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Alexandria as a Centre of Greek Philosophy in Later Classical Antiquity*

H. J. BLUMENTHAL

Any discussion of Greek Alexandria may properly take its starting point from the work of P. M. Fraser, even if only to dissent from it. In the preface to *Ptolemaic Alexandria* Fraser observes that philosophy was one of the "items" that "were not effectively transplanted to Alexandria."¹ In his chapter on philosophy, talking of the establishment of the main philosophical schools at Athens, Fraser writes that it "remained the centre of philosophical studies down to the closing of the schools by Justinian in A.D. 563."² The first of these statements is near enough the truth, since the Alexandria of the Ptolemies was not distinguished in philosophy as it was in literature or science, though even then some important things happened during that period too. But the implication that this situation continued during the Roman and early Byzantine periods is misleading, and by the end of the period simply false.³ The purpose of this paper is to examine some aspects of the considerable contribution that Alexandria made to the philosophical tradition that continued into the Islamic and Christian middle ages and beyond, and to show that it may lay claim to have been at least equal to that of Athens itself.

Though I do not want to spend long on the Ptolemaic period, a few points should be made before we jump forward into the third century A.D. That Alexandria at this time was not a centre of philosophical activity is true enough, but perhaps unimportant. That may strike some as a strange thing to say, the more so just now when the study of Hellenistic philosophy has become rather fashionable. Nevertheless it is not, I think, difficult to justify. The point is that most of the philosophical endeavour of these times was a dead end. On the one hand much was said and written by disparate groups of so-called philosophers trying to tie up loose ends or exploit suggestions made by the great philosophers of fifth- and fourth-century Athens, people

* All references to the Greek commentators on Aristotle are to the Berlin Academy edition, *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, unless otherwise specified.

¹ P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) viii.

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like the Megarians and Cyrenaics, whose very names have been forgotten by all but professional historians of philosophy. More important were the Epicureans and Stoics and those originally labelled Academics who were members of the Platonic Academy but abandoned Platonism to lay the foundations of the movement known as Scepticism. By the early third century A.D. even these movements were dead. It is by no means clear that Alexander of Aphrodisias' treatise *On Fate*, dedicated to the Emperors Caracalla and Severus, and directed against the Stoics,⁴ was still part of a live debate.⁵ At about the same time the Sceptic Sextus Empiricus worked at Alexandria, but by the time Augustine wrote his treatise against the Academics Scepticism had been defunct for some two centuries: Augustine's work is primarily an argument against ideas he found in the pages of Cicero.⁶ Such influence as Stoicism had was mainly through the adoption of some of its ethical notions by the founder of Neoplatonism.⁷ Epicureanism too had become defunct—it was in any case outside the ongoing discussion among philosophers of other persuasions—and was not to surface again till the Renaissance, when Lorenzo Valla took up and discussed some of its ideas.⁸ Both these schools had some appeal to the practical and unmetaphysical minds of the Roman upper classes, but perhaps the main contribution of Stoicism was that some of its nominal adherents, such as Posidonius, espoused Platonic doctrines and helped to keep them alive and topical. Conversely, a nominal Platonist like Antiochus took on so much Stoicism that he was seen by some as a virtual Stoic himself.⁹ Significantly, both came from the Near East, Posidonius from Apamea in modern Syria, Antiochus from Ascalon in modern Israel, Seleucid and not Ptolemaic territory. We might note in passing the rather obvious but rarely mentioned fact that philosophy, though sometimes centred at Athens, was not generally an activity of natives of that city. Socrates and Plato (and Epicurus) were exceptions to this rule in the Classical period, Plutarch the son of Nestorius in the revived Academy of the late fourth to early sixth centuries A.D.

The two kinds of philosophy that were to be of lasting importance in the Christian and Islamic worlds remained in the background during the period we have just sketched. Perhaps the most important event in their contemporary history was the editing and organizing of Aristotle's

⁴ See however the cautions expressed by P. Thillet in his Budé edition, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise. Traité sur le destin* (Paris 1984) lxxxiii–xc.

⁵ Though there is some evidence that there were still occupants of the Stoic chair at Athens in the mid-second century A.D.; cf. F. Ueberweg and K. Praechter, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* I¹² (1926; repr. Basle 1967) 665.

⁶ Cf. C. Kirwan, *Augustine* (London 1989) 16–17.

⁷ As noticed by Porphyry, *Plot.* 4–5.

⁸ For a brief treatment, see now H. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London and New York 1989) 144–49.

⁹ Cf. Cicero, *Academica* 2. 43. 132.

rediscovered works at Rome, the most important process the collection of material in the library at Alexandria.

Before we take up the matters which are the main concern of this paper, a word should be said about two figures, one of whom is so shadowy as to be almost unknown, the other well known and accessible through voluminous extant writings, but of relatively little importance in the Platonic tradition to which Alexandria contributed so heavily. The first of these is Eudorus, sometimes called "of Alexandria." Various descriptions as Platonist, Neopythagorean and "eclectic," Eudorus has been credited with the revival of Platonism after its dormant period. Though most would agree that the credit for that should rather be given to figures like Posidonius and Antiochus—or his teacher Philo, called "of Larissa" to distinguish him from his Alexandrian namesake—Eudorus might be the person who introduced the Platonism of his time to Alexandria and in any case might be the best claimant to the title of founder of Middle Platonism, one of several difficult and controversial matters which there is no time to discuss here.¹⁰ The second is Philo, who certainly absorbed a considerable amount of Platonic thought, but who remains peripheral to the study of pagan Greek philosophy, in spite of the efforts of some French scholars in the last century and the early years of this one to show that he played a major part in the formation of Neoplatonism through his influence on Plotinus.¹¹ Philo nevertheless deserves a brief digression in so far as he was a typical product of the Hellenistic tradition which continued into early Roman Alexandria. A member of the Jewish community at Alexandria, his work presents the application of a deep Hellenistic Greek philosophical culture to the discussion of the theological problems of Judaism. It is comparable to what was done later by Christians like Clement and Origen, whose minds were, however, clearer on philosophical matters, because the eclectic tendencies of Greek philosophy were on the decline. Philo is sometimes described as an adherent of that philosophical tendency—I am deliberately avoiding referring to it as a school or group—which is labelled Middle Platonism. It was not, for the century and a half or thereabouts between Philo and Plotinus, particularly associated with Alexandria and its importance lies primarily in its contribution to the formation of Neoplatonism.

