



Sergei Mariev (ed.), *Byzantine Perspectives on Neoplatonism*. Byzantinisches Archiv, Series Philosophica 1, Boston/Berlin, de Gruyter 2017, 289 p., ISBN 978-1-5015-1167-7.

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Even if some fundamental works of the Byzantine period that have circulated in rich manuscript families still lack proper critical editions, Byzantine studies in general, and Byzantine philosophy in particular, has been met with a growing interest from scholars of various disciplines in the last decades. A new series on Byzantine philosophy, *Byzantinisches Archiv–Series Philosophica*, published by De Gruyter, was initiated in 2017 with a volume which brings together several articles on Byzantine philosophy and theology under the generic title *Byzantine Perspectives on Neoplatonism*. The volume, edited by Sergei Mariev, brings together ten papers presented in two different panels at the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies (ISNS), one from 2013, in Cardiff, and the second from 2014, in Lisbon.

The opening of the volume is made by the article, “**Neoplatonic Philosophy in Byzantium. An Introduction**” (p. 1-29), written by the editor, which is a chronological summary of key figures of the intellectual history of Byzantium, who, to a degree, were knowledgeable in Neoplatonic philosophy. The editor starts with Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, who brought Neoplatonism into the heart of Christianity, continues with the brief mention of “Gazan Christians”, especially Aineias of Gaza, Prokopios of Gaza and Zacharias Scholasticus (p. 2), who, unlike Ps.-Dionysios, confronted and criticized the Neoplatonists, and, as R. Sorabji puts it, were “waiting for Philoponus”¹, whose modern scholarship is briefly reviewed by Mariev, pointing to the tension between the Neoplatonic works of Philoponus and those of his writings that had an explicit Christian character. The next important figure is Maximos Confessor who is only briefly discussed, Mariev concluding that: “Maximos found a place for some central Neoplatonic concepts that were familiar to him mostly but not exclusively through the mediation of Ps.-Dionysios the Areopagite, by adapting Neoplatonic concepts to the exigencies of his own, Christian perspective.” It is still a matter of debate, and one of major interest, precisely how well-acquainted Maxim was with Neoplatonism, and “not exclusively through the mediation of Ps.-Dio-

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¹ See Richard Sorabji, “Preface: Waiting for Philoponus” (p. vii-xxx), in Aeneas of Gaza: *Theophrastus*. With Zacharias of Mytilene: *Ammonius*, translated by S. Gerts, J. Dillon & D. Russell, Bloomsbury, (Ancient Commentators on Aristotle), p. VII–XXX.

nysios” (p. 4). The issue, underdeveloped by Mariev, is given some attention in a footnote (f. 21), based on the article of Van Deun and Mueller-Jourdan:² there is “une certaine familiarité du Confesseur avec le vocabulaire et les idées de la tradition jamblichéenne” and other Neoplatonic philosophers. Next Mariev briefly discusses John of Damaskos (p. 4-5), stressing that the author of *On Heresies* “identifies «Hellenism» as one of the four «mothers» of heresies and includes Platonists in the list of heresies” (p. 5), along with Barbarism, Scythianism and Judaism. Photios and Arethas of Caesarea are shortly reviewed before a more consistent discussion of the polymath Michael Psellos (p. 7-10). At this point Mariev argues against F. Lauritzen (f. 43), who considers that Psellos understood ideas as beings and not as pre-existing the cosmos (as middle Platonist did, especially Alcinous), by insisting that Psellos “rehearses the thesis of the Middle Platonists according to which the ideas are thoughts of God”, and that he “proposes the Plotinian theory of identity between the Intellect and the ideas”. Mariev argues that, even if Psellos’ immersion into pagan philosophy makes us question his true intellectual affinities, whether he was indeed a true Christian or a [crypto-] neopagan (p. 9), we should leave such a question behind, since it is more relevant “to understand the complexity of Psellos’ attitude towards Neoplatonic philosophy, and to view his attitude as a reflection of an ultimately unresolvable tension between the heritage of antiquity and Christian faith that was predominant in Byzantium,” (p. 9-10). This tension, in my judgement, is at the core of Byzantine thinking (which intermingles theology and philosophy, and thus Christianity and Pagan heritage), and has repercussions even nowadays, in the underestimation or overestimation of the pagan heritage. (The issue is developed by Graeme Miles’ article further in the volume.) Psellos’ disciple, John Italos, receives equal attention (p. 10-12), and we learn just how much Italos was involved in pagan philosophy, and that he was accused of heresy, because of his “believing in the truth of Greek philosophy” (p. 10). Some minor figures are also scrutinized: Italos’ disciple Eustratios of Nikaia, Nicholas of Methone who thought that Proklos corrupted the wisdoms of Dionysios, Nikephoros Blemmydes, George Akropolites, George Pachymeres, Nikephoros Chumnos, Theodoros Metochites, Nikephoros Gregoras. Palamas receives more attention, especially by questioning how aware he was in adopting some distinctive Neoplatonic elements. In a similar note, Plethon’s return to the roots of Hellenism is scrutinized, and Bessarion’s stress on Platonism ends Mariev’s introduction in Byzantine philosophy

