

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
FACULDADE DE LETRAS
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

Tomaz Pedrosa de Tassis

**Historical Experience and Mysticism in The Philosophical History of
Damascius**

Belo Horizonte

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Abstract

The *Philosophical History*, a historical and biographical text written in the 6th century CE by the Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius (c. 458/462 – c. 540), also known in the scholarship as *Life of Isidore*, has come down to us in a fragmentary state. The extant material contains many descriptions of philosophers and mystics attaining mental states that can be described as altered states of consciousness, besides observations of miraculous powers and states that can be defined as analogous to deification. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate a relationship between the “decadence” of the pagan world perceived by Damascius and the phenomenon of mysticism, articulating the mystical sensibility as a response to the collapse of historical structures and world-images (myths, religions, rituals). In order to do that, I will analyze some literary motifs present in the text, like the Iamblichean doctrines of embodiment pervasive in the *Philosophical History*, the so-called “story of Paralius”, related in the *Life of Severus* by Zachariah of Mytilene and mirrored in the *Philosophical History*, and the use by Damascius of Hermetic and Egyptian literary *topoi* about the fall of Egypt and their relation with a cyclical philosophy of history reminiscent of the “Great Year Myth”. In the last chapter, those stories of decay and pagan liminality will be shown to be constitutive of the experiences that led pagan mystics in the 5th and 6th centuries to search for an absorption into the divine (θεοκρασία). As a concluding remark, I will articulate the picture of Damascius, Isidore and “pagan” mystics and thinkers in the *Philosophical History* as that of pagan holy men engaged in a constant search for a type of religious experience that was waning in the Christianized Byzantine Empire.

Keywords: Damascius; Theurgy; Mysticism; Philosophy of History

Resumo

A História Filosófica, um texto histórico e biográfico escrito no século VI d.C. pelo filósofo neoplatônico Damáscio (c. 458/462 – c. 540), também conhecido nos estudos como Vida de Isidoro, chegou até nós em um estado fragmentário. O material existente contém muitas descrições de filósofos e místicos atingindo estados mentais que podem ser descritos como estados alterados de consciência, além de observações de poderes milagrosos e estados que podem ser definidos como análogos à deificação. O objetivo deste estudo é demonstrar uma relação entre a "decadência" do mundo pagão percebida por Damáscio e o fenômeno do misticismo, articulando a sensibilidade mística como resposta ao colapso das estruturas históricas e das imagens de mundo (mitos, religiões, rituais). Para isso, analisarei alguns motivos literários presentes no texto, como a doutrina jambliqueana da corporificação presente na História Filosófica, a chamada “estória de Paralio”, relatada na Vida de Severo de Zacarias Retórico e espelhada na História Filosófica, e o uso por Damáscio de *topoi* literários herméticos e egípcios sobre a queda do Egito e sua relação com uma filosofia cíclica da história que lembra o "Mito do Grande Ano". No último capítulo, essas histórias de decadência e marginalidade pagã serão mostradas como constitutivas das experiências que levaram os místicos pagãos nos séculos V e VI a buscar uma absorção no divino (θεοκρασία). Como observação final, articularei a imagem de Damáscio, Isidoro e dos místicos e pensadores “pagãos” da História Filosófica como a de homens santos pagãos engajados em uma busca constante por um tipo de experiência religiosa que estava em declínio no Império Bizantino cristianizado.

Palavras-Chave: Damáscio; Teurgia; Misticismo; Filosofia da História

οὐ γὰρ ἐφικτὰ τὰ θεῖα βροτοῖς τοῖς σῶμα νοοῦσιν,
ἀλλ' ὅσσοι γυμνήτες ἄνω σπεύδουσι πρὸς ὕψος.

Chaldean Oracles, fr. 116 (É. des Places)

Intelligence flourishes only in the ages when beliefs wither, when their articles and their precepts slacken, when their rules collapse. Every period's ending is the mind's paradise, for the mind regains its play and its whims only within an organism in utter dissolution. The man who has the misfortune to belong to a period of creation and fecundity suffers its limitations and its ruts; slave of a unilateral vision, he is enclosed within a limited horizon.