That kind of philosophy, which was to dominate all pagan and some Christian philosophy for the three centuries after it began, certainly started in Alexandria, even if its founder subsequently lived and taught at Rome. For reasons which we shall see, the precise nature and content of the Alexandrian contribution is extremely difficult to assess. We are dealing with two figures about whose personal lives there is a notorious scarcity of information: Plotinus, who seems on the whole to have avoided talking

¹⁰ On these matters, cf. e.g. J. M. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977) 115 ff.

¹¹ Cf. e.g. H. Guyot, *Les réminiscences de Philon le Juif chez Plotin* (Paris 1906).

about his personal life—Porphyry says that he was apparently ashamed of being in a body¹²—and his teacher Ammonius.

It should be said immediately that there is virtually no evidence about Ammonius and that attempts to reconstruct his philosophy have therefore been uniformly and inevitably unsuccessful.¹³ About his life we know even less: There have even been inconclusive discussions about the significance of his name Saccas, which is only securely attested in Theodoret (*GAC* 6. 60) and lexicon entries derived from him.¹⁴ Theodoret's comment, "he abandoned the sacks in which he used to carry about grain and took up the life of philosophy," is presumably ultimately responsible for the description of Ammonius by an archaeologist whose expertise lay in other fields as "a porter from the Alexandrian docks."¹⁵ The little that we do know is, however, significant.

First there is his name, the Ammonius part, which does indicate Alexandrian, if not necessarily Egyptian, rather than Greek or Roman origins.¹⁶ The Saccas is useless: porter, wearer of a rough cloak, Iranian or what have you. We do know, because Porphyry tells us so in his life of Plotinus, that Plotinus found that he was the only satisfactory teacher after a number of others had been found wanting (*Plot.* 3. 11–12). That would bear out the view that there was not a great deal of worthwhile philosophy going on at Alexandria at this time, though Porphyry's statement does not rule out the possibility that there were other competent philosophers about who for one reason or another did not attract the intellect or sympathy of their intending pupil. It might also indicate—and here we are not, I think, sufficiently informed—that the Christian philosophers did not wish to take pagan pupils, a situation which probably changed subsequently. The contrary inhibition did not apply, since Ammonius, whom one generally assumes to be a pagan—though that could be wrong—may have taught both Origen the Christian as well as his pagan namesake and Plotinus. It has been suggested, for example by A. K. Bowman in his book on post-Pharaonic Egypt, that Ammonius was perhaps a Christian convert to paganism,¹⁷ but there is no good evidence that I know of for this view. Apart from a very small number of comments with poor credentials in later writers, we know only two things about his instruction. One is that there

¹² Cf. *Plot.* 1. 1–4, but see ch. 3.

¹³ For recent discussions of what can be known, cf. H.-R. Schwyzler, "Ammonios Sakkas, der Lehrer Plotins," *Vortr. Rhein.-Westfäl. Akad. der Wiss.* G. 260 (Opladen 1983); F. M. Schroeder, "Ammonius Saccas," in *ANRW* II.36.1 (Berlin/New York 1987) 493–526.

¹⁴ Otherwise it appears in Ammianus Marcellinus 22. 16. 16, where it is probably a later insertion; cf. H. Dörrie, "Ammonios, der Lehrer Plotins," *Hermes* 83 (1955) 467.

¹⁵ M. Wheeler in the Swan's *Hellenic Cruises Handbook* for 1964 (London 1964) 211.

¹⁶ On names of this type, derived from Egyptian gods but also used by Greeks, cf. P. M. Fraser, "Two Studies in the Cult of Sarapis in the Hellenistic World," *Opuscula Atheniensia* 3 (1960) 15–16.

¹⁷ A. K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs* (London 1986) 230.

was an element of the esoteric about it, because Plotinus and Origen (not the Christian¹⁸), as well as one Erennius, a third pupil in the group, made an agreement not to divulge the content of Ammonius' instruction (Porph. *Plot.* 3. 24–28). The other is that Plotinus himself not only immediately recognised Ammonius as the teacher he had been seeking and wished for no other (*Plot.* 12–14), but that in his own philosophizing he introduced—or conveyed—the mind of Ammonius. The precise sense of the Greek is not clear: τὸν Ἀμμωνίου φέρων νοῦν ἐν ταῖς ἐξετάσεσιν is how Porphyry expresses it (*Plot.* 14. 15 f.). Since the immediately preceding words stress Plotinus' independence, the point here must be that Plotinus followed Ammonius in approach rather than teaching, but that there was some doctrine or doctrines which Ammonius' close pupils regarded as very important follows from the story about the agreement to keep them within the philosophical group. What exactly "the mind of Ammonius" means we do not then know: A possibility is that it meant, among other things, interpreting Plato in a highly metaphysical sense with the aid of certain Aristotelian principles, for that is certainly what Plotinus did.

That is about all one can safely say about Ammonius himself. But, if we may believe Porphyry, and there is no reason to think we should not, then it is the case that this almost unknown figure at Alexandria himself rose above what appears to have been a very mediocre level of philosophical activity, and provided the essential stimulus for the development of the greatest mind in Greek philosophy after Plato and Aristotle themselves.

I have expressly referred to Ammonius as someone at Alexandria rather than an Alexandrian, because we know nothing of his life, and he could have come from anywhere: Only his name, as I have mentioned, indicates that he was from Egypt rather than some other part of the Roman empire. I leave to others better able than I am to discuss such matters the question of what constituted being an Alexandrian at this time—or any other—if it was not just a matter of possession of a citizenship whose holders are not usually individually identifiable, and pass on to Plotinus himself, about whom there are similar problems.

