

PERSECUTION AND RESPONSE IN LATE PAGANISM: THE EVIDENCE OF DAMASCIUS*

THE theme of this paper is intolerance: its manifestation in late antiquity towards the pagans of the Eastern Mediterranean, and the immediate reactions and long-term attitudes that it provoked in them. The reasons why, in spite of copious evidence, the persecution of the traditional cults and of their adepts in the Roman empire has never been viewed as such are obvious: on the one hand no pagan church emerged out of the turmoil to canonise its dead and expound a theology of martyrdom, and on the other, whatever their conscious religious beliefs, late antique scholars in their overwhelming majority were formed in societies whose ethical foundations and logic are irreversibly Christian. Admittedly a few facets of this complex subject, such as the closing of the Athenian Academy and the demolition of temples or their conversion into churches, have occasionally been touched upon;¹ but pagan persecution in itself, in all its physical, artistic, social, political, intellectual and psychological dimensions, has not as yet formed the object of scholarly research.

To illustrate the pressures wrought by intolerance upon late antique society, I have chosen a period of one hundred years spanning the life, testimony and initiatives of Damascius. In the 460s Neoplatonism as a fairly standardised expression of pagan piety still formed—despite occasional persecution—a generally accepted way of thinking and living in the Eastern Mediterranean; moreover, as epitomised by Proclus and Athens, it was a recognisably Greek way. By 560 on the other hand, as a result of Justinian's decree prohibiting the official propagation of the doctrine in Athens, its exponents, after various vicissitudes, had ended up in a frontier town, where their philosophy had become contaminated by local forms of thought and worship and was on the way to losing its Graeco-Roman relevance. The interaction and the resulting changes in late antiquity of a sociological force—intolerance—and of a *Weltanschauung*—Neoplatonism—is a complex phenomenon in which causes and effects are never clearly defined. In an attempt at clarifying this development (which lies at the heart of the transformation of the ancient into the medieval world) I have in what follows set the focus of the action against two contrasting backgrounds. The first consists of a selective study of violence in Alexandria between the fourth and the sixth centuries; the second is represented by an equally impressionistic account of the evolution of Neoplatonism at Harran between the sixth and the tenth centuries and its increasing relevance to the world of Islam.

I. THE PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY

By way of introduction to my theme I shall attempt to animate the gallery of believers presented by Damascius. Born in all probability in the early 460s in the city from which he

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¹ Recent bibliography on the closing of the Academy in H.J. Blumenthal, '529 and its sequel: what happened to the Academy?', *Byzantion* xlviii (1978) 369-85; I. Hadot, 'La vie et l'oeuvre de Simplicius d'après les sources grecques et arabes'; *Id.*, *Simplicius: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie* (Berlin 1987) 3-39; A. Frantz, *The Athenian Agora: results of excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens XXIV: Late Antiquity A.D. 267-700* (Princeton 1988) 44-47, 84-92, together with B. Ward-Perkins, *JRS* lxxx (1990) 251. On temples, see J.M. Spieser, 'La christianisation des sanctuaires païens en Grèce', Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, *Neue Forschungen in griechischen Heiligtümern* (Tübingen 1976) 309-20; G. Fowden, 'Bishops and temples in the Eastern Roman Empire, A.D. 320-435', *JTS* n.s. xxix (1978) 53-78.

derives his name,² Damascius studied in Alexandria, and seems to have taught rhetoric both there and in Athens. He belonged by right of birth to that charmed circle of holy men and literati, whose achievement and shortcomings he undertook to appraise for his own pleasure and for that of posterity in his *Life of Isidore*, a book which in the *Suda*, and occasionally in Photius, bears the much more felicitous title Φιλόσοφος Ἱστορία.³ This splendidly irreverent hagiography was written in Athens in the first quarter of the sixth century, presumably shortly after Damascius became head of the Academy. Surviving in sadly fragmentary form, the work bears witness to the ease with which the members of a wide philosophical circle moved in the late fifth and early sixth centuries between Athens, Alexandria and Aphrodisias. Yet much more than a testimony to the physical and spiritual peregrinations of the pagan élite of the time, this text is a criticism of current opinion on the ideal philosopher:

I have chanced upon some who are outwardly splendid philosophers in the multitude of views treasured in their rich memory; in the wondrous quickness of their crafty syllogisms; in the constant asset of their extraordinary power of perception; yet inside, in the things of the soul, they are poverty-stricken and lacking in true knowledge.⁴

This polemical point is specifically made in connection with Isidore. By a startling paradox, conventional mental abilities in him were so ordinary, that philosophy rested μόνη τῆ ψυχῆ, 'exclusively on his soul'.⁵ Thus Isidore appears as the antipode of the much admired Asclepiodotus, whose claim to intellectual wholeness Damascius demolishes with cruel methodicality:

Contrary to what most people think, Asclepiodotus' mind was not perfect. He was sharp at raising questions, but not so shrewd when it came to putting an argument together; his was an uneven intelligence, especially when it came to divine matters—the invisible and intelligible concepts of Plato's thought. Even more wanting was he in the field of higher wisdom, the Orphic and Chaldaean wisdom which transcends philosophical common sense. In natural philosophy, however, he was by far the strongest among his contemporaries. Likewise he was good at mathematics, and this is what gained him the reputation of an overall genius. In the sphere of morals and virtue finally he was constantly trying to innovate and to limit understanding to the realm of the visible, without taking any account of the theories of the Ancients, but packing together everything and degrading it to this mundane world.⁶

As must already be clear, Damascius was no charitable observer of human nature; he was a subtle psychologist, a cruel logician and, above all, a man endowed with a superb sense of the ridiculous. Yet if with all this mental impedimenta and a thorough training in rhetoric he did not end up as a compulsive spirit of contradiction, this is purely because of the spiritual conversion he underwent around his thirtieth year. Under the impact of this experience, Damascius gave up his rhetorical career to devote himself to philosophy.⁷ His intuitive mind afforded him the means of penetrating the innermost recesses of transcendental mysticism and, as a result, he is the only Neoplatonist after Iamblichus to have produced a truly original work of systematic theology. But Damascius was a man of many parts. Not untypically, he also produced a collection of marvellous stories and a philosophical *Who's who*; at the same time

² For the date of Damascius' birth, see L.G. Westerink, *Damascius, Traité des premiers principes* I (Paris 1986) pp. x-xi.

³ *Suda*, s.v. 'Δαμάσκιος' and Photius, *Bibl.* 181 (125b).

⁴ Damascius, *Vita Isidori*, ed. C. Zintzen (Hildesheim 1967) *Epitoma Photiana* (henceforth EP) 17; for an extreme case along these lines, see EP 62 on Damascius' own master of rhetoric, Theon.

⁵ EP 17.

⁶ EP 126.

⁷ See EP 201 together with Westerink (n. 2) pp. xiii-xiv; cf. Damascius, *Vita Isidori* (n. 4) fr. (henceforth fr.) 325.

he proved an intrepid traveller, an inspiring teacher, an able administrator and, when circumstances required, a leader of men.

In undertaking to write a prosopographical study of contemporary philosophy, Damascius was following a well-established trend. The surviving fragments may be enigmatic, but they leave one in no doubt of the style, intent and ambience of the original. The *Philosophical history* is no apologetic work. The air of doom which pervades Eunapius' *Lives* is absent here. This is a critical, and often humorous, appreciation of the character and achievement of individual men and women, judged as overall personalities. Set firmly against a wide geographical, historical and political background, these people are shown to move in two disparate and often clashing worlds, those of paganism and Christianity. That the two formed an organic unity is a fact of which Damascius, unlike many of his contemporaries, was vividly aware. Yet his art consists in his ability to clothe with objectivity the psychological world of other people. Space and Time too are prominent in this book. But, whereas all Space is viewed with a benign eye, as the perpetual theatre of divine revelation, Time, as the purveyor of decay, becomes for Damascius the villain *par excellence*. We are dealing with a typically Neoplatonic universe. The philosophers' private lives are firmly integrated into this metaphysical context, while at the same time they are inextricably linked with a sequence of events in local, imperial and international politics. Yet most of the actors appear only to a limited degree conscious of the public events around them; using a post-Euclidean image, I would describe their lives as running at different angles more or less parallel to the axis of imperial history, and when, not uncommonly, these men's perceptions clash with reality, the collision does not seem to wake them from their slumber. Gossip too is of the essence of this book. But Damascius is neither small-minded nor embittered. Contemptuous of most people, but never cantankerous in the manner of a Eunapius or a Zosimus, the author is also capable of tremendous outbursts of anger: the Christians and their view of Time, of Space and of the Beyond are his constant *bête noire*, the great negative theme which, more than any other force, cements these philosophic Lives together. All this material is presented in a superb linguistic garb, but what gives the text its unique grace is the style. At the risk of being accused of pretentiousness, I would describe Damascius' art as an unexpectedly felicitous combination of the apparently incompatible achievements of an Anatole France and a Proust.

II. REVELATORY WISDOM

By the mid-fifth century 'the purified philosophy of Plato'⁸ had taken deep root in Athens. What we call Neoplatonism was the renovated paganism of the Hellenised Syrian, Egyptian or Arab, which combined an acceptance of all local cults with a moral, intellectual and spiritual teaching that was recognisably Greek.

The man who was instrumental in the creation of this pagan oecumenism was the Syrian Iamblichus who, in the conceptual sphere, sanctioned the dogma of the accordance of Plato and Aristotle and, on the practical level, established a Pythagorean model of behaviour for the Saint. Stoic, Peripatetic and Cynic ethics were nicely fitted into this framework, while a crucial Stoic notion, that of universal sympathy, was called upon to account for the unbreakable unity of the physical universe. Unity of space had its correlative in unity of time and, accordingly, Iamblichus' impressive synthesis embraced, justified and finally systematised whatever was known of humanity's religious past. All major theologies, whether Egyptian, Babylonian or Greek, with their cultic customs, their mythologies and their metaphysics, were explained as

⁸ The phrase is used by Hierocles, *On providence*, ap. Photius, *Bibl.* 214 (173a *ad fin.*) to describe Neoplatonism.

facets of the same grandiose revelation, a revelation which—unlike the Judeo-Christian revelation—is a continuing, unending one. The particular expression of the divine word that provided Iamblichus with the theoretical basis for his religious system was a collection of hexameter verses revealed to humanity at the time of Marcus Aurelius and circulating under the name of Chaldaean Oracles.⁹

Iamblichus' achievement was universally acclaimed. In the following generations men set themselves the task of producing commentaries on the most metaphysical of Plato's dialogues and on the Chaldaean Oracles along the lines of exegesis established by Iamblichus. Gradually they even came to read only those dialogues which had been singled out by Iamblichus and in the order proposed by him.¹⁰ Inevitably, his theological teaching came to acquire the aura of dogma and by the same token the criteria of orthodoxy and heresy were imported into pagan theology. The need for a holy book became imperative, and it was in this connection that the Emperor Julian declared the whole of Greek literature sacred.¹¹ But Julian was an enthusiast. Most people would regard as canonic scriptures only a very limited body of texts, as the testimony of Proclus in this respect shows: 'he used to say', reports Proclus' biographer, 'that if it were in his power he would have preserved only the Chaldaean Oracles and the *Timaeus*, destroying all other books' as positively harmful to humanity.¹² These words, with which, revealingly, Marinus concludes his teacher's biography, anticipate the various stories about the destruction of the Library of Alexandria and epitomise their spirit.¹³

The need for a pagan identity, created not least by Christian aggressiveness, gradually led the Neoplatonists not only to acquire an *esprit de corps*, but also to seek to define their roots, that is to present themselves as a group in synchronic and diachronic terms. The latter attempt resulted at some time in the fifth century in the evolution of the theory of the 'golden chain', professing belief in an unbroken succession of divinely inspired teachers, who both taught and practised the Platonic mysteries. Naturally the line started with Plato, though later Neoplatonists tended to attribute the birth of their doctrine to an almost mythical figure, the Egyptian Ammonius Saccas, master of the two most powerful geniuses of the third century—Plotinus and Origen. More concretely, however, Iamblichus came to be recognised as the founder of renovated Platonism, and Athens as its consecrated seat.¹⁴

From the early fifth century the Athenian Academy was a teaching centre in the physical, legal and spiritual sense, yet more importantly it was also moving towards becoming something

⁹ For a brief and clear analysis of the importance of the Chaldaean Oracles within the context of Neoplatonism, see J.F. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London 1989) 119-122. On Iamblichus, see my articles, 'Philosophers and oracles: shifts of authority in late paganism', *Byzantion* lxii (1992) 48-49 and 'Dreams, theurgy and freelance divination: the testimony of Iamblichus', *JRS* lxxxiii (1993) 115-130. A good description of the aims of Iamblichian syncretism is given by Marinus with reference to Proclus: *πάσαν μὲν θεολογίαν ἑλληνικὴν τε καὶ βαρβαρικὴν καὶ τὴν μυθικοῖς πλάσμασιν ἐπισκιαζομένην (...) εἰς φῶς ἤγαγεν, ἐξηγουμένους τε πάντα ἐνθουσιαστικώτερον καὶ εἰς συμφωνίαν ἄγων*: *Vita Procli* (henceforth *VP*) 22; for a slightly different emphasis, cf. fr. 134. For Asclepiades as an adept of the Iamblichian school of thought, see fr. 164.

¹⁰ On the Iamblichian canon, see L.G. Westerink, *Anonymous, Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam 1962) p. xxxvii, as complemented by A.J. Festugière, 'L'ordre de lecture des dialogues de Platon aux Ve/VIe siècles', *MH* xxvi (Paris 1969) 281-96 and esp. 283 [= *Etudes de philosophie grecque* (1971) 535-550].

¹¹ See Julian's Edict on Education, *ep.* 61 (Bidez) and my *Julian: an intellectual biography*² (London 1992) 1-12.

¹² Marinus, *VP* 38. That this attitude was becoming standard among Neoplatonists is illustrated by the Alexandrian ascetic Serapio, who not only spent his life reading just Orpheus (fr. 41), but also made a point of bequeathing to Isidore 'the two or three books' that he possessed (fr. 287).

