argued in favour of a return to the roots of Hellenic greatness.<sup>102</sup> Accordingly, he became an active promoter of a religious system that closely resembled, at least in some aspects, Hellenic Platonism. The pantheon that he developed in the *Laws* shows clear analogies with Proklean theology. And yet, his attitude towards Neoplatonism and especially the Neoplatonic doctrines of Proklos<sup>103</sup> is not merely receptive. On the one hand, Plethon did adopt and reformulate within his own theoretical framework a number of important elements of Proklos’ metaphysics. On the other hand, the

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Knežević 2015, in particular the discussion of Meyendorff’s thesis on pp. 376–377.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Rigo 1997, 524ff.

<sup>98</sup> Demetracopoulos 2011a, 142 maintains that “The close affinities of this *corpus* [the corpus Dionysiacum] with Proclus made Barlaam feel free to integrate into his writings numerous terms and doctrines from several Proclean works (*Elements of Theology*, *Platonic Theology*, *Commentaries on Alcibiades*, *Parmenides*, *Timaeus et al.*) and eclectically combine them with Christianity. Barlaam did the same with Plato’s texts (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, *Republic*) as well as with those by many other Neoplatonists (Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Olympiodorus), along with some Byzantine Neoplatonizing authors (Michael Psellos, Michael of Ephesus, Eustratios of Nicaea).” On the sources of Barlaam, cf. also Demetracopoulos 2003, 83–122. Quite predictably Siniosoglou tries to style Barlaam also as a “crypto-pagan”. Siniosoglou’s position was effectively criticised by Kappes 2013, in particular on Barlaam, 211–213.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Woodhouse 1986b and Masai 1956b.

<sup>100</sup> Monfasani 2006.

<sup>101</sup> Hankins 1990b, 194.

<sup>102</sup> On the specific meaning of the word “Hellenic” during the last two Byzantine centuries and especially during Plethon’s lifetime, cf. Page 2008.

<sup>103</sup> As Gersh has recently pointed out, the affirmations made by Plethon’s adversary Gennadios Scholarios, who alleged that Plethon was merely repeating Proklean views (cf. Georg. Schol. *Letter to Exarch Joseph*, in C. Alexandre (ed.), *Pléthon: Traité des Lois*, trans. A. Pellissier, Paris 1858, app. 424. 4–13), cannot serve as a reliable basis for the evaluation of Plethon’s actual reception of Proklos. However, there is evidence of Plethon’s reception of Proklos (cf. Plethon, *Letter to Bessarion* [19] and *Letter to Bessarion* [21], in L. Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann. Funde und Forschungen*, III, Paderborn 1923, 458–463 and 465–468; cf. Leg. III. 34, 168.21ff.; cf. the passages analyzed in Gersh 2014a).

theoretical distance between him and Proklos is difficult to overlook.<sup>104</sup> Scholars continue to debate the status of the first principle within Plethon's theoretical system, that is to say the question of its transcendence and independency. This question is closely related to another controversial issue, namely the problem of Plethonian rejection of the Neoplatonic negative theology. A number of scholars stress that Plethon does not accept the negative approach to the first principle,<sup>105</sup> thus clearly distancing himself from Neoplatonism. Other scholars point towards some other works of Plethon that clearly demonstrate his adherence to the negative theology.<sup>106</sup> An even more interesting question concerns the motives that could have induced Plethon to reject some Prokleian theoretical elements. Gersh has recently suggested that Plethon's oscillating attitude between assimilation and refutation should be traced back to his desire to "to excavate a Platonism that is free of later Christian accretions".<sup>107</sup> Whatever Plethon's personal *credo* and his personal attitude towards Christianity – Tatakis spoke of "Plethon's indifference"<sup>108</sup> towards Christianity; Hankins believed that even though Plethon "surely rejected dogmatic and institutional Christianity",<sup>109</sup> he did not reject Christianity *per se*, while Carabă described Plethon as an "enemy of the Christian doctrine"<sup>110</sup> – it is still true that Plethonian theology (as set out in the *Laws*) contains theoretical elements that are irreconcilable with Christian doctrine (such as absolute and indivisible unity of the first principle, universal determinism, the complete eternity, both *a parte post* and *a parte ante* of the universe and of the soul, and metempsychosis).<sup>111</sup>

In the spring of 1439 Plethon finished his *De differentiis*, a work of immense importance in which he mounted a violent attack on Aristotle, demonstrating the superiority

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**104** Gersh 2014a, 218 observes that "the Byzantine thinker's approach varies between the extremes of following Proclus on a precise textual level and of either ignoring his views or contradicting them explicitly". Tambrun had already highlighted not only similarities, but also a number of important disagreements between Plethon and Proklos (cf. Tambrun 2006a, 153–168). On the relationship between Plethon and Proklos cf. also Nikolaou 1982.

