General introduction to the Commentary

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE *TIMAEUS* AND ITS COMMENTARY TRADITION

Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* is arguably the most important text of ancient Neoplatonism. The *Timaeus* itself has proved to be the most important of all Plato's works from a historical perspective, for it remained a key text from the death of Plato, through Hellenistic philosophy, Philo of Alexandria, Middle Platonism, and the Christian fathers, down to the Neoplatonists, and well beyond. The fact that in the past century or so it has been effectively challenged by the *Republic* for the title of 'Plato's greatest work' means little in the 2500-year history of Platonism. The *Timaeus* was acknowledged as one of the two supreme texts of the Neoplatonist curriculum. The other was the *Parmenides*, which was of similar importance to many Neoplatonists, but less widely acknowledged as central to a Platonic education.

The commentary itself was usually the major vehicle of Neoplatonist teaching, even though much of what survives on Plato, unlike Aristotle, is not in this form. Interpretation of authoritative texts, including many of those of Plato, was a central part of a Neoplatonist's work. The commentary arose directly out of the reading of texts in the schools of philosophy, though some commentaries went on being used by subsequent generations, for which reason Proclus would have been conscious that he was not writing an ephemeral work, but one that could be used in other contexts.

The *Commentary on the Timaeus* is the culmination of centuries of interpretative work, with much earlier material embedded within it. From it we can see the kinds of debates about interpretation that flourished in a previous age, as well as the particular stance taken by the Athenian School under Proclus and Syrianus. From the historical point of view, this commentary is the richest that Proclus has left us. It also gives insights into the interpretation of other Platonic works, in particular the *Republic* and *Critias*, which Proclus believes to be part of the same Platonic sequence. It will often seem alien to us, employing unfamiliar exegetical and metaphysical assumptions. Yet in following his reasoning, and seeing how he argues for his views, we shall have new cause to question our own interpretative assumptions.

PROCLUS' LIFE AND WRITINGS: SOME ESSENTIAL FACTS

We are reasonably well acquainted with the facts of Proclus' life through a surviving biography by his successor, Marinus.[1] The biography aims not merely to record the events of Proclus' life, but to show how his ascent through Neoplatonism's various grades of virtue enabled him to live a happy and blessed life. So it is partly a moral treatise and partly a pagan hagiography, like Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Nonetheless, we may draw some relatively secure conclusions about Proclus' life.

He was very likely born in 411 and died in 485.[2] His father, Patricius, was a lawyer at court in Byzantium, but shortly after Proclus' birth took a post in Xanthus. This might well have been agreeable to his parents, since they were themselves Lycians. Siorvanes suggests that this choice might also have been related to a law of 415 that excluded pagans from imperial service and the army. While this is possible, there is no easy pathway from our knowledge that the law at a certain date forbade something to the conclusion that the prohibition was uniformly enforced.

Proclus was intended to follow his father into the law. He studied rhetoric and law both at Xanthus and then at Alexandria. It is an indication of his father's wealth and reputation that he was tutored by important men, such as Leonas of Isauria. At the behest of the governor of Alexandria, Theodorus, the young Proclus accompanied Leonas to Byzantium. There Marinus' hagiography records that Proclus had a vision of the goddess Athena who instructed him to leave rhetoric and law and pursue the study of philosophy (*VProc.* 9). It is possible that the climate had changed in Byzantium and that Proclus encountered Athenian Neoplatonism within the circle of the Empress Eudocia and her father, the pagan sophist Leontius. In any event, Proclus did not move immediately to Athens, but rather returned to Alexandria where he studied logic and mathematics with distinction. At the age of 19 he moved to Athens to study at the 'Academy'.