E.M. Cioran

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Appendix III: Preliminary Portuguese Translation of the Proemium

I. 1-4

Abbreviations

Asc. – *Asclepius* (Λόγος Τέλειος)

Bib. – Photius. *Bibliotheca*.

CH – *Corpus Hermeticum*

CP – Damascius. *Commentary on the Parmenides*

Crit. – Plato. *Critias*

C-W – Damascius. *Traité des premiers principes*. Translated by J. Combès. Edited by L. G. Westerink

DA – Iamblichus. *De Anima*

DELG – Chantraine, P. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots*.

DK – Diels, H., and W. Kranz. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*

DM – Iamblichus. *De Mysteriis*

De. Princ. – Damascius. *Problems and Solutions on First Principles*

DPC – Proclus. *De Philosophia Chaldaica*

DSM – Proclus. *De Sacrificio et Magia*

Egpt. – Fowden. *The Egyptian Hermes*

Enn. – Plotinus. *Enneads*

ET – Proclus. *The Elements of Theology*

In. Crat – Proclus. *Commentary on the Cratylus*

In Phaed. – Damascius. *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*

In Phil. – Damascius. *Lectures on the Philebus*

LSJ – Liddell-Scott-Jones. *Greek-English Lexicon*

Marc. Gr. – Marcianus Graecus

Op. – Hesiod. *Works and Days*

Or. Ch. – *Chaldean Oracles*

Phaed. – Plato. *Phaedrus*

PGM – *Papyri Graecae Magicae*

PH – Damascius. *The Philosophical History*

PS – Eunapius. *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists.*

PT – Proclus. *Platonic Theology*

Rep. – Plato. *Republic*

Rev. Festugière. *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*

SH – *Stobaei Hermetica*

Tim. – Plato. *Timaeus*

VI – Clemens Von Zintzen. *Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*

VP – Marinus. *Vita Procli* (Life of Proclus)

VS – Zacharias. *Vita Severi.*

Introduction

The interpretation of the *Philosophical History*, also known in the scholarship as *Life of Isidore*, is a difficult task. The work, as it came down to us, is fragmentary and the fragments are divided between quotations of the Byzantine patriarch Photius and the Suda. So far, two main reconstructions have been made: the one of Clemens Zintzen (1967), based on the German translation of Asmus (1910), with all the Greek fragments juxtaposed and Latin commentary by the editor, and the version of Polymnia Athanassiadi (1999) with Greek text and English translation alongside a substantial introduction and discussion of the scholarship about the fragments. Given the title of the present dissertation, it is clear that I am working mainly with Athanassiadi's hypothesis of reconstruction and edition, considering that while Zintzen's reconstruction is "one step closer to the evidence" it is far less readable¹. The *Suda* calls the work a "History of Philosophers" or *Philosophical History* rather than a sole biography of Isidore² and despite Photius claim that the work is a biography of Isidore, he himself claims that Damascius writes "not so much the Life of Isidore, as that of many other people"³.

The available text is far from being solely a hagiography of Damascius' master Isidore, as the biographies of Plotinus and Proclus by their disciples, and discusses a vast array of individuals and events, from Hypatia's death at the hands of the Christians to a supposed crisis of the Athenian school after the death of Proclus, with many mystical, theurgic and anthropological commentaries spanning between the descriptions of events. It could be said that those mystical and theurgic elements are part of a general interpretation made by Damascius on the state of affairs in a world in which everything seemed to be dissolving. Among the fragments one can find allusions to Hermetic apocalyptic writings and theories on cosmic cycles⁴. The structure of the work, in my opinion, is closer to a

¹ Athanassiadi tried to reconstruct the original text as much as possible, for that reason she synthesized in some fragments many sparse sources from Photius and the Suda, while Zintzen simply presents all the fragments as they appear in the sources. In this work, however, the number of the fragments will indicate the number given by Athanassiadi and when necessary, as in the case of fragments that she synthesized based on different sources, the fragment will be referred to its sources based on the *Vitae Isidori Reliquiae* of Zintzen. All the concordances between the versions of Athanassiadi and Zintzen are listed by Athanassiadi at the end of her edition. Cf. (1999a, p.385-403).

² (II, 3, 28).

³ (Bibl. Cod. 181. 18-19).

⁴ E.g. (*PH*, 36B and 36C).

book like the one of Eunapius on the lives of philosophers and sophists⁵, even though Damascius is touching in deeper and far more elaborate metaphysical themes⁶.

