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### Title

Introduction

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91f2n88g>

### Journal

The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition, 18(1)

### ISSN

1872-5082

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### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.1163/18725473-12341559

Peer reviewed



BRILL

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF THE PLATONIC TRADITION 18 (2024) 1-9

The International  
Journal of the  
Platonic Tradition  
brill.com/jpt

## Introduction

### *Between Athens and Alexandria: Neoplatonists and the Great Library*

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Received 10 December 2023 | Accepted 15 December 2023 |  
Published online 18 March 2024

Neoplatonism was born not in Athens, Plato's birthplace, but in Alexandria. The Great Library and the *Mouseion* once defined the glory of Alexandria. Yet, Neoplatonism did not emerge in the scholarly milieu of the Library. Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus were not members of the *Mouseion*. It is, however, undeniable, albeit not often acknowledged, that, without the intellectual background shaped by these institutions and by the achievements of their scholars in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the school of thought we now call "Neoplatonism", and which marks a milestone in the history of ideas in both the East and the West, could never have emerged. This "new" philosophical version of absolute monism that interacted with Christian theology and enabled the integration of Greek philosophy with Islam and with Judaism was well rooted in philosophical developments that had been centered in Alexandria since the end of the first century BCE.

Athens and Alexandria were intellectually connected but quite different centers. Alexandria took over from Athens as the main center of cultural and intellectual activity in the Mediterranean world early in the Hellenistic period. When, around the turn of the fifth century CE, Synesius of Cyrene, Hypatia's pupil, visited "holy" Athens on his way to Constantinople, his impressions of the rising Platonic School under Plutarch and his daughter Asclepigeneia were quite disappointing. But Synesius already hints at the degree of scholarly

exchanges between the two cities.<sup>1</sup> Less than forty years later, the Egyptian city began hiring Athenian-trained philosophers to teach in its publicly-funded classrooms. This began a collaborative relationship between the two ancient intellectual centers that lasted into the sixth century. Until the early 530s, Neoplatonists would spend their lives and careers studying, teaching, and travelling between Athens and Alexandria. Late Antique Athens was a city of perhaps fifteen thousand people in which education represented the only world-class industry.<sup>2</sup> Private teachers of philosophy could appeal to the city's historical reputation as a cultural center in order to attract students to privately endowed schools based in their own private homes<sup>3</sup> and influence the political life of their city. It was perhaps the world's first college town.

Alexandria was different. It was a much larger city that had perhaps thirty times the population of Athens. It was also a city whose rich intellectual history depended upon great, well-funded public institutions like the *Mouseion* and Great Library, both founded around the turn of the third century BCE by Ptolemy I Soter.<sup>4</sup> The *Mouseion* offered a learned society populated by many of the most esteemed intellectuals in the Mediterranean world. They were paid high salaries from a royal endowment, ate meals together, and gave public lectures while making use of the library for their scholarship.<sup>5</sup> When Rome took control of Alexandria in 30 BCE, the emperors took over the funding and management of the institution.<sup>6</sup> The scholars they appointed tended to be conservative, establishment figures who often had pleased an emperor.<sup>7</sup>

Neoplatonism grew up in the shadow of these great public institutions. Porphyry tells us that, when Plotinus arrived to study philosophy in Alexandria in 233 CE, he first frequented the schools of "the most renowned teachers in Alexandria at that time," figures who were likely members of the *Mouseion*. He "came away from their lectures so full of sadness" that a friend recommended he turn to another teacher, Ammonius Saccas, who stood outside of the Alexandrian philosophical establishment.<sup>8</sup> Plotinus, who upon hearing

1 Syn. Ep. 136; Ep. 56. Kalligas 2020, 181-183; Viltanioti 2021, 530.

2 Watts 2008.

3 For the houses of philosophical schools in Athens, see Afonasin and Afonasina 2014; Athanassiadi 1999, 47.

4 For the foundation of these institutions, see Fraser 1970, 305-335. For the *Mouseion* in particular, see Erskine 1995.