Proclus' talent was quickly recognized in Athens. Syrianus was at this time the acting head of the school, and with him Proclus embarked on the first part of the Neoplatonic curriculum – the works of Aristotle. Indeed, Proclus became such an intimate of Syrianus that he lived in his house, calling him 'father'. Syrianus persuaded the aging Plutarch of Athens, who had retired as head of the Academy, to instruct his star pupil

[1] For the Greek text see Boissonade (1966), and for an English translation, Edwards (2000).
[2] There is some uncertainty about the date of his birth. What Marinus tells us about the date of his death and the length of his life is incompatible with the horoscope that Marinus provides for Proclus. The issue is well discussed in Siorvanes (1996).

in Aristotle's psychology and Plato's *Phaedo* (*VProc.* 12). Such was Proclus' progress that at least some version of the work before us was written in his twenty-eighth year (*VProc.* 13). The date of Syrianus' death is not clear. Proclus became *Diadochos* or 'Platonic successor' either immediately afterwards or perhaps after a brief interlude in which Domninus assumed leadership.[3] Thus Proclus was head of the Academy for around fifty years.

Proclus lived a life of strict asceticism. He abstained entirely from sex, and ate meat only in the context of sacrifice where necessary for the sake of piety. His religious devotion apparently imposed considerable strains on his somewhat delicate constitution. His habits included ritual bathing in the sea year-round, all night vigils, and fasts. He died at seventy-five years of age, though for the last five years of his life he endured ill-health (*VProc.* 26). At his death Marinus tells us that he was 'judged worthy of the rites according to the ancestral custom of the Athenians' (*VProc.* 36, trans. Edwards). He was buried in a common tomb with his teacher, Syrianus, on the hill of Lycabettus.

CULTURAL CONTEXT: PROCLUS AND PAGAN PRACTICE IN ATHENS

One of the things that must strike any reader of Marinus' biography is the extent of Proclus' devotion to the gods. When contemporary readers imagine the office of 'Head of the Academy' it is easy to think of a professional academic – a slightly eccentric but harmless chap who spends a lot of time in the library and rather less lecturing. Certainly Proclus lectured, and wrote commentaries and essays – what university administrators might now characterize as 'research'. But we cannot get a clear picture either of the man or of Athenian Neoplatonism without some appreciation of the centrality of pagan religious practice in the life and perception of both.

It is a familiar point that 'pagan religion' was even less of a unitary thing than the religion of the Christians who adopted this single word to describe so much. This 'other' of Christianity was in fact a fairly disparate collection of localized cults. Central to the various cults was not a body of *doctrine* that one believed in, but rather a set of *practices* that one engaged in. Participation in one set of rites in no way prohibited participation in others. Moreover, people could participate in various rituals with various attitudes and degrees of understanding. It would be a mistake to suppose that, even in the fifth century, we can distinguish completely distinct groups of people – the Christian and pagan communities. Christians

[3] Cf. Diller (1957), 188 and Siorvanes (1996), 6.

sought to incorporate traditional celebrations into the new religion.[4] Doubtless there were many hard-working men and women who didn't really care whether a particular feast was part of a pagan sacrifice or a saint's day. Who today would refuse a day off on religious or political grounds? The self-understanding among those who did not think of themselves as Christians differed too. The word 'Hellenes' is traditionally used of intellectuals who see the tradition of Greek language, poetry, drama, and philosophy (*paideia*) as the core of civilization. The traditions of pagan religious rituals were commonly integrated within this *paideia*. Radical 'Hellenists', like Julian the Apostate, were Hellenes who supposed not only that this integration should be pursued thoroughly and systematically, but that the empty, superficial, populist tide of Christianity ought to be vigorously resisted. Perhaps it is not too far wrong to see the Hellenes as like conservatives in the 'culture wars' in America in the 1980s and 90s. They supposed that empty, superficial post-modernism and deconstruction were assailing the eternal values of 'Western culture'. Attention lavished on the simple *koinê* Greek of New Testament writers might have been regarded by the Hellenes much as conservatives regard cultural studies PhD theses on Madonna or Mills and Boon novels. An important disanalogy with the culture wars of America was that the Christians had the law notionally on their side.

The Theodosian Code of 438 sought to codify laws in the eastern Roman Empire issued since 312. Among these were various proscriptions of pagan religious practices. An imperial decree in 391 notionally prohibited all pagan cults and closed their temples. But it is one thing to pass a law, and another to have it enforced with due diligence everywhere, as we still see in states with laws against sodomy or the possession of marijuana. Pagan religious practices in the fifth century were in a similar situation. Different cities took different attitudes and much depended on the degree of animosity to paganism, the energy and the influence of the local Christian population.[5] One of Marinus' anecdotes about Proclus' arrival in Athens is perhaps revealing about the extent to which Athenian pagans were closeted and the extent to which Proclus was not.