The general purpose of the work has been interpreted as a moral discourse on the six Neoplatonic virtues (natural, ethical, political, cathartic, paradigmatic and theurgic)⁷, a narrative about the soul's embodiment and release from the bonds of generation⁸, an *encomium* to the sanctity of the Hellenic religion⁹, a Neoplatonic anti-Christian philosophy of history¹⁰, a narrative on the anagogic function of the marvelous¹¹ and an exploration of mythic patterns related to the Neoplatonic cathartic virtue (“becoming a Bacchus”)¹². As recent research by T. Krulak¹³ has shown, Damascius had a particular way of interpreting theurgy¹⁴, a view in which the cultic aspects could be incorporated “without requiring performance”¹⁵.

The thesis behind this dissertation states that in the *Philosophical History* there is a sacred narrative about the relationship of philosophy, theurgy and mysticism intertwined with a description of the decline of the “historical order” or the pagan religion in the (Christian) times of Damascius. From the presentation of philosophy's origins among the Egyptians to the intrigues and schemes leading to the persecutions of 5th century Alexandria and Athens, Damascius is presenting a “cosmic history” that involves the descriptions of theurgic and ascetic techniques alongside altered states of consciousness and miraculous powers. The theurgic and mystical techniques are presented in the book as complementary ways for the contemporary humankind to overcome the “Typhonian age”

⁵ *Eunapii vitae sophistarum*. Ed. (Giangrande, J. Polygraphica, 1956.) It is likely that Damascius, a former professional rhetorician and member of the Neoplatonic milieu in Athens and Alexandria, would be familiar with works like the *PS* of Eunapius or the *Lives of Sophists* by Philostratus.

⁶ “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”. (Athanassiadi, 1993, p. 3).

⁷ (O’Meara, D. J, 2006, p. 74-90).

⁸ (Athanassiadi, 1999a, Introduction).

⁹ (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010, p. 10).

¹⁰ (Hoffmann, P. 2017, p. 737-775).

¹¹ (Napoli, V. 2018, p. 121-155).

¹² (Miles, G. 2018, p. 55–66).

¹³ (Philosophy, Ἱερατική, and the Damascian Dichotomy: Pursuing the Bacchic Ideal in the Sixth-Century Academy. In: *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017) 454–481).

¹⁴ Contrary to Krulak, I do not interpret theurgy as only being related to the rites of the *Chaldean Oracles*, all that Damascius subsumes under the guise of Ἱερατική is considered part of “theurgy” in the present text. The Neoplatonic philosophers often used those terms interchangeably. E.g. Proclus *De Sacr. et Mag.* or the *Platonic Theology*.

¹⁵ (*Ibid*, p. 456).

in which Damascius was living, like gifts of the gods for a Neoplatonic community doomed by the decline of philosophy and the spread of the Christian religion.

Interpreting the *Philosophical History* in the present moment, with the available sources, depends, of course, in a certain degree of speculative reasoning, considering the fragmentary state of the work, with a reliance on a particular ordering of the fragments. Luckily for my enterprise, it seems that both Athanassiadi and Zintzen seem to agree that the work started with the statement about the oldness of the Egyptians and the exegesis of the Osiris – Dionysus myth. Another problem is the fact that the text might have been corrupted or altered by the Byzantine commentators, especially on the aspects related to ritual, philosophical and mystical trends. Photius is somewhat critical of Damascius in his epitome of the *PH*, saying that the Syrian Platonist philosopher was “extremely impious”, also needing to be blamed for his “coward” and “malevolent” veiled comments against Christianity¹⁶. So, in any sense, all interpretations of the text are bound to that fragmentary state and to the fact that it has been transmitted by sources in general hostile to its author.

Additionally, the *Philosophical History* would be difficult in itself even if it had reached our times in complete form. The subjects discussed are elusive for people living in a culture in which philosophy is associated with being a professor in a university and “supernatural” realities are seen as fictions, a culture in which time is an irreversible linear order flowing from the past to the future with events being forever unredeemable. As noted by P. Hadot¹⁷, the gaps that we need to cross in order to reach ancient philosophical and literary texts are immense, we do not know much about the persons discussed, almost nothing of their sources and very little of their forms of living. At least not as much as we know about Hegel, Balzac, Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin. We can, at most, make educated guesses about the subjects at hand, trying to capture with our limited information the immense oceanic horizon that is lost through our mediated telescopes.