5 For *Mouseion* members using the Library, see Delia 1992.

6 Str., 17.1.8.

7 Lewis 1995, 257-274.

8 Porph. *Plot.* 3, 7-13. Kalligas 2014, 29, suggests that Ammonius' marginality with respect to Alexandria's philosophical life might be explained by his "heretical" Aristotelianism rather than by his alleged Pythagoreanism. The majority of specialists identify the Christian Origen's

Ammonius famously said, “This is the man I was looking for” (τοῦτον ἐζήτησεν), stayed with him for eleven years and developed the ideas that would revolutionize Platonism.<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence that he ever again frequented the lectures of the city’s philosophical establishment. The same is true of Origen,<sup>10</sup> the other great philosophical mind of mid-third century Alexandria. Both men produced massive quantities of brilliant work. Nothing survives from the contemporary dons of the *Mouseion* aside from scattered references in documents.<sup>11</sup>

This silence is unfortunate because the *Mouseion* and the Library both suffered severe damage in the early 270s, when forces loyal to the emperor Aurelian sacked Alexandria and devastated the Broucheion quarter in which the institutions were housed.<sup>12</sup> The *Mouseion* lived on, however. The mathematician Theon, the father of Hypatia, was a member in the middle of the fourth century, although Hypatia was not. Given the historical conservatism of the *Mouseion*, her exclusion may have been as much related to the radical shift in her teaching, which seems to have privileged Plotinian and Porphyrian Neoplatonism, as it was due to her gender.<sup>13</sup> Towards the end of the fourth century, the Serapeum of Alexandria, the “daughter-Library”, was destroyed in the aftermath of an outburst of Christian-pagan conflict in which Hypatia apparently played no part. By the mid-fifth century, some thirty years after Hypatia’s violent death, there are again references to a physical space known as the *Mouseion* in the city in the works of Zacharias of Mytilene, also known as Zacharias Scholasticus.<sup>14</sup> Zacharias strongly suggests that it abutted the complex of more than twenty classrooms constructed in the fifth century

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teacher with Ammonius Saccas. On the distinction between two Ammonii, the teacher of Plotinus and the teacher of the Christian Origen, see Edwards 1993.

9 Porph. *Plot.* 3, 13-17.

10 On Origen, see Edwards 2002; 2008; Prinzivalli 2015. Most scholars distinguish between the Christian Origen, who was a prolific author, and the Pagan Origen, who according to Porphyry wrote nothing except for the treatises *Περὶ τῶν δαιμόνων* and *Ὅτι μόνος ποιητῆς ὁ βασιλεύς*; see Porph. *Plot.* 3, 24-32; 14, 21-25; 20, 36-39. Yet, some think it may be possible to identify the two. See also Ramelli 2008; 2013.

11 The last reference to *Mouseion* membership appears in materials dating from the 260s: Lewis 1995, 157.

12 The destruction of the *Mouseion* in this attack is suggested by the reuse of a stone statue base that was originally dedicated to a member of the *Mouseion* in the reign of Diocletian. See Breccia 1911, n. 146.

13 On the nature of her teaching, see Watts 2017, ch. 3, 4, and 6; Viltanioti 2021, 528-530; 537.

14 Zacharias Scholasticus, *Ammonius*, ln. 367. On these, see Rodziewicz 1995, esp. 325 sq., and, for a detailed plan of the site, Tkaczow and Zych 1993, plans IIIa-b. See also Vinzent 2000.

on the ruins of a residential area devastated during the attacks of the later third century.<sup>15</sup>

It is here that we can finally find a Neoplatonist who entered the *Mouseion* membership. Hermeias, Ammonius Hermeiou, Isidore, Asclepiodotus, Olympiodorus, Elias, and many other less celebrated commentators and Platonic teachers of the fifth and sixth centuries taught in this Alexandrian classroom complex. Despite their accomplishments, it seems that none were *Mouseion* members or affiliates. But the last known *Mouseion* member, in the reign of Zeno, did belong to this circle of Neoplatonists. This was Horapollon of Phenebythis (in the district of Panopolis), the one man who joins the eight-hundred-year-old tradition of the *Mouseion* to the Neoplatonic “Golden Chain”.