² Peter Van Deun, Pascal Mueller-Jourdan, “Maxime Le Confesseur”, in: C. G. Conticello (ed.), *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. I/1. Corpus Christianorum: La Theologie Byzantine, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers 2015, p. 387–510, p. 430-433.

and theology. This introductory chapter is a good outline into the history of Byzantine philosophy, it has a useful bibliographical apparatus, and could be part of any syllabus for a course on *Introduction to Byzantine Philosophy*.

The second article, with the title “**The Divine Body of the Heavens. The Debates about the Body of the Heavens during Late Antiquity and their echoes in the works of Michael Psellos and John Italos**” (p. 31-65), co-authored by Sergei Mariev and Monica Marchetto, analyses how Michael Psellos and John Italos conceived the nature of the heavenly bodies, through the filter of debates from late antiquity. The first part of the article reviews how Aristotle’s doctrine of the fifth element (*quinta essentia*, the constitutive element of stars and celestial spheres) was understood by Plotinus, Proclus, Philoponus, and Simplicius. There is also an insight into patristic literature, especially Gregory of Nazianzus. Although Plotinus conceived the body of the sky as purer than earth, he understood the cosmos as formed by the same four elements of nature, rejecting thus, “implicitly” (p. 32), Aristotle’s view that there is such a thing as the fifth element. This should not come as a surprise since other Peripatetics did it as well (as Strato or Xenarchos of Seleukeia who authored a work entitled *Against the fifth substance*). In addition to the four elements of the sublunary sphere, Proclus appears to be more open to speak of the body of the heavens as being a fifth element (p. 38). The authors review Philoponus’ vision, namely that “even if in heaven there are the finest and purest parts of the sublunary elements, the celestial bodies have the same qualities as the sublunary bodies” (p. 42), while Simplicius, accusing Philoponus of being guided by “vainglory more than by love of knowledge”, thinks that he had an “anthropomorphic representation of God and [...] on account of his erroneous conception of God, he ends up with the cosmological error [...] that the heavens possess the same nature as the sublunary realities and hence are generated and destructible.” (p. 43). Mariev and Marchetto also explore the patristic perspective, for which the difference between God and his creatures is at the core, and not so much the difference between the sensible and the intelligible substance (p. 45). Some traces of the conception of a fifth element are suggested by the corporeality of angels and of bodies of the resurrected. However, authors such as Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 28) view that God cannot be regarded as a fifth body (p. 47), but rather that God is beyond the fifth element, that “is a body which is devoid of materiality to an even higher degree” (p. 48). Overriding important centuries (and omitting authors such as Maxim Confessor or John of Damascus – which, probably, would occupy too much space to be discussed), the authors revert to Michael Psellos and John Italos. The authors compare Psellos’ *Opusc.* 13 with Philoponus’ *In De anima* I, and show that

the Byzantine author was aware of this late antique debate and that he at times argued along the lines of Philoponos. (p. 51) But for Psellos it was essential to understand God not as a fifth element since this would conduct to a *hybris* to believe “that God is of the same substance as his creatures” (p. 56). The well-known student of Psellos, John Italos, (on whom a comprehensive study is still lacking), takes the problem further in an attempt to reconcile Plato with Aristotle on the issue of the fifth body and element.