¹³ For which, see A.J. Butler (ed. P.M. Fraser), *The Arab conquest of Egypt*² (Oxford 1978) 401-403.

¹⁴ Marinus, *VP* 10; Hierocles, *On providence*, *ap.* Photius, *Bibl.* 214 (173a, 34 ff.; 172a, 1-9); cf. the important EP 150, where Iamblichus and Plutarch are pronounced in one breath.

of a monastic institution—a theological college, one might say, or a dervish tekke. In this capacity the school at Athens was unique in the later Roman world. There was at least one municipal chair of philosophy at Alexandria but, as Ilsetraut Hadot has conclusively argued, no Platonic School of Alexandria can ever have existed.¹⁵ Recent research suggests that Aphrodisias too was a flourishing centre for Iamblichian studies at the end of the fifth century, though again there could have been no official Academy based there.¹⁶ Throughout late antiquity Athens remained the only universally recognised dispenser of pagan theology, and to have been formed there was a *sine qua non* for those who subsequently taught either at Alexandria or at Aphrodisias. Relations between the three cities were close, but the certificate of orthodoxy could be conferred only by Athens.

Such is the picture conveyed by Damascius, who also offers the extremely interesting information that by the late fifth century men could be elected honorary *diadochi* of the Academy. This was undoubtedly so in the case of Isidore, a man who attached great value to personal independence. Accordingly ‘he was elected a *diadochus* of the Platonic interpretation in title rather than actual deed’.¹⁷ This election *honoris causa*, as I understand it, must have meant that, while remaining a freelance *diadochus*, Isidore was officially recognised as forming a link in the golden chain of Plato. And it was typical of Damascius’ independence of mind and peculiar sense of humour that, upon receiving the Platonic succession, he made a point of writing the Life of Isidore rather than that of his own predecessor, Zenodotus. Indeed by canonising Isidore’s unconventionality, Damascius both complied with School tradition and made slight fun of it.¹⁸

III. THE SACRED RACE

If not everybody could form part of the ‘golden chain’, there were at least other symbolic chains which attached men to heaven.¹⁹ For the Neoplatonist, we are all divine and the meaning of life consists in taking consciousness of this inherent divinity. The discovery of God is thus a journey within, in which the point of embarkation coincides with birth. It is there that some people are more fortunate than others, for the degree of awareness of one’s divinity is determined by heredity. In a society in which political propagandists had raised the principle of imperial legitimacy to a metaphysical level, the Neoplatonists came effortlessly to evolve and spread a dynastic theology. Indeed by the time of Damascius, the history of the caste had acquired its own mythology as well, for the creation of which all sorts of forged genealogies were mobilised.²⁰

¹⁵ Evidence for the existence of a municipal chair in Alexandria is provided by Damascius who says that, after her husband’s death, Aedesia succeeded in ensuring for her sons the revenues of the chair ἕως ἐφιλοσόφησαν, fr. 124. On the metaphysical importance of the Athenian succession, EP 151. For a general appraisal, I. Hadot, *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin; Hiéroclès et Simplicius* (Paris 1978) 10-12 and, more recently, *id.* (n. 1) 7.

¹⁶ See C. Roueché, *Aphrodisias in late antiquity* (London 1989) pp xxv-xxvi, 85-87. On the issue of an ‘Academy’ at Aphrodisias, see the cautious analysis of the building complex which housed the philosophers’ portraits by R.R.R. Smith, ‘Late Roman philosopher portraits from Aphrodisias’, *JRS* lxxx (1990) 130; cf. *id.* ‘Late Roman Philosophers’, R.R.R. Smith-K.T. Erim (eds), *Aphrodisias Papers* ii (1991) 144-6.

¹⁷ EP: καὶ ἐνηφίσθη διάδοχος ἐπ’ αἰζιώματι μᾶλλον ἢ πράγματι τῆς πλατωνικῆς ἐξηγήσεως.

¹⁸ This point becomes even clearer in the light of the first half of Section IV.3.

¹⁹ For a good presentation of the relevant material, see P. Lévêque, *Aurea catena Homeri: une étude sur l’allégorie grecque* (Paris 1959) *passim*.

²⁰ Theodora, the pupil of Isidore and of Damascius and the inspirator and dedicatee of the *Philosophical history*, is presented as the linear descendant of Iamblichus and, beyond him, of Sampsigeramus and Moninus, priestly kings of Emesa, Photius, *Bibl.* 181 (125b): cf. *JHS* cii (1982) 49 n. 128, to which add the evidence of Strabo xiv 2.10; for the evolving ethos of the royal house of Emesa and its increasing connection with philosophical mysticism, see K.

The oecumenism of Neoplatonic theology had its social pendant in a matrimonial cosmopolitanism. Except for those, not so few, who chose to preserve ritual celibacy,²¹ the members of the 'sacred race' married cultured women actively committed to the pagan cause, preferably relations of their masters and fellow-students.²² As a result of this marital policy, women moved between continents just as easily as men, a circumstance which enhanced conformity and cohesion.

The sense of belonging to a caste was promoted in various ways, all of which suggested that legitimacy was a matter of spiritual rather than blood kinship. Thus the terms 'father' and 'grandfather' were regularly used to refer to one's masters, while children named after their parents' teachers served as living reminders of the fact that spiritual ancestry counted more than carnal.²³ The dedication of books, the leaving of legacies, the pronouncement of funeral speeches and the writing of biographies defined in subtle ways spiritual linkage in a community which described philosophy as its 'ancestral inheritance'.²⁴ This attitude meant that, whether clever or stupid, all children had to embark on a philosophical career, increasingly viewed as a battle station the defence of which passed from father to son.²⁵ 'One could call us fighters', wrote Syrianus somewhat out of context while commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 'since we defend the best and most beautiful of philosophies from the charges brought against it'.²⁶ To leave one's station and go over to the Christians was an act of desertion, as the technical verb *αὐτομολῶ* used by Damascius in connection with Horapollo's conversion signifies.²⁷ It meant no less than exchanging a life of chastity and happiness, 'the Cronian life', whose foundation was reason, for 'a totally dissipated existence, corrupted by lust and wantonness, low-minded, full of female prejudice, a cowardly life roaming about in all manner of swinishness, mean and petty, a life running after the servitude of security, wholly abject and weak, counting happiness solely by the measures provided by one's belly and pudenda, incapable of doing anything noble even for a second; like an enervated body, thrown in a corner

Buraselis, 'Syria, Emesa and the Severans. Political ambitions and Hellenistic tradition in the Roman East', *O Ελληνισμός στην Ανατολή: Acts of the First International Archaeological Congress at Delphi, 6-9 November 1986* (Athens 1991) 23-39. Theagenes of Athens, who was connected through marriage with Nestorius and Plutarch, appears as the descendant not only of a score of Homeric heroes but also of the victor of Marathon, Miltiades, ?Pamprepius, *Panegyric*, E. Heitsch, *Die griechische Dichterfragmente der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Göttingen 1961) 119, 30 ff. See also the Stemma at the end of the article.

²¹ Fr. 34 (for Sarapio); fr. 124 (for Proclus); not unlike Plotinus, Proclus chose to remain unmarried and look after other people's families *ὡς κοινός τις πατήρ*: Marinus, *VP* 17.

²² Olympiodorus offers to his star pupil, Proclus, the hand of his daughter, who was brought up φιλοσόφως (*VP* 9); Aedesia, a close relative of Syrianus and a saint, marries Hermias, after Proclus declines her (fr. 124).

²³ Chrysanthius of Sardis called his son Aedesius, after his master: Eunapius *VS* xxiii 5.1; Proclus refers to Syrianus as 'father': *In Tim.* ii 253, 31; iii 35, 26; *In Remp.* ii 318, 4; *In Parm.* vii col. 1142, 11; cf. *ibid.* iv col. 1058, 22: Πλούταρχος, ὁ ἡμέτερος προπάτωρ, and *VP* 29. Isidore named his son Proclus (EP 301). In the generation after Proclus there is a philosopher called Syrianus, who may well be a brother of Hegias (EP 230); Isidore is called by Damascius θεῖος πατήρ (fr. 1). For a schematisation of the dual linkage that connected men in our circle, see the attached Stemma.

²⁴ The orthodoxy of Asclepiodotus was put beyond contest when Proclus dedicated to him his Commentary on the *Parmenides* (*In Parm.* I, col. 618, 18); Sarapio left his possessions to Isidore to whom he was not related (fr. 287); at a very young age Damascius recited a *laudatio* in verse at Aedesia's funeral (fr. 125); at Proclus' funeral Isidore was the censor-bearer (EP 187). After her husband's death, Aedesia expected her sons to enjoy philosophy *καθ' ἅπερ κληρὸν τινα πατρώας οὐσίας* (fr. 124).

²⁵ Fr. 121: on Hermeias' dullness of mind; fr. 115: on Theon, a teacher of Damascius!

²⁶ *In Met.* (Kroll), 91, 8 ff. The frequent experience of law-courts (cf. Eunapius *VS* vi 10.2) naturally exacerbated the manner of the Neoplatonists: Isidore is a litigious man (frs 62, 65); fr. 66 describes him as ἐνστατικός, EP 30 as φιλάίτιος. Christian aggression had contaminated the pagan psyche to such an extent that by Damascius' day the philosophers were expected to write only for polemical purposes or in defence: EP 8.

²⁷ Fr. 317.

like a sack, incapable of movement'.²⁸ For the Neoplatonist, such and even baser was the life of his contemporaries, for 'they had pulled down and trailed on the ground the divine that is in us and imprisoned it in the earthly and accursed, the Giant-like or Titanic gaol'.²⁹

As well as an undisguised reference to Christian revelation, this passage contains all the key-words of pagan polemic. In the language of the Neoplatonists, the Giants and the Titans are the Christians—mythological beasts with only the external characteristics of Man, who during their brief passage on earth choose to be ruled exclusively by passion.³⁰ In Athens in particular this slogan carried a strong dose of wicked topicality, as it could be seen to allude to the very symbol of the New Order, the palatial residence of the emperor or his representative. Erected, it would appear, by the apostate empress Athenais-Eudocia for the use of her brother Gessius, the building dominated the Agora, where all philosophical activity occurred.³¹ And the visual inescapability of its Tritons and Giants—the sea and land monsters which adorned its monumental façade—must have given rise to an inside joke based on the slanderous identification of Christians with archaic monsters.

Yet pagan hagiographical literature is not just a string of embittered attacks; it is also permeated by the Messianic belief that ultimately the Christian leaders will meet the fate of the Homeric Giant Eurymedon, 'who ruined his reckless people and perished himself'.³² Then the realm of reason will be established again and Hellenism will spread as far as the utmost confines of the civilised world.³³ In the meantime, however, one has to be brave and discreet. This is why 'the sacred race lived apart, leading the blissful life which is pleasing to the gods, devoted to philosophy and to the worship of the divine beings'.³⁴

IV. THE CLAIMS OF ORTHODOXY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

1. *Holy sites*

Just as, whether they had a vocation for it or not, the offspring of the sacred race had to embrace philosophy, so too they saw it as their duty to write religious poetry. Proclus dedicated hymns to the traditional Greek and Roman gods,³⁵ but also, complying with Iamblichan orthodoxy, to Marnas of Gaza (whom Bishop Porphyry had a few years before deprived of his sumptuous abode)³⁶ to the Arab Theandrites (whose temple at Ezra was shortly destined to be emphatically converted into a Christian church)³⁷ and to Isis (whose cult at Philae was to continue undisturbed until the time of Justinian).³⁸ Isidore too felt constrained to compose

²⁸ Fr. 30a; cf. the language of Proclus, *In Remp.* i 75, 15-16: ἀφίστασθαι μὲν τῶν θεῶν καὶ τῆς ὄντως ἱερᾶς θρησκείας, φέρεσθαι δὲ εἰς τὴν ἐμπαθῆ καὶ ἀλόγιστον ζωὴν. On the κρόνιος βίος, see EP 22, frs 33, 287 etc.

²⁹ Fr. 32.

³⁰ See e.g. Proclus, *In Remp.* i 74, 12-16; ii 176, 14.

³¹ On the Palace of the Giants, see Frantz (n. 1) 95-116; for the plausible assumption that it was built by Eudocia, G. Fowden, 'The Athenian Agora and the progress of Christianity', *JRA* iii (1990) 497-8.

³² Eunapius *VS* vi 11.2 and *Odyssey* vii 59-60.

³³ The conviction that divine providence cannot allow the Christians to destroy this universe forms a major theme of Neoplatonic literature, cf. Salustius, *De diis et mundo* xviii; Hierocles (n. 1), 214 (172b).

³⁴ EP 95.

³⁵ See the surviving hymns, edited with commentary by E. Vogt (Wiesbaden 1957).

³⁶ For what follows, Marinus, *VP* 19; for the importance of Gaza for the Neoplatonists, fr. 186; for the destruction of the Marneion, Mark the Deacon, *V. Porph.* 69.

³⁷ On the Syrian Theandrites/Theandrios, EP 198; cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in late antiquity* (Cambridge 1990) 18; on the conversion of the temple at Ezra into a church of St. George, *OGIS* 610.

³⁸ For Isis and Philae, see below, n. 189.

religious hymns, though certainly no Muse had touched him with her grace, as his pupil and biographer irreverently remarks.³⁹ But a saying that Proclus never tired of repeating must have impressed the young man, namely that ‘it is becoming for the philosopher to worship not just the gods of one city or even of one nation, but to be the hierophant of the entire world’.⁴⁰

For the entire world is sacred. While all space is divine, however, some places are more numinous than others; caves and groves, springs and meteorites⁴¹ have been known since time immemorial as sites and manifestations through which God communicates more effortlessly with Man. As such, these inherently sacred places have formed focuses of worship, locations where God reveals Himself even to the layman through miracles and wonders. Living in a period of growing persecution, the Neoplatonists naturally felt the need to protect these holy spots from pagan indifference and Christian attack.