Marinus tells us that Proclus was met upon his arrival in Athens by a fellow Lycian, Nicolaus. On the way back up to the city, Proclus finds

[4] Trombley (1995), chapter 2.

[5] Marinus' biography of Proclus is one of the documents that historians appeal to in order to understand the progress toward the closure of the Academy in 529. We discuss below one episode from Marinus' biography that indicates some sort of dispute between Proclus and the Christians. Two other points seem salient. First, Marinus notes rather sadly that – at the time at which he is writing – the city no longer has the use of the temple of Asclepius (29). Second, he makes oblique reference to the removal of the great statue of Athena from the Parthenon (30). It is unclear whether this took place in Proclus' lifetime.

that he is tired and they stop to rest. Nicolaus has a slave fetch water from a nearby spring where stood a statue of Socrates. Nicolaus, Marinus tells us, was struck by the fact that the newly arrived Proclus first drank the Attic water (a metaphor for eloquence) in a place sacred to Socrates. After making obeisance (*proskunêsas*), presumably worshipping the statue of Socrates, he continued on. Proclus' readiness to engage in this behaviour contrasts sharply with his initial introduction to the circle of Syrianus. As Proclus talked with Syrianus and Lachares, the sun set and the moon appeared for the first time in her new cycle.[6] The older men wanted to send their new acquaintance away in order that they might worship the goddess (*proskunein*) by themselves. But when Proclus saw the moon he took off his sandals[7] in front of these strangers and greeted the god. Both were struck by Proclus' *parrhêsia* – his paradigmatically Athenian frankness of speech and action – in doing so. Proclus' willingness to display his pagan piety openly contrasts with their initial desire to rid themselves of the stranger so that they might worship in private.

Proclus clearly did things that were forbidden by the law. He sacrificed, not merely cakes or wheat, but animals. Marinus tells us that, on the whole, Proclus abstained from eating meat except where it was necessary as part of the ritual for the sake of holiness (19). He performed ceremonies in which he invoked the aid of the gods for the healing of the sick. Marinus says that he interceded on behalf of ill friends by works and hymns (*ergois te kai hymnois*, 17). He is particularly associated with the cult of Asclepius, whose temple was near where Proclus lived. When Asclepigeneia, who was the wife of the archon Theagenes, fell sick, he 'worshipped Asclepius in the ancient manner' and successfully cured her. But apparently even Proclus knew his limits. Marinus says of this episode:

> Such was the act he performed, yet in this as in every other case he evaded the notice of the mob, and offered no pretext to those who wished to plot against him. (*VProc.* 29, trans. Edwards)

But there must, nonetheless, have been limits. It appears that Proclus' devotion to the cults of the Greeks, Egyptians and Chaldeans caused

[6] Trombley supposes that the goddess that Proclus worships in this episode is Athena. Edwards supposes that the goddess in question is Artemis and/or Hecate, both of whom are associated with the moon. If the latter is correct, then the action is doubly bold. Hecate is associated with theurgy and magic. Magic was particularly likely to be suppressed and the penalty was death.

[7] As Edward's note ad loc. informs us, the removal of one's footware was not a feature of Greek ritual, though it is associated with Pythagorean sacrifice by Iamblichus. If the anecdote is true, perhaps Proclus thereby related his foreign and wonderful learning from Lycia. Cf. Iamblichus, *VPyth*. 85, 105.

trouble for him at least once. Marinus gives a cryptic reference to a year in which he left Athens for Lydia.