The short but concentrated third article of the volume (67-77), “**The Waves of Passions and the Stillness of the Sea: Appropriating Neoplatonic Imagery and Concept Formation-Theory in Middle Byzantine Commentaries on Aristotle,**” signed by Michele Trizio, analyses how Eustratius of Nicaea “reframes Proklos’ vocabulary in new sentences” (p. 68). Trizio, who is also the author of a monography on Eustratius (*Il neoplatonismo di Eustrazio di Nicea*, Bari 2016), gives important examples of the manner in which Eustratius manages to escape the “passage copy-paste” technique (p.69), and thus not “simply copy Proklos” (p. 74). Michael of Ephesos, briefly discussed by Trizio, often uses literal transcriptions from Proklos, whereas Eustratius manages to adjust “the grammar and the word order” (p.68). Trizio exemplifies, in parallel columns, Eustratius’ use of Neoplatonic psychological vocabulary, particularly Proclean terminology and metaphors (exercised by Neoplatonists in allegorizing Homer). The metaphors of waves and water, which are to be taken as the soul’s condition in the material world (together with the fire which stands for knowledge) play an important role in Eustratius (p. 69). Providing consistent Greek quotations (p. 72-73), Trizio succeeds to show that “most of Eustratios’ vocabulary concerning the passions and the body as a burden for the soul and the latter’s need to imitate the Intellect is taken from Proklos” (p. 72). The conclusion is that Eustratios appealed to readers that “could detect the Neoplatonic flavour of his imagery” (p. 74) and appreciate his effort “to produce his own Neoplatonic metaphors” (p. 74-75). A more general conclusion is also drawn on Eustratios’ “peculiar hermeneutic”, where one can find, on the one hand, “the rise of Neoplatonic vocabulary as the noblest and finest philosophical vocabulary then available”, while, on the other hand, one can assist to “the revival of Neoplatonic allegorical hermeneutics in 11th–12th c. Byzantium and its Neoplatonic roots” (p. 75).

The fourth paper (p. 79-101), “**Psellos and his Traditions**”, by Graeme Miles, is dedicated to Psellos’ Christian and Neoplatonic sources. After a consistent *Introduction* (p. 79-82), Miles addresses in separate sections what would be *Psellos the Platonist* (pp. 82-89), *Psellos the Christian* (p. 89-93), and, as a conclusion, *Psellos as Philosopher and Christian* (pp. 93-98). These facets of Psellos show clearly that he is not a writer who can

easily be grasped and branded. One feature of Psellos' assimilation of Neoplatonic tradition, which is very well exemplified by Miles, is the exercise of allegorical reading of both pagan and Christian themes; as, for example, in explaining the image of the sphinx, "an image of the composite nature of human beings, put together from dissimilar parts" (p. 86), or the interpretation Psellos gives to Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, which stays as "a symbol of the elevation of the psyche beyond matter" (p. 95). Psellos considered, in a pure Neoplatonic way, that "the ancients concealed secret wisdom in their myths which it is the task of the interpreter to reveal" (p. 87), and, according to Miles, it is precisely here that the Byzantine writer "can often be seen at his freest and most original" (p. 85). For Psellos there is nothing hidden in the strange nature of Greek myth – "more desirable as an interpretive object" –, which makes "the metamorphosis into truth (...) all the more profound" (p. 89). Miles concludes that in Psellos "we find a person with an independent mind" (p. 98), and even if the contradictions and inconsistencies in his own works cannot be overlooked, one should accept that this "was the nature of the tradition as much as of Psellos himself" (p. 98). The dominant trait of Psellos' thinking – Miles argues – is the attempt to reconcile opposite directions into a middle ground, an issue which is well pointed out by his comments on the Chaldaean oracles (p. 87).

