CHAPTER 20

Ammonius and the Alexandrian School

Michael Griffin

1 Introduction

In AD 415, the Alexandrian philosophical establishment was shaken by the murder of a widely respected public philosopher, Hypatia,[1] in an atmosphere perceived to be growingly hostile to pagan intellectualism. Cultural and rhetorical teaching proceeded normally, but the best philosophy students left Alexandria for Athens, where Plutarch and Syrianus helmed a resurgent Platonic Academy. Syrianus' personal connections in Alexandria, coupled with Athens' reputation as a safe haven for Hellenic religious and philosophical activity in the tradition of Iamblichus, may have helped to draw students to the Greek mainland. When Syrianus' Alexandrian pupils returned home from Athens later in the century, they brought his philosophical outlook with them, together with a revitalized Hellenic piety that encouraged religious experimentation among Alexandria's student body.[2]

Alexandria appointed one of Syrianus' most talented pupils, Hermeias, to a publicly funded chair in philosophy. His second son Ammonius (*ca.* 435/45–517/26), who inherited his chair, was exceptionally influential. Ammonius trained many of the most important philosophers of the following generation, including Damascius, Simplicius, and John Philoponus. Ammonius was succeeded (indirectly) by Olympiodorus (*ca.* 495/505–after 565), who may have been the last Alexandrian teacher to profess philosophy without at least a nominal commitment to Christianity. His own pupils, active in the later sixth and early seventh centuries, had Christian names; but they kept their philosophy and their Christianity broadly separate, and likely preserved the school's pedagogical tradition into the seventh century. Copies of the school's lectures

* I am indebted to Andrea Falcon, Richard Sorabji, and Mossman Roueché for valuable criticism of earlier drafts of this chapter; its remaining faults are solely my responsibility.

1 On the shifting intellectual climate of the fourth and fifth centuries, see for example Watts 2006: 169–231. For the Neoplatonic tradition on Hypatia, see Damascius, *Life of Isidore* [*Philosophical History*]43 A–E (Athanassiadi 1999).

2 For an overview of these early years, see for example Westerink 1990, Blank 2010. For the religious atmosphere of the school, see Watts 2010: 23–88; Hoffmann 2006.

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and commentaries resurface briefly in the "philosophical collection" of the tenth century, and many would reach Italy in the fifteenth century.[3]

This chapter presents the Alexandrian school as maintaining the basic philosophical positions and curricula developed by Syrianus and Proclus, with few amendments.[4] Following Ammonius, the school pays especially careful attention to Aristotle. It endorses the three Neoplatonic hypostases One, Intellect, and Soul. Even positions contrary to contemporary Christian orthodoxy—such as the eternity of the world, the rationality of the heavens, and the pre-existence of the soul—continue to be taught at the end of the sixth century. The school's attitude to the doctrinal convictions of its students, however, remained flexible and conciliatory.

2 Sources

Damascius, the last head of the Academy in Athens, composed a biographical history of his contemporaries and predecessors, focusing on the life of his teacher Isidore. Fragments of this history survive in Photius and the *Suda*.[5] Damascius displays a clear agenda in composing this *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical History* (hereafter cited according to Athanassiadi 1999).[6] He critiques the triumph of rhetoric over philosophy as a guiding intellectual and political standard for his age, he castigates politicized Christianity as a symptom of the resulting social corruption, and he draws attention to human exemplars, both positive and negative, to drive home his message. The *Life* is a helpful resource, so long as it is interpreted as a work of hagiography and literature and not straight history.

We can also draw on several distinguished actors in the events of the later fifth century (discussed below), including critiques by Zacharias[7] and reports from John Philoponus (*ca.* 490–575), a Christian pupil and editor of Ammonius

3 Usener 1879 proposed that Stephanus accepted an imperial appointment in AD 610, and Westerink suggested that he brought the school's library to Constantinople (Westerink 1986; see also Rashed 2002, Goulet 2007). But Roueché has provided strong reasons to doubt this narrative (see Roueché forthcoming and 2012, and below).

4 See Lloyd 1970, Hadot 1978, Verrycken 1990, and Blank 2010: 663–66; contrast Praechter 1910: 151–56; 1912.

5 See Athanassiadi 1999: 15–17; 58.

6 See the introduction in Athanassiadi 1999: 19–70 (and the previously standard edition of Zintzen 1967); Watts 2010: 53–54. For the title, see Athanassiadi 1999: 39–40, 58.

7 See now Dillon, Russel, and Gertz 2012.

who meticulously criticized Neoplatonic (and Aristotelian) orthodoxy.[8] Finally, we have material evidence, including the recent excavations at Kom el-Dikka,[9] to sketch a picture of the lived environment.

3 Atmosphere and Curricula of the School

The city of Alexandria was a hub of higher education. The Neoplatonists taught alongside specialists in rhetoric, medicine, and other disciplines that constituted *paideia* in the cultivated Roman world.[10] A student applying to the school of Hermeias for philosophical instruction would have already mastered letters, then literature, and finally rhetoric; philosophy was a capstone discipline, sometimes regarded from outside as a kind of "finishing school" for the international culture of the lettered elite, but explained by the philosophers themselves as a unique path to human virtue (ἀρετή).[11] The curriculum and outlook of philosophical training remained resolutely pagan, but disagreements between intellectually cultivated pagans and Christians were often friendly, and the schools fostered an atmosphere of religious experimentation.[12] If a student became especially close to a teacher, they might expect to be invited to the teacher's home to share a meal and gain access to a richer, private oral tradition.[13]

3.1 *The Aristotelian Curriculum*

The Alexandrian school claimed to cultivate excellence through the close study of classical texts with a knowledgeable teacher. The study of texts could function as a kind of spiritual exercise.[14] Novices, perhaps tempted by a protreptic "Introduction to Philosophy" offered by an energetic lecturer,[15] began with Aristotle's *Organon* and finished with his *Metaphysics*, before turning to Plato,

8 See chapter 21.

9 See Derda, Markiewicz, and Wipszycka 2007; Watts 2010: 62.

10 Watts 2006: 2–7; Cribiore 2001; Kaster 1997.

11 See Olympiodorus, *On Plato's Alcibiades* 140.18–22; *On Plato's Gorgias* 1.6. The scale of virtues itself has been much discussed; see for example O'Meara 2013 and 2012, Dillon 1996.