We are told by Eunapius (*VS* 455) that Plotinus came from Lycopolis, modern Asyūt, a town in Upper Egypt some 500 km inland from Alexandria. Readers of the Loeb translation of Eunapius might be misled by the translation, "Plotinus was a philosopher of Egyptian birth": All the Greek says is that he was from Egypt, ἐξ Αἰγύπτου. About his early life we know nothing, because, as we learn from his biographer, he was as reluctant to discuss such trivia about the material world as his origins or his home as he was to have his portrait done (Porph. *Plot.* 1. 1–9). That must, unfortunately, cast some doubt on the correctness of Eunapius' naming of his birthplace, for which there is no evidence in any earlier source:

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. A. H. Armstrong's note ad loc. in the Loeb Classical Library Plotinus, vol. I.

Eunapius himself is not the most reliable of writers. There are no indications that Plotinus' culture was other than Greek: The mispronunciations reported by Porphyry (*Plot.* 13. 1–5) are not, as they have sometimes been claimed to be, evidence to the contrary. His name is uninformative because by now plenty of people of multifarious origins had Roman names. Readers of Lawrence Durrell might "know" that he was black, but there is no evidence for this, and the one portrait bust which is generally assumed to be of Plotinus, but may well not be, would be evidence to the contrary. The only thing we can add about Plotinus' period in Alexandria is that it lasted at least eleven years, since Porphyry tells us that that was the time he studied with (συνεσχόλασε) Ammonius (*Plot.* 3. 20): Were it not for the statement about the mind of Ammonius we should not even be able to conclude that he shared his teacher's views, for Aristotle after all stayed with Plato for twenty.

The question which now presents itself is how influential Plotinus was in the formation of the philosophy of his successors, and thus how far we may regard Neoplatonism as a specifically Alexandrian contribution to the history of philosophy. It cannot be said too often that "successors" must be used in a purely chronological sense, if only so as not to beg questions. In the early days of the study of Neoplatonism this might have seemed a pointless question: The pioneer French studies of Neoplatonism in the nineteenth century actually called the whole group "L'école d'Alexandrie."¹⁹

Two questions arise. In the first place we must look, at least briefly, at the continuity—or otherwise—of the Neoplatonic tradition. Secondly it is necessary to ask how far Plotinus is actually a full member of that tradition. The first of these questions is actually the more difficult. The second may be answered with a guarded "yes": Neoplatonism starts with Plotinus, but considerable changes were made to his form of it as time progressed. Let us return to the first.

We know that Plotinus taught Porphyry or, more safely, that Porphyry was a member of Plotinus' group of associates at Rome: He himself would have us believe that he was the most important of the group (cf. *Plot.* passim). Porphyry retired to Sicily. At some time, and at some place, he may have taught Iamblichus,²⁰ who came from Syria but whose movements are not known. Porphyry seems to have followed Plotinus in most matters, though questions have been raised about whether or not he subscribed to Plotinus' view that there were three intelligible hypostases: Some scholars have argued that he "telescoped" the intelligible world by doing away with the distinctions between them, and Soul and Intellect in particular.²¹ What

¹⁹ So e.g. E. Vacherot, *Histoire critique de l'Ecole d'Alexandrie* (Paris 1846–51).

²⁰ Eunapius, VS 458, tells us that he attached himself to Porphyry.

²¹ Cf. A. C. Lloyd in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge 1967) 288–89.

they do have in common is a relatively simple view of the structure of the intelligible universe, and in that both differ from Iamblichus and, to some extent, from all later Neoplatonists. Iamblichus' distinctive contributions were two. One was a huge elaboration of the complexity of the intelligible universe by the invention of extra entities to bridge the gaps between the parts of the earlier and simpler Neoplatonic world. The other was the admission of an alternative and no longer strictly philosophical system for that ascent to the One which was the goal of the philosophic life for all Neoplatonists. Before leaving Iamblichus I should perhaps say why I am not going to discuss his book, *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, which might seem to belong to our subject. In the first place this traditional title is incorrect.²² Secondly, apart from straight Neoplatonism, it contains a great deal of sub-philosophical material culled from a variety of sources: Very little of it is identifiably Egyptian, and, in so far as it is, it does not belong to the philosophical content of Neoplatonism.

Thereafter there is a gap in the tradition, or at least in our knowledge of it. The attempts to fill it are not entirely convincing, and our task of examining the Alexandrian contribution allows us to abstain from discussing this still unsatisfactory topic. We may, instead, note that most of those who came after Iamblichus seem to have been influenced by him to the extent of operating with systems more complex than that of Plotinus, though it is certainly not the case that he was followed in every detail even by those who express the greatest admiration for him. Moreover, this influence does not extend to the Christian Platonists to the same degree. Among them the simpler Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry seems to have held its own. The reasons for this are complex, but the most important may have been the provision of three clearly—or at least relatively clearly—defined hypostases corresponding in number if not, in the end, in relationship to the three components of the Christian god.

Both at Alexandria and at Athens there is a gap, either in activity or in our information about it, till the end of the fourth century and the turn of the fifth. We have some names, and some information, about who studied where and with whom, but virtually nothing about the contents of their studies or the philosophical views of those who taught them. At Athens the story resumes in some detail with Plutarch the son of Nestorius, at Alexandria with Hypatia and her pupil Hierocles. From then on, until the sixth century, Athens and Alexandria were the major centres of pagan

²² The correct title is "Master Abbamon's Reply to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo and Solutions to the Problems in it"; cf. M. Sicherl, *Die Handschriften, Ausgaben und Übersetzungen von Iamblichos De Mysteriis: Eine kritisch-historische Studie*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur 62 (Berlin 1957) 166, the *Notice in des Places* edition (Paris 1966) 6 and now H.-D. Saffrey, "Les livres IV à VII du *De Mysteriis* de Jamblique relus avec la Lettre de Porphyre à Anébon," in H. J. Blumenthal and E. G. Clark (edd.), *Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods* (London 1993) 144–45.