**105** Cf. Tambrun 2006a, 175–176: "En premier lieu [...] il exclut la thèse de base du néoplatonisme selon laquelle le premier principe – la première cause –, est l'Un (hen) qui n'est pas Être (on). Pléthon, au contraire, pose que le premier principe [...] est auto-être [...]. Deuxièmement, Pléthon n'accepte pas d'approche négative du premier principe".

**106** Cf. Gersh 2014a, 222–223. Hladký 2014, 75–77 provides a rather ambiguous interpretation of this issue (cf. Bydén 2014b, 297).

**107** Cf. Gersh 2014a, 218. Plethon's approach is based, according to Gersh, on two ideas about the history of philosophy, "first, that the 'Zoroastrian' oracles contain pre-Platonic doctrine copied by Platonists; second, that Proclus expounds a Platonism contaminated with Christian features derived from Dionysius the Areopagite" (p. 218).

**108** Tatakis 2003b, 241.

**109** Hankins 1990b, 202.

**110** Carabă 2010, 67.

**111** Carabă 2010, 68.

of Plato.<sup>112</sup> The composition of this treatise started a controversy over the respective merits of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy that continued both in the Byzantine East and in the Latin West for over thirty years.

Cardinal Bessarion (1408–1472), one of the most brilliant of Plethon’s disciples, promoted a very different view on the relationship between Plato and Aristotle to that his teacher had expounded in his *De differentiis*. In 1458 George of Trebizond published the treatise *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*, in which he attacked Plato and the Platonic doctrines by alleging that Platonic philosophy was irreconcilable with Christian doctrines and, viewed as a whole, amounted to nothing more than a muddle of monstrosities and depravities. Aristotelian philosophy, on the contrary, according to George of Trebizond, was not only perfectly compatible with Christian doctrines, but even contained some fundamental Christian theses *in nuce*. Bessarion wrote his major philosophical work, *In Calumniatorem Platonis (ICP)*, to confute George of Trebizond. In his response, Bessarion does not attempt to criticize, let alone to “calumniate” Aristotle. He adopted a completely different strategy. As Bessarion stressed on several occasions throughout his work, he held Plato and Aristotle in great esteem. Given that both philosophers were pagans and therefore unable to elevate themselves to the truth of the Christian faith, and even though some aspects of Platonic teaching are indeed irreconcilable with the teachings of Christianity, Platonic philosophy exhibits a greater affinity with Christian doctrines than does Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>113</sup> Bessarion demonstrated, on the one hand, that George of Trebizond, though he pretends to be an advocate of Aristotle, in reality does not understand Aristotle and as a consequence deviates from the interpretations of Aristotle that had been elaborated by the “holy teachers of the Church”.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, Bessarion stressed the high degree of correspondence between the opinions of Plato and those of the “holy teachers of the Church”, who frequently resorted to them and even explicitly expressed their approval of them.<sup>115</sup> Bessarion also sought to demonstrate that many aspects of Aristotelian thought are not in disaccord with Platonic philosophy. Aristotle wrote as a physicist who concentrates on natural entities. Plato wrote as a theologian who contemplates divine realities that are free from matter.<sup>116</sup> It becomes quite obvious at this point that when Bessarion adopts this strategy of reconciliation, his aim is not only to demonstrate that the contradictions between Plato and Aristotle are only apparent, but also to suggest the superiority of Plato over Aristotle

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**112** Demetracopoulos defends the thesis whereby “Plethon’s acquaintance with the Thomistic version of Aristotelianism probably explains why he did not follow the ‘soft’, compromising Neo-platonic line of trying to integrate Aristotle into a general Platonic outlook and preferred, instead, to demote him” (Demetracopoulos 2002, 169; cf. Demetracopoulos 2006).