> [He] entered into the billowing tempest of affairs at a time when monstrous winds were blowing against the lawful way of life, yet he carried on a sober and undaunted existence even amid the perils; and once when he was critically harassed by certain giant birds of prey, he left Athens, just as he was, entrusting himself to the course of the world . . . (*VProc.* 15, trans. Edwards)

Saffrey has speculated that the 'tempest of affairs' might have been the closure of the temple of Asclepius and its conversion to a place of Christian worship.[8]

It would have been necessary for Proclus to be particularly circumspect about *theurgy*. For the Neoplatonists of the Athenian school, the theurgical virtues were the highest level of intellectual and moral perfection. The accomplished theurgist understands enough about the way in which various gods are manifested and symbolized through different physical substances in order to open himself to the ubiquitous presence of the divine in all things. It is a form of ritual magic in which the aim is to become united with the gods. However, theurgy was associated with other, less noble forms of magic. The laws forbidding sorcery were more stringently enforced, having had their origins in the reign of Constantine when there was a positive terror of the black arts.[9] The execution of the magician Maximus of Ephesus, associate of Julian the Apostate, in 371–2 set a bad precedent for Hellenes with Platonic leanings and an association with theurgy. Yet in the chapter on Proclus' theurgic expertise Marinus reports that he used his skills to end a drought in Attica, that he protected the city from earthquakes, and that he made use of the prophetic tripod.

One conclusion to draw from the evidence of pagan religious practice in Marinus' biography of Proclus is that Athenian Christians were

[8] Saffrey (1975), 555–7. It seems that Proclus was particularly devoted to the cult of Asclepius, as the episode with Theagenes' wife shows. Marinus even notes that Proclus' house was conveniently located in close proximity to the temple. So it is certainly possible that this is what Marinus alludes to. However, if Trombley is correct to place the closure of the temple in the period 481–5, this would mean that Proclus left Athens 'just as he was' in the last five years of his life during the period of his illness (Trombley (1995), 342–4). If the events related in §32 involving a visit to the temple of the sons of Asclepius near Adratta are supposed to take place during Proclus' year in Lydia then this seems odd. Marinus notes that he was deeply affected by the memories of what took place there, and perhaps this implies that the events were significantly in the past. Second, Marinus seems to imply that he put to good use what he learned of the gods of Lydia in the course of his career. But if the trip to Lydia happened in his twilight years, this seems hard to understand.

[9] Trombley (1995), 65.

relatively tolerant. This may be true, but we should also not overlook the rather special position that Proclus occupied. As the Platonic successor, he would have been a relatively important person in Athens. First, he would have been afforded slightly more latitude than the ordinary non-citizen for speaking his mind in public. The Athenians were apt to tolerate a certain amount of blunt speaking from the inheritors of Socrates' role.[10] Second, Proclus would have had the financial resources to back his favoured causes and Marinus tells us that he did much of this through his friend Archiadas, the grandson of Syrianus who was entrusted to Proclus' care after his teacher's death (*VProc.* 12, 14). In his capacity as *Diadochus*, Proclus would have had an income of 1,000 gold *solidi* a year–a sum that Siorvanes estimates as equivalent to over US$ 500,000 per annum.[11] The intellectual, cultural-historical and financial power of the Platonic successor is physically manifested in the dimensions of the 'Proclus house'. Near the temple of Asclepius on the southern side of the Acropolis is a large structure that some archaeologists believe to be the house used by Syrianus, Proclus and their Neoplatonic school (*VProc.* 29).[12]

So Proclus was no closeted academic happily writing books that few will read. He was a powerful man in a delicate political position. Neither should we think of Proclus' religiosity as an extraneous aspect of his Platonist role – as someone like Isaac Newton, who held a position at Cambridge because of his brilliance in mathematics and physics, but who happened to be interested in alchemy as well. Proclus' religious devotion and his practice of theurgy were not an incidental hobby, irrelevant to his role as a Platonist. Rather, it was partly *because* of his piety that he was deemed worthy of the job. For the Athenian Neoplatonists, the activity of teaching Plato and writing works of Platonic philosophy was itself a spiritual exercise. This has implications for the understanding of Proclus' *Timaeus* commentary. Shortly we examine the contrast between modern commentaries and those of the Neoplatonists, but we should first examine the breadth of Proclus' writings.