12 For the atmosphere of the schools, see Hoffmann 2006.

13 Watts 2010: 60.

14 See Hoffmann 1987: 83–90; Hoffmann 2006.

15 Like the anonymous *Introduction to Platonic Philosophy* (Westerink 1962) and others treated below; the *Introduction* attributed to Elias, for example, is full of anecdotes and citations from the entire range of Greek literature, and was evidently designed to entertain. For the Alexandrian introductions, see Wildberg 1990.

whose dialogues would be studied in the order recommended by Iamblichus (discussed below).[16] Each lecture (πρᾶξις) would occupy about an hour, in which the lecturer would offer a high-level analysis (θεωρία) of a passage of text, followed by a line-by-line analysis (λέξις); this division likely formalized Proclus' practice.[17]

Students might have laid the groundwork for philosophy through their rhetorical training or with "baby ethics," reading material like the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* or Epictetus' *Handbook*.[18] But the starting-point for serious philosophy was logic, effectively synonymous with Aristotelian demonstration. Olympiodorus recommends the study of Aristotle because this discipline promotes precision (ἀκρίβεια) in defining the goals of human life (*Introduction to Philosophy* 1.3–24). Simplicius, another of Ammonius' pupils, stresses that human beings require logical proof as an instrument or tool (ὄργανον) through which we can distinguish between beneficial and harmful actions, and between true and false beliefs (*On Aristotle's Categories*. 14.19–25).

After mastering logic and proof through the *Categories* (simple referring terms), *On Interpretation* (sentences), *Prior Analytics* (syllogistic), and *Posterior Analytics* (demonstration), the student would ideally read Aristotle's ethics, politics, physics, and metaphysics (theology) (Ammonius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 5.31–6.8). However, engagement with Aristotle appears to have been selective, with some subjects, such as logic and metaphysics, emphasized more heavily than others, such as biology. (This judgement is based on our reports of lectures and commentaries by Ammonius and Olympiodorus; see below.) Proclus graduated from the Aristotelian curriculum in less than two years, a feat that Marinus implies was remarkable.[19]

Early lectures prepared students by following a traditional pattern of *prolegomena*, or "things that ought to be said before the study of a text."[20] A standard list of ten points originated with Proclus (according to Elias, *On Aristotle's Categories* 107.24–27) and developed in the commentaries of Ammonius, Olympiodorus, Elias, Philoponus, and Simplicius: (1) names of philosophical schools; (2) classification of Aristotle's writings; (3) the beginning: logic; (4) the goal: knowledge of God, the first principle; (5) the way to the goal: ethics, physics, mathematics, theology (metaphysics); (6) the student's

16 See Festugière 1969, Hadot 1978: chapter 7.5 (= Hadot 2001: chapter 3.5).

17 Beutler 1949: 226.

18 See the introductions to Brittain and Brennan 2002; Brennan and Brittain 2002.

19 Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 13, in Edwards 2000.

20 Mansfeld 1994, Hadot 1991.

qualifications; (7) the interpreter's qualifications; (8) Aristotle's style; (9) Aristotle's obscurity; (10) preliminaries to this text (e.g., *Categories*).

3.2 *The Platonic Curriculum*

The student would turn to Plato next. (The prior curriculum would have situated Aristotle within a Platonist framework, gently correcting or harmonizing with Plato his occasional critiques of the Academy.)[21] The Platonic dialogues guided the student through four stages of virtue: civic, purificatory, contemplative, and theurgic.[22] They were studied in the order *Alcibiades, Gorgias, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Phaedrus, Symposium*, and *Philebus*, followed by *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, capping the study of natural and metaphysical philosophy respectively. Through this curriculum, the student hoped to achieve successive grades of virtue, contemplate intelligible reality (Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 73.32–74.3), and achieve "likeness to God" (in the language of Plato, *Theaetetus* 176 B).

4 Hermeias

Between AD 429 and 436, Hermeias was among many Alexandrian students drawn to Athens by Syrianus' charisma and Alexandrian connections. He underwent a similar training to that which Marinus describes for Proclus (*Life of Proclus* 13): he would have read "the entire works of Aristotle, logical, ethical, political, physical, and the science of theology which transcends these," followed by "Plato, in due sequence,"[23] then one of the sacred cycles of texts, such as the Orphic or Chaldaean theology.[24] While Hermeias was a match for Proclus in diligence and passion for knowledge, he had neither the temper nor talent for the cut-and-thrust of debate. He was, however, gentle, honest, and drew admiration for his character.[25]

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21 See Hadot 2015 on the Alexandrian school's approach to harmony, and Karamanolis 2006: chapter 7 on the Porphyrian sources of the later Neoplatonic consensus. On Syrianus, see e.g. Saffrey (1987) and Dillon and O'Meara 2006; for Ammonius' commitment to harmony, see Asclepius, *On Aristotle's Metaphysics* 69.17–27.

22 Olympiodorus, *On Plato's Phaedo* 8.2.1–20; Damascius, *On Plato's Phaedo* 1.138. See Dillon 1996, O'Meara 2013 and 2012, Tarrant 2007. On the curricular ascent, see also Hoffmann 1987, Griffin 2014a and 2014c.

23 For this curriculum, see Westerink 1962: XXXIX–XL.

24 Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 26.

25 Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 54.