Neoplatonism, and developed along similar and interconnected lines. The leading masters at both were, for a prolonged period, students and teachers of those at the other, or engaged in controversy with them. So close was the relationship, both personal and intellectual, that some would now maintain that there were no serious differences between the two groups: For reasons which will emerge I do not think they should be referred to as schools. As in many questions where the prevailing view has changed, I think the pendulum has swung too far from the previously accepted opinion, launched by Praechter in a famous article in 1910, that there were, among others, distinct Alexandrian and Athenian movements in Platonism.²³

Whatever the intellectual differences between Athens and Alexandria may have been at the end of antiquity—a question to which we shall return—it is certainly true that all the major figures of late Greek Neoplatonism passed through Alexandria in the course of their education. As far as philosophy was concerned it was Alexandria that was the crossroads, focus or whatever other metaphor one might wish to use, of the whole of the philosophical activity of late pagan antiquity, and remained so till certain changes were caused by the Arab conquest just over a century after the alleged ending by Justinian of philosophical teaching by pagans in 529. We may compare its position with that of Paris in the thirteenth century. I mention Paris not merely because it is comparable with Alexandria as the leading centre of its time for the study of philosophy, but also because these two centres are the crucial junctions between the Greek and the Islamic philosophical traditions: Alexandria provided at least the first meeting point at one end, at the other Paris was the main centre for the reassumption of Greek thought, both directly and through the medium of the great Islamic thinkers who had absorbed and to some extent re-thought the work of the Greeks, and then exerted their own considerable influence on Western, if not Eastern, Christian philosophy. Curiously, the writings of the “Arabic” tradition had much more influence in the West than in the East. Thus Latin translations of Aristotle and his Greek commentators appeared at the same period as those of the Islamic philosophers and their commentaries on the Greeks, as well as of some basically Neoplatonic works lost in Greek, like the *Theology of Aristotle* and the *Liber de causis*. The best example of this confluence of traditions is perhaps the major ideological dispute about the unicity or otherwise of the human intellect ending in the well-known decree of 1210 banning the teaching of Aristotle.²⁴ The dispute was caused largely by the impact on the medieval West of Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle. The most offensive were those on the *De anima*, which in turn took as one of their starting points an interpretation of

²³ K. Praechter, “Richtungen und Schulen im Neuplatonismus,” in *Genethliakon C. Robert* (Berlin 1910) 105–55, reprinted in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. by H. Dörrie (Hildesheim 1973) 165–216.

²⁴ On these matters, cf. F. van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West* (Louvain 1955) 66–77.

Alexander maintaining the unicity of the intellect which was reported and discussed by the Alexandrian commentators.²⁵ Another possibly superficial but perhaps not unimportant characteristic shared by the Greek philosophers of late antiquity and their Arabic successors is that most of them were neither Greeks nor Arabs. As is well known, it is not always easy to establish the national origins of leading figures of late antiquity: These were often obscured by the outward trappings of the Roman citizenship they all shared. Plotinus, the one with the best claim to have been an Egyptian, and whom we have already discussed, is a case in point. Many of the others came from outlying parts and sometimes identifiably from other nations. Porphyry was a Phoenician from Tyre whose name was, in Greek transcription, Malkos (Porph. *Plot.* 17. 7 f.), and Damascius, perhaps the last original thinker in the Greek tradition, came, as his name implies, from Syria, while Proclus and Simplicius were from parts of Asia Minor not central to the Greek tradition: Their ancestry is unknown. Of the philosophers in the Arabic tradition al-Fārābī was a Turk, ibn-Sīnā (Avicenna) a Persian and ibn-Rushd (Averroes) a Maghrebite of uncertain descent. Why this was so is probably unanswerable, unless the answer is that philosophers are concerned with truths that are not constrained by time or space, but it is interesting to observe that both groups shared these accidental attributes of origin as well as the essential ones of intellectual affinity.

Most of the rest of this paper will be devoted to discussing the special characteristics of Alexandrian Platonism in its final period, and trying to establish how far it was peculiar to Alexandria. According to Praechter's view, which was the prevailing opinion until about fifteen years ago, Alexandrian Neoplatonism was characterised by a greater structural simplicity and, in particular, the abandonment of the transcendent One at the top of the system. That view was challenged by Ilsetraut Hadot, in a book appropriately entitled *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin: Hiéroclès et Simplicius*, where she argued, and to my mind succeeded in demonstrating, that the main outlines of Alexandrian Neoplatonism were not basically different from the Athenian variety.²⁶ The basis of Praechter's differentiation between the two was the absence of the One from two Alexandrian works, Hierocles' commentary on the "Pythagorean" *Carmen aureum* and Simplicius' on Epictetus, but, as Hadot argued, this can be explained by the subject and purpose of the two works in question. In so far as they are primarily concerned with practical ethics, the higher metaphysics is not essential to the task in hand, though it might, of course, be objected that Neoplatonists normally say everything everywhere. If we accept this

²⁵ Cf. Philoponus, *Commentaire sur le De anima d'Aristote*, ed. by G. Verbeke (Louvain/Paris 1966) 43–44 (Moerbeke's translation; Alexander is not named) and (?)Stephanus = [Philoponus] *In De an.* 535–36.

²⁶ I. Hadot, *Le problème* (Paris 1978); her conclusions are summarised on pp. 189–91.

argument, then the most striking difference between the two centres disappears.²⁷ Nevertheless there are others, some clear ones of external fact, or appearance, as well as some much less clear ones of doctrine and approach.

But before we go on to look at them, let us remind ourselves of the close ties between the pagan philosophers of Athens and Alexandria. Many of them were set out in a well-known article by H.-D. Saffrey in 1954.²⁸ They go back to the renewal of the Platonic Academy at Athens by Plutarch: That it was he who was responsible for the revival I have argued elsewhere.²⁹ At Athens there was a clear succession: Plutarch taught Syrianus, to whom he handed over his young pupil Proclus.³⁰ But Plutarch also taught the Alexandrian Hierocles,³¹ and Syrianus taught another Alexandrian, Hermias,³² the commentator on Plato's *Phaedrus* and father of the Aristotelian commentator Ammonius. Ammonius in turn studied with Proclus.³³ Proclus himself had been to Alexandria in the course of his educational wanderings, but, though he studied rhetoric there happily enough, he became dissatisfied with the philosophical instruction on offer (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 8, 10). If that is true, we may surmise that Hermias had not yet returned from his spell at the feet of Syrianus, likely enough in so far as Syrianus had not yet become the leading teacher at Athens when Proclus himself arrived there. As to his view of Alexandrian philosophy, it is slightly suspect, in so far as it is reported by his "Athenian" biographer Marinus.³⁴ There are some other indications that, notwithstanding their close relations, the two groups were not above making critical comments about each other, and in a previous generation Synesius had, if for more easily understandable reasons, pronounced Athens a philosophical desert.³⁵ It may also be significant that the age of 28, at which Porphyry tells us that Plotinus began philosophy, was the age at which Marinus tells us that Proclus composed his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* (*Vita Procli* 13). That could, of course, simply be the truth. If so, it is a strange coincidence, and since there are signs that Marinus wrote his biography of Proclus with

²⁷ Cf. now also K. Verrycken, "The Metaphysics of Ammonius son of Hermias," in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence* (London 1990) 199–210 and 218–31.