In a documentary papyrus laying out a property dispute with his estranged wife, Horapollon describes himself as the holder of a chair in philosophy in Alexandria and a member of the *Mouseion*.<sup>16</sup> We know from other sources that he taught in the public classrooms in the center of the city that abutted the space where a fifth century *Mouseion* may have been. And, like the above-mentioned commentators, who also taught there, he was a Neoplatonist. Thus, while one can see early Neoplatonism as a sort of marginal movement against a conservative Alexandrian institutional establishment, the tradition ends up as something that the establishment wholeheartedly embraced.

But there remained some space for insurgency. After all, Damascius suggests that Horapollon, whom he describes as not being “a philosopher by nature (τὸ ἦθος)” and as having “an insatiable desire for gain (ἀπλήστου ἐπιθυμίας),” converted to Christianity before receiving these honors.<sup>17</sup> If this is true, it may still have been possible for pagan Neoplatonists to still “push against” that establishment, if they so desired, and stay clear of the *Mouseion* forever. Yet, Damascius’s accusation against Horapollon is quite vague, as is also his reference to Ammonius’s greediness (αἰσχροκερδής) and proneness to profit (χρηματισμός), which would have led him to an agreement (ὁμολογία) with the Patriarch Peter Mongus.<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested that, according to that agreement, Ammonius and Horapollon continued to teach in the classrooms provided by the city and to receive their salary on the condition of not promoting pagan ritual and theurgy in public.<sup>19</sup> Hence Damascius’s accusation of greed.

15 For the remains of this complex at Kom el-Dikka, see Majcherek 2007; Sorabji 2014.

16 His positions are defined in *P. Cairo* 3.67295, published in Maspero 1914, 163 ln.1, 166 ln.15. On Horapollon, see *DPhA* H 165.

17 Dam., *Isid.* 120B Athanassiadi. See also Athanassiadi 1993, 20–21.

18 Dam., *Isid.* 118. The existence of such deal has been doubted by Blank 2015, 660.

19 Sorabji 2016, 47; Griffin 2016, 401.

There is, however, no definitive proof that Horapollon or Ammonius betrayed their principles.<sup>20</sup> There is no such hint in Ammonius' surviving evidence.<sup>21</sup> Ammonius and Horapollon may have simply been the most prominent representatives of a group of professors who realized that, unlike what was the case in Athens, in Alexandria, private funding would not be enough for keeping the school open: they needed public support, for which a deal with the Christian authorities was necessary. Their sagacious strategy was not approved by all Neoplatonists: Damascius's blame might echo other opposing voices too. Yet, history has shown that the agreement kept the school in Alexandria open beyond the end of the seventh century, whereas, in Athens, the activities stopped in 529. Zacharias, who, unlike Damascius, was an eyewitness of the events of 486, tells us that Horapollon—nicknamed “Psychapollon” by Christian monks of the Henaton monastery and the students with whom they associated<sup>22</sup> because of the great numbers of souls he had caused to be lost as a result of their conversion to paganism—had to leave Alexandria after a mob destroyed the temple of Isis that might have had some ties to his school.<sup>23</sup> Like Ammonius, Horapollon might eventually have found a way to make peace with the Christian authorities without being actually converted to Christianity. Or, he might have been a member of the *Mouseion* before his alleged conversion. Furthermore, before or after the *ὁμολογία*, his *Mouseion* membership might not have been an isolated case among pagan Neoplatonists. That would fit both the spirit of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism and the tradition, going back not only to Hypatia's school but also to the welcoming scholastic circles of Plotinus and Ammonius Saccas, that Alexandrian schools could be frequented by pagans and Christians alike.<sup>24</sup> A long-lived and influential institution like the *Mouseion* would not simply adapt itself to changing times: it would play the leading role in shaping them by moulding together tradition and innovation.