To complicate things further, the Neoplatonists were not very keen to a personalist view of history and historical events, much of what is discussed in their texts that might be signs of individual idiosyncrasies are in fact symbols, myths and *topoi* typical of the times. If we can at least guess, based on his writings, that Damascius was a very different man – with different sensibilities and spiritual inclinations – when compared to Porphyry or Iamblichus, we might never know how much of himself is revealed in his texts. Athanassiadi says that Damascius in the *Philosophical History* was something in between

¹⁶ (*Bibl. Cod* 181).

¹⁷ (1993, p. 17-18).

Ronald Syme and Marcel Proust¹⁸ for his generation while I think that if any comparison could be made, he is closer to being a curious encounter between the metaphysical sensibility of Mircea Eliade and the literary style of Emil Cioran.

The dissertation will be divided into two main parts, the first, with 4 chapters, will be called *Biography, History and Embodiment*. The second, with 3 chapters is named as *Cosmology, Prophecy and Religio Mentis*. In the first part, the dissertation will deal with the description of Damascius' times, his opinions and perceptions about some of his contemporaries and the fundamental doctrine behind Damascius' view of the mission of what modern historians call "pagan holy man" or "Neoplatonic saint": the Iamblichean theory of embodiment and its reflection in the *Philosophical History*.

Starting in the chapter 1 with biographical and historical information about Damascius' adventures with Isidore and Dorus, his diadochy, the journey to Persia after Justinian's edict of 529 and his near disappearance from historical records after 538 the text will be followed by the skepticism of Damascius towards the practical restoration of paganism. Some of his cosmological and philosophical corollaries will also be briefly discussed, including his related view of individuals like Anthemius, Marcellinus, Severus and Pamprepius. A very brief comparison of the *Philosophical History* with the contemporary Alexandrian Christian Monophysite text modernly known as *Theosophia Tubingensis* will be followed by a theoretical and historiographical discussion about the Iamblichean theory of embodiment and how the mission of the pagan holy man Isidore in the *Philosophical History* can be interpreted as a countercultural or liminal activity.

The first part will be closed by a comparative analysis of the stories surrounding the philosopher Asclepiodotus and his barren wife, both in Damascius and the *Life of Severus*, by Zachariah of Mytilene. The purpose of such comparison is to contrast Damascius and Zachariah regarding the events happened in Alexandria at the end of the 5th century and to show the opposite Christian and pagan views. That chapter will conclude with the destruction of the temple of Isis at Menouthis and will be a key to demonstrate the Christian "demythologization" of the pagan religious structures.

The second part will begin with a chapter on the Damascian claim of Egypt's prominence among all known peoples. I pretend to show that Damascius share with Iamblichus and the Hermetists a particular conception of the repetition of cosmogony as the fundamental aspect of mythical ritual and that the claim of the Egyptian origin for the

¹⁸ (1999a, p. 40-41).

hieratic art and the doctrines of the immortality of the soul are not merely historical descriptions: the rituals and sacred practices of the Egyptians are what made them the “oldest people” known. The “Egyptian Proemium” of the text will be analyzed as being part of a series of “romantic” literary *topoi* appropriated by Damascius from the Hermetists on the decadence and fall of cultures. The myth of Osiris discussed in the *Proemium* will be shown to be a typical Neoplatonic hermeneutic exercise based on correspondences with the Chaldean Oracles – in fact, Damascius is probably quoting a Chaldean Oracle in part of his interpretation – and an explanation of the world’s current decayed state in relation to the mystical and theurgical practices.