The fifth paper "**Proclus as Heresiarch: Theological Polemic and Philosophical Commentary in Nicholas of Methone's *Refutation (Anaptyxis)* of Proclus' *Elements of Theology***" (p. 103-135), is signed by Joshua Robinson, who is currently working for a critical edition (with translation) of both Nicholas' *Refutation* and Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. In introducing this consistent paper, Robinson outlines the work of Nicholas and his knowledge and access to Proclus' writings. In the first part of the article, he scrutinizes the *Refutation* from the perspective of polemic theology (section 1.1), which places Nicholas among polemical writers (p. 104). The polemic with Proclus is thus "primarily theological and traditional in character rather than philosophical" (p. 110). The themes approached by Nicholas are the transcendence of God, creation *from not being* (Nicholas' words) and Trinity. Nicholas thinks of God as *exērēmenon*, transcending all beings, in contrast to Proclus for whom the term "applies to multiple levels of the metaphysical hierarchy, designating the relative transcendence of one level over another and, in general, of the participated term over the participant" (p. 113), and accuses Proclus of an emanationist metaphysics (p. 114). Nicholas believes erroneously also that Proclus has in mind the doctrine of Trinity (p. 115) in the first proposition of the *Elements* ("Every manifold in some way participates unity" – trans. Dodds), with the intention to criticize thus Chris-

tianity. Next (section 1.2) Robinson debates Nicholas' idea that Proclus is a source of Christian heresies, taking as example prop. 32 ("All reversion is accomplished through a likeness of the reverting terms to the goal of reversion" – trans. Dodds), considered by the Byzantine author as a source for inspiring heretics (p. 119, p. 121), such as Arius, Nestorius, and Origen. This lineage of Christian heresy is problematic and anachronic (p. 120). The second part of the article considers the possibility that the *Refutation* may actually be a philosophical commentary (although Robinson insists that the difference between these two identities, theologian, and philosopher, may not have existed in the first place). The paper concludes that Nicholas criticizes Proclus' argument on the basis (1) of external premises (Christian or other philosophers), and (2) internal premises ("attempting to turn Proclus' thought against itself", p. 122).

The next article, "**Two Conflicting Positions Regarding the Philosophy of Proclus in Eastern Christian Thought of the Twelfth Century**" (p. 137-152), signed by Magda Mtchedlidze, parallels Nicholas' commentary together with that of Petritsi on Proclus' *Elements*. Mtchedlidze contrasts the two commentaries as if they would respond to each other, arguing that this supposed "dialogue" should be understood in the context of its historical era. Mtchedlidze looks at "the attitude towards ἔξω σοφία in general, the stance towards Platonism and Proclus, the interpretation of the relationship between philosophy and theology, the issue of the criterion of truth, and the concept of commenting on pagan authors." (p. 142) She shows how for Petritsi, Proclus' intention is to "demonstrate the Supreme and Pure One through the means of syllogistic compulsion", and "through the laws of logic", while Nicholas, using the *elenchus*, the classical Socratic philosophical method, intends to show "the fallacy hidden beneath the refinement" (p. 138). Thus in the case of Petritsi, we observe an *encomium* in a tradition of Psellos – where Proclus is "a really divine man" – followed by Italos, while with Nicholas we notice a *psógos* (p. 140), Proclus being thus "a genuine servant of demons".

The seventh article of the volume is "**The Reception of Proclus: From Byzantium to the West (an Overview)**" (p. 153-173), signed by Jesús de Garay who restates the topic of the treatment of Proclus in both Byzantium (where "he was always a recognized author") and in the West (where he "remains nearly unknown until 1268"), highlighting the radical differences in his reception. This contribution comes as supplement to Gersh's edited volume on Proclus' heritage³, expanding the differences in interpretation in

³ Stephen Gersh (ed.), *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2014.