PROCLUS' WRITINGS

Marinus tells us that Proclus was a workhorse who wrote and lectured relentlessly. His surviving works alone bear this out. They divide into roughly four genres: commentaries; large systematic works; shorter

[10] See Edwards (2000), 78 for the tradition of 'parrhesia' or 'philosophic frankness' that comes with the role of the philosopher.
[11] Cf. Damascius *Phil. Hist.* 102, in Athanassiadi (1999), and Siorvanes (1996), 22.
[12] Karivieri (1994).

monographs; and religious hymns and works dedicated to the exegesis of sacred texts other than Plato's.

Commentaries on Plato's dialogues dominate the first group. We have only a portion of Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus* – it breaks off after 44c where the condition of the newly embodied soul is discussed. But even this portion runs to over one thousand pages in the Teubner edition of the Greek text.[13] Both his massive commentary on the *Parmenides* and his *Alcibiades I* commentary are also cut short.[14] A partial summary of his commentary on the *Cratylus* too has been preserved.[15] Proclus' *Republic* commentary is actually a collection of essays on topics relating to that dialogue.[16] The other surviving work in commentary form is on Book 1 of Euclid's *Elements*.[17] Among the Plato commentaries that are lost to us are works on *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus* and *Philebus*. Probably there was also a *Sophist* commentary,[18] a *Theaetetus* commentary,[19] and a commentary on Plotinus.[20] There may also have been a commentary, or perhaps just an essay, on *Symposium*.[21]

Three of Proclus' systematic treatises survive. The best known is his *Elements of Theology*.[22] The least well known is his systematization of Aristotelian physics, the *Elements of Physics*.[23] The third is the massive *Platonic Theology* which attempts to chart the hierarchy of divinities from the highest to the lowest gods.[24]

We also possess three monographs from Proclus: *Ten Problems concerning Providence*, *On Evil*, and *On Fate*.[25] The contents of his work, *Eighteen Arguments on the Eternity of the World* can be reconstructed from Philoponus' criticisms in the latter's *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World*.[26] There are also two astronomical works. The first, *Outline of the Astronomical Hypotheses*, is a critical examination of Ptolemy's astronomy.[27] The

[13] For the Greek text see Diehl (1965). For a French translation see Festugière (1966–8).
[14] In the introduction to his Morrow/Dillon translation of Proclus' *in Parm.*, Dillon suggests that this might be the consequence of an exhausted scribe!
[15] Duvick (forthcoming), Pasquali (1908).
[16] Greek text: Kroll (1899–1901). French translation: Festugière (1970).
[17] Morrow (1970). [18] Annick (1991), Guérard (1991).
[19] Cf. Marinus, *VProc.* 39 and *in Tim.* 1. 255.25. [20] Diller (1957), 198.
[21] A scholion to Proclus' *Republic* commentary at II. 371.14 gives the title 'On the speech of Diotima'.
[22] Greek text with English translation is provided in Dodds (1963).
[23] Ritzenfeld (1912), Boese (1958).
[24] Greek text with French translation is provided in Saffrey and Westerink (1968–97). With a certain amount of caution, one can also make use of the reprint of Taylor's 1816 translation of *Platonic Theology*, Taylor (1995). On the question of the completeness of the work as we have it, see Saffrey and Westerink vol. 6, xxxv–xliv.
[25] Isaac (1977), (1979), (1982). [26] Lang and Macro (2001).
[27] Manitius (1909).

other is a paraphrase of some difficult passages in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. There are a couple of lost works mentioned in the *Timaeus* commentary which we may assume would form similar short essays. One is an 'examination of the objections made by Aristotle to the *Timaeus*' (II. 278.27). At least part of this work is preserved in Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's *On the heavens* (*in Cael.* 640–71). The other is a 'collection of mathematical theorems in the *Timaeus*' (II. 76.22).