In such *topoi*, Egypt is the counterpart of the image of metaphysical order, an image that echoes the Hermetic Asclepius (Λόγος Τέλειος) and the *Korē Kosmou*, in opposition to the Christian empire as the image of the Typhonian time that needs to be overcome by the sacred arts and mystical ascents of the Platonic holy man¹⁹. The very important fragment 18, synthesized by Athanassiadi based on 2 citations of Photius and a larger passage of the Suda, will be discussed as a demonstration of a Neoplatonic philosophy of history that is based on discussions of Plato in the *Republic*, Hesiod’s narrative about the cosmic races and Hermetic doctrines found not only in the *Asclepius*, but also in the *Korē Kosmou* and other Hermetic treatises whose influence pervaded many of the available fragments of Damascius’ work. The discussion about the cycles of history opens the path to the discussion in the final chapter: the idea of the mysticism of pagan ascetics and holy men as a reaction against a perceived “decadence” or “setting sun” of the polytheistic Hellenic culture.

The last chapter will thus start with a discussion on the prophecies of Antoninus and Olympus on the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum, the fall of Egyptian sacred order and their meaning for a kind of a pagan “*religio mentis*” in post-Christian paganism. The interesting aspect of such visions and prophecies is the affirmation that despite the destruction of the temples and sacred places by the Christians, God was to be found inside oneself²⁰, not solely in the buildings and rocks that have been destroyed and vanished. The

¹⁹ “Damascius dealt with the marvelous 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”. (Athanassiadi, 1993, p. 8).

²⁰ E.g. Olympus’ claim that that “the symbols of religion are mere matter and that God is within”. Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1993, p. 14).

resonances of those ideas in the *Philosophical History* can be found in fragments like the foundational 4C and in the descriptions of Isidore's mystical capabilities²¹.

As a concluding remark, I plan to discuss how the initiatory journey of Damascius with Isidore, and the *Philosophical History* as a literary genre in its own, reflect the shifting isolation and sense of abandonment of the pagan holy man in the 5th and 6th centuries. In a world shared with Christians and in which all of the pagan sacred geography and locative religious organization was dissolving, the pagan holy man was almost a romantic philosopher-poet dislocated from the world, a nostalgic trying to transcend history and time with his manipulation of symbols, myths and mystical experiences. The “liminal experience” of the Neoplatonic pagan holy man is the testimony to the dissolution and reconstruction of the *épistème* or regime of historicity from the “polytheistic” mythic tradition to the Christian historiological theophany.

All Greek translations of the *Philosophical History* in the body of the text are mine, except when expressly noted. I based myself mostly in Athanassiadi's translations, but I also consulted the German translation of Asmus and other scattered translations in articles and specialized books. Any mistakes and problems are my own responsibility. Following Athanassiadi, I left in italics the passages in Greek in which the excerptor – either Photius or the anonymous doxographer of the Suda – is probably commenting on the text of Damascius. Contrary to Athanassiadi, I included those passages in my translation. In some few passages I also used the “original” fragments as collected by Zintzen rather than Athanassiadi's edition, notably in her fragment 18 and other synthesized fragments in which the Greek text is not identical through all sources. To other translations from Greek and Latin I mostly used the most recent or standard edition published in English or other modern vernacular languages. Where no translation is indicated, it is my own. When two or more standard editions exist, I chose the most recent or the one which the availability was more immediate.

²¹ E.g. 9A, B, C, D, E, F, 10A and B and also in the important fragments 135B and 138.

Theory and Philology

I would like to begin the considerations of the theoretical and philological perspective behind this work with a double quotation. The first has its roots in a brutal encounter between a maiden and a god, in a story told by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and beautifully recounted by Adluri and Bagchee in their criticism of German philology called “*The Nay Science*”²². The Greek legend tells us about Orithuia, the daughter of the Athenian king Erechtheus. In her child play with friends near the borders of the Ilissus, she is captured by the North Wind, Boreas. In a conversation near the river, Phaedrus asks Socrates if he believes in the myth²³. His response unfolds as follows²⁴:

