Yury Arzhanov Porphyry, On Principles and Matter

Scientia Graeco-Arabica

Herausgegeben von Marwan Rashed



Yury Arzhanov **Porphyry,** *On Principles and Matter*

A Syriac Version of a Lost Greek Text with an English Translation, Introduction, and Glossaries

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Preface

The Syriac treatise published in this volume is in many respects a unique text. Though it has been preserved anonymously, there remains little doubt that it belongs to Porphyry of Tyre. Accordingly, it enlarges our knowledge of the views of Plotinus' famous disciple. The text is an important witness to Platonist discussions of First Principles and of Plato's concept of Prime Matter in the *Timaeus*. It contains extensive quotations from Atticus, Severus, and Boethus, and thus provide us with new textual witnesses to these philosophers, whose legacy remains very limited. Additionally, the treatise is a rare example of a Platonist work preserved in the Syriac language. Syriac reception of Plato and Platonic teachings has left rather scant traces, and the question of what precisely Syriac Christians knew about Plato and his philosophy remains a debated issue. The treatise provides new evidence of the close acquaintance of Syriac scholars with Platonic cosmology and with philosophical commentaries on the *Timaeus*.

Before turning to the description of the Syriac text, some preliminary notes are necessary:

The author: The text has come down to us without the author's name. However, the latter calls himself a disciple of Longinus and Plotinus, and thus it is most probable that the treatise derives from Porphyry of Tyre. Comparison with extant fragments of Porphyry's writings leaves no doubt that the treatise goes back to Plotinus' disciple.

The title: The Syriac text has been preserved without title. The comparison with the extant evidence of, and about, Porphyry's writings does not allow one to identify with certainty the Syriac version as part of any known Greek work of this author. The treatise focuses on two topics: First Principles and Prime Matter evaluated in the light of Plato's *Timaeus*. Thus, in order to give an idea of the contents of this Syriac text, it is published as Porphyry's *On Principles and Matter* (abbreviated as *PM*).

The main aim of this book is the publication of the Syriac text, making it available for specialists in late ancient philosophy. Hence, it is not meant to provide an exhaustive commentary on the details of the text, but it does seek to establish the evidence necessary to demonstrate that the text belongs to Porphyry. It is hoped that with the release of this edition, the important work of elaborating multiple details within the text will be taken up by historians of philosophy and Porphyry scholars.

The structure of the Introduction reflects the main purpose of the book, i.e. the publication of the Syriac version of the treatise. The Introduction contains two parts, the first of which suggests a detailed description of the preserved text and tries to contextualize it within the history of Syriac literature. The second part gives an

overview of the contents of the treatise and lists its main arguments, allowing one to ascribe the Greek source to Porphyry with great certainty. The glossary at the end of the book is an attempt to reconstruct the terminology of the Greek original, which is based on the extant ancient Syriac translations from the Greek.

Transliteration: Syriac words are vocalized according to the East Syriac vocalization system, but long and short vowels remain undifferentiated.

Table of Contents

Introduction

- 1 The Syriac Text and its History 3
 - 1.1 Description by Timothy I (d. 823) 3
 - 1.2 Treatise in Ms. Dayr al-Suryan Syr. 27 (9th cent.) ---- 5
 - 1.3 Epitome by Barhebraeus (d. 1286) 10
 - 1.4 Natural Philosophy in Syriac Schools 14
 - 1.5 Time and Background of the Syriac Translation 26
- 2 The Treatise 38
 - 2.1 The Structure of the Text 38
 - 2.2 The Doxography (Part 1, §§1–16) 41
 - 2.3 Introductory Issues (Part 2, §§17–28) 47
 - 2.4 Definition of First Principles and Matter (Parts 3 and 4, §§29–67) — **51**
 - 2.5 Various Interpretations of Plato's *Timaeus* (Part 5, §§73-97) ---- 56
 - 2.5.1 Atticus 57
 - 2.5.2 Severus 61
 - 2.5.3 Longinus and Boethus 63
 - 2.6 Porphyry as the Author of the Treatise 66
- 3 Conclusion 79