We possess fragments of a variety of works that demonstrate Proclus' interest in the canon of pagan Neoplatonic religious texts, as well as in theurgic practices. Among these are the fragments of his commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles*.[28] The *Oracles* were a collection of hexameter verses composed by Julian the Chaldean – or perhaps his son, Julian the Theurgist – during the late second century AD. Previous Neoplatonists had accorded these a great importance. Proclus' chance to study the *Oracles* in depth with Syrianus was lost. The master set his two star pupils, Proclus and Domninus, the choice of reading either the *Oracles* or the Orphic poems with him.[29] They disagreed. While Proclus preferred the *Oracles*, Domninus opted for the works of Orpheus. Alas, Syrianus died shortly thereafter. Proclus, however, seems to have worked up his commentary on the *Oracles* from his study of Porphyry and Iamblichus (*VProc.* 26). Marinus also tells us that Proclus was further instructed in the theurgic rituals associated with the *Oracles* by Asclepigeneia, who was the daughter of Plutarch (*VProc.* 28). A portion of Proclus' work *On Sacrifice and Magic* survives.[30] In spite of his preference to study the *Oracles* rather than the Orphic writings, it appears that Proclus did not neglect these inspired texts either. The *Suda* attributes to him a commentary on the *Orphic Theology*, as well as a work entitled *On the agreement of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato with the books of the Chaldeans*.[31] Finally, we have a number of hymns to various gods from Proclus.[32]

In light of his pagan piety and the cultural context, we may regret that we have no record of any work on Christianity. Porphyry, of course,

[28] Text and French translation included in des Places (1971). English translation in Johnson (1988).

[29] The 'Orphic writings' that Proclus and the Neoplatonists quote most frequently, however, is the *Rhapsodic Theogony* which is mostly the product of the post-Hellenistic period. Comparisons with the Derveni papyrus suggest that they also encompass earlier material too. On the Orphic poems generally, see West (1983). We cite the fragments of Orphic writings that Proclus quotes by their numbers in Kern (1963).

[30] Greek text, Bidez (1928); French translation in Festugière and Massignon (1944).

[31] It is possible that Proclus' role here was to edit Syrianus' notes and perhaps to add some scholia. A work of the same title is attributed to both authors. Cf. Dodds (1963), xiv. On the question of originality in Proclus' works, see pp. 13–16 below.

[32] Cf. Vogt (1957), van den Berg (2001).

wrote an infamous *Against the Christians* – in no fewer than fifteen books. Saffrey argued that we can discern coded references to Christians in Proclus' works.[33] But these are very subtle. Proclus' work *On the Eternity of the World* is often given the sub-title 'Against the Christians', but Lang and Marco argue convincingly that this is a later addition.[34] The more obvious targets of Proclus' arguments in this work are other Platonist philosophers, such as Plutarch, who supposed that the *Timaeus* implies a creation of the world in time. Of course, it may simply have been too dangerous by the mid-fifth century to write anything that was openly critical of Christian theology. This would perhaps explain the absence of any such work by Proclus, even though he was not much inclined toward compromise. It seems equally likely that Proclus cultivated the same frosty indifference to Christians that Plato displayed toward Democritus.

To conclude, just as we should not think of Proclus' religious devotion as distinct from his role as Platonic successor, so too we should not imagine that his works divide into two distinct kinds: sober exegesis of Platonic texts and enthusiastic writings on obscure, mystery religions. Proclus' version of the content of Platonic philosophy weaves what may seem to the modern reader to be quite disparate elements into a single synthesis which is pagan religious Platonism.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERPRETATION IN THE NEOPLATONIC COMMENTARY TRADITION

The Neoplatonic commentaries on Plato differ in quite significant ways from the modern commentaries like that of Cornford or Taylor on Plato's *Timaeus*. One potentially misleading way to characterize the difference is to claim that for modern commentators the purpose of the commentary is simply to interpret Plato's text, while for the Neoplatonists, the commentary form serves as a vehicle for the elaboration of the commentator's own philosophical views. This *may*, in fact, be the correct way to contrast the content of, say, Cornford's commentary with that of Proclus, depending on what you take to be the distance between Neoplatonism and Plato's intended meaning. But it is exactly the wrong way to characterize the Neoplatonic commentators' own self-conception. The Neoplatonists would be shocked by such an imputation, not only because they would regard it as false, but because the idea of philosophical theorizing independently of a tradition of interpretation would be *hubris*. Thus, Damascius writes in *On first principles* (*Peri archôn*):

[33] Saffrey (1975). [34] Lang and Macro (2001).