Σωκράτης

ἀλλ’ εἰ ἀπιστοίην, ὥσπερ οἱ σοφοί, οὐκ ἂν ἄτοπος εἶην, εἶτα σοφίζόμενος φαίην αὐτὴν πνεῦμα Βορέου κατὰ τῶν πλησίον πετρῶν σὺν Φαρμακείᾳ παίζουσαν ὥσαι, καὶ οὕτω δὴ τελευτήσασαν λεχθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ Βορέου ἀνάρπαστον [229d] γεγονέναι--ἢ ἐξ Ἀρείου πάγου· λέγεται γὰρ αὖ καὶ οὗτος ὁ λόγος, ὡς ἐκεῖθεν ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐνθένδε ἠρπάσθη. ἐγὼ δέ, ὦ Φαῖδρε, ἄλλως μὲν τὰ τοιαῦτα χαρίεντα ἡγοῦμαι, λίαν δὲ δεινοῦ καὶ ἐπιπόνου καὶ οὐ πάνυ εὐτυχοῦς ἀνδρός, κατ’ ἄλλο μὲν οὐδέν, ὅτι δ’ αὐτῷ ἀνάγκη μετὰ τοῦτο τὸ τῶν Ἴπποκενταύρων εἶδος ἐπανορθοῦσθαι, καὶ αὖθις τὸ τῆς Χιμαίρας, καὶ ἐπιρρεῖ δὲ ὄχλος τοιούτων Γοργόνων καὶ Πηγάσων καὶ [229e] ἄλλων ἀμηχάνων πλήθη τε καὶ ἀτοπίαι τερατολόγων τινῶν φύσεων· αἷς εἴ τις ἀπιστῶν προσβιβᾶ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἕκαστον, ἅτε ἀγροίκῳ τινὶ σοφία χρώμενος, πολλῆς αὐτῷ σχολῆς δεήσει. ἐμοὶ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὰ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶ σχολή· τὸ δὲ αἴτιον, ὦ φίλε, τούτου τόδε. οὐ δύναμαί πω κατὰ τὸ Δελφικὸν γράμμα γινῶναι ἑμαυτόν· γελοῖον δὴ μοι φαίνεται [230a] τοῦτο εἶτι ἀγνοοῦντα τὰ ἀλλότρια σκοπεῖν. ὅθεν δὴ χαίρειν ἔασας ταῦτα, πειθόμενος δὲ τῷ νομιζομένῳ περὶ αὐτῶν, ὃ νυνδὴ ἔλεγον, σκοπῶ οὐ ταῦτα ἀλλ’ ἑμαυτόν, εἴτε τι θηρίον ὄν τυγχάνω Τυφῶνος πολυπλοκώτερον καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπιτεθυμμένον, εἴτε ἡμερώτερόν τε καὶ

²² (*The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*. Oxford University Press, 2014, p. xi-xvi).

²³ (*Phaedrus*, 229a-c).

²⁴ (*Ibid.* 229c-230a).

ἀπλούστερον ζῶον, θείας τινὸς καὶ ἀτύφου
μοίρας φύσει μετέχον. ἀτάρ, ὦ ἑταῖρε, μεταξὺ
τῶν λόγων, ἄρ' οὐ τόδε ἦν τὸ δένδρον ἐφ' ὅπερ
ἦγες ἡμᾶς;

SOCRATES: Actually, it would not be out of place for me to reject it, as our intellectuals do. I could then tell a clever story: I could claim that a gust of North Wind blew her over the rocks where she was playing with Pharmaceia; and once she was killed that way people said she had been carried off by Boreas—or was it, perhaps, from Areopagus? The story is also told that she was carried away from there instead. Now, Phaedrus, such explanations are amusing enough, but they are a job for a man I cannot envy at all. He'd have to be far too ingenious, and work too hard—mainly because after that he will have to go on and give a rational account of the form of Hippocentaurs, and then of the Chimera; and a whole flood of Gorgons and Pegasuses and other monsters, in large numbers and absurd forms, will overwhelm him. Anyone who does not believe in them, who wants to explain them away and make them plausible by means of some sort of rough ingenuity, will need a great deal of time. But I have no time for such things; and the reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was saying, I look not into them but into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature? But look, my friend—while we were talking, haven't we reached the tree you were taking us to? (Transl. Nehamas and Woodruff).

For Adluri and Bagchee, “Socrates’ answer complicates the violent simplicity of Phaedrus’ question”²⁵.

The young Phaedrus was someone banned from Athens due to his impiety and profanation of the mysteries²⁶, he is a distant echo of the modern intellectual with his

²⁵ (p. xii.)

propensity to disregard the realities of any “mythical narrative”. While the specific quarrel of Adluri/Bagchee with modern philology is not necessarily shared by my work, the position of Socrates outlined by them is a guideline.