Syrianus chose Proclus to fill his shoes as Platonic Successor and invited him to marry his young ward, Aedesia. But "some god [...] prevented Proclus from entering into marriage."[26] Later, Syrianus betrothed Aedesia to Hermeias and encouraged Hermeias to decamp to Alexandria to take up a public professorship of philosophy. He may have sought to prevent rivalry between his strongest pupils,[27] although Proclus continued to regard Hermeias as his "friend and colleague", and when Hermeias' sons came to study at Athens, Proclus gave them special care (Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 57 C). The simplest explanation might be that a publicly funded position lay open to Hermeias in Alexandria, and his acceptance of the position was good for him, his family, and both schools.

While we have little information about Hermeias' lectures or treatises, we can assume that he lectured on the Aristotelian and Platonic curriculum. His surviving commentary on the *Phaedrus* has been recognized, since Praechter, as a compendium of notes from Syrianus' seminars on the dialogue.[28] This provides some circumstantial support for Damascius' judgement (*Life of Isidore* 54) that he did not innovate. An episode in the *Phaedrus* commentary is illustrative: Hermeias reports Syrianus' explanation of the four divine madnesses of *Phaedrus* 244 A–245 B (89.20–90.2), and recounts two challenges by Proclus (92.10–13) and an interesting exchange between master and pupil on the value of theurgy.[29] But Hermeias does not editorialize. The passage does, usefully, imply that Hermeias endorses the practice of theurgy.

Hermeias and Aedesia had three children. Their firstborn, a precocious boy who remembered his past life, only lived until the age of seven. Their next sons were Ammonius and Heliodorus. Aedesia arranged for both to study philosophy under Proclus in Athens; she hoped for them to follow in their father's footsteps (Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 56), and she arranged for Hermeias' public salary to be paid to the boys while they were young.[30]

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26 Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 56.

27 Watts 2010: 208.

28 Couvreur 1901 (second edition by Zintzen 1971). Praechter 1909 originally suggested that the text recorded Syrianus' views. Dickie 1993 argues for the importance of Hermeias' role.

29 For Hermeias' discussion as a whole, see Sheppard 1982: 214–18.

30 Perhaps meaning that Hermeias' salary stayed with the family, and his professorship stood empty until it was later taken up by Ammonius. For alternate construals of *Life of Isidore* 56, see Watts 2006: 209 n. 35 and Blank 2010: 655 n. 2.

5 Ammonius

Ammonius was born around AD 440.[31] Under Proclus' tutelage, he distinguished himself in technical subjects like geometry and astronomy, swiftly surpassing his seniors (Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 57 C). Proclus gave special attention to Hermeias' sons, both because of his friendship for their father, and his warmth of feeling for their mother, Syrianus' former ward. Ammonius proved to be exceptionally diligent (φιλοπονώτατος), and he was in a strong position to make the best of Proclus' attention.

After returning to Alexandria, Ammonius took up a publicly funded professorship in philosophy. This was presumably the same professorship that Aedesia had arranged to be reserved for him; and his achievements under Proclus would have made his appointment an easy case.[32] Damascius suggests that Ammonius' family was relatively poor, thanks in part to Aedesia's prolific acts of charity for the needy; as a consequence, Ammonius may have been especially dependent on the city's public funds.[33]

In the late 480s, Ammonius was targeted by an imperial investigation.[34] There may have been political motivations, but the real cause was likely a struggle between Alexandrian's pagan intellectuals and the Christian bishop, Peter Mongus.[35] The trouble began in 486, when Paralius, a new pupil of Horapollon, was impressed by a miracle that the professors claimed for the goddess Isis.[36] Ultimately, Paralius was disappointed by his vision of the goddess at her temple, and he slandered her priestess.[37] When Horapollon's class attempted to punish Paralius, he fled into a crowd of Christian students. Peter Mongus presented Paralius' attempted punishment as an assault by the pagan teachers on the city's Christian community: the consequence was a riot and

31 For a clear and up-to-date overview of Ammonius' life, thought, and key secondary literature and controversies, see Blank 2014 and 2010; for a sample of primary texts by Ammonius, see Sorabji 2004, *Index Locorum* s.v. "Ammonius."

32 It was certainly an exceptional arrangement, though not unprecedented (Watts 2006: 210).

33 As we shall see below, this may partially underlie Damascius' criticism of Ammonius' "greed" (118B).

34 The narrative is taken from Zacharius' *Life of Severus*, edited and translated by Kugener 1971 and translated by Ambjörn 2008, following the summary in Watts 2010: chapter 1. For what follows, see Watts 2010: chapters 1–2.

35 Watts 2010: 1–22.

36 Zacharias, *Life of Severus* 16–19.

37 Zacharias, *Life of Severus* 22–23.

the destruction of the temple of Isis.[38] The professors saw an alarming analogy with the violence toward Hypatia earlier in the century.[39] Toward late 487 or 488, an imperial official, Nicomedes, arrived to investigate the teachers,[40] focusing on Ammonius.[41] Some were tortured for information, others imprisoned. Isidore, Damascius, and Asclepiodotus escaped the city, but Ammonius and Horapollon remained. Damascius, writing from a distance and after the fact, states that Horapollon later converted to Christianity, while Ammonius made an "agreement" with "the overseer of the prevailing doctrine" (presumably Peter); Damascius criticizes them both for greed (118 B, 120 B).[42]

