

Where to Live the Philosophical Life in the Sixth Century? Damascius, Simplicius, and the Return from Persia

Edward Watts

WHEN ESTABLISHING an endpoint for the classical philosophical tradition in the Greco-Roman world, scholars often choose the closing of the Athenian Neoplatonic school by the emperor Justinian in 529.¹ This institution was not, as commonly supposed, the Academy founded by Plato in the fourth century B.C.² It was instead the self-styled spiritual heir of Plato's school, and its closure continues to excite a great deal of fascination. According to the traditional narrative, the closing was followed by a sad coda in which Damascius, the last head of the school, and his inner circle of philosophical initiates left the Roman Empire for the

¹ Of the many studies exploring the closing of the school and its implications, the most notable are Alan Cameron, "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens," *PCPS* 195 (1969) 7–29; J. Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Göttingen 1978) 322–329; H. J. Blumenthal, "529 and its Sequel: What Happened to the Academy," *Byzantion* 48 (1978) 369–385; P. Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, transl. B. A. Archer (Cambridge [Mass.] 1990) 135–139; G. Hällström, "The Closing of the Neoplatonic School in A.D. 529: An Additional Aspect," in P. Castrén (ed.), *Post-Herulian Athens* (Helsinki 1994) 141–160; and U. Hartmann, "Geist im Exil: Römische Philosophen am Hof der Sasaniden," in M. Schuol et al. (edd.), *Grenzüberschreitungen: Formen des Kontakts zwischen Orient und Okzident im Altertum* (Stuttgart 2002) 123–160. For the most recent account see E. Watts, "Justinian, Malalas, and the End of Athenian Philosophical Teaching in A.D. 529," *JRS* 94 (2004) 168–182.

² Against the identification of this school with the Academy see Glucker, *Antiochus* 322, and Blumenthal, *Byzantion* 48 (1978) 369–385.

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 45 (2005) 285–315

© 2005 GRBS

Persian court of Chosroes in 531.³ The historian Agathias, the only surviving source for the incident, states that the philosophers chose to make this trip because “they had come to the conclusion that, since the official religion of the Roman Empire was not to their liking, the Persian state was much superior.”⁴ The experience in Persia proved disappointing and the philosophers soon returned home with the freedom to practice their religion secured by the Roman-Persian peace treaty signed in 532 (Agath. 2.30.5–2.31.4).

This much of the story is well known, but a question lingers: What did the philosophers do when they returned? In at least two cases, they continued to philosophize. Simplicius authored the vast majority of his works in the period following his return.⁵ Priscian of Lydia also wrote two extant texts and he was an important enough thinker that John Philoponus attacked his

³ Since Alan Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 13, this date has been widely accepted. I. Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire sur le Manuel d'Épictète* (Leiden 1996) 12, argues unpersuasively that Agathias made no attempt to link the philosophers' trip to Persia with Chosroes and, therefore, the date of 531 is merely hypothetical. On her points, see Watts, *JRS* 94 (2004) 180 n.91. The argument that some of Damascius' colleagues stayed behind in the Roman Empire while Damascius went to Persia has been dismissed by R. Thiel, *Simplikios und das Ende der neuplatonischen Schule in Athen* (Stuttgart 1999) 12, and C. Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 482–504 (review of Thiel).

⁴ *Hist.* 2.30.3–4: οὐ πολλῶ γὰρ ἔμπροσθεν Δαμάσκιος ὁ Σύρος καὶ Σιμπλίκιος ὁ Κίλιξ Εὐλάμιος τε ὁ Φρὺξ καὶ Πρισκιανὸς ὁ Λυδὸς Ἑρμείας τε καὶ Διογένης οἱ ἐκ Φοινίκης καὶ Ἰσίδωρος ὁ Γαζαῖος, οὗτοι δὴ οὐδ' ἅπαντες τὸ ἄκρον ἄωτον, κατὰ τὴν ποιήσιν, τῶν ἐν τῷ καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνῳ φιλοσοφησάντων, ἐπειδὴ αὐτοὺς ἡ παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις κρατοῦσα ἐπὶ τῷ κρείττονι δόξῃ οὐκ ἤρεσκεν ὄντο τε τὴν Περσικὴν πολιτείαν πολλῶ εἶναι ἀμείονα, τούτοις δὴ τοῖς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν περιεδομένοις ἀναπεπεισμένοι, ὡς εἶη παρ' ἐκείνοις δικαιοτάτον μὲν τὸ ἄρχον καὶ ὅποιον εἶναι ὁ Πλάτωνος βούλεται λόγος, φιλοσοφίας τε καὶ βασιλείας ἐς ταῦτ' οὐκ ἐξυελθούσης ... τούτοις δὴ οὐδ' ὡς ἀληθέσιν ἀρθέντες καὶ πρός γε ἀπειρημένον αὐτοῖς ἐκ τῶν νόμων ἀδεῶς ἐνταῦθα ἐμπολιτεύεσθαι, ὡς τῷ καθεστῶτι οὐκ ἐπομένους, οἱ δὲ αὐτίκα ἀπὸντες ὄχοντο ἐς ἄλλοδαπά καὶ ἄμικτα ἦθη, ὡς ἐκείσε τὸ λοιπὸν βιωσόμενοι.

⁵ Alan Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 13. On the date of the *Encheiridion* commentary see Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire* 8–24.

ideas.⁶ But Damascius, the leader of the group, is known to have written only an epitaph of the slave girl Zosime that was erected in the city of Emesa in 538.⁷ There is no evidence of any other activity on his part.

That philosophical activity continued among at least some of Agathias' philosophers is probably unsurprising, but the question about where this activity occurred is far more controversial. In the last century, Alexandria, Athens, Asia Minor, and Harrān (the Greek Carrhae) have all been suggested.⁸ Each site has been proposed on the basis of an impressive interpretation of our incomplete evidence, and each possibility is problematic. Nevertheless, in recent years, many scholars have been swayed towards the particular argument of Michel Tardieu that Harrān is the place to which the philosophers returned.⁹

At first, this question might seem trifling. After all, if we can get some sense of what the returned exiles were doing, why does it matter where they were doing it? In truth, this question concerns not so much the place in which study was done as the

⁶ Priscian's two texts are an epitome of Theophrastus' *Περὶ αἰσθήσεως* and the *Solutiones eorum de quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex*. For Philoponus' attack see Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 24.

⁷ *Anth.Gr.* 7.553: Ζωσίμη, ἡ πρὶν ἐοῦσα μόνῳ τῷ σώματι δοῦλη | καὶ τῷ σώματι νῦν ἡδὺρον ἐλευθερίην. The original stone (*JGLSyrie* V 2336) has been found in Emesa and is explicitly dated to 538; cf. Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 21–22.

⁸ On Alexandria see P. Tannery, "Sur la période finale de la philosophie grecque," *Revue philosophique* 42 (1896) 286, and, tentatively, Blumenthal, *Byzantion* 48 (1978) 379. For Athens see Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 25–29. Asia Minor was suggested by I. Hadot, *Le problème du Néoplatonisme alexandrin: Hiéroclès et Simplicius* (Paris 1978) 27. For Harrān see M. Tardieu, "Sābiens coraniques et 'Sābiens' de Harrān," *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 1–44, and *Les paysages reliques. Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius* (Louvain/Paris 1990).