order “to present a synoptic vision” (p. 153). We find a survey from the 11th until the 16th century, more precisely, from Psellos until Ficino, in which one can speak about a *direct reception*, both in Byzantium and in the West, and an *indirect one*, through Pseudo-Dionysius and *Liber de causis*. Besides that, as de Garay points out, both in Byzantium and in the West, Proclus’s reception is “marked by important discontinuities” (p. 153). Since many ideas in the article have already been the object of other contributions in the volume, I would insist here on the analysis of some peculiar features of Pletho reading Proclus. One can see how a Byzantine author tries to shape a “scientific theology, which can be developed in a strictly rational fashion, but having a polytheist character, so that that it can be adjusted to pagan beliefs” (p. 159). De Garay points out that Platonic philosophy would be only a link in a much older tradition, and both Pletho and Proclus discover in the *Chaldean Oracles* the revelation of this ancient wisdom, “even if they do so in different ways”. Thus, highlights de Garay, “all philosophies and religions are nothing more than a reformulation, more or less distorted, of this *philosophia perennis*” (p. 160). Worthy to mention here is the western response to Proclus, which recognised no tension between Dionysius and Proclus, “but rather a complete continuity”, (p. 162). The reception of Cusanus (“the most important landmarks for the direct reception of Proclus”) is further analysed, who, similarly to Pletho, reads Proclus “as engaged in a polemic against Scholastic Aristotelianism”, but, unlike Pletho, in a continuity with Augustine and Dionysius (p. 166). The next in line, Ficino, “aware of Cusanus’s stance”, knew Proclus well, but valued Pseudo-Dionysius and Iamblichus over Proclus, and prized the *Corpus Hermeticum*. De Garay reaches thus the conclusion that, whereas in Byzantium Proclus was associated with Greek rationalism, in the West he was perceived as adversary to Aristotelian epistemology.

The next article, “**Elementi di demonologia neoplatonica nell’opuscolo bizantino Τίνα περί δαιμόνων δοξάζουσιν Έλληνες. Alcune considerazioni**” (p. 175-220), signed by Flavia Buzzetta and Valerio Napoli thoroughly discusses different theories of Neoplatonic demonology, and how they diverge from each other even if they seemingly belong to the same tradition, and how these have been a subject of interest in Byzantium. The opus in discussion is *Τίνα περί δαιμόνων δοξάζουσιν Έλληνες*, which stays as a Byzantine dossier on ancient Greek religion. Known in its Latin version as *Graecorum opinioniones de daemonibus*, the work was falsely considered to have been written by Psellos. Buzzetta and Napoli look for the Neoplatonic substratum in the eight section of the text, and discuss the relation between demons and angels (p. 185-188), classifications of orders of demons (p. 188-199), the problematic place of demons between punishments and passions

(p. 199-208), the body and appearance of demons (p. 208-210), their relation with divination (p. 211-212). The sources of the text are also discussed beyond the more visible Christian sources: Clement of Alexandria, Proclus, and, perhaps, other Neoplatonic writers, as Porphyry and Iamblicus, to whom the compiler refers to (p. 213). The text is therefore a significant witness to the circulation in the late Byzantine culture of various aspects of the Neoplatonic thought. One important idea that they reach is that different Neoplatonic doctrines on demons can be reduced to a single *hellenikos logos*, as opposed to a *Christian logos* (*ho hemeteros logos*).

The penultimate article, “**Plethon on the Grades of Virtues: Back to Plato via Neoplatonism**” (p. 221-242), signed by Lela Alexidze, is dedicated to one of the last Platonists of Byzantium, Gemistos Pletho, with a special focus on his theory of virtues. Alexidze points out that Pletho is one of the few philosopher who valued Platonic philosophy highly, and voiced his considerations in “quite an unconventional, direct and uncompromised manner” (p. 221), and focuses her paper on Pletho’s theory of virtues in contrast with Porphyry’s, *Sententia* 32. Alexidze discusses the relationship between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* (p. 222-224), and compares Pletho and Patrisi, taking Porphyry’s scales of virtues as a criterion. Pletho, she argues, clearly inspired the tendency of “rehabilitation” of *vita activa* taken further by the Italian Renaissance philosophers and presents a short exposé of Pletho’s (p. 224-227) and Porphyry’s theory of virtues (p. 231-237). For Porphyry, virtues do not have political significance, they serve for the “elevation” of the self to the level of divine Intellect. On the other hand, in contrast to a Platonic understanding of the human being as divided (body and soul, with the body taking the negative role), Pletho is inclined to consider the body positively, as being at the same level with the soul. Moreover, the “self” of a man should be understood as part of the ‘national’ identity, and the purpose of the virtues is to transform not only the human being but also the whole ‘nation’ (p. 238).

