

Yury Arzhanov

**Porphyry, *On Principles and Matter***

# **Scientia Graeco-Arabica**

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Herausgegeben von  
Marwan Rashed

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**Porphyry,**  
***On Principles and Matter***

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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.



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## Introduction



# 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)<sup>1</sup>, wrote a letter to Mar Pethion, the head of the school of the monastery of Mar Abraham at Bashosh near Mosul<sup>2</sup>. 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 books<sup>3</sup>.

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 library<sup>4</sup>. 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 Dashandad<sup>5</sup>) started to translate Aristotle's *Topica* into Arabic<sup>6</sup>. The difficulties in understanding this Aristotelian

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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 Nuḥ and that he himself translated only part of the text from Syriac into Arabic, while Abu Nuḥ 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.



his detailed description of the treatise<sup>10</sup>. 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-Suryan<sup>11</sup>. The authors of the catalogue did not notice the similarity between one of the items in ms. 27 and the text referred 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 texts<sup>12</sup>.

## 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 library<sup>13</sup>. 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 published<sup>14</sup>. The codex containing *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)<sup>15</sup>. 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 B<sup>16</sup>. However, it is likely that this number should be reduced. There is no doubt that

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Brock & Van Rompay, *Catalogue*.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Brock & Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Kamil, *Catalogue*.

<sup>15</sup> Brock & Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, 159–177.

<sup>16</sup> Brock & Van Rompay, *Catalogue*, 164–177.

the last folios of DS 27, i.e. fols. 124–127 (= “[Ms. 5]” of Van Rompay<sup>17</sup>) 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 elements<sup>18</sup> 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 above-mentioned 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 × 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.







k fols. 123r–v

A collection of texts, bearing the title *On Virtue According to the Philosophers and on the Definition of Names* and including a selection from *Sayings of Greek Philosophers*<sup>31</sup> and *Pythagorean Sentences*<sup>32</sup>

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-Suryan<sup>33</sup>.

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.

The references by Timothy (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ — “On natural principles of bodies”) and the reference on fol. 100r of the codex (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ — “On those who did research on natural principles”) in various ways make use of the first sentence of the treatise, which runs as follows: ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ ܕܥܡܡܐ — “Among those who did research on natural principles, some said that the first principle is one, and some said that the principles of natural things are many”. While the Catholicos picks up the last words of this sentence, the scribe of the codex quotes its beginning. At present, it is difficult to say whether, originally, the Syriac version of the treatise started with these words and lacked any formal introduction, or whether some part of the treatise had been lost before Timothy came across it at the end of the eighth century.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Arzhanov, *Syriac Sayings of Greek Philosophers*, 34–37.

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

<sup>33</sup> 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 Boethius. 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 ✧ 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-Faraġ Bar 'Ebraya, or Barhebraeus, was born in 1225/1226 in Melitene<sup>34</sup>. 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, Barhebraeus 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 Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, whose works made a great impact on him<sup>35</sup>.

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

<sup>34</sup> For Barhebraeus, his life and works, see Takahashi, *Barhebraeus: A Bio-Bibliography*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Borbone, “*Marāgha Mdittā Arškītā*”.