⁹ Among those echoing Tardieu's findings are I. Hadot, "La vie et l'oeuvre de Simplicius d'après des sources grecques et arabes," in I. Hadot (ed.), *Simplicius: Sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie* (Paris 1987) 10–20; P. Athanassiadi, "Persecution and Response in Late Paganism," *JHS* 113 (1993) 1–29; and, with more hesitation, P. Athanassiadi (ed. and transl.), *Damascius: The Philosophical History* (Athens 1999) 51–53. See also Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire* 25–50, and Thiel, *Simplikios*.

institutional continuity of the school once headed by Proclus and Damascius. Institutional continuity is important in philosophy because, in many cases, it connotes a type of doctrinal continuity as well. If a student studies in the same building, uses the same texts, and follows the same curriculum as the generations of philosophers who came before him, he can, with great confidence, assume that what he is learning is authoritative. Indeed, an interest in institutional continuity was common among later Neoplatonists. Hierocles in his *On Providence*, as quoted by Photius, provides a good illustration in invoking the teaching on the subject “professed by Ammonius [Saccas], likewise Plotinus and Origen, and indeed Porphyry and Iamblichus and their successors”; all these men were “born of divine stock, as far as Plutarch of Athens, who he says was the Master who taught him these doctrines,” and all are “in agreement with the philosophy of Plato in its pure state.”¹⁰

Hierocles was an Alexandrian who had studied in Athens before returning to his home city, and his statement about the chain of correct philosophical interpretation reveals a subtle, yet distinct, idea about doctrinal continuity. In his conception, this continuity was based upon personal teaching ties. It did not depend upon the survival of any one institution or teaching locale. In fact, the intellectual lineage that Hierocles describes was centered in diverse places. Ammonius taught in Alexandria, Plotinus and Porphyry taught in Italy, Iamblichus was based in Apamea, and Plutarch and Plato were Athenians. For Hierocles, the purity of doctrine and the identity of one’s teachers took precedence over the location of the school. Indeed, it seems that this was a natural state of affairs in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Eunapius too describes a shifting center of gravity that moves from Iamblichus’ school in Apamea to Aedesius’ teaching circle in Pergamum and, eventually, to the school of his own teacher Chrysanthius in Sardis.¹¹ In each case, there seems to be a recognition that the center of

¹⁰ Phot. *Bibl. cod.* 214 p.173a32–40 (III 129–130 Henry).

¹¹ This is the scholarly genealogy that Eunapius provides; on this and its role in shaping Eunapius’ narrative see D. F. Buck, “Eunapius’ *Lives of the Sophists*: A Literary Study,” *Byzantion* 62 (1992) 141–157.

Platonic teaching shifted along with the reputations of the most prominent teachers.

This state of affairs began to change only when the Athenian Neoplatonic school was established by Plutarch the scholar at the turn of the fifth century. Assisted by a political climate that protected its strongly pagan philosophical teachings, the Athenian school developed a following among Syrian and Egyptian pagan students.¹² The school was then blessed with Syrianus and Proclus, the two gifted and strong-willed successors of Plutarch, who enabled it to remain at the forefront of Platonic thought for most of the century. Nevertheless, the political and intellectual position of the school remained somewhat precarious throughout this period. No less a figure than Proclus was said to fear lest “the truly Golden Chain of Plato might abandon our city of Athens.”¹³ The Athenian honor of Platonic intellectual leadership, though longstanding, could still be lost.

This was due to particular concepts of intellectual leadership in late Platonism. Both Hierocles and Proclus give far greater importance to philosophical purity and doctrinal continuity than to geographical continuity.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there was a particular relationship to place. Both Hierocles and Proclus traveled to Athens to become initiated into the mysteries of Platonic philosophy. Hierocles lived at the end of a period in which the most influential centers for Neoplatonic teaching had

¹² On the local political climate see E. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, forthcoming) ch. 4. Synesius’ complaints about “Plutarchan sophists” and their questionable recruitment methods (*Ep.* 136) suggest that Plutarch’s recruitment efforts had begun to affect student enrollment at the school of Hypatia: see E. Watts, “Travel to Intellectual Centers: What was the Attraction?” in L. Ellis and F. Kidner (eds.), *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot 2004) 11–21.

¹³ Damascius *V. Isid.* fr.98C (Athanassiadi). See also *V. Proc.* 10, 26.

¹⁴ On the attention that later Neoplatonists paid to doctrinal consistency, see Athanassiadi, *JHS* 113 (1993) 11–12, and P. Athanassiadi, “Philosophy and Power: The Creation of Orthodoxy in Neoplatonism,” in G. Clark and T. Rajak (eds.), *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford 2002) 271–291.

been constantly shifting. He had no apparent concern for the place in which teaching occurred so long as the teaching was authoritative. Proclus, however, had lived and worked through a period when Athens was, without question, the most important place for Neoplatonic philosophical study. Proclus saw that the Golden Chain of Platonic interpretation had, in a sense, been re-institutionalized in Athens, and he worked to ensure that this situation would not change under his leadership.¹⁵ As the one who had assumed leadership of the Athenian institution charged with preserving the Golden Chain, Proclus feared circumstances under which this institutionalization would change.

Neoplatonists understood that, while doctrinal continuity could be maintained even though circles scattered, the existence of a community of scholars that was rooted in one place made such continuity more likely. The great attraction of Tardieu's idea that Harrān was the place to which Damascius and his followers returned lies in its ability to extend an institutional chain from the later Roman Empire into the 'Abbāsīd period. Indeed, mediaeval Arab scholars themselves were interested in this sort of scholarly continuity. This concern seems to lie at the heart of the famous Arabic tradition that describes the transfer of the philosophical and medical curriculum from Alexandria to Baghdad.¹⁶ If Tardieu is correct, the institutionalized Platonism so treasured by Proclus (and so foreign to Hierocles and Eunapius) did not disappear in 529. It simply moved, first to Persia, then to Harrān, and, ultimately, to Baghdad.

Difficulties with a Harrān stay

Tardieu's hypothesis relies upon a passage in a tenth-century

¹⁵ Proclus' concerns are evident in Damasc. *V.Isid.* fr.98C.

¹⁶ Variants of this tradition are found in al-Fārābī, al-Mas'ūdī, the Muslim physician Ibn-Ridwān of Cairo, and the Jewish physician Ibn-Gumay'. See M. Meyerhof, "Von Alexandrien nach Bagdad. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des philosophischen und medizinischen Unterrichts bei den Arabern," *SBBerl* (1930) 389–429; D. Gutas, "The 'Alexandria to Baghdad' Complex of Narratives: A Contribution to the Study of Philosophical and Medical Historiography among the Arabs," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 10 (1999) 155–193, esp. 157–168.

account of the visit of the Arab scholar al-Mas'ūdī to the city of Harrān. In it, mention is made of a meeting place in which philosophers gathered.¹⁷ Above the door knocker on this building was a Syriac inscription: "He who knows his nature will become God." When asked to interpret the text, one of the intellectuals who met in the building responded that it had come from Plato.¹⁸ In another of his works, al-Mas'ūdī repeats this same phrase and again attributes it to members of the Harrānian community.¹⁹ Elsewhere al-Mas'ūdī also describes the transfer of the seat of teaching from Athens to Alexandria, and then successively to Antioch, Harrān, and Baghdad.²⁰ By linking this apparently Platonic inscription with the tradition of scholastic transfer, Tardieu has seen in this Harrānian assembly of so-called Sābians the descendant of a Neoplatonic school founded in the city by Damascius and his colleagues upon their return from Persia. Tardieu maintains that Harrān had a native Greco-semitic pagan community that had been

¹⁷ The word used is *majma'*. Tardieu, *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 16–18, argues that the term here suggests an "academy." The more conventional translation is "temple" or simply "meeting place": J. Lameer, "From Alexandria to Baghdad: Reflections on the Genesis of a Problematic Tradition," in G. Endress and R. Kruk (eds.), *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism* (Leiden 1997) 181–191, at 186. Tardieu (11ff.) also sees in al-Mas'ūdī's description an attempt to separate true Harrānian philosophers from a mass of credulous simpletons in the city. This is based upon a reading of the Arabic text that Lameer has questioned (187–188). On Lameer's reading, al-Mas'ūdī is calling all the "philosophers" in Harrān simpletons and is distinguishing them from more erudite thinkers elsewhere.

¹⁸ Tardieu, *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 13–14.

¹⁹ Tardieu, *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 15. This appears in *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa-l-iṣṭifā'* p.162.3–5 de Goeje.

²⁰ al-Mas'ūdī *Tanbīh* pp.121–122; discussed Tardieu, *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 20–22. Note however the difference between the tradition of scholastic transfer described by al-Mas'ūdī and Tardieu's notion of a philosophical school that went from Athens to Harrān via Persia. The movement from Athens to Alexandria occurs, according to al-Mas'ūdī, during the Hellenistic period (Gutas, *Documenti e studi* 10 [1999] 158; cf. *Tanbīh* p.121.19ff.). One version of the tradition, that of Ibn-Ridwān (see Gutas 161–162), does include a time when teaching was based in Persia. In his reconstruction, however, this period evidently ended before the career of Oribasius in the fourth century.

prominent since the fourth century²¹ and that, consequently, the city represented a natural destination for the philosophers returning from Persia.²² To further support this, he maintains that passages in the works of Simplicius can be explained only by a stay in Harrān.