Damascius leaves the nature of Ammonius' agreement vague, and it has been the subject of intense speculation; given Damascius' rhetorical agenda, its existence has even been doubted.[43] Ammonius presumably continued to teach and receive his public salary, upon which he was dependent: hence, perhaps, Damascius' accusation of greed. But what did Ammonius promise in return for keeping his school's doors open? Karl Praechter suggested that he no longer taught Plato, focusing instead on Aristotle,[44] since Plato was regarded as more dangerous to Christian doctrine. On the other hand, some Christian philosophers made enthusiastic use of Plato, and there is considerable evidence for Ammonius' Platonic lectures continuing into the sixth century.[45] Sorabji 1990 and 2005 has offered a more promising suggestion: perhaps Ammonius agreed not to promote pagan ritual, or theurgy, in public. There is a clear illustration in Ammonius' discussion of semantics, in his commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* 34.10–39.10: though reliant on Proclus, Ammonius declines to use Proclus' example of theurgy for natural semantics, and substitutes a different example. As van der Berg points out,[46] there may be independent philosophical motivations for this substitution. Nonetheless, the pagan professors' public claims of miracles performed by Isis were responsible for stalling Paralius' conversion to Christianity (Zacharias, *Life of Severus* 16–19); perhaps it was just this kind of public witness, grounded

38 Zacharias, *Life of Severus* 24; Watts 2010: 12–13.

39 See Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 43 A–E.

40 Watts 2006: 220.

41 Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 117 B.

42 Westerink 1990: 327, Athanassiadi 1999 ad loc.

43 Blank 2010: 660.

44 See Praechter 1010: 151–56; 1912.

45 He lectured to Olympiodorus on the *Gorgias* in about 515 (Olympiodorus, *On the Gorgias* 199.8–10), and there is other evidence for his Platonic lectures (for example, Asclepius, *On the Metaphysics* 77.4).

46 van den Berg 2004; see also Blank 2010: 659–60.

in a long tradition of Neoplatonic "oral anecdotes,"[47] that Ammonius would henceforth avoid.

The most parsimonious explanation of Damascius' criticism may simply be that Ammonius continued to accept his public salary. In any case, Ammonius continued a long and healthy lecturing career; he likely continued to teach until about 520, educating central philosophers of the following generation.

5.1 *Thought*

Damascius describes Ammonius as a specialist in Aristotle, and a brilliant mathematician and astronomer.[48] Although he taught both Plato and Aristotle well into the sixth century (Zacharias, *Ammonius* 2.19–20), our evidence for the Aristotelian curriculum is more expansive. Even here, we face challenges: it is unclear to what extent Ammonius depends on Proclus, or where he innovates; it is also unclear where one of his student-recorders has interposed his own opinions (especially in the case of John Philoponus: see chapter 21, below); and finally, our sample of Ammonius' pedagogical output is not necessarily representative.

The only book that we have from Ammonius' hand is a commentary on the *On Interpretation*, reliant on Proclus. Most of his output survives for us today in the form of his students' lecture notes on Aristotle, under his own name or under that of his pupils.

Commentary	*Preserved under the name of*
On Porphyry's *Isagoge*	Ammonius
On Aristotle's *Categories*	Ammonius and Philoponus (2 sets of notes)
On Aristotle's *On Interpretation*	Ammonius (a treatise, not lecture notes)
On Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*	Ammonius and Philoponus (2 sets of notes)
On Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*	Philoponus
On Aristotle's *Physics*	Philoponus
On Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption*	Philoponus
On Aristotle's *Meteorology*	Philoponus
On Aristotle's *On the Soul*	Philoponus
On Aristotle's *Metaphysics*	Asclepius

47 See Cox 1983: 9–20; Cox Miller 2000: 242–44; Watts 2010: 39, 63.

48 Damascius, *Life of Isidore* 57 C. For Alexandrian natural philosophy, see Praechter 1910: 155–56; Verrycken 1990: 200.

We can derive some conclusions about the shape of Ammonius' thought from internal evidence. First, he regards himself as an interpreter or commentator (ἐξηγητής). A good commentator should be intelligent and diligent in pursuing the truth through the study of his text, but also not a slave to the source (Ammonius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 8.11–19; cf. Elias, *On Aristotle's Categories*, 122.25–123.11). This view rubbed off on Ammonius' disciples (e.g. Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 7.23–32), and it's likely that Simplicius also draws from Ammonius his emphasis on the commentator's role as harmonizer of Plato and Aristotle, since Ammonius goes to considerable trouble to show that Aristotle does not really criticize Plato (cf. Asclepius, *On Aristotle's Metaphysics* 69.17–27), whereas Syrianus and Proclus had defended Plato against Aristotle.[49]

Two aspects of Ammonius' Aristotelian exegesis are particularly noteworthy. Simplicius reports that Ammonius spilled considerable ink on a proof that the Aristotelian god is both final *and* efficient cause of the cosmos and everything in it (see texts in Sorabji 2004.2, 8(c)). He resisted Peripatetic interpreters like Alexander, who made Aristotle's god solely the *final* cause of the whole cosmos, and efficient cause of nothing but the heavens' motions.[50] This allowed Ammonius to harmonize Aristotle's intellect and "unmoved mover" with Plato's account of a productive demiurge in the *Timaeus*, replying to Proclus' critique of Aristotle (Proclus, *On Plato's Timaeus* 1.266.28–268.24). Although Ammonius strove to harmonize Plato and Aristotle, the resulting interpretation of Aristotle would also later prove valuable to Islamic and Christian theologians. Secondly, Ammonius' commentary on the "sea-battle" (*On Interpretation* 9) has become in its own right a minor classic,[51] in which he describes two arguments for determinism before suggesting, against determinism, that statements about singular contingent future events ("there will be a sea-battle tomorrow", *On Interpretation* 9, 18b17–25, 19a30–32) must be either true or false *indefinitely* (οὐκ ἀφωρισμένως).[52]

More attention, however, has focused on Ammonius' metaphysics, due to Praechter's suggestion that he espoused a pre-Plotinian theology better suited to Christianity. Ammonius describes himself as a close follower of

49 See Blank 2010: 663.

50 Simplicius, *On Aristotle's On the Heavens* 271.13–21 and *On Aristotle's Physics* 1360.24–1363.24. See Blank 2014: 3.2.