Porphyry, On Principles and Matter: Syriac Text and English Translation ---- 81

Syriac and Greek Glossary — 125 Syriac Glossary — 128 Greek Glossary — 157 Proper Names — 164

Bibliography — 165

General Index — 179

References — 183

Introduction

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1 The Syriac Text and its History

1.1 Description by Timothy I (d. 823)

The earliest reference to the Syriac treatise *On Principles and Matter* (hereafter: *PM*) dates from the last decades of the eighth century AD. At that time, Timothy I, who had just assumed his position as the head of the Church of the East (East Syrian Catholicos-Patriarch between 780–823)¹, wrote a letter to Mar Pethion, the head of the school of the monastery of Mar Abraham at Bashosh near Mosul². Pethion died in 782/783, so that it must have been 781 or early 782 when Timothy wrote his letter, asking Pethion to do him a favor and to search for a number of books³.

The place where these books could have been found was not the East Syriac monastery of Mar Abraham where Pethion lived, but the West Syriac convent Mar Mattai, which was situated not far from Mosul and possessed a large library⁴. Timothy asked Pethion to make his inquiries concerning books secretly, for he supposed that, if his request became public, the Syrian Orthodox community would not be eager to share their book treasures with the head of the Church of the East.

Timothy's first years as Catholicos were marked by active scholarly work. Following the request of the caliph al-Mahdi, Timothy (who had received a solid training in the school of Pethion's predecessor, Abraham bar Dashandad⁵) started to translate Aristotle's *Topica* into Arabic⁶. The difficulties in understanding this Aristotelian

¹ For Timothy I, see especially Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*. See further Heimgartner, "Der ostsyrische Patriarch Timotheos I. (780–823) und der Aristotelismus".

² Letter 43 in the collection of letters of Timothy. The Syriac text has been preserved in ms. Baghdad, Chaldean Monastery 509 (dated to 1299), which served as the basis for a number of later copies; cf. Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Textedition*, vii–xii. The Syriac text of Letter 43 was published twice on the basis of the modern copies of the Baghdad codex: Braun, "Briefe", 4–11 (Syriac with a German transl.); Pognon, *Une version syriaque*, xvi–xx (Syriac with a French transl.). Sebastian Brock published an English translation of it: Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy", 235–237. The modern critical edition of the letter is: Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Textedition*, 65–68. German translation: Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Übersetzung*, 47–52.

³ For the date of the letter, see Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*, 50–62; Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Übersetzung*, li.

⁴ Cf. Berti, "Libri e biblioteche cristiane nell'Iraq".

⁵ Cf. Berti, Vita e studi di Timoteo I, 122–132.

⁶ Timothy writes that he worked together with the scholar Abu Nuh and that he himself translated only part of the text from Syriac into Arabic, while Abu Nuh finished the translation. Timothy's description of this project is not quite clear and it has caused various interpretations of it. Cf. Heimgartner, *Die Briefe* 42–58: *Übersetzung*, 47–48, n. 219.

work made Timothy ask Pethion to look for commentaries and scholia not only on the *Topica*, but also on other works of Aristotle (in the Syriac or Greek languages)⁷.

Additionally, among the works that attracted the attention of the Catholicos was one text, which Timothy described as follows⁸:

Further, search for the treatises on the natural principles of bodies, written by someone according to the Platonic teachings (*dogma platoniqos*), whose beginning is: "Concerning natural principles of bodies some said..." In the first part (*memra*), he (i.e. the author) lists the views of all the ancient philosophers and explains the Platonic (*platoniqo*)⁹ Ideas (*ideos*) and Forms (*tapnke*). In the second part (*memra*), he starts to speak about matter, species, and negation according to the Aristotelian teachings (*dogma aristoteliqos*). He makes ca. five chapters in it, but gives no conclusion to the treatise.