However attractive it may seem, the idea of a Harrānian Neoplatonic school is also problematic. As mentioned, this rests upon three crucial pieces of evidence—the passages in Simplicius, the Platonic references given by al-Mas'ūdī, and the Arabic tradition of scholastic transfer. The passages in Simplicius' various writings include the following significant points: (1) in his commentary on Epictetus' *Encheiridion* Simplicius responds to elements of Manichean cosmology which, it is suggested, come from a conversation with a Manichean that must have occurred in Harrān;²³ (2) Simplicius discusses the beginnings of the year as represented in four calendars, three of which may have been used only in Harrān in the sixth century;²⁴ (3) he also mentions a specific type of boat that

²¹ The emperor Julian stayed there for a few days on his march to Persia in order to visit its temples (Amm. Marc. 23.3.21). It is known to have been a pagan city in the fifth century (Theodoret *Hist.Rel.* 17.5) and it retained a large pagan community until the Arab conquest. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for it serving as an intellectual center as well as a regional cultic center in late antiquity.

²² The native language in Harrān was Syriac, but it is not likely that all of the philosophers spoke Syriac. Priscian was from Lydia, where Syriac was not spoken; Simplicius was from Cilicia, where Syriac also was not widely spoken. Note the Cilician hermit Thalaeus, who could only speak to Theodoret in Greek (*Hist.Rel.* 28.4; for similar examples see Jones, *Later Rom. Emp.* 994).

²³ Simplic. *In Ench.* 35.90–91; discussed by Tardieu, *Journal asiatique* 274 (1986) 24 n.105, and Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire* 29–32.

²⁴ “The beginnings of the year that we set according to our custom are towards the summer solstice just as the Athenians; or, just as well, towards the autumnal equinox, just as the inhabitants of what is now called Asia; or towards the winter solstice, just as the Romans; or, just as well, towards the spring equinox, just as the Arabs or residents of Damascus; and if anyone shall set as the beginning of the month either the full moon or the new moon, these beginnings are by convention” (*In Phys.* p.875.19–22 Diels); discussed by M. Tardieu, “Les calendriers en usage à Harrān d'après les

descends the Aboras River in Mesopotamia, a vessel that he may have seen as part of a pilgrimage from Ḥarrān;²⁵ and (4) he includes a number of compound and Greco-semitic names and titles in his works that may point to the Greco-semitic environment of Ḥarrān.²⁶

Each of these points has been addressed critically by Concetta Luna, and her arguments highlight genuine problems with these interpretations of Simplicius' texts. She has suggested that the anti-Manichean references are similar to others found in commentaries written by Simplicius' teacher Ammonius. In addition, though Tardieu's interpretation presupposes a discussion with a Manichean, Simplicius gives no indication that this is what he means to suggest. The passages in question simply represent Manichean ideas and do not correspond to the content of an actual conversation.²⁷ Manichean beliefs about a dualistic universe form the basis of much of Simplicius' discussion. These ideas were widely known and their refutation remained something of a standard part of rhetorical training well after significant Manichean communities had disappeared from the Roman world.²⁸

The idea of the four calendars is introduced in the context of a discussion about the nature of beginnings.²⁹ Simplicius maintains that beginnings can be either natural or conventional. He alludes to the Athenian, Roman, Asian, and Damascene calendars because they all begin the year in a different season. Months too can begin with the new or full moon and, consequently, such things are conventional. Though Simplicius

sources arabes et le commentaire de Simplicius à la Physique d'Aristote," in Hadot, *Simplicius: Sa vie* 40–57.

²⁵ Simplicius simply remarks that he saw the air push a great cargo when he was sailing down the river Aboras (*In Phys.* pp.684.35–685.3; *In De caelo* p.525.10–13 Heiberg).

²⁶ These include Athwālīs, to whom his commentary on *De anima* is dedicated. See Hadot, *Simplicius: Commentaire* 42–47.

²⁷ Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 482–504, esp. 491–492.

²⁸ See S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester 1985) 175. This type of exercise was particularly important for theologians.

²⁹ Simplic. *In Phys.* pp.874.27–875.30.

uses the first person plural, e.g. ἄς δὲ ἡμεῖς ποιούμεθα ἀρχάς (p.875.19–20), throughout the passage, this seems to be a collective “we” that refers to the behaviors of people in general and not the specific practices of a Neoplatonic school.³⁰ Simplicius’ knowledge of these calendars need not be very detailed for him to make this point. This too need not suggest residence in Harrān.

Simplicius’ boat trip and his use of Greco-semitic nomenclature are also ambiguous evidence for a stay in Harrān. Luna reasonably suggests that the boats that Simplicius describes could have been observed during the course of a journey on the Aboras, regardless whether Simplicius was traveling up or down the river.³¹ The compound and Greco-semitic names that he uses are also explicable without confirming a link to Harrān. The compound names seem in large part to be derived from conventional examples found, among other places, in the grammatical works of Apollonius Dyscolus.³² The use of Greco-semitic nomenclature, and especially the name of Athwālīs, is interesting, but the name is not preserved in any Greek manuscript. It is first noted by an Arabic author describing a dedication found atop a Syriac manuscript of a Simplicius

³⁰ Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 484–488. Note as well the earlier arguments of S. van Riet, “À propos de la biographie de Simplicius,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 89 (1991) 506–514; P. Foulkes, “Where was Simplicius?” *JHS* 112 (1992) 143; and H. J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca 1996) 45.

³¹ Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 489–490; note also Blumenthal, *Aristotle* 45.

³² Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 495–497. Especially notable is Apollonius’ use of the name Agathodaimon. This name is said by Tardieu (*Les paysages* 158–159) to mark a Hermetic figure held in high regard by the people of Harrān. This name is joined in a clause with the compound name Neapolis in both Simplicius *In Cat.* p.43.20–24 Kalbfleisch (ὅταν μὲν γὰρ ἐν ἧ τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ τὸ νόημα ἓν, ἀπλοῦν ἔσται τὸ λεγόμενον καὶ ἄνευ συμπλοκῆς, κἂν πλείονες αἱ λέξεις δοκῶσιν, ὡς ἐπὶ τοῦ Νεάπολις ἢ ἀγαθοδαίμων) and Apollonius Dysc. *De pronom.* p.60.14–16 Schneider (πολλάκις καὶ ἐπ’ ὀνομάτων καθ’ ἐνὸς ὑποκειμένου δύο κλίσεις γίνονται, Νέα πόλις Νέας πόλεως, ἀγαθὸς δαίμων ἀγαθοῦ δαίμονος). This suggests, as Luna notes, a set of terms produced not by an experience in Harrān but by a familiarity with grammatical works.

commentary.³³ Even if one accepts this dedication as genuine, Simplicius' communication with Syriac speakers may have been due either to the increasing interest of Syriac speakers in Greek philosophy (as was the case with Sergius of Rēš'anā) or to the Syrian origins of some other members of the school.³⁴

While they address specific points in Simplicius' commentaries, these objections to Tardieu's argument collectively amount to a significant criticism. Beyond these ambiguous statements, Simplicius never mentions Harrān in his works and includes little else in his texts that could place him there. Consequently, while it does not exclude Harrān as a site to which he may have returned, the Simplician evidence does not suggest Harrān either.

The Arabic evidence for a Harrānian Neoplatonic school then becomes a crucial part of the discussion. Among Arabists, Tardieu's ideas have been received with a great deal of skepticism,³⁵ much of which derives from the difficulties with the historical study of Harrān. The city was the home of a community of people who continued some form of organized pagan practices until the tenth or eleventh century. Despite extensive scholarly treatment, there is little agreement about the nature of the Harrānian pagan tradition or the place of philosophical learning within it.³⁶ What is acknowledged, be-

³³ See Luna, *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 499–500. The reference is al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* p.605 transl. Dodge.

³⁴ On Sergius see below. Among the Syrians associated with Damascius' school were Theodora (to whom the *Life of Isidore* is dedicated) and her sister.

³⁵ For knowledge of this I am particularly grateful to Dimitri Gutas and Robin Lane Fox. They explained to me two different sets of objections based upon Arabic evidence. Some of the points relating to this Arabic evidence were initially raised by Kevin van Bladel in an unpublished paper first presented at the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies conference in 2003. I thank him for allowing me to see a draft of this paper.