One way in which this purpose was achieved was through commentary and exegesis. Beginning with Porphyry, the Neoplatonists wrote consciously and copiously for an educated and a general public alike, interpreting at various levels the sacred myths of paganism and at the same time justifying ritual in both the local and metropolitan traditions.⁴² An optimistic thought-world, which considered all Nature as the realm of revelation and all literature as holy, naturally regarded folk-lore as the repository of divine mysteries. Thus the theologians of Neoplatonism collected and systematised popular tales in an attempt to reveal and spread the spiritual truth lurking behind the veils of extravagance and incongruity.⁴³ We know for instance that in a now lost work, Damascius presented 572 marvellous tales of jinns and miracles.⁴⁴ Reading the relevant note in Photius, one cannot escape the impression that in this collection one would have come across several of the stories contained in the *Thousand and one nights*, though possibly told in a different spirit. With the same didactic intention Damascius dealt with the marvellous and the fantastic in his *Life of Isidore*, where old Egyptian folk tales, contemporary miracles and holy places are inextricably linked together to illustrate the unity of the universe, which even in its sensible form and historical manifestation is filled with beauty and delight.⁴⁵

A more straightforward way in which the Neoplatonists sought to promote their optimistic view of Nature and History was by spending money on their holy places. In tune with an ancient tradition of civic patriotism still alive as a powerful ideal in their social milieu, the

³⁹ EP 61; literature in general bored Isidore, EP 35, 85—a regard in which Asclepiodotus was more successful, fr. 209; cf. fr. 164 (on Asclepiades); fr. 348 (Damascius on the Phoenician Asclepius).

⁴⁰ Marinus, *VP* 19.

⁴¹ Βαίτυλος (= meteorite, ensouled stone) is a word possibly coined by Damascius (fr. 203, cf. EP 94 for βαϊτύλιον) as a phonetic rendering of the Hebrew *byt'l*, house of God.

⁴² This practice was initiated by Porphyry and taken to its logical conclusion by the Emperor Julian (see my *Julian* [n. 11] 132 ff.); cf. EP 213 for Isidore. For a theoretical justification of this position, see Proclus, *In Remp.* i 75, 16 ff. In his recent book (n. 37) Bowersock presents Hellenism as a cultural *koine*, which allowed the voice of local traditions to become fully articulate in the Roman empire. By using iconographical evidence and philological argumentation, the author shows how Greek culture delivered the ethnic cults, especially in Syria, from their parochialism – religious, cultural and linguistic – without adulterating their essence.

⁴³ For Damascius’ programmatic declaration, EP 2: εἶσω δὲ ἡ τοιαύτη σοφία κρυπτομένη ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τῆς μυθολογίας ταύτης ἀληθείας, οὕτως ἡρέμα παραγυμνοῦται κατὰ βραχὺ τῷ δυναμένῳ πρὸς θεὸν ἀνακλῖναι τὴν ἱερὰν ἀγῶν τῆς ψυχῆς. Cf. EP 213.

⁴⁴ Photius, *Bibl.* 130 (96b-97a).

⁴⁵ EP 63, 68, 69, 87, 88, 93 (for the popular Egyptian background, cf. G. Lefebvre, ‘Le conte des deux frères’, *Romans et contes égyptiens de l’époque pharaonique* (Paris 1949) 139), EP 140, 203.

Neoplatonists put their financial resources at the service of the pagan cause.⁴⁶ Asclepiodotus the Younger for one was ruined 'on account of his pious inclinations',⁴⁷ and certainly anyone who has recently visited Aphrodisias would find this proposition more than credible. Complying with more general policy, the Alexandrian philosopher, who in his youth 'could not bear even to offer sacrifices',⁴⁸ had to suppress his anti-ritualistic tendencies and lead a campaign aimed at the restoration of pagan cult throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and not least in his native Alexandria.⁴⁹

A third way in which the men of our circle defended the *loci* of paganism was by visiting them. Restlessly moving from place to place, these spiritual tourists encouraged the locals in the exercise of their ancestral religious customs and at the same time drew inspiration for themselves.⁵⁰ At a time when he was evading persecution at Athens, Proclus spent a year in Lydia; there, at Adrotta, he revived a local cult and made at least one convert, young Pericles, who eventually followed him back to Athens.⁵¹ Of even greater interest to us is the expedition which brought Damascius himself and his master Isidore from Alexandria to Athens through Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor. This journey, which lasted eight months, appears as a pagan version of the pilgrimage of Egeria. Despite the rigours of bad weather and difficult terrain, despite the hostility of government officials, who created great difficulties for them, the two men were able to visit the most important holy sites on the way.⁵² And, once in Aphrodisias, they were welcomed by Damascius' old tutor, Asclepiodotus, who organised for them physical and mental excursions into the sacred. From Aphrodisias Damascius visited the Phrygian Hierapolis in the company of another philosopher, Dorus. During the night he spent there he dreamt that he had become Attis and that, at the instigation of the Mother of the Gods, he was celebrating the feast of *hilaria*, a clear symbol, Damascius thought, that he and his companion had been saved from spiritual death. On his return to Aphrodisias, Damascius told his host how he had descended into the sacred cave of Apollo without suffering any harm from its poisonous exhalations. Asclepiodotus then regaled his guest by narrating an analogous miracle which had occurred to him when he visited the site as a young man.⁵³

It was presumably during the same visit that Asclepiodotus decided to take Damascius to see the miraculous statue of Apollo in another sacred cave in Caria at a location just across the Maeander called Ἀπόλλωνος Αὐλαί.⁵⁴ Carried away by their religious enthusiasm, the two men did not wait for the boat to take them across, but threw themselves into the river. Submerged by its strong currents, they were soon under water and death by drowning seemed

⁴⁶ Fr. 186 (on Antonius); fr. 273 (on Theagenes and Archiadas); fr. 351 (on Hegias); it was in the course of the fifth century (κατὰ τοὺς νεωτέρους χρόνους) that the Academy acquired its huge fortune through donations; fr. 265 and EP 158.

⁴⁷ Fr. 189.

⁴⁸ Fr. 202.

⁴⁹ Fr. 204.

⁵⁰ On spiritual tourism, see fr. 38 (= EP 239) in connection with Serapio: προθυμότητος εἰς ἀποδημίαν οὐ τὴν μάταιον καὶ τρυφώσαν, εἰς ἀνθρώπινα οἰκοδομήματα καὶ μεγέθη καὶ κάλλη πόλεων διαχαίουσαν. Cf. fr. 94 (Asclepiades visiting Baalbek).

⁵¹ Marinus, *VP* 15, 29, 32, 36.

⁵² EP 206-220. I agree only partly with the reconstruction of the journey proposed by M. Tardieu (*Les paysages reliques: routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius* (Louvain 1990)), who inexplicably excludes Asia Minor from the itinerary of the two men. My description of their journey (which I have recently attempted myself) is to appear in my forthcoming translation of Damascius' *Philosophical history*, partly in the Introduction and partly as Commentary.

⁵³ EP 131.

⁵⁴ For the identification of the site, see L. Robert, *BCH* ci (1977) 86.

imminent. It was at that point that, emerging for a moment and catching sight of King Helios, Asclepiodotus muttered a secret spell. The charm wrought its effect and, seconds later, the two men were lying on the riverside, exhausted but alive.⁵⁵

If such miracles were not uncommon in late pagan circles, they tended to occur inside temples or in their vicinity. This is why the Neoplatonists defended these buildings often at the cost of their lives. And, as we shall see, Damascius' manner of speaking about Olympius—the philosopher who led the defence of the Serapeum against Christian attack in 391—is indicative of his approval of such an extreme attitude.⁵⁶

2. *The meaning of asceticism*

Yet, however sacred, this world of the senses is largely illusory to the Neoplatonist. Its beauty is allusive, its divinity hidden; being is concealed from perception by the tides of becoming. In such a world any dynamic manifestation of the divine—what these men called a theophany—is an extraordinary event, a miracle. And what produces miracles is Man's empathy with God, which can only be achieved by purging the soul of its demonic elements. For the Neoplatonist, therefore, miracles are not wrought through the technical expertise of the magician, who knows how to manipulate the forces of Nature, but through the purity of the ascetic.⁵⁷

Both Plotinus and Iamblichus had defended this position and illustrated its validity by personal example. Yet theirs was a tolerant asceticism, a personal pattern of behaviour which they did not seek to impose on others; their circles were unhomogeneous gatherings and each of their pupils profited from their teaching to the extent of his own ability and will. This was no longer the case in Proclus' circle, or even in Plutarch's, where we first come across the claims of an institutionalised asceticism.⁵⁸ Here *obedience* and conformity in practical and spiritual matters were the cardinal virtues required by the pupil;⁵⁹ accordingly young men were scrutinised 'as gold in fire' before being accepted into the philosopher's room.⁶⁰ If admitted, their gastronomic and sexual continence together with their intellectual and emotional discipline was proclaimed to the world by the special garment of the novice. When Isidore arrived from Alexandria at this semi-monastic community, 'Proclus ordered [him] to adopt the symbols of the best life and wear a coarse cloak', an order that the balanced Isidore found excessive, though in the end he complied with it,⁶¹ as he realised that in the rigid atmosphere of the Athenian Academy no deviations from the norm in practical or intellectual matters would be tolerated and that any individualistic tendencies would be decisively curbed.⁶²

These norms of behaviour were valid not only inside the philosopher's classroom. Virginity was a paramount ideal in these circles and the only excuse for forfeiting it was the requirements of procreation; upon realising that he was not destined to have children, the philosopher

⁵⁵ EP 116-117. For Neoplatonic miracles, see *i.a.* Eunapius VS v.2 (Iamblichus); Libanius, *or.* xviii 177 (Julian); Marinus, VP 29 and fr. 271 (Proclus).

⁵⁶ Frs 91-97; cf. below, 22-25. The defence of temples against Christian attack was not an uncommon feature among the "ἑλληνισταί"; cf. Sozomen vii 15.11; John Chrysostom, *ep.* 123.

⁵⁷ On this theme, see my 'Dreams, theurgy and freelance divination: the testimony of Iamblichus' (n. 9).

⁵⁸ The practice of communal life at the Academy had been Plutarch's wish, cf. Marinus VP 12, 29.

⁵⁹ EP 150.

⁶⁰ Fr. 135.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² On individualistic tendencies, EP 150: μηδ' αὖ μείζον φρονεῖν τῆς κοινωφελούς προαιρέσεως. On eating taboos, EP 125, frs 218, 227, 228. Hilarius was rejected by Proclus as a pupil on account of his appreciation of the pleasures of sex, EP 266.

Theosebius told his wife that she was free to marry another, but she replied that she could not imagine a happier existence than the one freed from the servitude of sexual intercourse; when one of the richest men in Aphrodisias married his daughter to the Alexandrian Asclepiodotus, he made a point of dressing the bride in a philosopher's rough garment. Such anecdotes, and the complacency with which they are reported by our sources, illustrate the overall attitude of these circles towards the body and its joys.⁶³

3. *The tyranny of dogma*

Asceticism's corollary in the mental sphere was orthodoxy. Indeed it is not difficult to see how the need for an orthodoxy emerged among people who lived in a society that was becoming more Christian every day. Intolerance is built into the very presuppositions of Judeo-Christian thought and, accordingly, the triumph of Christianity raised intolerance of other creeds to the level of a religious and social ideal. Infected by the new ethos, the Neoplatonists strove for a few generations towards making their creed as monochrome as possible until Proclus, that scholastic saint who gave the Academy its monastic tone, arrived and equated Platonism with Iamblichan teaching, as *he* understood it.⁶⁴

Among Proclus' intimates was one Domninus, a Syrian 'whose life was not impeccable in the way a true philosopher's life must be'. But the sin for which he incurred Proclus' wrath was that 'he perverted many of the doctrines of Plato by introducing his own beliefs'. Proclus immediately published a refutation with the characteristic title *Purificatory treatise of the Platonic doctrine*, and Domninus, who at some point in his career had been elevated to the chair of Plato, was struck off the list of *diadochi*.⁶⁵ His *damnatio memoriae* on account of his heretical views was complete and the language used by at least one of his successors, Damascius, harsh and scornful.⁶⁶

Much more revealing though of the atmosphere of intellectual terror that reigned in the Academy is the experience of the Samaritan Marinus. An un-selfconfident man with fragile health and a rather literal mind, Marinus had the succession more or less thrust upon him on Proclus' death. Terrified by so great an honour, he tried to acquit his duties as best he could; he thus began by composing a lengthy commentary on the *Philebus*, which he took to his star pupil, Isidore, asking for a detailed criticism prior to publication. After a careful reading, Isidore's polite remark was that Proclus' commentary on the same dialogue was quite sufficient. On hearing this Marinus destroyed the manuscript.⁶⁷ A little later, the hapless but persistent *diadochus* felt obliged to tackle the quintessentially metaphysical dialogue *Parmenides* but, as his pragmatic mind was incapable of any intuitive leaps, he produced a pedestrian interpretation, one at variance with Neoplatonic orthodoxy, which claimed that the dialogue dealt with species rather than gods. Isidore, to whom Marinus sent a letter expounding his argument, refuted it point by point and made it clear that 'the only true exegesis of the dialogue was the more divine one'. The reason why Marinus did not destroy this manuscript as well is extraordinarily interesting: Proclus had once dreamed that Marinus would indeed produce a commentary on the *Parmenides*.⁶⁸

⁶³ Cf. EP 59, on Theosebius; EP 262, on Asclepiodotus. For the circle's theoretical attitude to sex, EP 167, fr. 12 (on Isidore), fr. 102 (on Hypatia), fr. 174 (on Heraiscus). Faithful to the ideal of virginity, Proclus turned down two excellent brides, as Marinus approvingly reports (VP 9, 17).

⁶⁴ Fr. 134. Both Proclus and his followers misunderstood Iamblichus: cf. my 'Dreams' etc. (n. 9) *passim*.

⁶⁵ Fr. 227. For a different view on Domninus, see fr. 221.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* and fr. 228. On the School's Iamblichanism, EP 33, 36. On contemporary abuse of Iamblichus, EP 34.

⁶⁷ EP 42 (= fr. 90).

⁶⁸ Frs 244, 245.