²⁸ "Le chrétien Jean Philopon et la survivance de l'école d'Alexandrie au VI^e siècle," *REG* 67 (1954) 396–410.

²⁹ "529 and its Sequel: What Happened to the Academy?" *Byzantion* 48 (1978) 373–75.

³⁰ Cf. Proclus, *In Rempublicam* 2. 64. 6 for Syrianus and Marinus; *Vita Procli* 12 for Proclus.

³¹ Cf. Photius, *Bibl. cod.* 214, p. 173a36–38 = III 130 Henry.

³² Cf. Damascius, *Vita Isidori* fr. 120 Zintzen.

³³ Cf. Damascius, *Vita Isidori* fr. 127.

³⁴ Marinus originally came from the Neapolis in what is at the time of writing the Israeli-occupied West Bank area of Palestine. Unlike some of the other members of the Athenian group he is not known to have studied in Alexandria.

³⁵ *Letter* 135.

at least half an eye on Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*,³⁶ we may wonder just how much in it is intended to show that Proclus was the greatest philosopher, and Athens the best place to study philosophy.

Let us continue with our succession story. Ammonius at Alexandria started what was to all intents and purposes a new school, and a new industry. His pupils included leading figures at both centres. Asclepius continued to work at Alexandria: We do not know where he came from. Simplicius came from Cilicia and subsequently taught at Athens: We do not know whether he had already been there before he went to study with Ammonius. Another was Damascius, the last person whom we know to have been head of the Athenian Academy. And, at about the same time there was John Philoponus, whose standard description, "Alexandrinus," suggests that he was a native of the city. Let us note that at this stage the traffic seems to have been in one direction. After Ammonius' period of study with Proclus it looks as if it was Alexandria that was the teacher of the Athenian philosophers, and not the other way round. In this case we can be sure that we have not been misled by biased sources, because our information comes from "Athenian" sources—Damascius and Simplicius—as much as from Alexandrian ones.

After that the friendly relations between the two centres disappear from sight. There are two possible reasons for the change, neither of which we can establish with certainty, but which may not be unconnected. In the first place, there is the alleged closure of the Athenian Academy in 529. That this event, the traditional end of pagan philosophy, took place at all has been denied by Alan Cameron, who argued that the relevant imperial edict was simply ignored.³⁷ I have tried to show that, even if not for the previously accepted reasons, philosophical activity at Athens was not, after all, resumed when the Athenian philosophers returned from the famous trip to Sassanian Persia described by Agathias (2. 30–31).³⁸ If that is correct, there were no Athenians to relate to. Cameron suggested that Simplicius must have returned to Athens, because only there would he have had access to the Presocratic texts which he cites at length, and directly, in commentaries known to have been written after 529.³⁹ Alexandria would probably have satisfied the same conditions, and might have been a place where pagan philosophy would be less exposed than at Athens: That depends on various questions which we shall discuss shortly. Most recently the idea has been promoted, by Michel Tardieu and Ilsetraut Hadot, that Simplicius, and others of the group, settled at Harrān (Carrhae), and that pagan Platonism

³⁶ Cf. my "Marinus' Life of Proclus: Neoplatonist Biography," *Byzantion* 54 (1984) 483 ff.

³⁷ "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens," *PCPhS* 15 (1969) 7–12.

³⁸ In the article cited above (note 29), esp. 377 ff.

³⁹ Cameron (above, note 37) 21–25.

continued there for some four centuries.⁴⁰ This initially attractive idea must, however, be regarded as far from proven, if only because it rests heavily on the argument that Simplicius' reference to a set of calendars in local use indicates that he resided in the town which used those calendars⁴¹—not a strong argument.⁴² It is not the only one, but the others are, if anything, less convincing.

The second reason for the cessation of friendly relations would apply whether "Athenian" Neoplatonism continued there or elsewhere. That is the ferocious controversy that broke out about the eternity or otherwise of the physical world. This controversy, perhaps ignited by the influx of Christian thinking into Philoponus' previously plain Neoplatonic philosophy, first breaks out in the attack on Proclus contained in Philoponus' *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*, a series of savage attacks which is securely dated 529 A.D.⁴³ Not long afterwards Philoponus wrote a further, now fragmentary, work on the same subject, *Contra Aristotelem*, which concentrated on attacking the notion of a fifth element, divine and permanent.⁴⁴ It was followed by a series of attacks on Philoponus by Simplicius in the commentaries on the *De caelo* and *Physics*, launched from an unknown location which might just possibly have been Alexandria itself. Is this date 529 just coincidence? That it is cannot be excluded. If it is not, two explanations of the simultaneity of the composition of the *De aeternitate mundi* and the "events" of 529 are possible. One, which has commended itself to some, is that it was a manifesto of the Alexandrian group, dissociating itself from the offensive paganism of the Athenians as a prophylactic against imperial interference with the activities of the school.⁴⁵ If that were the case, one might ask a question which has not to my knowledge been asked by those who have concerned themselves with this matter, and that is why Philoponus directed his attack against someone who had been dead for over forty years? Is it because Proclus was some sort of paradigm of paganism? If so, why do we not hear about it elsewhere? Is it because Philoponus was reluctant to attack fellow pupils in the school of Ammonius? If so, why did Simplicius not feel similar inhibitions?