³⁶ The nature of the religious practices in Harrān has been the subject of extensive, though inconclusive, study. See D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und die Ssabismus* II (St. Petersburg 1856); J. Hjärpe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les Sabéens Harrāniens* (diss. Uppsala 1972); J. Tubach, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes* (Wiesbaden 1986), esp. 143–159; T. Green, *The City of the Moon God. Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden 1992); S. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of*

ginning in mediaeval Arabic sources, is the role that individual Harrānians played in the ninth-century translation projects of the 'Abbāsid caliphs.³⁷ While it is tempting to suppose some connection between the intellectual activities of individual Harrānians and the general pagan practices in the city, there is little evidence to support such an idea.³⁸ Some of this is due to the nature of our sources. Most of the evidence for Harrānian paganism comes from either polemical Muslim and Christian sources or apologetic accounts by Harrānians in Baghdad who were looking to defend their practices by stressing similarities to Muslim practices.³⁹ Because our window into Harrānian culture comes through the distorting lens of Baghdadi literary culture, it is difficult to separate accurate accounts of practices from information that is intended to serve as religious polemic.⁴⁰

This is what makes the information preserved in al-Mas'ūdī appear so valuable. He visited the city and his observations of it seem to be more objective than other accounts. He also describes the level of intellectual culture in the city. Nevertheless, this unique feature of his work does not offset some substantial difficulties with linking the information he provides to a sixth-century institution. For one thing, the tradition of the transfer of philosophical instruction from Alexandria to Baghdad, via Antioch and Harrān, is problematic. al-Mas'ūdī's reference to

Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandeans and their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'ān and to the Harranians (Oxford 1994) 134–191. See also K. van Bladel, *Hermes Arabicus* (diss. Yale 2004) 82–126.

³⁷ On the translation movement in general see D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York 1998).

³⁸ Note however Tubach, *Im Schatten* 153–156. Whatever contribution philosophy made to the Harrānian cult, astronomy and astrology appear to have played a far greater role.

³⁹ The charges leveled against them included human sacrifice (e.g. the tradition quoted by Hjärpe, *Analyse* 85–88, 101–105). On these traditions and their sources see Hjärpe 35–61.

⁴⁰ Though Hjärpe, *Analyse* (esp. 43–49), expressed skepticism about our contemporary abilities to do this, note the thorough discussion of Gündüz, *Knowledge* 163–187.

this transfer derives from a larger complex of narratives.⁴¹ Broadly speaking, this tradition evolved in a slow and comprehensible fashion. Yet the inclusion of the individual cities of Antioch and Harrān is peculiar and may well represent an attempt to emphasize the role played by Nestorian Christians and Ṣābians in the 'Abbāsīd translation movement.⁴² When the tradition took shape, it concerned only the transmission of the Alexandrian medical curriculum (of which the first half of Aristotle's *Organon* was a part); its relevance to the history of Platonic philosophy is unclear. In fact, al-Mas'ūdī is also the only Arabic source to suggest a link between the city of Harrān and Neoplatonism, a connection that some Arabists have judged to be rather tenuous.⁴³ A number of other sources discuss the city and its peculiar religious ideas, but they make no mention of Platonism in it.⁴⁴ This makes the three-hundred-year gap between the supposed Harrānian settlement of the exiled philosophers and the ninth-century flourishing of intellectual culture in Harrān especially suspect. About this chronological distance Lameer remarks:⁴⁵

We are faced with a kind of utter silence in this regard that must be taken as telling. We do not know a single scholar's name to be associated with an academy of any kind at Harrān in the period under consideration and neither do we know the title of a single book to have been written at that place ... even the proliferate Ṣābian scholar Thābit b. Qurra ... appears to have

⁴¹ Gutas, *Documenti e studi* 10 (1999) 155–193.

⁴² Gutas, *Documenti e studi* 10 (1999) 155–193. This is against the idea that the entire tradition was born of a mythologizing impulse (e.g. F. W. Zimmerman, *Al-Farabi's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* [London 1981] cxi n.2). The possible role of Ṣābians and Nestorians in shaping the tradition was first suggested by Lameer, in Endress/Kruk, *Ancient Tradition* 190–191, and echoed by Gutas 187–188.

⁴³ D. Gutas, "Plato's *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition," *Oriens* 31 (1988) 36–60, at 44 n.34, argues strongly against Tardieu's tendency to equate Harrān's Ṣābians with Platonists.

⁴⁴ Among these are al-Tabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, Ibn al-Nadīm, and al-Hwarizmi.

⁴⁵ Lameer, in Endress/Kruk, *Ancient Tradition* 186.

received most of his education in Baghdad rather than at an 'academy' in Harrān.

With no convincing Arabic evidence to bridge this divide, the connection between a sixth-century school and the meeting house seen by al-Mas'ūdī in the tenth century is precarious.

The connection becomes even more tenuous when one considers the direct evidence that al-Mas'ūdī provides. The Syriac inscription above the door knocker is vaguely Platonic and may, as Tardieu proposes, recall *1 Alcibiades* 133C. It is also sufficiently evocative of the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" to consider a non-Platonic source.⁴⁶ In addition, T. Fahd has argued that this saying from Harrān was well known in non-Platonic Arabic contexts like the so-called "Sayings of the Sages."⁴⁷ The maxim's presence then may be due to its general circulation in the 'Abbāsīd cultural milieu and need not indicate the existence of any sort of elite philosophical institution in Harrān.

Philosophy in its social setting

The inconclusive Greek and Arabic evidence for a Harrānian Platonic Academy requires that one address the likelihood that the Neoplatonists who fled from Athens would have considered Harrān a natural destination to which they ought to return. To do this, it is crucial first to determine why Damascius, Simplicius, and their associates departed for Persia. For this we have only one piece of direct testimony—the passage of Agathias (2.30.3–4): "the philosophers had come to the conclusion ... that the Persian state was much superior ... (because they had heard stories about the king's philosophical skills) and because it was impossible for them to live without fear of the laws, since they did not conform to the commonly

⁴⁶ The similarity with the Delphic maxim was first noted by Lameer, in Endress/Kruk, *Ancient Tradition* 189.

⁴⁷ T. Fahd, "Sābi'a," *Encyclopedia of Islam*² 8 (1995) 675–678. This text, the *Placita Philosophorum* of Pseudo-Plutarch, was already widely known before al-Mas'ūdī visited Harrān. See H. Daiber, *Aetius Arabus. Die Vorsokratiker in arabischer Überlieferung* (Wiesbaden 1980) 80–88, on the use of excerpts of the *Placita* in later Arabic literature.

followed conventions.” Agathias appears to be drawing from a source quite close to the philosophers, possibly even an account of their journey written by one of those involved, and his assertion that they traveled because they feared legal conditions in the Roman Empire must be taken seriously.⁴⁸

What Agathias describes is consistent with the political realities of the Roman world in the early 530s. When the Athenian school was closed in 529, it seems likely that the philosophers who had worked there remained together, probably in Athens.⁴⁹ For as both Damascius and Olympiodorus tell us, the Athenian Neoplatonic school was quite wealthy.⁵⁰ For over a century the school had received bequests of property and money from interested parties. Even with no teaching going on, this property would have likely sustained a community of philosophers indefinitely.⁵¹ Thus, while the restriction on teaching imposed in 529 was quite distasteful to the philosophers, it probably would not have led to the disintegration of the community. In or around 531, however, two laws

⁴⁸ E. Zeller, *Philosophie der Griechen* III.2 (Leipzig 1889) 916 n.3, marks Damascius as a possible author of the account used as a source by Agathias (cf. Hartmann, in Schuol, *Grenzüberschreitungen* 134–135). Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford 1970) 101–102, thinks it more likely that Simplicius is Agathias’ source. In either case, the account is likely to have been written. In this section of the text Agathias uses a euphemistic phrase that appears to draw upon a passage of Simplicius’ *Commentary on the Encheiridion* as well as another phrase used by Damascius. For discussion see Alan Cameron, *PCPS* 195 (1969) 102.

⁴⁹ The closing was mandated by a law (described by Malalas 18.47) that targeted the Athenian school because of the content of its teaching. On this see Watts, *JRS* 94 (2004) 181–182; for a different perspective, J. Beaucamp, “Le philosophe et le joueur. La date de la fermeture de l’école d’Athènes,” in *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron (TravMém* 14 [2002]) 21–35.