This Platonic brotherhood with its regimented way of living and thinking was, as already pointed out, the expected product of a world which had endorsed intolerance. Narrow and illiberal, it aspired towards what Damascius had described in another context as ‘the servitude of security’. It was an emotional haven for the weak, and one which combined the excitement of modernity with the authority of tradition as well as being socially exclusive, mentally demanding and spiritually satisfying. Above all, it afforded its members the convenience of a label. For all these reasons formal conversions to Neoplatonism were not uncommon.

If the abbot of the Platonic Academy, Marinus, was initially a Samaritan,⁶⁹ Iacobus Psychristus, the iatrophilosopher and philanthropist in whose honour the Athenian Academy and the Constantinopolitan Senate erected statues, was, to judge by his name, a convert from Judaism. More to the point, Damascius introduces two Alexandrians, Epiphanius and Euprepus, priests of Osiris and Aion and of Mithra respectively, who were born into Christian families. When the two men, says Damascius, were initiated into the mysteries of paganism by the traditional élites, they became ardent heralds—πολύφωνοι κήρυκες—of the new theology.⁷⁰

Of course most conversions to paganism occurred within an institutional framework. It was in this connection that a systematic proselytiser like Horapollo was nicknamed by the Christians ‘Psych-apollo’, ‘Soul-destroyer’.⁷¹ But even a compromiser like Ammonius could make converts, almost *malgré lui*.⁷² The social tension created by such conversions needs hardly any commentary, especially as the newly illuminated usually chose to proclaim their new allegiance to the world in pretty histrionic and entertaining ways; as for example the Alexandrian Zeno, who broke away from his native Judaism by driving a white ass through the Synagogue on the Sabbath.⁷³

V. PERSECUTION AND SURVIVAL

If Athens was the intellectual factory of late paganism, Alexandria was its main religious warehouse. Indeed, one expression of the awakening Egyptian nationalism was a conscious return to the roots of religion. In that ancient land, which had fascinated the Greeks long before Plato’s day, culture and religion had always been co-extensive. For that reason when a new religious mode emerged, it could only be accepted if seen in traditional cultural terms and, accordingly, Christianity became the driving force behind the tremendous revival of the national language and art in late antique Egypt. At the same time, either as a response to the Christian challenge or under its own momentum, Hellenism, which had for centuries enjoyed a formal connection with the local religion, was at last blessed with the intimacy of union. It was as if an arranged marriage, which had for years vegetated in the tepid embrace of convention, was miraculously immersed into the whirlpool of passion.⁷⁴ In a masterly article R. Rémondon has shown that the paganism of the philosophers in fifth century Alexandria was not an anachronism born of intellectual snobbery, but a vital movement with multiple roots in popular religion.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ EP 141.

⁷⁰ Fr. 100; *pace PRLE* ii, s.v. Epiphanius 2, ἀρχαιοπρεπής πολιτεία in this context can only mean paganism.

⁷¹ See Zacharias Scholasticus, *Vie de Sévère* (ed. trans. M.-A. Kugener), *Patrologia Orientalis* ii (1907) 32.

⁷² *Id. De mund. op.*, PG 85, 1012: ἡρέμα πρὸς ἑλληρισμὸν ἀποκλίνας.

⁷³ Fr. 239.

⁷⁴ EP 1; fr. 3.

⁷⁵ R. Rémondon, ‘l’Egypte et la suprême résistance au christianisme (Ve - VIIe siècles)’, *BIFAO* li (1952) 63-78; cf. fr. 80 (= EP 243). On Egyptian ‘nationalism’ and the slow Hellenisation of Egypt as a reaction to Rome, see the pertinent remarks of M. Sartre, *L’Orient romain* (Paris 1991) 454-8.

1. *Violence in Alexandria*⁷⁶

In the late 350s Alexandria experienced one of her most anti-pagan bishops in the person of the Arian George. Thrust into the see of Athanasius, George had recourse to every imaginable method of eradicating pagan cult.⁷⁷ An arrogant and provocative man when circumstances permitted it, but normally sly and servile, he converted temples into churches, organized public parades in which pagan sacred objects were ridiculed, deliberately insulted the pagans during the exercise of their worship and, finally, unleashed the army against the quintessentially symbolic temple of Egypt, the Serapeum.⁷⁸ Not content with mere monumental aggression, George then turned to human persecution, causing the exile of influential teachers, such as the pagan iatrophilosopher Zeno.⁷⁹ Not surprisingly, therefore, as soon as it became known that Julian was sole emperor, a large crowd sought George at the prison where he had been confined for his own safety and, after ritually torturing him, tore him limb from limb, burnt his remains and threw the ashes into the sea. The operation escalated into a riot in which, among other atrocities, many Christians were crucified.⁸⁰ When the incident was reported to the emperor, Julian addressed a letter to the Alexandrians, which, in the words of its editor, cannot have created the impression ‘d’une colère très dangereuse’, and sought to ensure for himself possession of George’s considerable library.⁸¹

After this peak of violence peace between the two communities was restored and freedom of worship was resumed in the city which ‘on account of the temple of Sarapis was a sacred world in itself’.⁸² The reference is to the Rhacotis Serapeum, though the temple of Sarapis at Canopus was no less famous. Situated some twelve miles to the east of Alexandria, Canopus had since Hellenistic times been an international oracular and healing centre, a meeting place of intellectuals and saints and, more unpleasantly, a popular tourist resort.⁸³ At the same time it held, in accordance with Egyptian custom, a community of men who had dedicated themselves to divine worship. At some moment in the second half of the fourth century there arrived at Canopus a remarkable holy man. Antoninus was the son of the philosopher Sosipatra and seems to have inherited from his mother both her prophetic and paedagogic gift and her unusual will-power in dealing with the demands of the passionate self. His fame spread quickly; indeed it was thanks to him that the Serapeum became again a major centre of pilgrimage.⁸⁴ As the years passed, however, Antoninus grew into a hieratic and remote figure increasingly consumed by one main concern:

⁷⁶ ‘Ὁ Ἀλεξανδρέων δῆμος πλέον τῶν ἄλλων δῆμων χαίρει ταῖς στάσεσιν· εἰ δέ ποτε καὶ προφάσεως ἐπιλάβηται, εἰς ἀφόρητα καταστρέφει κακά’: Socrates vii 13.2.

⁷⁷ On George’s personality, see E. Stein-J.R. Palanque, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* i (Paris 1959) 153 and my *Julian* (n. 11) 23-4. Cf. Sozomen v.7; τῶν περὶ τὰ ξόανα καὶ τοὺς ναοὺς ὕβριν καὶ τὴν τῶν θυσιῶν καὶ πατριῶν κώλυσιν.

⁷⁸ Socrates iii 2; Ammianus xxii 11.7; Julian *ep.* 60, 379a: εἰσήγαγεν εἰς τὴν ἱερὰν πόλιν στρατόπεδον, καὶ κατέλαβεν ὁ στρατηγὸς τῆς Αἰγύπτου τὸ ἀγνώτατον τοῦ θεοῦ τέμενος.

⁷⁹ Libanius *ep.* 171; Julian *ep.* 58.

⁸⁰ Stein-Palanque (n. 77) 164-5.

⁸¹ Julian *ep.* 60; cf. L’empereur Julien, *Lettres*, ed. J. Bidez (Paris 1924) 43; Julian *ep.* 106, 107.

⁸² Eunapius *VS* vi 10.8.

⁸³ Strabo, xvii 1.17, talks of a string of inns, and of masses of tourists who grossly misbehaved themselves (μετὰ τῆς ἐσχάτης ἀκολασίας).

⁸⁴ Eunapius *VS* vi 9.15-17; vi 10.6-10.

he predicted to all his disciples that after him the temple would be no more, but that the great and holy temples of Serapis would pass into formless chaos and lose their shape, while an abominable mythological darkness would hold tyrannical sway over what is fairest on earth.⁸⁵

Antoninus' obsessive repetition of these words coincides with the late 380s, a period which saw the initiation of a ferocious anti-pagan campaign in Alexandria. Early in 384 there arrived in Egypt the new praetorian prefect of the East, Maternus Cynegius, a Christian fanatic if ever there was one, who had express orders from Theodosius to prohibit pagan worship and close the temples.⁸⁶ It was in the course of a second visit to Alexandria, however, in 385-6, that Cynegius seems to have embarked on his mission, especially as he found an ideal ally in the person of the new bishop, Theophilus (385-412).

Born and bred in Memphis, Theophilus had had first-hand experience not merely of the awesome splendour of the ancient religion but equally of its tenacity and vigour.⁸⁷ His prolonged contact with paganism inspired in him a fierce hatred, comparable only to the fury he felt towards Alexandria's other major achievement: the legacy of Origen. And the attack on paganism and Origenism (which is the most Platonic form of Christianity) became the twin issue to which he consecrated his episcopal skills.

Relying on his armies of monks and with administrative backing, Theophilus unleashed a formidable attack on pagan monuments.⁸⁸ According to the combined testimony of Socrates and Sozomen, he destroyed or converted into churches several temples and had their sacred objects paraded in a feast of derision.⁸⁹ These sacrilegious acts provoked the wrath of even the most philosophical among the Hellenes, who then proceeded to attack the Christians. In the heat of the battle the pagans occupied the Rhacotis Serapeum, which was situated on the acropolis of the city, and turned it into a fortress. A holy war of untold savagery ensued; the pagans raided the city and brought their prisoners to the Serapeum, where they gave them the choice between sacrificing to the gods and death by torture. The powers-that-be proved unable to control the situation and the emperor's assistance was sought. Theodosius' order was to leave unpunished the pagans of Alexandria (in whom he saw prospective converts), but to demolish the temples.⁹⁰ In this new phase the resistance of the Serapeum was organised by Olympius, a philosopher who, not unlike Antoninus, had come specifically from Asia Minor to Alexandria in order to serve the god.⁹¹ He too was an adept of that *religio mentis* of which the Hermeticists speak and, as the Christian mob attacked the Serapeum, he urged his followers to die for the cause of religion; but, when he perceived their distress at the massive destruction of one of the most splendid buildings of antiquity, he explained in a moving speech that the symbols of religion are mere matter and that God is within.⁹²

These events occurred in 391. Subsequently Theophilus' monks overran the Canopus

⁸⁵ Eunapius *VS* vi 9.17.

⁸⁶ For the date of Cynegius' arrival in Egypt and the reliability of Zosimus' information, see Zosimus iv 37 with Paschoud's note *ad loc.*

⁸⁷ For the bishop's personality and politics, see A. Favale, *Teofilo d'Alessandria* (Turin 1958) *passim*.

⁸⁸ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 200A; ἦλθον ποτε πατέρες εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν, κληθέντες ὑπὸ Θεοφίλου τοῦ ἀρχιεπισκόπου, ἵνα ποιήσῃ εὐχὴν καὶ καθέλῃ τὰ ἱερά.

⁸⁹ Socrates v 16: ὁ Θεόφιλος παντοῖος ἐγένετο καθυβρίσαι τὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων μυστήρια. Sozomen vii 15: ἐπίτηδες σπουδάζων ἐνουβρίσαι τοῖς ἑλληνικοῖς μυστηρίοις, ἐξεπόμευεν ταῦτα.

⁹⁰ This may be the occasion which prompted *C.Th.* xvi 10.11, and Sozomen's words (*loc. cit.* in n. 89) may be a free rendering of the spirit of the law.

⁹¹ Fr. 91; fr. 97: Olympius held the presumably formal post of ἱεροδιδάσκαλος. Possible evidence for dedicating oneself to a god as a common attitude among philosophers is provided by EP 252.

⁹² Echoes of this famous speech reached both Sozomen (vii 15) and Damascius (frs 93-94).

Serapeum,⁹³ while they helped to convert the nearby temple of Isis into a church of the Evangelists.⁹⁴ Despite Theophilus' efforts, however, the influence of the goddess at Menuthis outlived him and it fell on his nephew Cyril, whom Theophilus carefully prepared as his successor, to deal with the matter. Cyril contrived to have an oracular dream in which an angel entrusted him with the mission of translating the relics of the obscure martyr Cyrus from St Mark's Church in Alexandria to the newly founded Church of the Evangelists at Menuthis.⁹⁵ Joined by the no less obscure martyr John, Cyrus was intended to take over the therapeutic function of Isis, as Cyril explained in three successive addresses at the inauguration of the cult.⁹⁶ Whether Κῦρος was chosen because of the phonetic affinity his name offered to Κυρῶ, as Isis was commonly known, one cannot tell; but at Menuthis we have a typical case of religious transference, in which even the healing methods used by the pagan cult were perpetuated by the Christians.⁹⁷ Indeed Abba Cyrus continued to serve the Islamic community as a doctor so well that eventually the place was renamed 'Abukir' after him.⁹⁸

As a sequel to the events of the 390s, Isis retreated to a private house at Menuthis, Olympius sailed to Italy, and the most notable among the defenders of the Rhacotis Serapeum dispersed all over the empire spreading the news of the siege, defence and final destruction of this potent symbol of pagan belief. Two of the most prominent among the defenders of the Serapeum were Ammonius, priest of Thoth-Hermes, and Helladius, priest of Ammon-Zeus; they both settled in Constantinople as grammarians and acquired great fame as teachers and scholars. Helladius, on whom uncommon imperial honours were showered,⁹⁹ left a truly lasting impression on his pupils: very often, turning aside from the quirks of Greek grammar, he would launch himself into a story of tears and violence, telling his religiously mixed audience how during the Serapeum riot he killed with his own hands no less than nine Christians.¹⁰⁰ The number of the victims, we may safely guess, grew with each telling. Olympius, on the other hand, the exceptionally good-looking and eloquent philosopher,¹⁰¹ was busy mythologising the events in Italy, though in less self-centred fashion.¹⁰² He used to relate Antoninus' apocalyptic vision, and so successful was he in spreading his fame as a prophet, that Augustine himself felt obliged to take some action: while recognizing Antoninus' prophetic gifts, he tried in his *de divinatione daemonum* to belittle them by contrast with those of the Prophets of Israel.¹⁰³

More importantly, however, the prophecy of the saint of Canopus found its way into that curious and patchy translation of the Hermetic *Perfect Discourse*, the *Asclepius*. The much discussed eschatological section of this text contains an exposition of the principles held by

⁹³ The literary, papyrological and epigraphic evidence for and from Canopus-Menuthis is collected by André Bernand, *Le Delta égyptien d'après les textes grecs* i 1 (Cairo 1970) 164-257. For a lively description of the events, see Eunapius *VS* vi 11.2-6.