Timothy's account suggests that the version of the text known to him was anonymous, though it makes clear that the author of the treatise aimed to expound the Platonic views of the material, combining it with elements of Aristotelian philosophy. While presenting the main points of the text, Timothy uses several terms characteristic of Platonic philosophy: *ideos* = $\alpha i i\delta \epsilon \alpha i$; *tapnke* = $\tau \alpha \epsilon i \delta \eta$, thus stressing that they formed the core of the argument.

Concerning the form of the text, Timothy stated that the treatise was incomplete. Its beginning, which the Catholicos quoted verbatim, does not look like a usual introduction to a philosophical work, which would explain its aim and ascribe it to particular author. Similarly, as Timothy noted, the text did not contain a proper conclusion, so that it looked rather like a fragment, which, however, was large enough to include several parts (*memre*), one of which contained a number of chapters.

Since the first publication of Timothy's letter to Mar Pethion, scholars have failed to identify the text that attracted the interest of the Catholicos in 781/782, in spite of

⁷ Letter 43.5, see Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Textedition*, 66; Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Übersetzung*, 49–50.

⁹ For the Syriac waw (a) representing the Greek plural ending oi, see Butts, Language Change, 91, 99.

his detailed description of the treatise¹⁰. This situation changed in 2014, when Sebastian Brock and Lucas Van Rompay published a catalogue of Syriac manuscripts now preserved in the Egyptian monastery Dayr al-Suryan¹¹. The authors of the catalogue did not notice the similarity between one of the items in ms. 27 and the text refered to in Timothy's letter. However, their description of the codex included the *incipit* of a treatise, which coincided nearly verbatim with the quotation preserved in Timothy's Letter 43. Thanks to this description, it became possible for the present author to establish the connection between the two texts¹².

1.2 Treatise in Ms. Dayr al-Suryan Syr. 27 (9th cent.)

In 1951, the Coptic scholar Murad Kamil visited the "Monastery of the Syrians" (Dayr al-Suryan) in the Egyptian desert of Scetis, where the abbot showed him the Syriac manuscripts (34 in number) that were still preserved in the monastic library¹³. Kamil briefly studied the contents of the codices and described the results of his analysis in Arabic, in a hand-written catalogue, which remained unpublished. Around 1960, Kamil's text was translated into English by Piet B. Dirksen, whose work was also never published¹⁴. The codex containting *PM* was listed under number 29 in this catalogue and, according to Kamil, it combined two different manuscripts, which he dated to the seventh and the tenth centuries respectively.

The first published description of the codex containing *PM* appeared in 2014 in the afore-mentioned catalogue of Brock and Van Rompay, where ms. 29 of Kamil received the shelf-mark 27 (hereafter: ms. DS 27)¹⁵. Similar to Kamil, Lucas Van Rompay, who was mainly responsible for the description of ms. DS 27, distinguished two large parts in it, which he marked as A and B. Part A covers folios 1–94. It contains poetical works of Ephrem the Syrian, Isaac of Antioch, and Jacob of Sarug, and it may be dated as early as the sixth century. Part B covers the rest of the codex (fols. 95–127) and includes, in turn, remains from several other manuscripts.

Van Rompay identified five different "unrelated" manuscripts that formed Part B¹⁶. However, it is likely that this number should be reduced. There is no doubt that

¹⁰ Cf. Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy", 243; Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I*, 320; Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58: Übersetzung*, 51, n. 238.

¹¹ Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue.

¹² The identification was suggested for the first time in the Russian publication: Arzhanov, "Syriac Natural Philosophy". See also Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers*, 129–130.

¹³ Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, xviii.

¹⁴ Kamil, Catalogue.

¹⁵ Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, 159–177.