⁵⁰ According to Damascius, “the goods possessed by the successors of Plato did not originate from the fortune of Plato, as many believe; for Plato was poor, and possessed only the garden in the Academy,” from which the revenue was three *solidi*. “Under Proclus, the revenue from its endowment was a thousand or more because many pious and devoted men, upon their death, willed their possessions to the philosophers” (*V.Isid.* fr.102). Compare Olympiodorus *In Alc.* 141.1–3 (p. 92 Westerink).

⁵¹ Glucker, *Antiochus* 254, has reckoned that the 1000 *solidi* endowment of the school was sufficient to fund up to fifteen teachers.

were issued to restrict the activities of pagans in the Roman Empire.⁵² These changed the circumstances of the philosophers in dramatic fashion. The first prevented pagans and their institutions from receiving bequests;⁵³ the second created even more stringent restrictions including the confiscation of property and exile of pagans.⁵⁴ These laws meant, in effect, that no more money could legally be given to the philosophers by their supporters, and the property that had come to form the endowment of the school was subject to seizure. In 531, the Athenian philosophers thus faced the very real prospect of imperial officials confiscating their property and destroying their ability to live a philosophical life.⁵⁵

Agathias then is likely correct in asserting that the philosophers decided to leave for Persia because they could not live without fear of the laws in the Roman Empire. In fact, the laws did pose a genuine threat to the philosophers if they continued to live in Athens. And we know how the philosophers thought they were supposed to behave in such circumstances. Simplicius, for example, states: "In corrupt states, one must ... preserve faith and modesty. Indeed, one ought to ask to be an exile from these incurable affairs, and, if indeed it is possible, one will go to another, better state" (*In Ench.* 32.186–191). A flight to Persia, in which philosophy was said to be respected by

⁵² On these laws and their dating see Watts, *JRS* 94 (2004) 178–182.

⁵³ "Let no one leave anything in a will or give anything as a gift to those people or places who still maintain the impiety of paganism" (*Cod.Iust.* 1.11.9.1).

⁵⁴ "However many men have never received the sacrament of baptism, it is required that they ... receive the salutary baptism. Or, if they think little of these things, they know that neither will they have any part in our state nor will our agents allow them to possess any moveable or immoveable property, but, giving up all of their goods, they will be left in poverty to suffer the suitable penalties" (*Cod.Iust.* 1.11.10.1).

⁵⁵ A. Frantz, *The Athenian Agora in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1988) 88, describes the apparent sixth-century abandonment and redecoration of a large pagan house in the Athenian Agora. It is termed "a transition (of the house) to Christian use of an official character" because a nymphaeum in the building had been converted into a baptistery. Pagan statuary was also found concealed in a well alongside the house. This seems to confirm that pagan property was confiscated in Athens in the early 530s.

the new king Chosroes, was acceptable on a philosophical level and also made a great deal of practical sense.⁵⁶

It seems, then, that the philosophers fled for a good reason. But what did they hope to find when they returned in 532? Agathias says that, when they left Persia, they received a benefit that was to give them peace of mind for the rest of their lives: a clause was included in the so-called Eternal Peace between the Romans and Persians to the effect that the philosophers should “be allowed to return to their homes and live out their lives in peace without being compelled to alter their traditional religious beliefs” (2.31.3–4); he adds that this was done at the behest of Chosroes himself and that any breach of this provision would be grounds for renewed war.

Agathias gives us a happy ending for the philosophers. They are able to return and live in peace without being forced to convert to Christianity. His account allows us to see more. He makes it clear that, to the best of his knowledge, the philosophers did in fact live out the rest of their lives unmolested. He was writing in the early 570s, presumably after the death of most or all of the exiled philosophers.⁵⁷ If he says that they continued to live unmolested, we should probably take him at his word. But this raises a potential difficulty. By 540, the treaty protecting the philosophers had been scrapped. When it was, the special protections given to the philosophers likely became reasons for particular suspicion about their loyalty to Rome.⁵⁸ If they did live out their lives unmolested by authorities, they would have done so not because of Chosroes’ protection but because they were able to blend into pagan communities that provided some protection. In the later Roman Empire, this protection usually came about when local government officials were persuaded to turn a blind eye to pagan activity. Indeed, this reality was even acknowledged as a particular problem by

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the historical parallels for such flights see Hartmann, in Schuol, *Grenzüberschreitungen* 142–143.

⁵⁷ For the date of Agathias’ work see Averil Cameron, *Agathias* 9–11.

⁵⁸ Abrogation of the “Eternal Peace”: Procop. *Wars* 2.3–4.

the Roman authorities.⁵⁹ Given that the success of governors and judges depended upon a functional relationship with the people being governed, the choice not to enforce anti-pagan laws was usually made when a locality had a significant or influential pagan community.

As we have noted, one such influential pagan community was based in Harrān. Although the city had bishops, they were a sad lot, known primarily for attending conferences and struggling to control religious life in the city.⁶⁰ The pagan community, by contrast, seems to have dominated public life. Procopius tells how, in his invasion of 540, Chosroes spared Harrān from attack and even refused to accept tribute money from it because the paganism of its residents made it unique (*Wars* 2.17.1–8). Furthermore, the city's pagan community remained connected to those in other cities in the region. When the surrender of Harrān to the Arabs was being negotiated in 639, the pagans in the city sent a delegation to Edessa for consultation about the terms.⁶¹ Harrān, then, certainly would provide the sort of religious climate that the fugitive philosophers sought.

It is seldom noticed that, in the 530s, many other local pagan communities had a similar degree of influence. For good reason, this was seldom advertised. As a result, our views into these groups generally come when their influence is discovered and imperial officials take action against them. Nevertheless, even a quick survey of Christian sources of the period makes clear that large and powerful pagan communities were not rare in the 530s (or even in the 570s).⁶² Pagans remained influential in both Harrān and Edessa into the mid-seventh century. If Harrān were a unique last pagan bastion, it is especially surprising to find the Harrānian pagan community looking for leadership from their Edessene cousins in the seventh cen-

⁵⁹ E.g. *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.19.3. On this situation in general see Jones, *Later Rom. Emp.* viii, 407–410; Watts, *City* ch. 4.

⁶⁰ E.g., Theodoret *Hist. Rel.* 17.5.

⁶¹ J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford 1970) 108.

⁶² J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford 2001) 260–269.

tury.⁶³

Significant pagan communities are recorded elsewhere as well. Contemporary sources record that, in the 540s, widespread anti-pagan actions in the cities of western Asia Minor led to the conversion of 70,000 urban and rural pagans.⁶⁴ Despite these actions, paganism persisted, both in Asia Minor and in the rest of the Empire. So again, in the 570s and 580s, another widespread persecution began in Baalbek and eventually swept up prominent pagans living in cities such as Antioch and Constantinople.⁶⁵

The inability of the Roman state to mount an effective, empire-wide persecution against paganism is noteworthy.⁶⁶ What is especially remarkable about the anti-pagan actions of the later sixth century is the high social level of the people targeted. In 545/6 the persecutions targeted “famous persons, nobles, and others—*grammatici*, sophists, *scholastici*, and physicians” as well as the former praetorian prefect Phocas.⁶⁷ If Christian sources are to be believed, all these men were evidently part of a well-organized Constantinopolitan community of pagans that included prominent intellectuals and government officials. A passage of John of Ephesus describes the

⁶³ The last mention of an Edessene pagan community comes in a late-seventh-century work by Jacob of Edessa: Segal, *Edessa* 108.

⁶⁴ “God’s grace visited the countries of Asia ... to the effect that 70,000 souls were instructed in the faith and turned away from the error of paganism” (Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre *Chronicle* p.72, transl. Witakowski). On this persecution and its effect see M. Whitby, “John of Ephesus and the Pagans: Pagan Survivals in the Sixth Century,” in M. Salaman (ed.), *Paganism in the Later Roman Empire and Byzantium* (Cracow 1991) 111–131.

⁶⁵ Liebeschuetz, *Decline* 266–269; F. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c. 370–529* II (Leiden 1994) 154–156.