⁹⁴ That was at Menuthis, less than a mile's distance from Canopus; the temple of Isis may have been totally destroyed by the Christians (cf. EP 71-73 and Zacharias, *V. Sev.* 19).

⁹⁵ Cf. Sophronius, *Laudes in SS Cyrum et Johannem* 27, *PG* 87.3, 3413.

⁹⁶ *PG* 77, 110-1105.

⁹⁷ See N.F. Marcos, *Los Thaumata de Sofronio: contribución al estudio de la incubatio cristiana* (Madrid 1975) 22 n. 25.

⁹⁸ Though the relics of the martyrs were translated after the coming of the Arabs, first to Constantinople and then to Rome, Menuthis remained a centre of pilgrimage, and underground Christian worship may never have ceased: cf. P. Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient* (Paris, 1985) 318-9.

⁹⁹ *C.Th.* vi 21.1.

¹⁰⁰ Socrates v 16.

¹⁰¹ EP 49, fr. 92.

¹⁰² Sozomen vii 15.

¹⁰³ Augustine *div. daem.* i 6.11.

Antoninus and Olympius on the topic of ritual,¹⁰⁴ refers to the conversion of temples into churches (for which the standard Neoplatonic slander-word *sepulchrum* is used),¹⁰⁵ and finally alludes to the anti-pagan legislation of the 390s.¹⁰⁶ If one makes allowance for the clichés proper to the apocalyptic genre, the text appears as a dramatized, though fairly accurate, description of the events of 391 in Alexandria and its suburbs. Those who emerged victorious out of the confrontation are described as Egyptian in language only, not at heart—a clear reference to Christians, whether they are Greek or Coptic speakers.¹⁰⁷ An exuberant cosmic optimism, free from the slightest Gnostic shade, is coupled with a typically Neoplatonic Messianic profession of faith. It is of course not possible to prove that Olympius and his milieu are responsible for all this, but the suggestion does not rest merely on intuition: the themes of the *Asclepius* Apocalypse are so neatly shaped that they leap into place by themselves to form the peculiar pagan jig-saw puzzle known from late antique Alexandria. Indeed Olympius' fame at home and abroad grew so much that he soon became interchangeable with Antoninus in the pagan subconscious, so that by the fifth century the Alexandrians attributed to him the prophecies which had made famous his Canopus counterpart.¹⁰⁸

Predictably, rather than arresting hostilities, the Serapeum issue initiated a period of constant brutality in which the persecuted became more arrogant and often unnecessarily provocative. A typical case is that of Hypatia, the minor Neoplatonic philosopher who dared stand against Cyril.¹⁰⁹ Confident in her assets, personal and social, Hypatia made an incessant show of power, preaching the doctrines of philosophy even in the streets of Alexandria. This attitude did not go unanswered for long and in 415 a Christian crowd dealt with her much in the manner in which George had been treated half a century before.¹¹⁰

The appalling cruelty of her public martyrdom, heightened by the factor of her sex, left an indelible impression on the Alexandrians. If Hypatia's fate gave rise to a legend, it also deterred the young from studying philosophy.¹¹¹ So long as Cyril was in power, pagans kept a low profile; for he proved a cruel and systematic persecutor of their creed. Indeed one of the tasks for which he will be remembered—not least because it immortalises the text it professes to destroy—is a voluminous formal refutation of Julian's *Contra Galilaeos*, dedicated by the bishop

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Asclepius* 24, 25 with Eunapius' and Sozomen's respective accounts of Antoninus' and Olympius' views on ritual: ἐπεδείκνυτο μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲν θεουργὸν καὶ παράλογον εἰς τὴν φαινομένην αἴσθησιν (Eunapius *VS* vi 9.7); ὅλην φθαρτὴν καὶ ἰνδάλματα λέγων εἶναι τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἀφανισμὸν ὑπομένειν· δυνάμεις δὲ τινὰς ἐνοικῆσαι αὐτοῖς, καὶ εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀποπηγαῖναι (Sozomen vii 15).

¹⁰⁵ *Asclepius* 24: tunc terra ista sanctissima, sedes delubrorum atque templorum, sepulchrorum erit mortuorumque plenissima.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*: quod est durius, quasi de legibus a religione, pietate, cultuque divino statuatur praescripta poena prohibitio; *Asclepius* 25: 'et capitale periculum constitueretur in eum qui se mentis religioni dederit, nova constituerentur iura, lex nova' can be seen as a specific reference to *C.Th.* xvi 10.6 (20.2.356). It is worth pointing out that *C.Th.* xvi 10.11 (16.6.391) was addressed to the Count of Egypt. On common-sense criticism of recent attempts to understand the Apocalyptic passages of the *Asclepius* in the light of reports on Unambal cultural despair, see R. Lane-Fox, *JRS* lxxx (1990) 238.

¹⁰⁷ *Asclepius* 24 *ad fin.*

¹⁰⁸ Fr. 97: οὕτω δὲ ἦν ὁ Ὀλύμπιος πλήρης τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὥστε καὶ προεῖπε τοῖς ἐταίροις, ὅτι ὁ Σάραπις ἀφίησι τὸν νεών.

¹⁰⁹ EP 164: ὁ Ἰσίδωρος πολὺ διαφέρων ἦν τῆς Ὑπατίας, οὐ μόνον οἷα γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἷα γεωμετρικῆς τῶ ὄντι φιλόσοφος.

¹¹⁰ See Socrates vii 15 and frs 104-105; J.M. Rist, 'Hypatia', *Phoenix* xix (1965) 214-25, reaches rather strange conclusions as regards the causes of Hypatia's murder.

¹¹¹ Fr. 276.

to Theodosius II.¹¹² A more or less permanent campaign of ridiculing the sacred teachings of the Neoplatonists was simultaneously launched,¹¹³ and this painful attack on the core of philosophy through its religious symbols seems to have further fired Egyptian nationalism and steeled Neoplatonic resistance. It was indeed in the course of the fifth century that the tables were unequivocally turned: because of her many sacrifices, Alexandria, ‘the city of foreigners’, was at last vindicated in Egyptian eyes and was even viewed as the very epitome of Egyptianism.¹¹⁴

It was in this atmosphere that Isidore grew up. He belonged by birth and leaning to the ‘sacred race’ and his masters, who were well versed in ‘the Egyptian mysteries’, vaccinated him with an enthusiastic belief in the indivisibility of the religious and the philosophical way. He himself became in turn an inspired teacher and, despite the element of terror still hanging over Alexandria, he enjoyed large audiences drawn from the wider intellectual circles of the city.¹¹⁵ Success had a positive effect on him. He continued to ‘philosophise unhindered’—by Christian malice, one assumes—‘till the Panopolitan misfortune occurred’.¹¹⁶

2. *The strategies of survival*

Before telling the story of the man from Panopolis, it would be helpful to look at the ways in which the Neoplatonists sought to secure toleration for paganism or even to reverse the religious tide. Their political activities as members of the civic élites are well known. This was traditional and expected behaviour along lines established centuries before Christianity became a social threat. A less obvious field in which the pagan intelligentsia fought its battle was that of high politics—imperial and international—and in this regard pagan behaviour was just as novel, original and progressive as their notion of sanctity, their attitude to cultural heritage and the actual expression of their metaphysics.

As a man well acquainted with Roman politics, Damascius punctuates his cultural history with the main attempts at a pagan restoration.¹¹⁷ He begins his story with Julian and ends it with his own teacher and fellow-citizen, Severianus, who taught him rhetoric ‘not in a technical sophistic spirit, but in the wise philosophical manner’.¹¹⁸ Severianus stayed in his pupil’s memory as a man who was ‘holy to the core and a Hellene’.¹¹⁹ In his youth he had burned with the desire to study philosophy, but his father insisted that he studied law instead and followed a public career. After his father’s death, Severianus went to Athens and studied under Proclus for a time, though in the end he fulfilled his father’s ambition and joined the imperial service.¹²⁰ As governor, he led a conspiracy against the Emperor Zeno with the specific intention of reviving paganism, but he was betrayed and had a narrow escape. Whether before or after the discovery of the plot, Zeno seems to have offered Severianus the praetorian prefecture of the East on condition that he converted to Christianity.¹²¹

The emperor’s offer is indicative of the atmosphere which prevailed in the upper layers of

¹¹² PG 76, 504-1058.

¹¹³ EP 77.

¹¹⁴ For some rabidly anti-Greek feelings, see the Oracle of the Potter, L. Koenen, *ZPE* ii (1968) 178-209; for the eventual change in attitude, Rémondon (n. 75) *passim*.

¹¹⁵ Fr. 276.

¹¹⁶ Fr. 286.

¹¹⁷ EP 290.

¹¹⁸ Fr. 282.

¹¹⁹ Fr. 304.

¹²⁰ Fr. 278.

¹²¹ Fr. 305.

the administration: cultured bureaucrats like Severianus, who happened to profess openly pagan beliefs, were not actively persecuted in normal times, but pressure was brought to bear on them. Intolerance in such cases took the sly shape of psychological coercion.

From the late 460s to the mid-480s the pagan communities lived through an exciting period of hope and expectation. This collective state of mind is faithfully mirrored in what survives of the *Philosophical history*, which in this respect is very much a pagan counterpart of ecclesiastical history. The pivotal figure of the early years is the *graecus imperator* of the West, Anthemius (467-472), who appears as a devout and militant pagan.¹²² The philosopher Severus, a consul and a patrician whom the emperor made prefect of Rome, is presented as the leading spirit of an abortive pagan revival,¹²³ while, more unexpectedly, Damascius emphasises the link between Anthemius and Marcellinus, the autonomous governor of Dalmatia. As a cultured and practising pagan, a friend and patron of philosophers and a competent military leader, Marcellinus was a favourite of the emperor who conferred on him the patriciate.¹²⁴

The close relations that Marcellinus entertained with members of Proclus' circle are an eloquent comment on the political and social cosmopolitanism of the circle;¹²⁵ more importantly though, they illustrate the determination of the Neoplatonists not to leave unexploited any channel through which power might trickle. One is reminded in this regard of the historian Olympiodorus of Thebes, a prominent figure in imperial politics and a scholar connected by personal and professional links to the Blemmyes of Nubia. This cultured pagan missionary dedicated his historical work to Theodosius II and was in turn the dedicatee of Hierocles' *De Providentia*.¹²⁶

This network of connections is revealing of the strategies dictated by pagan ambition. Moving at the upper end of a social order which they despised and adulated at the same time, the Neoplatonists sought to foster international alliances. It may be that in their optimistic moments they let themselves be carried away by the dream of a restored pagan empire: a new Julian, helped by pious barbarian tribes, would seize power and the Giants and the Titans would disappear for ever into Tartarus.¹²⁷ The fragility of this dream is of course illustrated by the fate of Hierocles himself, who was arrested in Constantinople and even flogged in the courts. He gathered into the hollow of his hand, says Damascius, some of the blood that was running from his body and, throwing it over the judge, exclaimed: 'there, Cyclops, drink this wine, after having devoured the flesh of men'.¹²⁸ The Homeric line uttered by Hierocles was not chosen at random; drawing on the Scriptures of Hellenism, the men of our circle had evolved a code language which, as has already been pointed out, further sustained their sense of identity in the deeply barbarised world in which they felt that they were living.

Characteristically Hierocles was sent into exile and, even more characteristically, he was allowed to return to Alexandria and resume his teaching in order to prepare a new generation

¹²² EP 108.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Frs 157-159.

¹²⁵ Fr. 145 together with fr. 159.

¹²⁶ See the classic article by J.F. Matthews, 'Olympiodorus of Thebes and the history of the West (AD 407-425)', *JRS* lx (1970) 79-97. For an account of the traditional and intimate link between the pagans and the Blemmyes and for the myth of the noble savage, to which the Blemmyes gave rise among Neoplatonists, see Rémondon (n. 75) 73-77.

¹²⁷ On this important theme, see R. von Haeling, 'Damascius und die heidnische Opposition im 5. Jahrhundert nach Christus', *JAC* xxiii (1980) 82-95.

¹²⁸ Fr. 106 and *Odyssey* ix 347.

of *paiens engagés*.¹²⁹ These men, whose activities are reported by both a Christian and a pagan hagiographical text, were absorbed in the business of shaping a new generation of fighters with an enthusiasm verging on the fanatic, when in 482 Pamprepius—a pagan who had several years before been rejected by the Athenian members of the charmed circle¹³⁰—arrived in Alexandria. In Damascius' view, Pamprepius was a dark, oily, presumptuous and remarkably ugly Egyptian, whose literary and diplomatic talents had enabled him to ingratiate himself with Illus, the only capable man in the entourage of Zeno.¹³¹ Before openly revolting and proclaiming Leontius emperor, Illus had retired to the East and from there he was conducting his campaign on the diplomatic level. It was in this context that Pamprepius arrived in Egypt 'with an impressive retinue and an incredibly haughty air', invested with the double mission of rallying the Chalcedonians and the pagans to Illus' cause.¹³²

The man's vulgarity horrified the Neoplatonists who pronounced him 'Typhon-like, yea an even more complicated beast than Typhon himself and even more puffed up with arrogance'.¹³³ The majority of pagans, however, were carried away by Pamprepius' flamboyant manner and believed in his prophecies. Something of this enthusiasm filtered through to the influential pagan community of Aphrodisias, where many people had recourse to divination in order to assure their compatriots that Illus' revolt would be crowned with success, that 'the moment had at last come when Christianity would break down and disappear, while paganism would be victorious'.¹³⁴ But things turned out very differently: in the autumn of 484 Illus and Leontius were defeated in battle near Antioch and fled to the Isaurian fortress of Papirios, where they held out for another four years. Pamprepius however was almost immediately executed by Illus, who had at last lost patience with him.