The volume ends with an article signed by Udo Reinhold Jeck, with the title “**Europa entdeckt die mittelalterliche byzantinisch-georgische Philosophie. Klaproth, Sjögren, Brosset und Creuzer über Ioane Petrizi**” (p. 243-270). As the title shows, this contribution addresses the work of four scholars who were active in early nineteenth-century and how they approached Ioane Petrizi, within the incipient Georgian and Caucasian studies. Some important moments of this odyssey of reaching Petritsi must be mentioned. The first scholar is the orientalist Heinrich Julius Klaproth (p. 245-248), who sketched the historical situation of Georgia and its connection with Byzantium in the 11th century, although not all information corre-

sponds to historical facts. Jeck highlights that Klaproth's pioneering account on the spiritual heyday of Georgia (which produced such a great thinker as Petrizi) appears to be limited to a few facts and contains obvious errors and inaccuracies. The orientalist Marie Félicité Brosset (p. 248-250 and 256-258), specialized in Georgian and Armenian studies, labelled Petrizi as „Jean le Philosophe ou Pétritsi“. Similar to Klaproth, Brosset described Petrizi not as an interpreter of Proclus, but rather as a Platonic commentator (p. 249-250), who drew his information from Anton I. Katholikos (1720-1788). The Finnish linguist and explorer Anders Johann Sjögren is then introduced, who, as Jeck highlights (p. 252), was the first European scholar to keep a Petrizi manuscript in hand (year 1837). Sjögren managed to procure a Petrizi manuscript for the Academy in St. Petersburg, which was further examined by Brosset, now able to comment on Petrizi in more detail than he previously had (p. 256). The philologist and archaeologist Friedrich Creuzer (p. 258-261) read some notes published on the manuscript in *Bulletin scientifique* (year 1838). Creuzer, the author of a famous book at the time, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, was an editor of Proclus (1822) and Plotinus (1835). But even if Creuzer's writings on Petrizi did reach a larger number of readers, the interest in Petrizi and the reception of the *Institutio theologica* in medieval Georgia remained unsubstantial. As Jeck put it, the spirit of the time proved unfavourable (p. 262).

Even if the articles of this volume are written in English, some of them often use the German established names or other variations, as for example Aineias of Gaza instead of Aeneas of Gaza, Prokopios of Gaza instead of Procopius of Gaza, Proklos instead of Proclus (some times in the same article), John of Damaskos (p. 4, 5, 13, f. 71), or Damaskus, instead of the English Damascus (p. 143, 146, 149), Simplikios (p.8, 13, 21) instead of Simplicius (p. 156); Plotinos (p. 8 et al) instead of Plotinus (p. 1, 82 et al); Syrianos (p. 8, 68) instead of Syrianus (p. 144). There are also some misspellings: Alkonoos for the German form of the middle Platonist Alkinoos. Throughout the review I used as much as possible the authors' versions for the names, but it would have been good for the volume to choose a unitary form, with the exception of those article written in Italian and German (where one can find even the old Germanic form Proklus, in quotations from Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, p. 262, footnotes 120 & 121).

This consistent volume ends with 18 pages of a dense and useful *Selected bibliography* (p. 271-289). This final bibliography recapitulates several of the previous entrances of the already used bibliography by each article, printed at the end of each article. A general bibliography at the end would have sufficed. Since the bibliography occupies such an important role, it

would have been helpful for the reader to have an index of modern scholars used by the contributors, as well as an index of ancient, Byzantine and medieval authors (which might have solved the issue of consistency of the names used). The lists of abbreviations could have been also compiled together as a single entry at the beginning of the volume. An editorial note on the content of the articles would have been very useful for the reader, or at least abstracts and keywords for each article. These details would have rendered the volume more unitary and would have not left room for the impression of articles randomly brought together.

The volume is an important contribution to the growing demand of studies in Byzantine philosophy, and it is a must-have book in the library of any Byzantine scholar. It deserves the attention of scholars working on the history of Byzantine philosophy, but as well as of historians and theologians, as it highlights some entanglements between Greek philosophy and Byzantine theology.