⁴⁰ Cf. M. Tardieu, "Sābiens Coraniques et Sābiens de Harrān," *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986) 1–44 and I. Hadot, reporting and commenting on Tardieu's work in "La vie et l'oeuvre de Simplicius d'après des sources grecques et arabes," in I. Hadot (ed.), *Simplicius: Sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, Actes du Colloque International de Paris 28.9–1.10.1985 (Berlin/New York 1987) 9–21.

⁴¹ M. Tardieu, "Les calendriers en usage à Harrān d'après les sources arabes et le commentaire de Simplicius à la Physique d'Aristote," in *Simplicius* (previous note) 40–57; his conclusions are given at 55–57. The text in question is at *In Phys.* 18–30.

⁴² Cf. now P. Foulkes, "Where was Simplicius?" *JHS* 112 (1992) 143.

⁴³ *De aet. m.* 579.13–17 Rabe.

⁴⁴ The fragments have been collected by C. Wildberg and translated in *Philoponus. Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World* (London 1987).

⁴⁵ Cf. Saffrey (above, note 28) 406–07.

Christian charity can hardly be the answer, since that did not usually inhibit controversialists. There was, of course, a long classical tradition of attacking people who could neither answer nor be harmed by the attacks, and it may be that it is in this context that the answer should be sought. In the end one has to admit that there is no clear solution.

Another possibility is that it was Philoponus' attack which precipitated Justinian's move, having somehow been brought to his attention. Again there is nothing to show that this was the case, but if it were it might have been some sort of wish to express his views without actually causing trouble for former colleagues that lay behind Philoponus' choice of opponent. The urge to express his own views leads us to another, and perhaps more likely, explanation of Philoponus' reasons for writing the *De aeternitate mundi*. Most would now accept that Philoponus was a Christian throughout: If and when he became a convert to that religion is no longer a matter for prolonged discussion. What is now a more serious question is the extent to which in his case Christianity influenced a philosophy which is basically Neoplatonic. I have argued elsewhere that it did not, and that some of the ideas in his work which look at first sight as if they were Christian could equally well be explained as the adoption of perfectly respectable, if in some cases no longer standard, Platonic positions.⁴⁶ A good example would be the notion that the world was created in time, a tenable and nowadays increasingly popular interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* which orthodox Neoplatonists in Philoponus' time did not accept. Half a century earlier the controversy was sufficiently important in those circles for Proclus to give an account of the upholders of both views in his commentary on that dialogue.⁴⁷ And in Simplicius' attack—or counter-attack—on Philoponus this particular issue is discussed in terms of *Timaeus* exposition.⁴⁸ I now think that it must be admitted that his Christian orientation did influence Philoponus' later philosophical works—there is of course no question about the theological work for which he eventually abandoned philosophy.⁴⁹ Where the line is to be drawn is a more difficult matter, but a good case for drawing it through the *Physics* commentary has been made by Koenraad Verrycken: He has tried to show how Philoponus developed from a straight Neoplatonist, following his teacher Ammonius, to something rather

⁴⁶ Cf. my "John Philoponus and Stephanus of Alexandria: Two Neoplatonic Christian Commentators on Aristotle?" in D. J. O'Meara (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, Studies in Neoplatonism Ancient and Modern 3 (Albany 1982) 56–59.

⁴⁷ In *Tim.* 1. 276. 10 ff.

⁴⁸ Cf. Simplicius, In *De caelo* 85. 7 ff. On Simplicius' polemic against Philoponus, cf. P. Hoffmann, "Simplicius' Polemics," in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London 1987) 57–83.

⁴⁹ On his theological output see H. Chadwick, "Philoponus the Christian Theologian," in Sorabji (previous note) 42–54.

different.⁵⁰ Within this framework the *De aeternitate mundi* may be understood as Philoponus' public statement of his new philosophical position, without recourse to external causation.

None the less the explanation of Philoponus' motives in writing that work cannot be divorced from consideration of an event which may or may not have happened some thirty years before. That is the deal which Ammonius is alleged to have made with the ecclesiastical authorities to abandon the teaching of Plato because it conflicted with Christianity. This is one of those pieces of common knowledge that would probably be better not known. The evidence for it is slender. It rests partly on circumstance, and partly on a text of Damascius which will not bear the weight that has been put upon it. I have discussed this question in another place,⁵¹ but since belief in the "deal" is still expressed it may be worth returning to it for a few moments. The circumstantial evidence is easily disposed of. In the first place it consists of the apparently changed orientation of teaching as inferred from the massive production of commentaries on Aristotle. Two points should be made: First, the composition of Aristotle commentaries need not imply that teaching was restricted to Aristotle. After all, many modern academics teach subjects on which we do not write. Second, there were good academic reasons for concentrating on Aristotle, namely that Proclus had already written what may have been regarded as definitive commentaries on a major part of the Platonic curriculum, including the two "perfect" dialogues which came at the end of it, namely the *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. He had also expounded some of Aristotle's treatises.⁵² The text from Damascius—we have it in Photius' *Bibliotheca*, which is not irrelevant—runs as follows: ὁ δὲ Ἀμμώνιος αἰσχροκερδῆς ὢν καὶ πάντα ὁρῶν εἰς χρηματισμὸν ὄντιναοῦν ὁμολογίας τίθεται πρὸς τὸν ἐπισκοποῦντα τὸ τηλικαῦτα τὴν κρατοῦσαν δόξαν, "Ammonius, who was disgracefully avaricious and looked at all matters from the point of view of making money, made agreements with the man in charge of the prevailing opinion" (Photius, cod. 242. 292).⁵³ The "prevailing opinion" is, of course, Christianity. The extract comes from Damascius' life of Isidore, and when Rudolf Asmus originally reconstructed that document he combined with it

⁵⁰ It is set out fully in an unpublished Louvain dissertation, *God en Wereld in de Wijsbegeerte van Ioannes Philoponus* (1985). A summary of the case may be found in his "The Development of Philoponus' Thought and its Chronology," in Sorabji (above, note 27) 233–74.

⁵¹ Cf. "John Philoponus: Alexandrian Platonist?" *Hermes* 114 (1986) 321–24.