But before discussing all of those things, let me introduce the second quotation, an advice that comes from the inner depths of the object being studied²⁷:

ὥς ἔγωγε ἐνίοις ἤδη περιτετύχηκα τὰ μὲν ἔξω φιλοσοφοῦσι λαμπρῶς ἐν τε μνήμη βαθείᾳ πολλῶν δοξασμάτων καὶ ἐν ἀγχιστρόφῳ δεινότητι συλλογισμῶν ἀπεράντων καὶ ἐν δυνάμει συχνῆ δαιμονίας αἰσθήσεως, εἴσω δὲ τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀποροῦσι καὶ πενομένοις ἀληθοῦς ἐπιστήμης.

Thus, for my part, I have met some persons who philosophize splendidly in their rich memory of many theories and rapidness of impressive syllogisms; in the frequent might of their marvelous perceptions. But within their souls are poor and look away from true knowledge.

Damascius mobilizes a philosophical vocabulary here (ἀληθής, ἐπιστήμη, δύναμις etc.) in order to contrapose those that are “rich in knowledge” and dominate the most variegated syllogisms with the pagan holy man Isidore, his master, described in a long sentence before in that same fragment as someone with only average capabilities of memory, imagination and “moderately acute senses”. In terms of Neoplatonic biographies, that passage contrasts with the biography of Proclus by Marinus, a text in which the Lycian philosopher and theurgist is described as having superhuman memory²⁸. It is not my focus in this text, of course, to focus on the differences between Isidore and Proclus, but to illustrate a theoretical point about my reading of the *Philosophical History*: the primacy of experience, of the journeys and matters of the soul in contrast with the development of philosophical and theological theories. If Damascius is not lacking in rigorous aporetic considerations, as

²⁶ “Phaedrus, although young, beautiful, and a lover of *logoi* (i.e., semiscientific speeches on various matters), participated in the profanation of the mysteries and mocked the soteriological hope of the Athenians. It is to such an iconoclast, exiled for this reckless act, that Socrates is addressing his speech. Orithuia is a stand-in for Persephone, albeit lacking the goddess’s soteriological hope: she is a mortal who simply dies. In the game of philology, matters of life and death hang in a balance. With the technical skill in reading texts comes the awesome responsibility to consider the mortal, philosophical, and ethical ramifications of actions.” *Ibid.*

²⁷ (*PH*, 14.)

²⁸ (*VP*. 4, 5, 20.)

his treatises on First Principles and commentaries to Plato testify, the primacy here is clearly the spiritual experience.

One could say that Damascius is making a wordplay between the mythical λήθη (forgetting) that unfortunately affects Isidore as a sign of his imperfect human life²⁹ and ἀλήθεια, often understood as the Greek word for truth³⁰, that is manifested here in his search for a true knowledge (ἀληθῆς ἐπιστήμη). The tradition of interpreting the words and their meaning in classical philology as a *synchronic* system has a deep history and for a term such as ἀλήθεια we would need e.g. to consult the volume of Levet on the meaning of the words in the archaic period³¹. Then it would be necessary to search for historical studies, like the one by Marcel Detienne, on the relationship between truth and poetry in Archaic Greece³². Greek philosophy obviously emerges³² from non-philosophical contexts, so etymology and the shifting meaning of words would be an undeniable addition to our knowledge about that word. Only the discussion about what constitutes “true knowledge” in the field of Greek philosophy would lead us to the aforementioned studies and also to Plato³³, Heidegger³⁴, Paul Friedländer³⁵, etymological dictionaries, Hellenistic Philosophy, Plutarch etc.

And that’s not even the beginning without searching for the meaning of ἐπιστήμη, a very important word in Plato. It would be a long journey in order to understand the linguistic constitution of “true knowledge” from Archaic Greece to the Byzantine Empire in the time of Damascius. But then we would be talking about the Greek language in itself as a closed system, rather than about the late antique world.