¹⁶ Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, 164–177.

the last folios of DS 27, i.e. fols. 124–127 (= "[Ms. 5]" of Van Rompay¹⁷) originate from a separate codex that is, like the rest of Part B, dated to the ninth/tenth century. These folios are written in one column in the traditional Estrangela script and thus clearly differ from the ductus and from the layout of the rest of Part B.

Two folios, i.e. fols. 96-97 (= "[Ms. 2]" of Van Rompay) are characterized by some unique elements¹⁸ that differentiate them from the ductus of fols. 95 + 98-123. However, they share the same layout of the pages as the latter and are dated to the ninth century. The differences between fols. 96-97 on the one hand, and fols. 95 + 98-123 on the other, may be explained by the assumption that different scribes worked on the same codex, which would reduce the number of manuscripts in Part B to two, though this question demands further clarification.

What seems to be much more certain is the relation between the rest of the folios in Part B. Van Rompay identified three different codices there (= "[Ms. 1]", "[Ms. 3]", and "[Ms. 4]"). The text of *PM* gives good reasons for revising this identification. The first mention of the treatise, which in Syriac starts with the words: "Among those who did research on natural principles..." (cf. the description by Timothy I above) appears on folio 100r, which Van Rompay considered part of "[Ms. 4]". At the end of the fragment of an unidentified text, there stands a short note: "After this — 'On those who did research on natural principles...'." This note is elliptical and it may be understood as: "After this, follows..." However, the next piece in the manuscript is not the abovementioned treatise, but the epistle of Severus Sebokht to Yonan concerning questions of Aristotelian logic. The text of *PM* begins on fol. 114v, which Van Rompay ascribes to "[Ms. 1]". Folios 98–99, which Van Rompay identified as a separate work ("Explanation of Plato's thoughts on matter") and as part of another codex, "[Ms. 3]", in reality contain the last portion of *PM*.

Thus, "[Ms. 1]", "[Ms. 3]", and "[Ms. 4]", as identified by Van Rompay turn out to be connected through the treatise *On Principles and Matter*, which is scattered through different parts of ms. DS 27. The dating, layout, and the ductus of the three allegedly separate manuscripts also speak in favor of their interrelation:

- All three parts are dated by Van Rompay to the ninth/tenth centuries.
- Their layout is nearly identical: the area of writing is $18/19 \times 12/12.5$ cm, written in two columns, with 32 to 40 lines per column (this number varies throughout the ms.).
- The form of writing is very similar. It combines elements of Estrangela (e.g., in the letters *Beth*, *Gamal*, *Mim*, *Qaph*, and *Shin*) and Serto (e.g., in the letters *Alaph*, *Dalath*, *He*, *Rish*, and *Taw*).

¹⁷ Cf. the table in Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, 177.

¹⁸ Cf. Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, 166.

- The similarities between the three parts of the ms. do not rule out the obvious differences between them. Rather, they can be explained as different scribal habits, so that a number of hands may be detected in the same codex.

Thus, we have enough arguments to consider "[Ms. 1]", "[Ms. 3]", and "[Ms. 4]" as identified by Van Rompay, as originally belonging to the same manuscript, although a number of scribal hands may be determined there. Based on its paleographical features, combining Estrangela and Serto scripts¹⁹, this manuscript may be dated with the help of the "Digital Analysis of Syriac Handwriting" (DASH) tool²⁰ to the last half of the ninth century²¹.

Though the exact date and place of the production of the codex remain unknown due to the loss of its colophon, a scribal note at the bottom of folio 111r informs us about the time and circumstances of its coming to Egypt²²:

This book belongs to the Monastery of the Mother of God in the desert of Scetis (i.e. Dayr al-Suryan). Patriarch Abraham donated it to the monastery in the days of Abbot Ṣaliba. Anathema will fall on everyone who removes it from the desert of Scetis.

This note refers to the Coptic patriarch of Syriac origin, Abraham b. Zur'a, who occupied the Alexandrian see in 975–978²³ and who must have brought a number of Syriac mss. with him to Egypt²⁴.