The Neoplatonists' outright condemnation of Pamprepius affords a comment on both the moral standards and the social ethos of the circle. The leading philosophers would not entrust the cause of paganism to the hands of a character as unscrupulous as Pamprepius; and nobody, either in the centre or on the periphery of the charmed circle, would dream of associating with a person of such striking vulgarity. Yet the most important reason for Damascius' strident tone against what he calls 'the Panopolitan misfortune' is to be sought elsewhere.¹³⁵

As soon as the revolt was crushed, an imperial envoy by the name of Nicomedes arrived in Alexandria with the express order to break up the pagan circles. On his arrival, he proceeded to invite the philosophers for an interview, an invitation which they seem to have ignored. This arrogance enraged Nicomedes,¹³⁶ who arrested Agapius, a well known iatrophilosopher who belonged to the inner circle, and a few others, and had them brought before him for interrogation.¹³⁷ The enquiry seems not to have been a very civilised affair, but the

¹²⁹ EP 54.

¹³⁰ Frs 288-289 and Malchus fr. 20, Müller *FHG* iv 131-132 (= Blockley fr. 23).

¹³¹ Frs 178-179 (on Pamprepius); Stein-Palanque (n. 77) ii (1949) 9, 28-31 (on Illus and his revolt); EP 172.

¹³² *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* viii (ed. Cumont) (1922) iv, 224: μετὰ πολλῆς δορυφορίας καὶ πολλοῦ τύφου.

¹³³ Fr. 287; τυφώνετος (cf. EP 110). In Egypt Typhon was the very personification of evil, whether within the soul or without; for evidence see *Corpus Hermeticum* iv (Paris 1954) 77 n. 23.

¹³⁴ Zacharias V. Sev. 40 and frs. 294-295.

¹³⁵ Fr. 286; cf. fr. 178 *ad fin.*: ἡ μὲν οὖν εὐδαιμονία τούτου (...) πολλῶν αἰτία ἀτυχημάτων γέγονε τῇ πολιτείᾳ. Despite his political importance (μέγιστον ἤδη δυναμένω), Pamprepius is treated as a social inferior by Salustius, as Damascius delightedly reports: fr. 148; cf. fr. 300.

¹³⁶ EP 190.

¹³⁷ Frs 330, 331, 277.

philosophers showed courage and perseverance.¹³⁸

The persecution of individuals was complemented, as usual, by an attack on pagan monuments in and around Alexandria. At the same time, incited by adroit preaching and assisted by bands of monks, the crowd searched and sacked the houses of important pagans; whatever idols were found were ceremoniously burned, while the crypto-pagan Prefect of Egypt, Entrechius, was required to enforce the imperial law.¹³⁹ Behind most of these activities was the Monophysite Bishop of Alexandria, Peter Mongus, whom Damascius understandably describes as 'a reckless rascal'.¹⁴⁰ Peter succeeded in staging a protest against the militant pagan Horapollo, which resulted in the closing down of his school of rhetoric. In churches all over Alexandria thousands of imprecations were launched at the Sunday liturgy against Psychapollo, the Soul-destroyer. The grammarian was duly arrested together with his uncle, the philosopher Heraiscus. Both were tortured to make them reveal the names of other co-religionists, but 'they gnashed their teeth and did not succumb to the tyrant'.¹⁴¹ When eventually they were released, Horapollo was forced to leave Alexandria and Heraiscus had to go into hiding, seeking refuge in the house of the doctor Gessius who may have been a Christian baptised for reasons of convenience.¹⁴² Damascius praises the courage of Gessius who hid a man wanted by the emperor himself, and dwells on the details of the burial of Heraiscus who ironically died soon after becoming the guest of one of late antiquity's most famous doctors.¹⁴³ As the philosopher Asclepiades was burying his brother according to the ritual befitting an Egyptian priest, the shroud was suddenly bathed in light and hieroglyphics appeared on it as well as the symbols of those gods in whose company Heraiscus' soul was now dining.¹⁴⁴ A martyr on earth, Heraiscus had found his place in heaven as a blessed saint.

As Damascius watched men's reactions to the Great Persecution, he spontaneously classified attitudes and passed judgements on human conduct. That adversity, for example, could turn ordinary men into heroes was something that he discovered at the time, not least by observing the behaviour of his own younger brother, Julian.¹⁴⁵

Yet if Damascius approved of martyrdom and praised the fighting spirit of men like Heraiscus and Hierocles, he was very far from equating flight with cowardice. For Damascius was a pragmatist. Moreover he was an intuitive man, able to grasp the spirit in which people acted. Fleeing danger, rather than resorting to acts of useless heroism, was an attitude illustrated by his own master, Isidore, a man of principle, brave but realistic, full of optimism and good humour.¹⁴⁶ During the persecution Isidore sought refuge in young Damascius' house and then

¹³⁸ EP 190: ἀλλ' ὁμως οἱ φιλόσοφοι καρτερεῖν ᾤοντο δεῖν καὶ τὰ συμβαίνοντα φέρειν εὐλόφως.

¹³⁹ For the above and most of what follows, Zacharias *V. Sev.* 19-35 and R. Herzog, 'Der Kampf um den Kult von Menuthis', *Pisciculi: Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums, Franz Joseph Dölger ... dargeboten* (Münster 1939) 117-124.

¹⁴⁰ EP 170; cf. EP 178.

¹⁴¹ Frs 314-315.

¹⁴² Sophronius, *Mir. Cyr. et Jo.* 30.2 (on his crypto-paganism). Gessius was so important a figure on the late antique intellectual scene that his academic witticisms were repeated by his students' students (Stephanus of Athens, *Commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms* (Westerink) II.53, *CMG* xi 1.3.1 (1985) 256), while more than a hundred years after his *floruit* Sophronius felt the need to invent an exemplary story of Christian conversion on his behalf (*mir.* 30), cf. fr. 335.

¹⁴³ Fr. 334.

¹⁴⁴ Fr. 174.

¹⁴⁵ Frs 319-320; EP 185.

¹⁴⁶ EP 38; 177.

sailed away.¹⁴⁷ While hiding he had the courage and decency to do what he could to protect other members of the community;¹⁴⁸ and when he decided to leave (in all probability when his ‘contact’ with the other philosophers was caught and gave away his master’s name), he had the incredible sang-froid to gather his possessions together, as if he was preparing for a journey in normal times.¹⁴⁹ If eccentric in daily life, Isidore was a man of principle when it came to ideological issues. Thus his attitude to the Christians was one of firm contempt: ‘he found them absolutely repulsive as being irreparably polluted, and nothing whatever could constrain him to accept their company; neither fabulous wealth nor exalted social position nor great political power nor a tyrant’s malignity’.¹⁵⁰

Just like his master, Damascius found the Christians despicable and those of his co-religionists who chose to convert to Christianity for whatever reason repellent. This was his attitude to Horapollo, whose case is worth comment, for it affords us a direct insight into the psychology of a passionate man who was also one of the protagonists of the fight for paganism in Alexandria. His uncle, Heraiscus, who had brought him up, had died in the persecution and his own father and teacher was also dead. The fortunes of his professional and domestic life thus seemed to combine against any hope of peace and happiness. All that was left to him was a wife, with whom he had been brought up, the daughter of Heraiscus himself. One day this wife and cousin deserted him and together with her foreign lover—*ἄτε ξένου ὄντος*—she sailed away from Egypt. Then, while Horapollo was in Alexandria, possibly in gaol, she returned secretly to their home in Upper Egypt and removed whatever she could from the household. Not content just with portable objects, she searched everywhere for a hidden treasure and for this purpose she even removed the floors of the ancestral home. Embittered by this further act of the adulteress, Horapollo took her to court.¹⁵¹ By now Zeno and Peter Mongus were dead and the pagans in Alexandria were given a short respite, so that Horapollo could live without fear. Yet the pressures on him had been too many; and the mockery implicit in his appalling betrayal by a wife of impeccable pagan pedigree and upbringing must have struck at the very core of his belief.¹⁵² It was at that point that he broke down and converted to Christianity (as his uncle Heraiscus had foretold) ‘without any apparent necessity forcing him to do so’.¹⁵³ Damascius, who makes this comment, also adds ‘he chose to go over to the other side of his own free will, probably in the hope of satisfying his greedy nature, for I cannot off hand think of any other reason’.¹⁵⁴ The consideration that as a co-religionist he was likely to be favoured by the judge who was to look into his case clearly appeared to Damascius too low a motive for a man to sacrifice his religious beliefs. But this is not the point. Horapollo’s combative spirit had been worn away by a psychological war of attrition which lasted for too long. This failure of nerve was an all-too-common response to Christian intolerance. Yet, whether the conversion to Christianity was genuine or simulated,¹⁵⁵ spontaneous or the result of fatigue or coercion,

¹⁴⁷ Fr. 321; EP 187.

¹⁴⁸ Fr. 314.

¹⁴⁹ EP 181, 186.

¹⁵⁰ Fr. 19.

¹⁵¹ See the text of Horapollo’s prosecution as edited and commented upon by M.J. Maspero, ‘Horapollon et la fin du paganisme égyptien’, *BIFAO* xi (1914) 163-194.

¹⁵² I owe this suggestion to the Anonymous Reader of my paper for the *JHS*.

¹⁵³ Fr. 317.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ A palm on a body in late antique tombs in Saqqara was a sign of crypto-paganism (J. Schwartz, *Qasr-Qārūn/Dionysias* (Cairo 1948) 28 n. 7). See also Ch. Guignebert, ‘Les demi-chrétiens et leur place dans l’église antique’, *Revue de l’histoire des religions* lxxviii (1923) 65-102.

it lent itself to only one interpretation: that of open defeat.

Damascius registers a fourth attitude to persecution: rather than engaging in a desperate battle, avoiding the enemy or going over to his side, men could try to come to terms with their persecutor. This was the option that the philosopher Ammonius took when he approached Peter Mongus (or possibly his successor, Athanasius II) and entered negotiations with him clearly in the interest of his fellow-philosophers.¹⁵⁶ To Damascius, who when confronted with a similar situation forty years later took the road to Ctesiphon, this seemed mercenary and avaricious behaviour.¹⁵⁷ And it is not difficult to see his point of view. When the cycle of persecution, martyrdom and compromise unfolded in Alexandria, Damascius was very young; pained and disgusted by what he saw, he rebelled against submission and raised the banner of struggle: the genuineness of a man, he claimed, is tested in the market place; his public actions and public words are the mirror of his virtue; for 'when those learned men who sit in their corner and with a solemn air philosophise on justice and prudence are called to act, they disgrace themselves'.¹⁵⁸

Behind these words lurks the influence of Isidore, an active and efficient man,¹⁵⁹ who knew exactly where to draw lines. When, for instance, he was asked to give up teaching for a time, Isidore refused to obey and sought another place to exercise his freedom of speech.¹⁶⁰ This behaviour, which Damascius compares with that of Socrates under the Thirty Tyrants, was in tune with that of their common master, Proclus, 'who swam with dignity and firmness through the stormy sea ploughed by hurricanes which raged against civilised life'.¹⁶¹ Yet when 'men of prey' came and dragged him to the law-courts, Proclus felt that he had to leave Athens. His example was followed by Marinus, who during what seems to have been a fierce private quarrel over the Platonic Succession, decided to emigrate to Epidaurus rather than succumb to a martyr's fate.¹⁶² After all the real concern of the Neoplatonist was victory over the inner enemy—the army of desires and irrational urges—since 'the real war of the Giants is fought within'.¹⁶³

Being permanently aware of the fact that truth and reality are foreign to the world of becoming, and that in the best of cases society can be but a macrocosm of the soul, Damascius was even less capable than his predecessors of experiencing any patriotic emotions towards geographical locations. After all to him the entire world was divine, and holy sites were indiscriminately sown on the face of the earth. On arriving in Athens about the end of the century together with Isidore and finding Hegias passing for a great philosopher, Damascius felt an acute disappointment. The man was certainly well-born and pious, but so ignorant and *exalté* at the same time, that Isidore was forced to remark to him drily that 'those destined to be gods must first become human',¹⁶⁴ and to conclude sadly that the greatest gift sent by God to humanity, namely philosophy, was now not merely balancing on a razor's edge, but had reached

¹⁵⁶ See EP 184 together with EP 179.

¹⁵⁷ Fr. 316.

¹⁵⁸ Fr. 325; cf. EP 29.

¹⁵⁹ Fr. 25; EP 29.

¹⁶⁰ Fr. 336.

¹⁶¹ Marinus, VP 15.

¹⁶² Fr. 266.

¹⁶³ Proclus *In Parm.* i col. 692. 27-28: ὁ ὄντως γιγαντικὸς πόλεμος, ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἐστί. *In Tim.* iii 346. 30-347.2: καὶ οὗτος ὄντως ἐστὶν ὁ γιγαντικὸς πόλεμος, τὰ ἐν ἡμῖν γιγενῆ τῶν Ὀλυμπίων ἐντιμότερα ποιῶν καὶ οὐχ ὡσπερ ἐν τοῖς ὄλοις ὑποτάττων τὰ χεῖρονα τοῖς ἀμείνοσιν. Cf. *In Alc.* 44. 4; 104. 22. Victory in this battle results in a state of perfect freedom: EP 255.

¹⁶⁴ EP 227, a standard Neoplatonic witticism, cf. Hierocles *In aur. cat.* (Kohler) *Proem.* 4, p.6.

the point of extreme decrepitude. In his disappointment Isidore left Athens.¹⁶⁵ But Damascius stayed on and became the last official *diadochos* of the Academy, initiating a campaign for its revival.

This campaign, which had a physical, a human and an institutional aspect, was to some extent inspired by the example of Aphrodisias, visited by Damascius in his youth. The mansion at the side of the Sebasteion, which was converted, presumably by Asclepiodotus, into a 'cultural centre' of untold splendour,¹⁶⁶ may have kindled Damascius' envy,¹⁶⁷ but at the same time it must have set in motion more constructive emotions in him, which came to fruition when he became head of the only official institution propagating the Platonic doctrines.¹⁶⁸ Delving into the finances of the Academy¹⁶⁹ and using his connections, Damascius discovered ways which would enable him to turn his vision into reality. Naturally his primary concern was with the scholarly level of the Academy; accordingly he summoned from all over 'the domain of Hellenism' the most famous philosophers of the day.¹⁷⁰ The distinguished community that Damascius assembled and whose daily needs involved teaching, research and the performance of cultic acts, clearly required living quarters, and not just one building, but a vast complex with diverse facilities.