⁵² For the evidence for Proclus' lost commentaries on Plato, cf. "John Philoponus" (previous note) nn. 57–61; for one on Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*, cf. Ammonius, *In An. pr.* 43. 30–31. Some other possible references to commentaries on the logical works are assembled by L. G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam 1962) xii n. 22 = xiii n. 18 of the Budé edition, *Prolegomènes à la philosophie de Platon*, ed. by Westerink, J. Trouillard and A. P. Segonds (Paris 1990).

⁵³ 352a11–14 = *Vita Isid.* fr. 316 Zintzen.

another sentence from an earlier section of Photius (179),⁵⁴ πρὸς τὸν ἐπισκοποῦντα τὸ τηνικαῦτα τὴν κρατοῦσαν δόξαν Ἀθανάσιον, thus identifying the other party of the agreements as the man who was Patriarch of Alexandria from 490 to 497.⁵⁵ Asmus, however, thought that the name was a mistake, and that the events, whatever they were, belong to the time of the previous patriarch, Peter Mongo, who was consecrated in 482. In either case we are talking about a time well before 529, but we cannot be sure that the unconnected snippet containing the name really does belong with the reference to Ammonius. It has long been customary to take this text as referring to a deal whereby Ammonius' "school" abstained from teaching Plato, and, as a result of which, it turned to work on Aristotle. As far as I can discover this suggestion was first put forward by Paul Tannery in 1896,⁵⁶ and was accepted as possible by Saffrey in the influential article mentioned earlier.⁵⁷ It must be remembered, however, that the Damascius text says nothing whatsoever about the contents of the agreement. The usual interpretation was questioned, rightly, by L. G. Westerink in 1962.⁵⁸ Westerink pointed out that Olympiodorus heard a lecture or lectures on Plato's *Gorgias* given by Ammonius in 510.⁵⁹ That in itself does not prove that Ammonius had never made the deal he is alleged to have made, for conditions changed with different patriarchs—and emperors. Other possible evidence is similarly indecisive. Thus, though we know that Asclepius heard Ammonius lecture on Plato (cf. *In Metaph.* 77. 3–4), Asclepius was there for a long time, and his attendance cannot be dated. It is, however, likely to have been later than the agreement.

If, then, there is no good reason to believe that the deal of which Damascius complains was about not teaching Plato, or writing about him, for which we have in any case already suggested more respectable reasons, what was it about? The straight answer is that we have no means of knowing.⁶⁰ We should in any case bear in mind that Damascius was given to making acerbic comments on other personalities,⁶¹ so that the matter to which he refers could have been something quite trivial. Perhaps the most reprehensible explanation, from the standpoint of an Athenian Neoplatonist's ideology, is that Ammonius converted to Christianity, a

⁵⁴ 347a19–20.

⁵⁵ R. Asmus, *Das Leben des Philosophen Isidorus von Damaskios aus Damaskos* (Leipzig 1911) 110 and note ad loc.

⁵⁶ "Sur la période finale de la philosophie grecque," *Revue philosophique* 42 (1896) 276.

⁵⁷ Saffrey (above, note 28) 401.

⁵⁸ Westerink (above, note 52) xi–xii, xiii–xv in the Budé edition.

⁵⁹ Cf. Olympiodorus, *In Gorgiam* 183.11 Norvin = 199.8 Westerink. There is an undatable reference to the teaching of Plato in Asclepius, *In Metaph.* 77. 4.

⁶⁰ Cf. P. Chuvin, *Chronique des derniers païens: La disparition du paganisme dans l'empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien* (Paris 1990) 140, who refers to the "mystérieux 'accord'" reported by Damascius between Ammonius and the patriarch.

⁶¹ Cf. Photius, *Bibl. cod.* 242, 348b20–23 = VI 44. 20–22 Henry = *Vita Isid.* pp. 276.23–78.1 Z.

suggestion made by Westerink.⁶² There is, however, no clear evidence that Ammonius exposed himself to that charge. Indeed, Bishop Zacharias of Mitylene, on a passage in whose *Ammonius* the supposition is based,⁶³ would hardly fail to have said so in as many words if a conversion had actually taken place. We might note too that Simplicius, who expressed nothing but contempt for Philoponus, never seems to have lost the high esteem in which he held his teacher Ammonius. So it cannot have been acceptance of Christianity which ignited Damascius' anger.

In any case it would appear that the religious affiliation of the Alexandrian Neoplatonists from this period on was not a matter of great importance. Unlike their Athenian counterparts, all of whom when we know anything about them appear to have been pagans, the Alexandrian group seems to have been more concerned with the teaching of philosophy through the medium of commentary than with maintaining any particular attitude to the "prevailing opinion." Of Ammonius' successors, Asclepius and Olympiodorus appear to have been pagans, while the Christian Philoponus, who clearly saw himself as the intellectual heir of Ammonius and published several of his courses, frequently remained so close to his master that it is extremely difficult to distinguish them.⁶⁴ But he separated himself from the philosophical tradition, apparently removed himself from Alexandria and devoted himself to theological controversy, espousing positions which were later condemned as heretical. His soubriquet γραμματικός may in any case indicate that he made his living teaching rhetoric rather than philosophy. His enemies used it as a term of abuse.⁶⁵ In the next generations the Aristotelian commentators at Alexandria seem to have been Christians: David and Elias, whose dates are unclear, and finally Stephanus, who may have written the commentary on Book 3 of the *De anima* which was transmitted as the third book of Philoponus';⁶⁶ he was eventually appointed to a post of οἰκουμενικός διδάσκαλος at

⁶² Cf. *Anon. Prol.* (above, note 52) xii-xiii. It is absent from the Budé edition (xiv).

⁶³ 1094-1121 Colonna = PG LXXXV 1116B-17B. For a discussion of this text, see "John Philoponus" (above, note 51) 322-23.

⁶⁴ On this question, cf. "John Philoponus" (above, note 51) 325-28. See now too the dissertation by Verrycken referred to above (note 50) and also his "The Metaphysics of Ammonius son of Hermeias" (above, note 27) 199-231 passim.