It is now difficult to reconstruct the original volume of the codex that Abraham donated to the monastery in the late tenth century. Given the evidence listed above, we may put the preserved folios of the codex in the following order:

¹⁹ This is particularly evident in the specific combination of the following letters: Serto *Alaph*, Estrangela *Gamal*, Serto *He*, Estrangela *Qaph*, and Serto *Taw*.

²⁰ <http://dash.stanford.edu/>, accessed 01.10.2020. This powerful tool supplements and at some points replaces the main reference work, i.e. Hatch, *Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts*.

²¹ The comparison with the DASH-database has made clear that the style of handwriting of those folios of ms. DS 27 that include *PM* turns out to be closest to mss. BL Add. 14668, fols. 40–43 (dated to 866), BL Add. 14650 (dated to 874–875), BL Add. 12167 (dated to 876), BL Add. 17130 (dated to 876–877), BL Add. 18819 (dated to 883–884), and BL Add. 17194 (dated to 885–886).

²³ See den Heijer, "Les Patriarches coptes d'origine syrienne", 49–57.

²⁴ Cf. Brock & Van Rompay, Catalogue, 172.

а	fols. 100r–103v + fols. 106r–107v	Letters of Severus Sebokht to Yonan ²⁵ and to Aitallaha ²⁶ concerning some questions of Aristotle's <i>De Interpreta-tione</i> and <i>Analytica Priora</i>
b	fols. 107v–113v	Anonymous treatise <i>On the Division of Substance, on the Division of Creatures, and on the Mixtures of Bodies,</i> which contains a commentary on the main terms of Porphyry's <i>Isagoge</i> ²⁷
с	fol. 95r	PsAristotle On Virtue ²⁸
d	fols. 95r-v + 114r	Prophecies of Pagan Philosophers about Christ ²⁹
е	fols. 114r-v	List of Syriac particles
f	fol. 114v + fols. 104r–105v + fols. 115r–116v + fols. 98r–99v	Treatise On Principles and Matter
g	fols. 117r–118r	Treatise on names deriving from actions
h	fols. 118r-v	Treatise on the types of statements according to Aristo- tle
i	fol. 118v	Ephrem the Syrian, A dispute with a poet
j	fols. 118v–123r	Treatise <i>On the Soul</i> divided into seven sections and de- rived mainly from the pseudepigraphical tract <i>On the</i> <i>Soul</i> ascribed to Gregory Thaumaturgus ³⁰

²⁵ Hugonnard-Roche, "Questions de logique au VIIe siècle". Cf. Reinink, "Severus Sebokts Brief".

²⁶ Hugonnard-Roche, "L'épître de Sévère Sebokht à Aitilaha" (the author did not use ms. DS 27 for his edition).

²⁷ Cf. the note on fol. 113v, col. b: معمد مرعم منه المعني المنابع المعني ال معني المعني معني المعني ا معالي المعني الم

²⁸ An unidentified pseudepigraphon, whose full text is quoted in Brock & Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, 164.

²⁹ Brock, "A Syriac Collection of Prophesies". Cf. Brock, "Some Syriac Excerpts from Greek collections of Pagan Prophecies"; Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers*, 103–110.

³⁰ The text of this treatise has been published twice. The first edition based on ms. Sinai Syriac 16: Lewis, *Catalogue of the Syriac MSS*, 19–26. Another one based on ms. BL Add. 14658: Furlani, "Syriac Version of the λόγος κεφαλαιώδης περὶ ψυχῆς πρὸς Τατιανόν". See also Zonta, "*Nemesiana Syriaca*". A third witness to this treatise is ms. Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs (CFMM) 404, available online in the database of *vHMML*, <<u>https://www.vhmml.org/</u>>, assessed on 01.03.2020.

k	fols. 123r-v	A collection of texts, bearing the title On Virtue Accord-
		ing to the Philosophers and on the Definition of Names
		and including a selection from Sayings of Greek Philos-
		ophers ³¹ and Pythagorean Sentences ³²