51 See for example Sorabji 1998.

52 For this, see Blank 2014: 3.3. Ammonius may build on a distinction offered by Alexander, *Questions* 1.4 (Sharples 1992, 32–36).

Proclus,[53] and this seems to be true. But on Praechter's view,[54] Ammonius compressed the upper hypostases of Proclan Neoplatonism, reframing the Intellect or Demiurge as the highest God, and omitting or de-emphasizing the transcendent One or Good. From the Neoplatonic perspective, that would make Aristotle's divine Intellect—identified by Platonists with the hypostasis Intellect or *Nous*—into the highest hypostasis, and facilitate syncretism with contemporary Christianity.

But there are difficulties.[55] Asclepius' commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, our best source for Ammonius' metaphysics, highlights the transcendence of the One beyond Intellect.[56] Even in the commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, which is meant to be elementary, Ammonius retains the standard three hypostases (*On Aristotle's On the Interpretation* 24.24–29). Admittedly, Ammonius has little to say explicitly about the 'henads', or fundamental divine individualities, that populate Proclus' first hypostasis; but his language in the commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* seems to presuppose them ("divine ranks [...] each with its unique character [ἰδιότης]," 135.28–32).[57] If Ammonius did develop small technical differences from Proclus in theology, there is no reason to put that down to Christian doctrinal pressure.[58] Perhaps the natural place to look for an explanation is where Damascius suggests: Ammonius specializes in commentary on Aristotle, and especially enjoys the study of the natural sciences. He is arguably less *interested* in the upper stories of Neoplatonic metaphysics.

6 Olympiodorus

Ammonius lectured into the second decade of the sixth century, at least through the dramatic date of Zacharias' dialogue *Ammonius*. His chair in philosophy then passed (indirectly) to a young professor, Olympiodorus, likely

53 Ammonius, *On Aristotle's On Interpretation* 1.3–11.

54 Praechter 1912: 5 n. 5.

55 See Lloyd 1970, Hadot 1978, Verrycken 1990, and Blank 2010: 663–66.

56 Verrycken 1990: 205–08.

57 Verrycken 1990: 213. Verrycken notes (following Saffrey and Westerink 1978: LXXXVI) that the henads are not discussed at all in Asclepius' commentary on the *Metaphysics*, and suggests that Ammonius' thought may have changed, though this might also be a function of the source material.

58 Blank 2010: 665–66.

born between AD 495 and 505.[59] Olympiodorus sometimes refers to Ammonius as "forefather" or "ancestor," which might indicate a literal family connection, or (more probably) a professional succession.[60] If the latter is true, it is plausible that another person held the chair between Ammonius and Olympiodorus. John Philoponus, the editor of Ammonius' lectures an otherwise tempting candidate, is ruled out, on the grounds that he is named professor of letters (γραμματικός), not professor of philosophy (φιλόσοφος). The most likely intervening party is a mathematician named Eutocius, who lectured in Alexandria on Porphyry's *Isagoge* (Elias, *On Aristotle's Prior Analytics* 134.4).

We know little of Olympiodorus apart from his lectures, preserved in students' notes taken "from his voice" (ἀπὸ φωνῆς).[61] He was once confused with the deacon Olympiodorus, which appears to be chronologically impossible,[62] and with an author of alchemical texts (see below). But we can retrieve some genuine outlines of his life and work from internal evidence.

Olympiodorus was likely born and raised in Alexandria.[63] When he was appointed to the chair, he was still young and finding his feet. His lectures on Plato offer clues to his intellectual development over a long career, which stretched at least until AD 565.[64] His course on Plato's *Gorgias* relies heavily on anecdotes and reports of Ammonius, especially in the later lectures.[65] Westerink reasonably concludes that these lectures were delivered early in Olympiodorus' life.[66] His course on the *Alcibiades* is more complex, and draws on a richer reservoir of sources, demonstrating familiarity with Damascius as

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59 See Westerink 1962: XIII–XIV; Wildberg 2008a; Opsomer 2010; Tarrant 1997. Olympiodorus was old enough to hear Ammonius lecture in the 520s, so he could not have been born much later than 505. He lived to lecture at least until 565, so he could not have been born much earlier than 495.

60 Compare Proclus' use of προπάτωρ at *On Plato's Parmenides* 1058.22, and Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 29.

61 For the locution, see Richard 1950.

62 Westerink 1976: 20.

63 At *On Aristotle's Meteorology* 169.34, Alexandria is "our city"; see also *On Plato's Alcibiades* 2.80–2 (Opsomer 2010: 697n2).

64 Olympiodorus' commentary on Aristotle's *Meteorology* can be dated after 565, on account of his description of a comet that year (52.31).

65 As has been frequently pointed out; see e.g. Westerink 1990: 331; Watts 2010: 61–2. For exegesis, e.g., at 32.2, 41.9; for personal anecdotes, 24.2, 39.2, 40.5, 44.5, 44.6, 48.5, with comments by Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant 1998: 252n739.