⁶⁶ R. Macmullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven 1997) 1–73. As Macmullen suggests, persecution did ultimately play a role in creating a Christian society, but this process succeeded for a variety of reasons beyond effective persecution. On some of the additional elements, see Whitby, in Salaman, *Paganism* 125–131.

⁶⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre p.71. Phocas is one of the more unfortunate victims. He had been charged in the earlier anti-pagan actions of the 520s and had managed to extricate himself by providing evidence of his Christianity; cf. Watts, *JRS* 94 (2004) 181 n.93.

persecution in Baalbek and shows how a pagan community could use the influence of some of its members to protect the interests of the larger group.⁶⁸ This reveals a pagan community that was wealthier and more numerous than the Christians in their city. Beyond Baalbek, John also mentions Rufinus, the high priest of Antioch, and Anatolius, the governor of the province, as prominent pagans who worked to protect the interests of pagans in the region.⁶⁹

One must always be cautious about accepting a Christian writer's classification of a community as pagan, especially when political or rhetorical motivations may lie behind the statement.⁷⁰ Even acknowledging the probability that some of the people caught in these persecutions were innocent, the relative prevalence of local pagan-Christian intercommunal conflict suggests that well-organized pagan communities existed in pockets throughout the sixth-century East. When Damascius and his colleagues returned from Persia, a number of cities, including Baalbek and some places in Asia Minor, had large pagan communities that could offer the same sort of religious protection as Harrān. To judge from its character in the early

⁶⁸ John of Ephesus *Ecclesiastical History* 3.27 (transl. Payne Smith); cf. Whitby, in Salaman, *Paganism* 123–124.

⁶⁹ Whitby, in Salaman, *Paganism* 124, points out that it is difficult to know how much to trust the accusations of paganism that were leveled against prominent Antiochenes because this occasion seems to have been “exploited by Monophysites in an attempt to embarrass the Chalcedonian establishment.” It is not surprising, however, to see a governor from the region. On the evolution of the role of a governor and the increasing importance of local elites see C. Roueché, “The Functions of the Governor in Late Antiquity: Some Observations,” *AntTard* 6 (1998) 31–36 and 83–89. C. Roueché, *Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity* (London 1989) 40, 65, gives an example of a prominent Aphrodisian who managed to get himself appointed governor of his home province.

⁷⁰ On this general skepticism see P. Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus the Church Historian* (Leuven 1981) 232; and, for a less skeptical perspective, Whitby, in Salaman, *Paganism* 113. Liebeschuetz, *Decline* 266–267, suggests that many of the accused pagans in Constantinople were senators who had been singled out for political reasons. See also Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1991) 197, for the use of paganism as rhetorical shorthand for deviance.

sixth century, Aphrodisias might also be among the unacknowledged possibilities.⁷¹ In addition, major cities like Constantinople and Antioch, with powerfully connected pagan minorities in the early 530s, may have seemed equally attractive as religious havens. Within their cities and, in some cases, their regions, these pagan communities were politically powerful and largely able to protect their religious interests. In the 530s, Harrān did not provide unique protection to pagans who feared persecution.

If one considers the question of where to settle from the perspective of the philosophers involved, the various local pagan communities that survived in the Levant, Asia Minor, and the major cities of the Eastern Empire in 532 were all possible new homes. The philosophers would not have known that John of Ephesus would lead a persecution of pagans in Asia Minor and Constantinople in the 540s. They also would not be able to predict that, in the 570s, pagans in Baalbek and Antioch would also be targeted. In fact, Harrān, which sat closer to the eastern frontier, may have seemed a more likely target for persecution in 532 than some of these other cities. Perhaps because of its strategic importance, an anti-pagan persecution was indeed launched in Harrān in the 580s.⁷² In short, a number of communities would have seemed to be viable places for the returning philosophers to settle.

In 532, there is little to suggest that Harrān would have provided a unique setting in which a revived Platonic Academy could take root. So, if the philosophers did not go to Harrān, where did they end up when they returned to the Roman Empire? Again, one must face the paucity of our evidence and reply that this question cannot be answered with certainty. The

⁷¹ The character of the Aphrodisian community is discussed in detail by Roueché, *Aphrodisias* 88–93. Zacharias Scholasticus *V. Severi* mentions an Aphrodisian Christian convert named Paralios who returned to the city in the early sixth century and set up a monastery that worked to convert pagans (44).

⁷² Described by Michael the Syrian (10.24); see Liebeschuetz, *Decline* 263 n.67. This persecution is also notable when one pictures an Academy of Harrān. If such a public symbol of paganism existed in the city, it is unlikely that it would have escaped the persecution intact.

most likely scenario seems to be a disintegration of the philosophical circle once headed by Damascius. In 532 Damascius was in his seventies.⁷³ Aedesius, Plutarch, and Proclus all show that teachers who reached this age commonly entered either a period of diminished activity or even full retirement.⁷⁴ When this occurred, it was not uncommon for the students of those teachers to leave the circle and begin teaching on their own in another city. In the fourth century Maximus of Ephesus had left the school of Aedesius when his master neared retirement; in the fifth century Isidore left Proclus under similar circumstances.⁷⁵ This raises the possibility that, upon the philosophers' return, Damascius, who no longer headed a school and was probably too old to start a new one, simply retired to the area around Emesa. If he did so, his followers would likely have scattered to pursue their studies among the remaining pagan communities of the Eastern Empire.⁷⁶ This does not have the cachet of a Harrānian Golden Chain that joined Arabic philosophy to Platō, but it does open the door to another compelling historical reality.

⁷³ Photius *Bibl. cod.* 181 p.126b (II 192 Henry) says that Damascius studied rhetoric in Alexandria for three years and then taught rhetoric for nine years. If one dates this backwards from his flight from Alexandria in 489, this gives a date of 477 for the beginning of his rhetorical study. Athanassiadi, *Damascius* 339 n.3, suggests that Photius' statement is a misunderstanding of *V.Isid.* 137B. If she is correct, Damascius would have begun rhetorical study in 480 instead of 477.

⁷⁴ On the gradual curtailing of activities by professors approaching retirement see Watts, *City* chs. 3, 4 (cf. Eunap. *VS* 474).

⁷⁵ Eunap. *VS* 474–475; Damasc. *V.Isid.* fr.98C–D.

⁷⁶ Indeed, an ambiguous statement in Agathias' account hints at this possibility. Agathias mentions that the treaty of 532 included a provision that "it was necessary for these men who were returning to their homes (ἐς τὰ σφέτερα ἦθη) to live out the remainder of their days without fear" (2.31.4). Agathias and other sixth-century historians used τὰ σφέτερα ἦθη most often to refer to a homeland, but the phrase can also mean "their homes" when used of groups of persons from different places (e.g. Menander Protector fr. 9.114–115). If the latter meaning is accepted, then we have tenuous textual support for the idea that the Neoplatonic scholars of Athens disbanded the school upon their return from Persia and scattered to their various homes.

An alternative to the Academy

Between the demise of Plato's Academy in the first century B.C. and the emergence of Plutarch's Neoplatonic school in the later fourth century, Platonic philosophy functioned quite well as a decentralized school of thought. Much of the philosophical vibrancy of this period has been lost because of the disappearance of many Middle Platonic texts, but the continued dynamism of Platonism is undeniable.⁷⁷ Prominent teachers were often based in Athens, but equally significant intellectual centers rose and fell depending upon the quality of individual teachers.⁷⁸ This allowed Platonism to thrive in a number of geographic centers and enabled the spread of vaguely Platonizing ideas into diverse intellectual communities throughout the Mediterranean.⁷⁹

This broad engagement with Platonic ideas continued even after the Athenian school had styled itself the custodian of the Golden Chain. In the fifth and sixth centuries, there is considerable evidence that geographically diffuse intellectual exchanges continued. Although most of the philosophical texts preserved from the period originated from either the Athenian Neoplatonists or their Alexandrian cousins, one sees elements of their work being discussed in a wide variety of communities in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁰ In the 480s Aeneas of Gaza published a work designed to circulate in Gaza and Alexandria

⁷⁷ The most comprehensive attempt to recover this material and describe the intellectual world in which it was circulating remains J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*² (Ithaca 1996).

⁷⁸ So, for example, Alexandria is prominent during the career of Eudorus in the first century B.C. and Smyrna during that of Albinus in the second century A.D.