The compendium that is reconstructed in the proposed form begins with questions on Aristotelian logic (items *a* and *b*, see also *c* and *h*), includes some works on grammar (items *e* and *g*), and a treatise on natural philosophy (*f*). These works appear side by side with various pieces that may be characterized as "popular philosophy" (*d* and *i*), or moral philosophy in the gnomic form (*j* and *k*), which mostly appear at the end of the compendium. Such a combination of logic, grammar, physics, and moral philosophy is characteristic of another large philosophical anthology, ms. BL Add. 14658, dating from the seventh century, which until the beginning of the 19th century had also been preserved in the library of Dayr al-Suryan³³.

The treatise *On Principles and Matter* occupies a central position in this compendium. Now, various portions of it are disseminated through Part B of ms. DS 27. The correct order of folios is: 114v; 104r–105v; 115r–116v; 98r–99v.

Both the beginning of the treatise (on fol. 114v) and its end (on fol. 99v) have been preserved in the codex. The description of Timothy I (see above) and the reference to the treatise on fol. 100r corroborate the assumption that the Syriac version of the treatise (already at the end of the eighth century, when Timothy was looking for it) contained no specific title, but was referred to by its first sentence.

³¹ Cf. Arzhanov, Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers, 34–37.

³² For various collections of this gnomic anthology, see Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers*, 84–90.

³³ For the content of this ms. and the idea of the *enkyklios paideia* reflected in it, see part 1.4 of the Introduction.

In the restored form, the treatise runs without breaks, so that no lacunas can be detected between the preserved folios. Thus, we can assume that ms. DS 27 contains the treatise in a very similar form, as it became known to Timothy, although the codex of Dayr al-Suryan contains no division into parts and chapters, which Timothy anticipates in his description.

The East Syrian Catholicos made clear that the treatise had no formal conclusion. This is also the case with the version of ms. DS 27 which ends with a quotation from Boethus. This quotation runs until the end of the second column of fol. 99v, and after it we find a blank space that could be filled with ca. two lines of text (if we compare this column with the first one on the same page). A graphic sign \star marks the end of the treatise, confirming the assumption that no part of the text has been lost due to the loss of folios in ms. DS 27.

The structure of the treatise preserved in the codex of Dayr al-Suryan is also confirmed by the 13th-century witness of Grigorios Bar 'Ebraya, or Barhebraeus, who preserved an abridged version of it.

1.3 Epitome by Barhebraeus (d. 1286)

The Syrian Orthodox Maphrian and polymath, one of the main figures of the so-called "Syriac Renaissance" of the 12th–13th centuries, Grigorios Abu l-Farağ Bar 'Ebraya, or Barhebraeus, was born in 1225/1226 in Melitene³⁴. He studied in Antioch, Tripoli, and possibly in Damascus, before entering the office of bishop and later on, in 1264, that of the "Maphrian of the East", the second highest office of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which he held until his death in 1286. His regular place of residence as Maphrian was the monastery of Mar Mattai near Mosul. Thus, Barhebreaus had constant access to the convent's library, which served as a rich source of material for his works. Additionally, he often resided in Maragha, which at that time became the usual residence of Ilkhans and a new center of learning. Maragha was the place where Barhebraeus met leading Muslim scholars of his day, among others Naşir al-Din al-Ţusi, whose works made a great impact on him³⁵.

Barhebraeus left an enormous corpus of writings, which to a large extent have the form of compendia and encyclopedias. Their contents vary from issues of theology to meteorology and natural sciences. The Syrian Orthodox Maphrian draw on a large variety of sources, both Syriac and Arabic, compiling them in such a way that

³⁴ For Barhebraeus, his life and works, see Takahashi, Barhebraeus: A Bio-Bibliography.

³⁵ Cf. Borbone, "Marāgha Mdittā Arškitā".