66 Westerink 1990: 331; see also Jackson, Lycos and Tarrant 1998: 3–4.

well as Proclus.[67] These (presumably later) lectures on the *Alcibiades* are more difficult to date, but it is reasonable to suppose that they belong to the later 550s or 560s.[68]

The following courses can be attributed to Olympiodorus with confidence. The dates of the latter commentaries are chiefly educated guesswork, as described above. In rough curricular order, they illustrate the range of teaching that was still available in Olympiodorus' school:

On Porphyry's *Isagoge* (lost, but serves as a source for David and Elias' lectures);
Prolegomena to Aristotelian Philosophy (extant);
On Aristotle's *Categories* (extant);
On Aristotle's *On the Interpretation* (partially extant as scholia);[69]
On Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption* (lost, but mentioned by Arabic sources);[70]
On Aristotle's *Meteorology* (extant; delivered in 565);
On Aristotle's *On the Soul* (lost, but mentioned by Arabic sources);[71]
On Plato's *Alcibiades* (extant; delivered *ca*. 555–560?);
On Plato's *Gorgias* (extant; delivered in the 520s?);
On Plato's *Phaedo* (extant for *Phaedo* 62 C–79 E; delivered between 530s and 540s?);
On Plato's *Sophist* (lost, but cited in Arabic sources, and mentioned by Olympiodorus himself).[72]

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67 For instance, Olympiodorus accepts Proclus' interpretation of the phrase "self itself" (αὐτό τὸ αὐτό, from *Alcibiades* 130 D) without discussion in his lectures on *Gorgias* (18.2, 103.26–104.2) and *Phaedo* (8.6.10–12), but in lecturing on the *Alcibiades* he attempts to adjudicate and harmonize Proclus and Damascius (204.15–205.7; 209.15–210.11; see also 5.17–8.14 on the topic or σκοπός of the dialogue). See Opsomer 2010: 698.

68 At 141.1–3 Olympiodorus comments that "the endowment [of the Academy] has lasted . . . despite the many confiscations that are underway," implying that these lectures predate the closure of the Athenian school in 529. But he also refers to the recent arrival of a governor named Hephaestus (2.80–2), which likely took place in 546. Perhaps the endowment of the Academy continued after 529 (Tannery 1896: 286; Westerink 1990: 330).

69 Scholia in *Vaticanus Urbinas graecus* 35, included in Tarán 1978.

70 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* 251.5; see Opsomer 2010: 699n9; Westerink 1976: 21–22n32–33.

71 And perhaps excerpted in one manuscript, *Ambrosianus Q74 Sup*.

72 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* 246.11–12 (Dodge 1970: 593) and 215.13–14 (Dodge 1970: 604). Olympiodorus mentions lectures on the *Sophist* (*On Plato's Alcibiades* 110.8–9).

A surviving Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy has often been credited to Olympiodorus, but is likely the work of a student.[73] There is also a commentary on Paulus of Alexandria (an astrological manual), dateable to summer 564; the lecturer, who presumably belongs to Olympiodorus' school, demonstrates stylistic and substantial affinities with Olympiodorus' school,[74] but disagrees with Olympiodorus himself on some key points (Opsomer 2010: 710). The anonymous notes on the *Phaedo* and *Philebus* preserved in *Marcianus graecus* 196 have been proven to belong to Damascius.[75] An alchemical commentary on Zosimus of Panoplis, *On Operation* was attributed to Olympiodorus in antiquity or later, but its treatment of Aristotle and Plato could hardly have been authored by an Alexandrian philosophy professor; the attribution probably sought to lend the manuscript the authority of Olympiodorus' name. Perhaps, however, the author did build upon Olympiodorus' lectures on Aristotle's *Meteorology*;[76] he may have been a Christian alchemist[77] who studied under Olympiodorus.

Although Olympiodorus saw the exile of his peers in the Athenian school, the surviving records from his lifetime of lecturing suggest no hostility.[78] He did not withdraw from the philosophical positions that typified later ancient Platonism. Instead, his students encountered a wholesale defender of the web-work of Hellenic *paideia*,[79] who professed traditionally pagan views about contentious philosophical topics including the eternity of the natural world, the reverence of stone images, the transmigration of souls, the nature of *daimônes*, and even the virtue of ritual theurgy (see below), while carefully making room for his students' convictions.

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73 Westerink 1962; Westerink, Trouillard and Segonds 1990.

74 Though attributed in the past to Ammonius' brother Heliodorus, the lecturer dates his course to summer 564, which makes Heliodorus an implausible author. The attribution to Olympiodorus' school rests on stylistic resemblance (the θεωρία–λέξις division) and similarities with Olympiodorus' lectures on Aristotle's *Meteorology*, delivered the following year. (See Opsomer 2010: 700).

75 Westerink 1959: XV–XX; 1977: 15–77.

76 Viano 2006.

77 The author ascribes to "the Lord" (94.13–15) a quotation from St. Paul (*Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 3.6), as Wildberg 2008a: §4 points out.

78 An epigram attributed by David to Olympiodorus in the *Greek Anthology* might suggest otherwise: "Had the writing of Plato not checked my impulse / I would have loosened by now the grievous, baneful bond of life" (*Appendix* 177). But the context is unlikely to be autobiographical, reflecting instead Olympiodorus' philosophical views on suicide and his exegesis of the *Phaedo*.

79 See Tarrant 1997: 182–183.

6.1 *Thought*

In metaphysics, Olympiodorus is an orthodox Neoplatonist: he describes the One, Intellect (subdivided into the triad Being, Life, and Intellect), and Soul (*On Plato's Alcibiades* 103.10; 109.18–111.2). While praising Aristotle's recognition of a single first principle in *Metaphysics* 12 (*Lambda*), he criticizes him for ranking that principle with Intellect, the second hypostasis (*On Plato's Alcibiades* 122.13; 145.6–9):[80] this is particularly interesting, given Ammonius' preference for harmonization, and the criticism may reflect Olympiodorus' deeper engagement in this commentary with Proclus and Damascius. He is also strongly committed to the harmony of Plato and Aristotle in general (*On Plato's Alcibiades* 5.29–32). In psychology, Olympiodorus stresses the crucial role of the "common concepts" (κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι) that we all share in virtue of our participation in Intellect (*On Plato's Alcibiades* 18.1–5; 40.18–41.4):[81] once refined by dialectic, they make philosophical demonstration possible (e.g., *On Plato's Gorgias* 3.1).