⁷⁹ For philosophical diversity, one need only look at the interpretative differences between the second-century Athenian teachers Taurus and Atticus. During this period Platonic ideas appear in documents as diverse as Gnostic writings, Hermetic works, and Chaldean texts. On the spread of Platonic ideas in the aptly-named Platonic Underworld, see Dillon, *Platonists* 384–396.

⁸⁰ Throughout the fifth century Alexandrian Neoplatonism enjoyed strong ties to the Athenian community: see M. Vinzent, "'Oxbridge' in der ausgehenden Spätantike oder: Ein Vergleich der Schulen von Athen und Alexandrien," *ZAC* 4 (2000) 52–55; and Watts, *City* chs. 4, 8.

that politely engaged Neoplatonic ideas about the eternity of the world.⁸¹ This topic was again broached (less politely this time) by Zacharias Scholasticus in a work originally published in the 490s and revised in the 510s or 520s.⁸² Around the turn of the sixth century the text now called the *Fragmentary Greek Theosophy* emerged.⁸³ It demonstrated the truth of Christian teaching by using references to pagan oracles and the vocabulary of Greek philosophy.⁸⁴ Later, from the 520s to the 540s, the Alexandrian John Philoponus wrote a series of works that used the language and concepts of Neoplatonic philosophy to again attack the doctrine of the eternity of the world.⁸⁵ These were, in turn, attacked by both Simplicius⁸⁶ and the Nestorian Christian Cosmas Indicopleustes.⁸⁷ Finally, from the late 520s into the 560s, the Alexandrian pagan teacher Olympiodorus continued to teach Neoplatonic philosophy and write Platonic

⁸¹ See E. Watts, "An Alexandrian Christian Response to Neoplatonic Influence," in A. Smith (ed.), *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity* (Swansea 2005) 215–229.

⁸² The work was called the *Ammonius*, an indication of the Neoplatonist it aimed to attack: see Watts, in Smith, *Philosopher* 215–229.

⁸³ H. Erbse, *Theosophorum graecorum fragmenta* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1995). On the possible context for this work see Athanassiadi, *Damascius* 350–357.

⁸⁴ The text was originally eleven books long. Books 1–7 described Christian teaching and 8–10 showed that "the oracles of the Greek gods and the theologies of the Greek and Egyptian sages as well as the Sibylline oracles agree with the objective and divine scriptures" (transl. Athanassiadi, *Damascius* 353). Book 11 contained a short chronicle of human history from Adam to the emperor Zeno.

⁸⁵ The first text (*De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*) was directed against a treatise written by Proclus. Philoponus here promises a second text aimed to refute Aristotle and a third that apparently aimed to prove Christian doctrines of creation, destruction of the world, and resurrection (*De aet.* 258.22–26, 399.20–400.3).

⁸⁶ P. Hoffmann, "Simplicius' Polemics," in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London 1987) 57–83.

⁸⁷ Cosmas was a member of Alexandria's small Nestorian community; he characterized Philoponus' works as "deceptive arguments and worldly deviousness" (*Topogr. Christ.* 1.2.1–12). On this debate see W. Wolska, *La Topographie Chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustès* (Paris 1962) 147–192; for Philoponus' response, C. Pearson, *Scripture as Cosmology: Natural Philosophical Debate in John Philoponus' Alexandria* (diss. Harvard 1999).

commentaries.⁸⁸

The influence of Neoplatonic teachings can also be seen in other places and contexts in the sixth century. As is well known, the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius relied heavily upon contemporary Neoplatonic ideas (specifically those of Proclus).⁸⁹ Perhaps less well known is the influence that Neoplatonic thinking had in monastic communities in Palestine in the mid-sixth century.⁹⁰ In addition, the Syrian Sergius of Rēš'anā (d. 536) studied under the Alexandrian Neoplatonist Ammonius and worked to bring Aristotle's *Categories*, elements of Galen's medical corpus, and Pseudo-Dionysius' writings into Syriac.⁹¹ He was an "heir" of the Neoplatonic tradition in the fullest sense, but his most significant contributions made Neoplatonic ideas more conveniently available to interested intellectuals who were outside of a Platonic school.⁹²

⁸⁸ On Olympiodorus and the setting of his activities see H. Tarrant, "Olympiodorus and the Surrender of Paganism," *ByzF* 24 (1997) 181–192.

⁸⁹ This has been recognized since the turn of the last century: e.g. J. Stiglmayr, "Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895) 253–273, 721–748; H. Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895) 438–454. Pseudo-Dionysius' reliance upon Proclus' *Platonic Theology* has been thoroughly examined by I. Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*," in A. Segonds and C. Steel (eds.), *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne* (Louvain/Paris 2000) 491–530.

⁹⁰ I. Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and Palestinian Origenism," in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven 2001) 261–282. Much of this Platonic influence came through the medium of either Pseudo-Dionysian or Origenist texts.

⁹¹ H. Hugonnard-Roche, "Aux origènes de l'exégèse orientale de la logique d'Aristote: Sergius de Rēš'anā (†536), médecin et philosophe," *Journal asiatique* 277 (1989) 1–17.

⁹² Hugonnard-Roche, *Journal asiatique* 277 (1989) 15. Though his writings focus upon Aristotelian and medical works, this does not preclude a background in Platonic philosophy. A good comparison could be made with Sergius' contemporary, the physician Gesius. Gesius was another student of Ammonius and, to judge by the references to him in Zacharias' *Ammonius* and Damascius' *V.Isid.* (fr.128), he clearly had training in Platonic philosophy. Regarding the Aristotelian focus of Sergius' writings, a similar comment could be made about the surviving works of Ammonius. Despite an Aristotelian focus in his written works, Ammonius is known to have taught

Ultimately one is left with a distinct impression that, when Damascius, Simplicius, and their fellow exiles returned from Persia, they would have found a number of communities to which they could easily return. Even in the 530s, many communities in the Eastern Empire (including some quite large ones) were able to protect the activities of their pagan citizens. With hindsight, we recognize that the pagan community of Harrān was the most enduring, but this was not knowledge that Damascius and his associates possessed. We cannot expect that it influenced their decision about where to settle. In addition, there was still a great deal of interest in philosophy throughout the whole of the Roman East in the 530s. These twin realities suggest the necessity of a radical shift in our perception of the returning philosophers. While their position was not ideal, they did not return as a group of exiles with limited options. There were many possible places to go and, philosophically, there was no need of a revived Academy.⁹³ This makes it unlikely that the philosophers would have decided to re-establish the Athenian Neoplatonic school in Harrān.

This should not, however, diminish the real contribution made by Tardieu and those who followed his argument. By the sixth century Neoplatonism had become an intellectual movement that occupied a real and deeply embedded position in the intellectual fabrics of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that, when Classical philosophy again emerged as something of an institutionalized movement in 'Abbāsīd Baghdad, it did so from these regional roots.⁹⁴

courses expressly on the *Theaetetus* (Asclepius *In Met.* p.70.31 Hayduck) and the *Republic* (Olympiodorus *In Gorg.* 32.2).

⁹³ The point has been made that Simplicius would have required access to a substantial library in order to find his abundant pre-Socratic references (e.g. Alan Cameron, *PCPS* 195 [1969] 23). If this is the case, his destinations would likely have been limited to Antioch, Constantinople, and, perhaps, Athens (if the local situation had become more settled). Alternatively, he could have carried the library of the school to and from Persia (cf. the similar attempt made by Isidore, *V.Isid.* fr.119A–D) or he could have taken his pre-Socratic references from books of collected quotations.

⁹⁴ For the role that Syriac scholars played in this movement see S. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes towards Greek Learn-

Tardieu's admirable attempt to illustrate the Syrian roots of this re-emergence has increased Hellenists' awareness of the importance of Syriac speakers in the transmission of the Greek philosophical tradition. Platonic philosophy had a significance that was recognized well beyond Harrān. When Damascius and his colleagues returned from Persia, they would have found many cities in which they could settle. It seems only reasonable to assume that a number of hosts benefited from their return.