As the strongest candidate for Damascius' academic premises I propose the three late antique houses (A, B and C) on the North slope of the Areopagus, whose function (traumatically interrupted in the early sixth century) has invariably been described by the excavators as educational.¹⁷¹ Though this is not the place to argue in detail my identification,¹⁷² I would nevertheless like to point out certain striking analogies between the most splendid of the Areopagus houses and the Sebasteion House in Aphrodisias. Like it, Athenian House C is a large mansion (covering an area exceeding 1.500 sq. metres), with a private section and a more public one, each respectively arranged around two peristyle courts. Its elaborate apsidal suite adjoining a nymphaeum of extraordinary grace recalls to the mind the court of the Sebasteion House where the shield portraits of philosophers and men of action stood. Built in the late fourth century AD, House C may have been the ancestral residence of Theagenes and Hegias or of some other Athenian magnate of pagan sympathies, as its remarkable collection of antique statuary among other things suggests. The bulk of this collection (which is dominated by a religious rather than a merely aesthetic criterion) was deposited in two of the wells of the house at a date which can be inferred from archaeological data to coincide with 529. As for the few articles which were either left lying around or less carefully hidden, they were deliberately mutilated and used for purposes clearly intended to cause offence. Among other significant alterations, the new owner had the floor of the triclinium in the apsidal suite reset in a cruciform pattern, obviously in replacement of some theological scene which wounded his religious sensibilities.

¹⁶⁵ EP 228-229.

¹⁶⁶ See Smith 1990 and 1991 (n. 16).

¹⁶⁷ Damascius goes to a lot of trouble to demolish Asclepiodotus' fame as an all-round intellectual and holy-man (cf. p. 3), a claim which is indeed splendidly reflected in the newly discovered 'Pantokrator' medallion (cf. Smith 1991 [n. 16] portrait No. 8 fig. 9), which shows a truly conceited man posing as a God.

¹⁶⁸ See above, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶⁹ As is clear from fr. 265.

¹⁷⁰ Agathias ii 30.3: τὸ ἄκρον ἄωτον (...) τῶν ἐν τῷ καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνῳ φιλοσοφησάντων.

¹⁷¹ See *Hesperia* xlii (1973) 156-164 (T.L. Shear Jr.); A. Frantz (n. 1) 37-48; J.McK. Camp, 'The philosophical schools of Roman Athens', S. Walker-Averil Cameron (eds), *The Greek renaissance in the Roman empire* (BICS Suppl. lv (1989)) 50-55.

¹⁷² A task to which a section in the Introduction to my forthcoming translation of the *Philosophical history* is devoted.

The story told by the Areopagus ruins is not different from that of the literary sources: the revived Academy of the early sixth century became the first target in Justinian's anti-pagan campaign. When this happened, Damascius, a pragmatic and decisive man, broke away from the precarious and stifling atmosphere of cities like Athens and Alexandria and led his companions to the Unknown.

VI. ON THE FRINGES OF THE EMPIRE

In the frontier zone between the Persian and the Byzantine empires lay the ancient city of Harran. In the face of advancing Christianity Harran held stubbornly to its traditional culture, and so extreme was its intellectual and religious loyalty to the past that by the mid-fifth century it became generally known as Ἑλλήνων πόλις.¹⁷³ Harran's significance as a potent symbol of paganism had been duly emphasised a century earlier by the Emperor Julian who, on his way to fight the Persians, delayed for several days there, visiting the city's sanctuaries.¹⁷⁴ Indeed it was in the temple of Harran's patron deity—the Babylonian moon god Sin—that in an occult ceremony Julian seems to have nominated as his successor his pagan cousin, Procopius, should he himself perish in the campaign.¹⁷⁵

Unlike other important centres of paganism in the Roman empire—cities such as Aphrodisias or Athens—Harran was a frontier town both in cultural and in military terms. On the one hand its *Hochkultur* was not overwhelmingly Hellenic, but a genuine hybrid of Semitic and Greek elements, while on the other the town lay in a strategically sensitive zone, well away from the centres of power, so that any attempt on the part of the emperor to displease its citizens could prove just as difficult in practical terms as it was politically unwise. For these reasons late antique Harran was allowed to develop its diverse culture in an atypically liberal climate, a circumstance which accounts both for the idiosyncratic character of this culture and for its vitality in an age which notoriously tended towards conformity.

In his attempt to render the empire as monochrome as possible, Justinian set himself the task of extirpating paganism, and issued in 529 a decree prohibiting philosophical teaching in Athens.¹⁷⁶ What instigated this special treatment was, as already shown, the revival of the Athenian School under Damascius; men of exceptional intellectual abilities had gathered around him and had immersed themselves in study and teaching in circumstances which could be deemed ideal. It was then that Justinian's edict came. Damascius, who had seen several waves of persecution come and go, felt that this time he had to resort to drastic measures;¹⁷⁷ and, like the jinns in the marvellous stories that he was collecting, he conceived the idea of transferring intact to another land the edifice that he had been building over the years. Platonic reminiscences of the constitutionally just character of the Persian king, as fashioned by the ideal

¹⁷³ E.g. Theodoret, *HE* iii 26.1: Κάρραι γὰρ πόλις ἐστὶν καὶ νῦν ἔχουσα τῆς ἀσεβείας τὰ λείψανα. Cf. *ibid.* iv 18.14, v 4.6; *HR* xvii 5 (Abraham III): πόλις δὲ αὕτη τῆς δυσσεβείας περικειμένη τὴν μέθην καὶ τῆ τῶν δαιμόνων ἑαυτὴν ἐκδεδοκυῖα βακχεία. For Ἑλλήνων πόλις, 'Acts of the Council of Chalcedon', E. Schwartz, *Acta Consiliorum Oecumenicorum* ii 1 (1933-55), p. 384, 3-4.

¹⁷⁴ Julian is in a great hurry (*Ammianus* xxiii 2.6; *Sozomen* vi 1.1), yet he stops for a few days at Carrhae (*Ammianus* xxiii 3.21: *moratus aliquot dies*), where he makes a point of visiting all the great temples and of offering sacrifices *ritu locorum* (*Ammianus loc. cit.*). It is typical of Libanius' cultural provincialism that he only mentions 'a great and ancient temple of Zeus' (*or.* xviii 214).

¹⁷⁵ *Ammianus* xxiii 3.2.

¹⁷⁶ *Malalas Chron.* (Bonn) 451: θεσπίσας πρόσταξιν ἔπεμψεν ἐν Ἀθήναις, κελεύσας μηδένα διδάσκειν φιλοσοφίαν. Cf. n. 1.

¹⁷⁷ The edict seems to have hit the philosophers both professionally as academics and personally as pagans (cf. *Agathias* ii 30.4). That they never returned to Athens is convincingly argued by H. Blumenthal (n. 1); the point is further supported by archaeological evidence (p. 23).

educational processes, mingled in his mind with the language of contemporary Sassanian propaganda and, suddenly, Ctesiphon appeared as the ideal philosophical abode.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, when compared with contemporary Constantinople, sixth-century Ctesiphon *was* a paradise of intellectual tolerance, and Damascius' choice was not as naive as Agathias makes it sound.¹⁷⁹

Soon after 529, under the leadership of Damascius, his peers set out from Athens for the banks of the Tigris.¹⁸⁰ The trip must have been a long one: the seven men were leaving behind for ever (as they then thought) the Roman *oikoumene* and considerations of spiritual tourism, which formed such a strong tradition in the circle, would no doubt have prompted them to pay prolonged respects to important holy places.¹⁸¹ Foremost among them was Harran. Just like Julian, Damascius and his companions must have stopped at this frontier town to visit its temples and examine its libraries.¹⁸² Then they pressed on to Persia, where it took them only a short time to understand that reality fell short of legend. This realisation was enormously facilitated by the idealised memory of Harran, a city which in the minds of these mostly bilingual, and even bicultural, men combined a familiar intellectual climate with the security implicit in the proximity of the Persian border.¹⁸³ Thus the philosophers struck a wonderful deal when, shortly after their arrival in the Iranian capital, they persuaded Khusrau Anushirwan to include a provision on their behalf in the peace treaty that he was about to sign with Justinian (AD 532). This clause, which was undoubtedly phrased by Damascius, since even as reported by Agathias it contains an eminently Damascian structure as well as Damascian vocabulary, has the unique merit of constituting the only profession of ideological toleration ever signed by Justinian.¹⁸⁴ It provided that the philosophers should live in the Christian empire for the rest of their days 'without fear', never forced to profess belief in anything clashing with their own ideas or to change their traditional opinions.¹⁸⁵ And indeed, as Agathias assures us, from then onwards their life was spent 'in the most delightful and pleasant way possible'.¹⁸⁶

After the conclusion of the peace treaty between the Sassanians and the Byzantines the seven men mentioned by Agathias seem to have returned to Harran; as four among them had a Graeco-Aramaic ethnic background and the remaining three came from lands considerably to the east of the Aegean, the cultural atmosphere of Harran must have appeared to them extremely

¹⁷⁸ Plato, *Alc. i* 121e-122a.

¹⁷⁹ That there was nothing naive in the philosophers' choice of Persia as a new home is shown by I. Hadot, who argues the point with reference to Nisibis, 'université nestorienne autrefois installée à Édesse en Syrie. Elle jouissait déjà avant 532 sous les rois perses d'une liberté de pensée considérable qui contrastait favorablement avec l'intolérance byzantine, à cause de laquelle cette école théologique avait dû fuir en Perse', *art. cit.* (n. 1) 9.

¹⁸⁰ The story is told by Agathias ii 30-31.

¹⁸¹ See above, pp 9-10.

¹⁸² That late antique Harran must have had important libraries is convincingly argued by I. Hadot, *art. cit.* (n. 1), 20-21.

¹⁸³ M. Tardieu, 'Sabiens coraniques et "sabiens" de Harran', *Journal asiatique* cclxxiv (1986) n. 102 (pp. 22-3), 28.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Agathias ii 31.4 (οὐδὲ ὅτιοῦν πέρα τῶν δοκούντων φρονεῖν) with EP 150 (μηδ' αὖ μείζον φρονεῖν τῆς κοινωφελοῦς προαιρέσεως). In his recently published book (n. 52) 128-132, M. Tardieu dismisses the Agathias story about the philosophers' journey to Persia and back, and postulates that only Damascius visited Ctesiphon with the specific mission to persuade the Persian king to negotiate with Justinian's ambassadors the inclusion in the peace treaty of a clause ruling that the philosophers should be allowed to lead in the Roman empire 'the life of their choice'. Such a hypothesis is unsupported by the evidence, and I would add that the story of the incestuous Persian whose exposed corpse was buried by the philosophers in their ignorance of the Persian custom, is a detail which cannot have been invented by Agathias.

¹⁸⁵ Agathias ii 31.4. On the meaning of "ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς" I agree with P. Foulkes (*JHS* cxii (1992) 143) *contra* I. Hadot.

¹⁸⁶ Agathias ii 31.3; that this phrase is richer in meaning than it appears is pointed out by I. Hadot (n. 1) 8.

congenial. Protected by imperial legislation and inspired by a friendly environment, the enterprising Damascius must have then set up the Academy in this North Mesopotamian paradise.¹⁸⁷ In gratitude to the Persian king and recalling their theoretical arguments, Damascius' colleague, Priscianus, wrote and sent to Khusrau a philosophical work, of which we possess only a Latin translation, *Solutiones eorum de quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex*.¹⁸⁸

To the arguments recently advanced by M. Tardieu and I. Hadot in favour of the thesis that on their return from Persia the Neoplatonist philosophers settled in Harran, I would like to add some further considerations. The clause that his Iranian counterpart obliged Justinian to include in the peace treaty of 532 must have been felt as a serious blow to his authority by an emperor who was oversensitive in matters of religious policy. To allay his frustration about not being able to touch Harran, which was no doubt mentioned in the treaty as the philosophers' abode, Justinian turned his attention towards another two important frontier *foci* of paganism which, like Harran, had been allowed to survive unmolested for strategic reasons. Putting aside any political considerations, Justinian decided to hit Philae in Upper Egypt and Augila in the Libyan desert. Making what seems to be an additional point, he ordered the Persian deserter Narses Kamsarakan to march on Philae at the head of an important military force and deconsecrate the temple of Isis by expelling its clergy, by destroying the images of the gods and by turning the edifice into a church.¹⁸⁹ In the oasis of Augila on the other hand, where religious life still thrived, Justinian reformed the locals' 'polluted ancestral customs' by intense missionary work.¹⁹⁰

Meanwhile in Harran Damascius and his colleagues expounded Iamblichan Neoplatonism within the framework of an institution.¹⁹¹ Fertilised by the indigenous intellectual and cultic tradition, their teaching struck deep roots in that religiously unequivocal city. A first step towards acculturation was taken by Simplicius when, in an Aristotelian commentary, he opened a parenthesis on the various calendars in use at Harran.¹⁹² Just as they had done in Athens, the philosophers continued to comment on Plato and eventually, in the culturally promiscuous atmosphere of this border town, they felt the need to add a further activity to the tasks of the Academy: they began to translate Greek texts into Syriac and at some point into Arabic too.¹⁹³ That the School of Harran was instrumental in the transmission of Greek theology to the Arab

¹⁸⁷ As argued by M. Tardieu (n. 183) and endorsed by I. Hadot (n. 1) 9, 17.

¹⁸⁸ I. Hadot (n. 1) 23 advances the legitimate assumption that the work must have been written at Harran.