The present special issue pays tribute to the ancient connection between Neoplatonism and the Great Library by bringing together, as a humble token of perennial gratitude, a collection of Neoplatonic studies in honour of the twentieth anniversary of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was inaugurated in October 2002 with the aim of reviving the spirit of the Great

20 Sorabji 2016, 47.

21 See also Blank 2015, 661-666.

22 These were the student-*φιλόπονοι*, a group of Christian students who were affiliates of the Monastery of Henaton, located nine miles outside of Alexandria. See Watts 2010, ch. 5.

23 Zacharias, *Vit. Sev.* 20-32 Kugener; Athanassiadi 1999, 27-29; Watts 2005; 2010, ch. 1-2; Griffin 2016, 400-401.

24 Porph. *Plot.* 3, 36-39; 13-14.

Library, an idea traced back to a group of scholars of Alexandria University in the early seventies. Thanks to their vision, which was unsurprisingly shared by the rest of the world, the Library of Alexandria stands anew at the Mediterranean seafront, in the same area where the campus of the *Mouseion* was located in Antiquity, in the quarter that was once called the Broucheion and is now Shatby, not far from the Kom el-Dikka classroom complex where Ammonius, Horapollon, and their fellow Neoplatonists taught. The sense of standing in their shadow is inevitable for contemporary commentators returning to the Library.

Two of the essays in this volume, by Irini-Fotini Viltanioti and Dimitrios Vasilakis, deal with Plotinus' interpretation of Plato, focusing on the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus* respectively. They discuss aspects of Plotinus' theory of Intellect, psychology, and demonology but also questions concerning his exegetical method, myth interpretation, and the place of Plato's authority in the *Enneads*. Edward Watts's and Pantelis Golitsis's contributions turn to late Neoplatonism and, more especially, to the interaction between Damascius, the last head of the Athenian School, and his Alexandrian teacher Ammonius Hermeiou, offering, among others, invaluable insights into the way in which the personalities of Neoplatonists shaped the character of their teaching. By challenging the traditional view, which emphasizes Damascius' downgrading of Ammonius, Golitsis focuses precisely on the time when the connection between Neoplatonism and the *Mouseion* becomes more tangible, while Watts, in the opening article of this issue, considers late Neoplatonic tensions within the wider framework of the Platonic tradition. Mark Edwards's final article discusses the debated authorship of the commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, strengthening the case for its attribution to the Christian Commentator John Philoponus as editor of his teacher Ammonius's Book 1 and 2 and as sole author of Book 3. Thus, the papers that follow span the history of ancient Neoplatonism, from Plotinus to the last Alexandrian commentators.

Some of the ideas discussed here have been presented at the 2022 "Institute for Mediterranean Studies & Alexandria Center for Hellenistic Studies Neoplatonic Lectures" held online on a monthly basis (2022-2024) as well as at the workshops "Intellect and Soul in Alexandrian Neoplatonism" and "Intellect and Soul in Athenian Neoplatonism", which took place with the participation of an international group of experts in Rethymno (Institute for Mediterranean Studies) and Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina) in June and September 2022 respectively. We warmly thank the speakers and the audience on all these occasions. The above activities were co-organised by the Institute for Mediterranean Studies of the Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas and the Alexandria Center for Hellenistic Studies of

the Bibliotheca Alexandrina within the framework of the research project “Between Athens & Alexandria. Platonism, 3rd-7th c. CE” supported by the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation. We most gratefully acknowledge the support received, *sine qua non*. Special thanks are due to Gelina Harlaftis, Director of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Emad Khalil, Head of the Alexandria Center for Hellenistic Studies, and Mark Kyriakos, External Relations and Activities Coordinator of the Alexandria Center for Hellenistic Studies. This special issue owes much to John Finamore’s editorial instruction as well as to Suzanne Stern-Gillet’s (†) advice. Many thanks go to David von Eijndhoven, to Brill’s editorial team, and to the anonymous referees for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of the collected essays.

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