By the last decade of the sixth century, however, this relatively fortunate situation seems to have changed. In the intellectual generations following the return of the philosophers, the full study of the Neoplatonic curriculum gradually withered. After the 560s, the commentaries written by Neoplatonists stopped focusing upon Platonic texts. At the same time, the composition of synthetic *Prolegomena Philosophiae* increased.⁹⁵ Perhaps as an inadvertent explanation of this phenomenon, each of these *Prolegomena* includes a section that suggests that contemporary students hesitate to read the entire texts of ancient philosophers because their writing is too obscure.⁹⁶ These works then represent a deliberate attempt to contract the philosophical curriculum and make it suitable for rather uninterested students.⁹⁷ This impression is enhanced when one notes the similar process of curricular contraction

ing," in N. Garsoian et al. (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington 1982) 17–34, and "Syriac Culture in the Seventh Century," *ARAM* 1.2 (1989) 268–280, esp. 272. On this idea, from an Arabist perspective, see Gutas, *Greek Thought* 11–27 (esp. 14, 20–22).

⁹⁵ These often take the form of commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge*. On these synthetic texts see C. Wildberg, "Three Neoplatonic Introductions to Philosophy: Ammonius, David, and Elias," *Hermathena* 149 (1990) 33–51; M. Marcovich, "Pseudo-Elias on Heraclitus," *AJP* 96 (1975) 31–34.

⁹⁶ So the commentaries on the *Isagoge* by Ammonius (p.38.14 Busse), Elias (p.41.30b), David (p.105.10), and Pseudo-Elias/David (p.28.26–29 Westerink); discussed by Marcovich, *AJP* 96 (1975) 31–34, and H. J. Blumenthal, "Pseudo-Elias and the *Isagoge* Commentaries Again," *RhM* 124 (1981) 188–192.

⁹⁷ Cf. M. Roueché, "Did Medical Students Study Philosophy in Alexandria?" *BICS* 43 (1999) 153–169.

taking place in Syriac intellectual circles in the sixth century. The writings of scholars of philosophy like Athanasius of Balad, Severus Sebokht, and Jacob of Edessa are largely concerned with Aristotelian philosophy and, most frequently, with the first half of the *Organon*.⁹⁸ In addition, as in the Greek philosophical environment, there are a number of late-sixth and early-seventh-century translations and commentaries on the *Isagoge* of Porphyry that, in their later forms, serve as introductions to Aristotelian logic.⁹⁹ This is notable because a third effort to streamline the curriculum was occurring in Alexandrian medical schools at roughly this time. This effort produced the abridgement of Galen that became the *Summaria Alexandrinorum*. According to one late tradition, this work was composed because “these synopses obviate the need for the original texts of Galen’s books and save one the trouble of [reading] the digressions and superfluous material which the latter contain.”¹⁰⁰ Other traditions also attribute the need for this abridgement to the laziness of students.¹⁰¹

Teachers throughout time have echoed these complaints about student laziness, but, when taken together, the late-sixth and early-seventh-century philosophical and medical evidence in both Greek and Syriac suggests an intellectual world in which student impatience and lack of interest progressively constricted teaching curricula. It has been argued that these two phenomena are linked and that the consolidation of the medical curriculum caused a similar compression of the

⁹⁸ On these Syriac commentators see Brock, in Garsoian, *East* 17–34. Especially indicative of this is the list of Syriac translations and commentaries published by S. Brock, “The Syriac Commentary Tradition,” in C. Burnett (ed.), *Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts: The Syriac, Arabic, and Medieval Latin Traditions* (London 1993) 3–18.

⁹⁹ Brock, in Burnett, *Glosses* 9, 11–12. This interest may be connected with the use of Aristotelian logic by teachers at the School of Nisibis: Brock, in Garsoian, *East* 21–22 n.42, and A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (Louvain 1965) 104–105.

¹⁰⁰ This is the tradition of Abū-l-Farağ ibn-Hindū, *Miftāḥ at-Ṭibb* p. 63.13–15. The translation is that of Gutas, *Documenti e studi* 10 (1999) 171.

¹⁰¹ E.g. ar-Ruhāwī *Adab at-tabīb* 193–194; on this and other manifestations of the tradition see Gutas, *Documenti e studi* 10 (1999) 169–174.

philosophical curriculum.¹⁰² This may well be true, but the effect of this development is significant. The teaching of Plato, in any extensive or programmatic fashion, seems to stop in the late sixth or early seventh century. Though some degree of engagement with Platonic philosophy can still be seen in scattered materials like the seventh-century Syriac translation of Philoponus' *Contra Aristotelem* and Severus of Nisibis' superficial allusion to Plato's *Timaeus*, this may well be the product of sporadic extra-curricular study.¹⁰³

The decreasing familiarity with Platonic thought can be seen particularly clearly in a Syriac Christian polemic written ca. 600 against "the uncircumcised Harrānians."¹⁰⁴ This document attempts to convert Harrānian pagans by laying out "testimonia from certain wise men and philosophers who belong to the same religion as you ... so that you will be totally without excuse and stand condemned for not even believing those who belong to your own tradition and are authorities for your own religious beliefs."¹⁰⁵ The authorities cited include pagan philosophers such as Plato, Porphyry, and Plotinus as well as figures like Orpheus and Sophocles. The placement of philosophers among these authoritative figures suggests that philosophy remained a respected activity in Harrān. It also may imply that philosophy was, in some form, connected to religious authority in the city. The document also reveals a Syrian Christian author who had a basic awareness of philosophical ideas and their importance. There is, however, no sign of genuine engagement with the Platonic tradition on the part of the author. There is also no evident expectation that his Harrānian audience would have any significant Platonic back-

¹⁰² M. Roueché, *BIGS* 43 (1999) 169.

¹⁰³ The seventh-century manuscript with Philoponus' text is Add. 17 214 in the British Library. See C. Wildberg, "Prolegomena to the Study of Philoponus' *Contra Aristotelem*," in Sorabji, *Philoponus* 197–209, esp. 198–200. On Severus of Nisibis see Brock, in Burnett, *Glosses* 24.

¹⁰⁴ See S. Brock, "A Syriac Collection of Prophecies of the Pagan Philosophers," *OrLouvPer* 14 (1983) 203–246 (repr. *Studies in Syriac Christianity* [Ashgate 1992] VII).

¹⁰⁵ Transl. Brock, *OrLouvPer* 14 (1983) 227.

ground. The work itself is a derivative one filled with unimpressive philosophical miscellanies and characterized by a strong textual relationship to the Greek *Theosophy*.¹⁰⁶ It too looks like the product of this handbook-based intellectual culture.

The polemic against the “uncircumcised Harrānians” then fits quite neatly into the intellectual world of the early seventh century. It is the product of an environment that found value in Platonic philosophy, recognized the importance of Plato as a wise man, but did not expect any direct engagement with Platonic texts. This seems to be the result of the trend towards intellectual streamlining that was common to both philosophical and medical teaching in the late sixth century. Apparently, it managed to collapse the Neoplatonic curriculum into a manageable, unverbose, utilitarian form. Eventually this handy philosophical curriculum may have blended with the Aristotelian elements of the medical curriculum. But even if it did not, it is unlikely that full-time philosophical teaching could survive such scholastic trends. Limited as Neoplatonism was by these circumstances, it is doubtful that even a renewed Academy could have enabled it to thrive in the seventh century.

The changed world of the late sixth and early seventh centuries should not figure in our analysis of the 530s. In 532 Damascius and his philosophical associates returned to a Roman world that contained many functional pagan communities and remained interested in conventional philosophical teaching. Though introductory handbooks outlining Platonic and Aristotelian teaching appear to have been composed by Ammonius in the early sixth century,¹⁰⁷ their dominance in dictating the limits of teaching had yet to be felt. Indeed, the intellectual and social environment to which the philosophers returned was more similar to the vibrant, diverse fourth-century philosophical world described by Eunapius than it would be to the intellectually compact Roman Empire of the seventh century. One must then recognize that the philosophers’ behavior would have been shaped more by an understand-

¹⁰⁶ These textual relationships are explored in much more detail by Brock, *OrLovPer* 14 (1983) 203–210.

¹⁰⁷ Wildberg, *Hermathena* 149 (1990) 34–37.

ing of these past precedents than by the expectation of a bleak future. If, as seems most likely, Damascius, Simplicius, and their associates dissolved their circle and went their separate ways upon their return, they likely did so without any suspicion that this would someday be marked as the end of Classical Philosophy. That it has often been so marked is probably more a failure of our imagination than an indictment of the era.

February, 2005

Department of History
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405
ejwatts@indiana.edu