¹⁸⁹ Procopius, *Bell.* i 19. 36-37. For the political importance of the cult of Isis at Philae, see Priscus fr. 21, *FHG* iv 100 (= Blockley fr. 27); cf. the pertinent remarks of F.R. Trombley, 'Paganism in the Greek world at the end of antiquity: the case of rural Anatolia and Greece', *HTR* lxxviii (1985) 342 n. 93. On the conversion of the temple into a church of St. Stephen, see E. Bernand, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae* ii (Paris 1969) Nos. 200-201 with their commentaries; for missionary activity in the area in the 540s and 550s, W.Y. Adams, *Nubia: corridor to Africa*² (Princeton 1984) 441-2. In 552, however, a pagan from Kom-Ombo in collaboration with the Blemmyes οὐκ ᾔκνησεν (...) καὶ δαίμοσιν καὶ ξοάνοις ἀφιερῶσαι σηκούς; *Pap. Maspero* 67004 l. 7.

¹⁹⁰ Procopius, *Aed.* vi 2. 14-20.

¹⁹¹ See the arguments presented by I. Hadot in support of Simplicius' teaching career at Harran (all references to the article cited in n. 1), 20. Whether a Neoplatonic School as such already existed in Harran and received the philosophers on their return from Persia is what I doubt; for the rest I espouse Hadot's hypothesis that the philosophers lived and taught together at Harran forming 'a school of thought', 21, 24. For Simplicius composing at Harran both his Commentary on the Manual of Epictetus, 18, 20, 28, and his Aristotelian Commentaries, 27-28, *id.* (n. 15) 51-65, 67, 168-187, 200-201. For Priscianus' Iamblichanism, see C.G. Steel, *The changing self: a study on the soul in later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus* (Brussels 1978) 9.

¹⁹² M. Tardieu, 'Les calendriers en usage à Harran d'après les sources arabes et le commentaire de Simplicius à la Physique d'Aristote'; cf. I. Hadot, *Simplicius* (n. 1) 40-57.

¹⁹³ Tardieu (n. 183) 28, 39.

world seems now a well established fact. A measure of its desire to make an impact on the Roman *oikoumene* as soon as the School was set up and at the same time to strike an international profile is provided by the sharp dialogue in which its members engaged with John Philoponus.¹⁹⁴ Locally of course the influence of the School must have been tremendous; by violence and persuasion, Church and State attempted to arrest the re-invigorated paganism of the city, the Emperor Maurice ordering

Stephanus, Bishop of Harran, to institute a persecution against the pagans of Harran. Some he managed to convert to Christianity while many who resisted he carved up, suspending their limbs in the main street of the town.¹⁹⁵

This happened in the late sixth century. At the same time or a little later, a work of propaganda was specifically addressed to the pagans of Harran, inviting them to convert to Christianity.¹⁹⁶ But neither persecution nor persuasion could as yet affect the course of Harranian paganism.

The School's persistent aura after its refounding may have played some rôle in the decision of Marwan II to transfer the see of the Caliph to Harran. Harun al-Rasheed occupied himself with the material welfare of this ancient city, but his son, Al-Ma'mun, ominously questioned its challenge to religious conformity when he passed through it in 830.¹⁹⁷ His impact though was hardly felt. Traditional religion, known as 'Chaldaean paganism',¹⁹⁸ continued to flourish in Harran under the changed name of Sabism,¹⁹⁹ while the Academy found a powerful patron in the person of al-Ma'mun's general, Tahir b. Husein, 'who spent his time in the reading, interpretation and familiarity of the philosophers'.²⁰⁰

From 830 onwards, however, persecution became a less sporadic phenomenon for the pagans of Harran. Conversion—whether genuine or simulated—to one of the licit religions of the Medieval Middle East seemed once again the only way out of the social impasse created by the spirit of intolerance that reigned in Constantinople and Baghdad. A less radical (and more shrewd) choice was adherence to Hermetic theosophy; as Louis Massignon has very well observed, by emphasising the 'propheticism' of Hermes-Idris, the pagans of Harran had an aspect of their creed insinuated into the canon of officially tolerated religions.²⁰¹

Whatever the impact of persecution on the population of Harran, however, the Academy continued to flourish.²⁰² Indeed it was towards the end of the ninth century that it produced its next most brilliant mind after Damascius. Tabit b. Kurra, a notable physician and philosopher, who became the court astronomer after his removal to Baghdad in 901, is the man

¹⁹⁴ For Philoponus' attacks on Proclus and Simplicius, see Blumenthal (n. 1) 372 n. 21, to which add the evidence from Cod. Coisl. 387 f. 153-4 (Athos, Magna Laura): 'Ἰωάννης ὁ Φιλόπονος, ὅστις καὶ κατὰ Πρισκιανοῦ ἠγωνίσαστο, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ κατὰ Ἀριστοτέλους.

¹⁹⁵ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* (trans. Chabot) ii 375.

¹⁹⁶ For an edition, translation and commentary on the text, see S. Brock, 'A Syriac collection of prophecies of the pagan philosophers', *OLP* xiv (1983) 203-246.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. the testimony of Abu Yusuf Isha 'al Qatiy'i *ap.* al-Nadim, *Fihrist* (trans. Dodge) ii 751-753.

¹⁹⁸ Hamaniyah al-Kaldaniyin: (n. 197) 745 n. 2.

¹⁹⁹ On the Sabians, see the more recent work by J. Hjärpe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les Sabéens harraniens* (Uppsala 1972).

²⁰⁰ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon* (trans. Chabot) iii 36.

²⁰¹ L. Massignon, 'Inventaire de la littérature arabe', A. J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* i (Paris 1944) 385.

²⁰² One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of imperial policies in frontier areas like Harran was their very remoteness from the centres of power, which meant that local governors could afford to ignore the orders of the ruler. A case in point is provided by the behaviour of the Emir of Harran, Ibrahim, under the caliph al-Ma'mun, who encouraged the pagans in the exercise of their religious practices rather than persecuting them: Michael the Syrian (n. 200) 34.

responsible for the flowering of Neoplatonic science and philosophy in the Abbasid capital. A man proficient in Greek, Syriac and Arabic and a universal genius,²⁰³ Tabit b. Kurra seems to have led a group of promising pupils to Baghdad after deciding that the intellectual climate in Harran was becoming too stifling.²⁰⁴ What is of particular interest to us, though, is the fact that, not unlike Damascius, Tabit b. Kurra wrote a religious history of late Hellenism.²⁰⁵ And, just as Photius preserved samples of Damascius' *Philosophical History* for stylistic reasons, so too did Bar Hebraeus in connection with the Harranian philosopher's text. In a fragment strongly reminiscent of Damascius' tone, Kurra describes the effects of persecution in Harran, but also allows us a glimpse into his own attitude towards martyrdom.

Although many have been subjugated to error by means of torture, our fathers by the hand of God have endured and spoken valiantly, and this blessed city hath never been defiled with the error of Nazareth. And we are the heirs, and transmitters to our heirs of paganism, which is honoured gloriously in this world. Lucky is he who beareth the burden with a sure hope for the sake of paganism.²⁰⁶

Subsequently Tabit b. Kurra goes on to say that all the culture and civilisation of which this world can boast is the gift of the pagans to humanity.

About half a century after these sentiments were expressed, Harran was visited by the Herodotus of the Arab world, al-Mas'udi, who wrote the following:

In the time of the Hellenes and during the early days of the empire of the Rum [the Byzantines] (...) the sciences were honoured and enjoyed universal respect. From an already solid and grandiose foundation, they were raised to greater heights every day, until the Christian religion made its appearance among the Rum; this was a fatal blow to the edifice of learning; its traces disappeared and its pathways were effaced.²⁰⁷

Al-Mas'udi came to Harran shortly before 947. He was shown round the Academy by Malik b. Ukbun, who must have been its head at the time, and by his colleagues, who translated for him the Syriac inscription on the door knocker of the building: 'he who knows his nature becomes god'.²⁰⁸ This maxim, which sums up the teaching of the Neoplatonists (and of the Sufis of Islam), is aptly linked by Mas'udi with the fact that the Greek philosophers do not accept the authority of a revealed book and of a sent prophet, but believe instead in the essential divinity of Man.²⁰⁹

Before visiting Harran, Mas'udi had done his homework. Once there, he discussed some of the theoretical and practical questions which had occurred to him during his readings and went away with the strong impression that most philosophers were anti-ritualists, who disapproved of the colourful religious practices performed by their less sophisticated fellow-citizens.²¹⁰

The antithesis between a spiritual *Hochreligion* and popular ceremonialism, as attested by

²⁰³ Cf. Gregory Abū'l Faraj Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* (trans. Budge) i 152-153.

²⁰⁴ On the reasons dictating Tabit b. Kurra's emigration from Harran, see Tardieu (n. 183) 19-20, who modifies Schwolson's and Hjärpe's views on the subject in a sensible way.

²⁰⁵ A few fragments of this *History* are preserved by Bar Hebraeus in his *Chronography*.

²⁰⁶ Bar Hebraeus (n. 203) 153; I thank Dr S. Brock for checking the translation of this passage for me. Significantly the word for 'paganism' in the passage is *hanputa*, a descriptive rather than pejorative term for non-Christian/Jewish religion.

²⁰⁷ Mas'udi, *Les prairies d'or* (ed., trans. B. de Meynard-P. de Courteille, C. Pellat) ii 741, 278 (with adjustments to the translation).

²⁰⁸ Mas'udi (n. 207) 1395, 536. Tardieu (n. 183) 14, was the first to identify this quotation with Plato *Alc. i* 133c, and trace its Neoplatonic descentance, 16. On the existence of a formal Academy at Harran in the tenth century, Tardieu (n. 183) 16-17, whose argument appears to me conclusive.

²⁰⁹ Mas'udi (n. 207) 1396, 537.

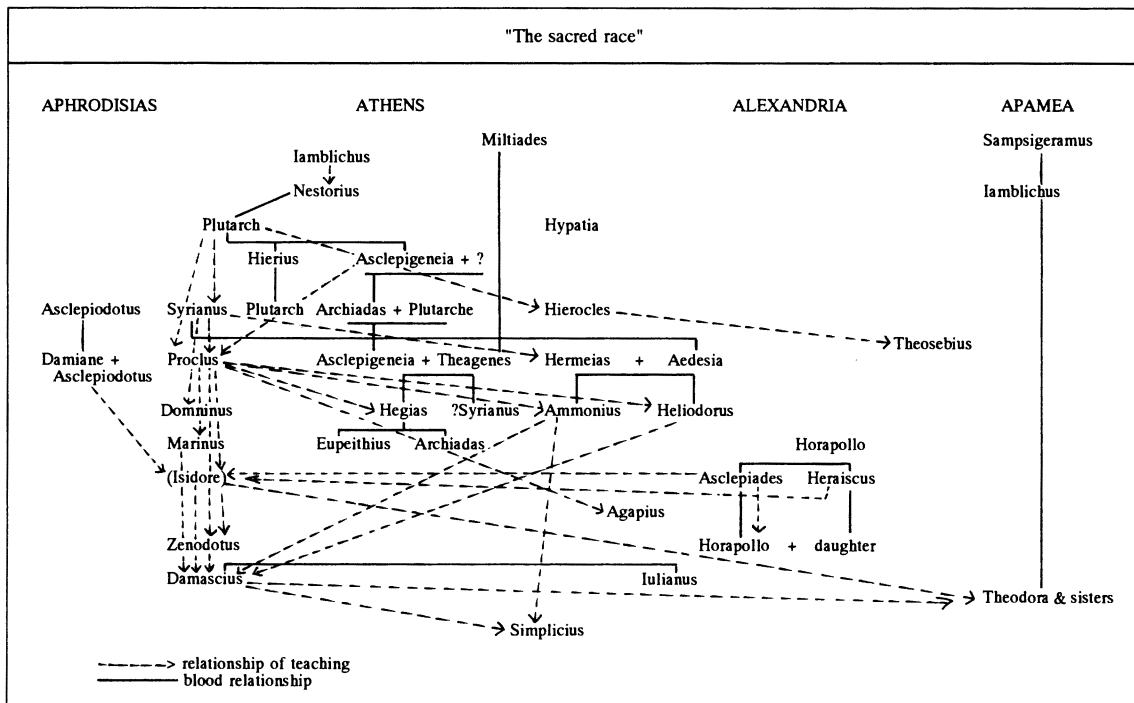
²¹⁰ Mas'udi (n. 207) 1397, 537-8.

al-Mas'udi, is not the only respect in which Harranian paganism had become polarised. The issue of orthodoxy, which had divided Neoplatonists in Athens, had become so pronounced with the passing of centuries that Mas'udi left the Academy with the belief that, whereas Iamblichus was the very repository of ancient wisdom, his correspondent, Porphyry, was a Christian sympathiser of Platonic views.²¹¹ An earlier and richer report on Harranian paganism had made exactly the same points as al-Mas'udi. According to 'the philosopher of the Arabs', Al-Kindi (801-860), the Chaldaean pagans (Harnaniyah al-Kaldaniyin) were a learned sect with typically Neoplatonic ethics and metaphysics and a sophisticated astrological ritual at variance with the idolatrous practices of the multitude. Moreover, Aristotle was understood by them in strictly Platonic terms, and so was the theology of Egypt, whether ancient or Hermetic.²¹²

Al-Mas'udi is the last author to mention the School at Harran, which in view of the political fortunes of the area cannot have survived after the eleventh century. Its message, however, had already found its way into heterodox Islam. Indeed it was thanks to the stepping stone of Harran and to Damascius' inspired decisiveness that Neoplatonic theology reached Baghdad by a clearly definable—if not direct—line from Athens.²¹³

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²¹¹ The evidence, from Mas'udi, *Kitab al-tambih wa-l-israf*, is presented and commented upon by Tardieu (n. 183) 14-16.

²¹² Al-Nadim, *Fihrist* ii (n. 197) 745-750. For a recent consideration of the authors discussed here, see T. M. Green, *The city of the moon god: religious traditions of Harran* (Leiden 1992) *passim*.

²¹³ In the history of this transmission there were vaguer paths, such as those which seem to have led from Athens and Alexandria to Panopolis, and from Panopolis/Ikhmim to Damascus and Baghdad through figures of such crucial importance as the great mystic of the ninth century Dhû'l Nun; cf. Ibn 'Arabî, *La vie merveilleuse de Dhû'l-Nun l'Égyptien* (trans. R. Deladrière) (Paris 1988) 15-16.