**113** Cf. Bessarion, *ICP* II, 3.3.

**114** Cf. Bessarion, *ICP* III, 19.6.

**115** Cf. Bessarion, *ICP* II, 3.2.

**116** Cf. Bessarion, *ICP* I, 3.1.

in the realm of theology. To reach his objectives Bessarion made use of both Greek and Latin sources. In particular, in Book 3 of the *ICP* Bessarion made extensive use of Scholastic sources in order to demonstrate how ignorant his adversary George of Trebizond was not only of Aristotle, but also of Scholastic authors. The insertion of this third book into the *ICP* – which increased from three to four the total number of books containing a refutation of the three-book *Comparatio philosophorum*<sup>117</sup> – is one of the most important changes that Bessarion made during his composition of the *ICP*.<sup>118</sup> In the first redaction the presence of the Latin sources was less conspicuous.<sup>119</sup> Bessarion made extensive use of Greek and in particular of Neoplatonic sources, quoting and paraphrasing a number of passages from Simplicios' *Commentary on the Physics* and several of Proklos' works, such as the *Commentary on the Timaios* and *Platonic Theology*.<sup>120</sup> Bessarion closely relied on these sources in order to underline a number of similarities between Platonic and Christian doctrines. For instance, in the second book of the *ICP*, without mentioning Proklos by name, Bessarion quotes extensively from Proklos' digression on matter,<sup>121</sup> in order to substantiate his own thesis that Plato thinks of matter as something brought into being by God and not as a principle that is independent from God and coeternal with him, as George of Trebizond had alleged. The reference to the Proklean doctrine according to which matter proceeds from the

**117** The Latin edition of the *ICP*, as it appeared in print in 1469, contained six books. In addition to the four books containing a refutation of the three books of the *Comparatio philosophorum*, it contained Bessarion's criticism of George of Trebizond's translation of Plato's *Laws* (book 5) and Bessarion's *De Natura et Arte* (book 6). The *De Natura et Arte* had been written at the beginning of the dispute between George of Trebizond and Bessarion, namely at the time when Bessarion had already read George's defamatory pamphlet containing a refutation of a letter Bessarion had written to Theodoros Gazes, but had not yet had a chance to read George's *Comparatio*. Cf. Mariev 2013 and Mariev, Marchetto, and Luchner 2015, ix–ivx.

**118** Monfasani 2012a, 473.

**119** Cf. Monfasani 2012a, 472: "when Bessarion first came to write the *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, his sources were all Greek save for a small handful of classic Latin references and a single Latin patristic reference". It is important to note that already in the *De Natura et Arte*, i.e. at the very first stage of the debate between Bessarion and George of Trebizond, which can be securely dated to 1458, Bessarion resorted to Thomas Aquinas. Bessarion's actual source was the *Compendium* that he had brought with him from Byzantium to the West. This first reference to Thomas Aquinas in Bessarion remained undiscovered for a long time, leading a number of scholars, including John Monfasani, to believe that Bessarion did not make use of Aquinas until he began to work on the refutation of the *Comparatio* or even later. On the relationship between the Greek original of the *ICP* and the role of Niccolò Perotti in the process of correction of the Latin version of the *ICP* cf. Monfasani 1995; Monfasani 2012b.

**120** Cf. Monfasani 2012a, 472. On Bessarion's study of the *Platonic Theology* and on his notes in the Cod. Monac. gr. 547 cf. Hankins 1990a, 442; Saffrey 1960. Cf. also Macé, Steel, and D'Hoine 2009.

**121** Cf. Bessarion, *ICP* II 6, 11.6–20 (Mohler, p. 120.5–20). Cf. Prokl. In Tim. I 384, 22–385.9. In his digression on matter in the *Commentary on Timaios*, Proklos deals with the question of whether matter is created or uncreated. In this context he refers to the Platonic *Philebos* and uses this reference to support his own thesis that, according to Plato, matter proceeds from the One and the first Unlimitedness, which is prior to the One Being.

One and the First Unlimitedness is, in other words, used by Bessarion to suggest that there is a fundamental agreement between Platonism *tout court* and Christian doctrine, which in a similar way asserts that matter was created by God. Bessarion interprets Plato not only through the filter of pagan Neoplatonism, but also through the mediation of the Christian Neoplatonism of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite. An appeal to Ps.-Dionysios allows him to demonstrate that there is a “symbiosis” between Platonic teaching and Christian doctrine that manifests itself even in the very fact that Ps.-Dionysios, one of the most eminent Christian authorities, uses Platonic language when speaking of God.<sup>122</sup>

## Abbreviations

ICP	Bessarion, <i>In Calumniatorem Platonis Libri IV, textum graecum addita vetere versione latina</i> (Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann, Vol. 2), ed. L. Mohler. Quellen und Forschungen aus dem Gebiete der Geschichte, Görres-Gesellschaft, Vol. XXII. Paderborn 1927
PLRE	J. R. Martindale (1980). <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> . 2 vols. Cambridge

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Bessarion, ICP II 4, 1–3. Cf. Del Soldato 2014, XIV; Monfasani 2013, 353.