Olympiodorus' lectures do not compromise on major points of pagan difference with Christianity. The eternity of the cosmos was a central point of tension: Zacharias had attacked Ammonius on just this point, and John Philoponus had used this point to distinguish himself, as a Christian, from paganism. But even as late as 565, Olympiodorus continues to defend the eternity and divinity of the cosmos.[82] He also rejects the theory of eternal punishment (*On Plato's Gorgias* 263.17–264.26) and maintains the value of theurgy (*On Plato's Phaedo* 8.2.1–20).

Building on his commitment to the "common notions" that we all share,[83] Olympiodorus is nonetheless careful to strike a conciliatory tone with the "popular doctrine" (συνήθεια) of Christianity.[84] One often-cited example occurs in his lectures on the *Alcibiades*, where he substitutes 'Democriteans' for Proclus' parallel (coded) critique of Christianity.[85] But it was especially Olympiodorus' *manner* of accommodating Christianity that led Westerink to attribute to him "a pliability so extreme indeed that it might be more correct to speak of a teaching routine than a philosophy."[86] It has appeared to some commentators

80 Opsomer 2010: 705 n29 also points to a parallel at David (Elias), *On Aristotle's Categories* 120.24–30.

81 See Opsomer 2010: 705–6.

82 Olympiodorus, *On Aristotle's Meteorology* 115.11–13; 118.5–119.8; 120.13–14 and 20–21; 153.19–21 (cited in Westerink 1990: 333).

83 Tarrant 1997: 189–91.

84 With Tarrant 1997, see Griffin 2014b.

85 Proclus, *On Plato's Alcibiades* 264.5–6; Olympiodorus, *On Plato's Alcibiades* 92.4–9.

86 Westerink 1976: 23. Tarrant has also stressed Olympiodorus' primary commitment as a teacher of Hellenism, a "classicist" or "champion of some ancient heritage that needed

that his willingness to accommodate other viewpoints might lead to an impossibly pliant and so incoherent philosophy, a "toothless Platonism" (see Wildberg 2005, 321).[87] Thus Olympiodorus excuses Socrates' oath "by Hera" (*On Plato's Gorgias* 449 D) with the remark that "we should not understand things spoken in mythical mode in their surface meaning," stressing that the name "Hera" really signifies the rational soul (*On Plato's Gorgias* 4.3). "We too know," Olympiodorus continues (καὶ γὰρ ἴσμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς), "that there is the one first cause, namely God, and not many." Continuing with this general theme, Olympiodorus asks his students not to believe that "philosophers honor representations in stone as divine" (*On Plato's Gorgias* 47.5). Representations of gods in stone serve "as a reminder" of bodiless and immaterial "powers," reflecting Olympiodorus' earlier comment that different gods could be viewed as "powers" of the one God.

As Tarrant has pointed out,[88] the "pliability" that has been attributed to Olympiodorus in his relationship to Christianity should be viewed in the broader light of his philosophy as a whole. In all these cases, Olympiodorus' treatment of names and myths is not *merely* a response to Christianity. All myths are falsehoods picturing the truth,[89] but contemporary society "respects only what is apparent, and does not search at all for what is concealed in the depths of the myth" (*On Plato's Gorgias* 46.4). His treatment of the dialogue form maintains that the characters are allegorical; the "actual truth" which the philosophers pursue in a myth is the ἐπιμύθιον, the moral of the story (*On Plato's Gorgias* 34.4). It is characteristic of Olympiodorus to suggest that superficial disagreement on the level of "names" overlies genuine agreement on the deeper level of reality. Arguably, Olympiodorus strives to construct a distinctive identity for himself as a "philosopher."[90] He frames all non-philosophers as engaged in the study of "appearances" (φαινόμενα) or myths, thereby liable to doctrinal disagreement and dispute—which may include the superficial disputes between Christians and pagans—while genuine philosophers drill down to the real, psychological meaning of myth and doctrine, and therefore rarely disagree.

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to be kept alive," while drawing out his views on the common ground of Platonism and Christianity. Indeed, Olympiodorus regarded himself as a teacher first and foremost, an expounder of Hellenic *paideia* (Tarrant 1997: 188–192).

87 See Griffin 2014a: Introduction.

88 Tarrant 1997.

89 On this point, see also *Republic* 2, 377 A, and Jackson & *alii* 1998: 290n876.

90 I try to develop this case further in Griffin 2014a.

7 Elias, David, and Stephanus

We have scattered evidence for Alexandrian lecturers who seem likely to have been Olympiodorus' pupils, or substantially indebted to the intellectual tradition of Ammonius and Olympiodorus. Their names imply Christian identities, although the lectures attributed to them continue to be uncompromisingly 'Hellenic' on points of doctrinal dispute such as the eternity of the world.[91]

7.1 *Elias*[92]

An incomplete manuscript of a commentary on the *Prior Analytics* is attributed to a certain "Elias," described as a "philosopher" and "ἀπὸ ἐπάρχων" ("former eparch"). The commentary demonstrates sufficient verbal similarities to the lectures of Olympiodorus that it seems reasonable to infer that the author was Olympiodorus' student.[93] This title ἀπὸ ἐπάρχων is ambiguous:[94] it might simply be an honorific bestowed on a cultivated person in recognition of cultural achievement, or it might identify Elias with a prefect of Ilyrium in December of 541, the addressee of Justinian's Novella 153. The latter identification seems less likely.