⁶⁵ Cf. Simplicius, *In De caelo* 119. 7-13; John of Ephesus, *Hist. Eccl.* III, interpretatus est E. W. Brooks, *C. Scr. Or.* 106 (Louvain 1936) 2. 51, 3. 17, 5. 5.

⁶⁶ Though Stephanus' authorship has been widely accepted since Hayduck in his edition, *CAG* XV, p. v, drew attention to the appearance of his name in two of the manuscripts of Book 3 and suggested that he may have written it, the attribution has been challenged by P. Lautner, "Philoponus, *In De anima* III: Quest for an Author," *CQ* 42 (1992) 510-22: Lautner, who makes a strong case against Stephanus, inclines to the view that the work was produced by a pupil of Philoponus.

Constantinople under the emperor Heraclius in 610,⁶⁷ thus feeding in—or renewing—Alexandrian influence there too. After that we do not know what happened at Alexandria in the remaining years before the conquest seems to have put an end to Neoplatonic teaching. Its influence on the Islamic world was exerted at other centres.

Let us leave this matter for the moment and return to a question we put aside earlier, namely the distinctiveness or otherwise of Alexandrian Neoplatonism. If we accept that the Alexandrians did not foreshorten their intelligible universe by excluding the One, should we also accept that there were no differences between the philosophical views of Athenians and Alexandrians? I think the answer is “no,” but let me say at the start that this is one of the many areas in the study of late Neoplatonism that requires further work before it can be answered definitively. A first difference is that the Athenians were far more interested in what I have called sub-philosophical matters like the *Chaldaean Oracles*, on which Proclus wrote extensively, and Neopythagorean numerology. In more strictly philosophical matters a first difference appears when one looks at the intelligible hierarchies used by the two broad groups: The Alexandrians used simpler ones. Though they were not compressed by the removal of the highest member, the Alexandrian ones are characterised by the absence of the extremely complicated schemes that appear in the pages of Proclus and Damascius. This seems to be true also of the work of Simplicius, and one must wonder if he is the exception proving the rule, for his ties with Ammonius and thus with Alexandrian Neoplatonism seem to have been strong. Is he then an Athenian behaving in the way that we have suggested is Alexandrian, or is he rather an Alexandrian working at Athens? The question might be more easily answered if we had more information than we do about Simplicius' career. A further difficulty is that it is possible that the deployment of a similar hierarchical structure was inhibited by the task of writing Aristotelian commentary. That would take in both all those normally regarded as Alexandrians and also the doubtful case of Simplicius. The difficulty with such a superficially attractive explanation is the Neoplatonists' notorious habit of putting any of their doctrines into the discussion of almost anything. On the other hand there are some indications that at least some of the Alexandrians did take a different line on the interpretation of Aristotle, and, in particular, on the lengths to which they would go in seeking to establish the fundamental agreement of Plato and Aristotle, which some proclaimed as a principle of their expositions.

We might consider briefly a test case, from the interpretation of the *De anima*, namely the definition of the soul. Here the problem was how to reconcile the Aristotelian view that the soul is the immanent form of the

⁶⁷ On Stephanus' connection with this post and its nature, cf. F. Fuchs, *Die höheren Schulen von Konstantinopel im Mittelalter*, Byzantinisches Archiv 8 (Leipzig 1926; repr. Amsterdam 1964) 9 and 13–16.

body with the Platonist one that it is a separate entity of a totally different kind. For a Platonist interpreter that meant that he had to show that Aristotle's definition, "the first actuality of a potentially living natural body . . . equipped with organs" (412a27–28), referred to the Platonic concept of the relation. The usual way of doing this was by misinterpreting the description of body as ὀργανικόν, equipped with organs, to mean "being an instrument," which the soul used. Simplicius attempted to bridge the inevitable gap by the standard, and some would say characteristically Athenian, device of multiplying entities, and split the soul into a phase that informed the body and another which used it (cf. *In De an.* 90. 29 ff.). Philoponus, on the other hand, though his explanation suffered from the unclarity of trying to do something that is philosophically impossible (cf. *In De an.* 224. 12–25. 31), does appear to have tried to offer a genuine explanation of the text before him (217. 9–15). Yet there were also differences among Athenians.⁶⁸ Nor can we rule out the possibility that Philoponus did not simply follow Ammonius, on whose lectures his commentary is based, since there are other cases where Philoponus is ostensibly giving us Ammonius' lectures with a few observations of his own, but in fact either indicating that Ammonius was a different person from the author or compiler of the commentary or that he was producing a different kind of explanation from the one that could be expected of Ammonius.⁶⁹ We may conclude, tentatively, that Alexandrian Neoplatonism does appear to have differed in some respects from that prevalent elsewhere, but that the differences among individuals may have been at least as important as those among groups working in different locations. A clearer answer still awaits the results of more detailed investigations.

It is time to return, briefly, to the question we set aside before, namely the further history of Alexandrian philosophy after 641, or, for that matter, in the preceding decades. Here again there is a gap in our knowledge. We do not know whether the study of Platonist philosophy was already moribund at the conquest, or whether it survived till then. Nor can we be sure of the sequence of events thereafter. We do know that Greek philosophy appeared in Arabic dress some two hundred years later in Baghdad, where, according to a report of al-Fārābī,⁷⁰ it arrived after a temporary sojourn in Antioch. Those who think the exiles from Athens settled there now see Ḥarrān as another route, for the "Athenian" variety.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Cf. [Philoponus] *In De an.* 535. 2–37. 4 on Plutarch and Marinus.

⁶⁹ On Philoponus and Ammonius, cf. "John Philoponus" (above, note 51) 525–28.

⁷⁰ Reported by Ibn Abī Ūṣaibi'ah, tr. in F. Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, transl. by E. and J. Marmorstein (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1975) 50–51.

⁷¹ Cf. Tardieu and Hadot (above, notes 40 and 41).

Eventually, by diverse routes, it found its way to the Latin West. But all that is another story.⁷²

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⁷² An earlier version of this paper was read to the Symposium on Alexandrian Civilization: Egyptian and Classical, held at the University of Alexandria in April 1988.