Elias taught courses on Aristotle and Plato, according to his account in the *Prior Analytics* commentary,[95] but only his lectures on Aristotelian logic survive. There is an introduction to philosophy and commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, an introduction to Aristotle and commentary on the *Categories* (which may be credited either to David or to Elias),[96] and the partial commentary on Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*. Modern scholars tend to use the name "Elias" as shorthand for the author of these commentaries, without committing to a specific historical identity.[97]

Elias retains a basically Platonist outlook: he defends the eternity of the cosmos,[98] and repeats that the goal of philosophy is "likeness to God" (*Theaetetus* 176 A–B). He does allow for miracles (242.11, echoing Philoponus' report of Ammonius, *On the Categories* 169.19), and occasionally the manu-

91 See Westerink 1990.

92 See now Wildberg 2008b.

93 Westerink offers a thorough list at 1990: 336–8.

94 Westerink 1990: 336.

95 Elias, *On Aristotle's Prior Analytics* 123.9–11.

96 Contrast Ouzounian 1994 and Goulet 2000b; see also Arevšatyan 1969, Mahé 1990, and Militello 2014: 94n13.

97 Wildberg 2008a.

98 Elias, *On Aristotle's Prior Analytics* 120.16–17; 187.6–7.

scripts have a parenthetical interjection such as "according to the false views of the Hellenes,"[99] though with his editor Busse, we might see these as the student recorder's or copyist's interventions. Like Olympiodorus, Elias often comes across as a lively lecturer, citing a diverse array of classical sources.[100]

7.2 *David*[101]

The commentator named in some Greek manuscripts as "David" is an even more mysterious figure. A commentary on the *Categories* is attributed to him in the manuscript, but has recently been credited to Elias. He also delivered an *Introduction to Philosophy* and commented on Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*. The author of these texts refers to Olympiodorus (*Introduction to Philosophy* 16.3, 31.34, 64.32), and has often been supposed to be his pupil. There is little evidence in the Greek tradition for David: only sixteenth-century manuscripts and one from the fourteenth century name "David" as the author; the earlier manuscripts are anonymous or offer different attributions, for example, to Elias, or to other respected figures.[102]

The *Introduction to Philosophy* was translated into Armenian before or during the fourteenth century. There also relatively complete Armenian translations of the commentaries on *Isagoge* and *Prior Analytics*. The Armenian tradition attributed these to David the Invincible,[103] a theologian and formidable debater described as active during the fifth century AD. While chronology may pose problems for that traditional identification, the influence of David in Armenian is astounding, and bears further study (see Calzolari and Barnes 2009).

There is also a commentary *On Porphyry's Isagoge* that seems closely related to David's commentary, but whose authorship belongs neither to David nor to Elias; this was published by Westerink, naming the author "Pseudo-Elias (Pseudo-David)."[104]

99 Elias, *On Aristotle's Prior Analytics* 7.3; 12.1; 69.22.

100 Wildberg 2008a: "there are 15 quotations from Homer as well as numerous scattered references to Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Marinus, Hierocles, Pythagoras, Archilochus, Theognis, Herodotus, Callimachus, Demosthenes, Sophocles, Euripides, Menander, Galen, and an unnamed Stoic."

101 See Wildberg 2008c, Calzolari and Barnes 2009.

102 Wildberg 2008c.

103 See Muradyan 2014; translation by Kendall and Thompson 1983.

104 See Marcovich 1975, Westerink 1967; for translation, Mueller-Jourdan 2007.

7.3 *Stephanus*[105]

Among the last known representatives of the school is an author named "Stephanus" in the heading of a course on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*. Stephanus explicitly recognizes the authority of Christian doctrine and the Bible, but he does not revise the basic views of Platonism: he describes (and does not refute) the eternity of the cosmos,[106] the rationality of the heavens,[107] and the existence of the human soul before birth.[108] Some passages align closely with Christian views, such as Stephanus' treatment of future contingents and divine foreknowledge (*On Aristotle's On Interpretation* 35.34–36.8).

Who was this commentator? The ninth-century *Concise Chronography* describes one "Stephanus, the Alexandrian philosopher" who "interpreted the table (κανών)" under Heraclius (who reigned in Constantinople from AD 610–641). A handbook on Ptolemy's *Handy Tables*, composed in Constantinople in 617–18, is extant and attributed in a fifteenth-century copy to "Stephanus the great philosopher."[109] In 1879, Usener combined this evidence into a very attractive hypothesis: the Aristotelian commentator Stephanus began his teaching career in Alexandria, but moved to Constantinople shortly after the accession of Heraclius in 610 (likely bringing with him the manuscripts of the school, on which our tradition is based).[110] There he was named ecumenical professor at the Imperial Academy (οἰκούμενος διδάσκαλος). If Usener were correct, we would be better informed about Stephanus than about Elias or David;[111] following Westerink (1986), we would also have a good explanation for the survival of the school's lecture records to the present day. Unfortunately, the evidence for this narrative is insecure. The title "ecumenical professor" appears to be anachronistic (as it is not attested before the ninth century) and cannot provide support for the hypothesis of an imperially sponsored appointment.[112]

With the seventh century, the Alexandrian school passes out of history. But by the early tenth century, Constantinople was on the verge of a scholarly renaissance. One of its leading intellectuals was studying the celebrated

105 See Usener 1879, Vancourt 1941: 43–8, Wolska-Conus, W. 1989, Goulet 2007, Rashed 2002, Roueché forthcoming, 2012, 2011.

106 "According to Aristotle," 540.27. For these references, I am indebted to Westerink 1990: 340.

107 595.33–598.7.

108 541.20–542.5.

109 The scholar is Joannes Chortasmenos (*Vaticanus Urbinas graecus* 80; see Usener 1879: 3–5).

110 So conjectures Westerink 1986: lxxvii; see also Rashed 2002.

111 See Westerink 1990: 341, with notes.

112 Roueché forthcoming, 2012, and 2011.

'philosophical collection' of vellum manuscripts, which had perhaps arrived from Alexandria two centuries earlier, including the single copy that preserved Olympiodorus' Platonic lectures (*Marcianus graecus* 196). That manuscript vanished for five centuries, before finally reappearing in the collection of Basilius Bessarion, who donated it to the Senate of Venice in 1468. There, like many of the Greek manuscripts pouring out of the East, it contributed to the renaissance of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotle considered in this chapter.

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