²⁹ That word appears in the preceding passage, where it is argued that God wanted to present Isidore as a soul alone, rather than body and soul: αἱ δὲ γε αἰσθήσεις μετρίως αὐτῷ δέκονται πρὸς μόνην ὑπηρετοῦσαι τὴν χρείαν, καὶ οὐχὶ αἱ αἰσθήσεις μόναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ κήρινον ἐκμαγεῖον, ἢ φαντασία, οὔτε πρὸς μνήμην τι τῶν πολλῶν διαφέρουσα καὶ τῆς λήθης οὐ τὸ παράπαν ἀπηλλαγμένη. καὶ γὰρ ἠβουλήθη αὐτὸν ὁ θεός, ὡς ἔοικε, ψυχὴν μᾶλλον ὄντα ἐπιδειξάι ἢ τὸ συναμφοτέρον μετὰ τοῦ σώματος, καὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν οὐ τῷ συναμφοτέρῳ ἐναποθεῖναι, ἀλλὰ αὐτῇ μόνῃ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐνιδρῦσαι.

³⁰“Aletheia is the most important Greek counterpart of our ‘truth’; alethes (true), alethos (truly) and alethein (to speak the truth) are related words. However, the Greek “truth-family” is much more comprehensive and consists of 14 words, among others (adjectives): *atrekes*, *nemertes*, *adolos*, *ortos*, *apseudos*, *etymos* and *etetymos*. It is characteristic that several words, including aletheia also, belonging to this variety begin with ‘a’. The most common interpretation of this lexical phenomenon is to consider ‘a’ as a sign of privativum, that is, as a negative noun or adjective. This understanding of aletheia was proposed by Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, Olimpiodoros and the so-called *Lexicon Gudianum* in antiquity” (Wolénski, 2003, p. 341).

³¹ (*Le vrai et le faux dans la pensée grecque archaïque*. Etude de vocabulaire; Tome I: Présentation générale. Le vrai et le faux dans les épopées homériques. Belles Lettres, 1976.)

³²(*The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*. Zone Books, 1999. Transl. Janet Lloyd.)

³³ (*Rep.* 515c and 515d.)

³⁴(*Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit, Geistige Überlieferung* 2, 1940, p. 96–124.)

³⁵ (*Platon: Seinswahrheit und Lebenswirklichkeit*, 3 vols., Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1954.)

The section just quoted of the *Philosophical History* is also quoted by Garth Fowden in his historical study of the “pagan holy man” in the late antique world³⁶. What Fowden is pointing is that simply reading Plato with the Neoplatonists as a modern philosopher and his theories as propositions that might be argued for or against in the sense of secular modern university is to lose a fundamental aspect of the Neoplatonic *milieu*: that of a religious movement in which the study of philosophy was a preparation for deification³⁷. To search what Damascius calls true knowledge it is necessary first and foremost to go beyond internalist linguistic analysis and understand him in his late Roman or early Byzantine world in Alexandria and Athens. A space inhabited by Christian Monophysites, Chalcedonians, Crypto-Pagans, international travelers from all over the world, Neoplatonist philosophers, Hermetists, senators, magicians and nomadic populations such as the Germanic tribes, the Asiatic Huns or the Nubian Blemmyes that sometimes reached the borders of the known world (οἰκουμένη)³⁸.

Language and etymology can be wonderful working tools, of course, but I do not see how going back to Hesiod, Pindar, Homer or even Plato could shed light on the *experience* that is sought here in the *Philosophical History*. From a self-confident pagan world that did not even know it was “pagan” to a reality in which every temple was crumbling, psychological and religious sensibilities changed radically³⁹. Paganism had to be *invented, crafted and propagandized* by the adepts of a certain view of reality⁴⁰. A Greek in the 6th or 3rd century BCE could never know anything about paganism, his “religious” sensibilities were just the way of the gods, the way things were and always have been. The rites regulated the social life and despite significant strife between certain philosophical schools and the adepts of the traditional religions, the whole order of the divine rites remained stable for centuries. The priests of Eleusis in the time of Plato could never imagine that their cult was going to be destroyed one day, that men in black robes, assisted by barbarians from the North, would transform the sanctuaries into mere rocks and ashes.

³⁶ (The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society, p. 36. In: The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 102. 1982).

³⁷ “Reflection on theological and philosophical truths was indeed widely accepted as a prerequisite of divinization.” (Ibid. p. 35)

³⁸ Cf. (Athanasiasiadi, 1993, p. 18).

³⁹ The thesis that “paganism” was born out of the confrontation between traditional religions and Christianity has been defended by historians such as O’Donnell (2015, p. 191-201) and Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013, p. 13).

⁴⁰ “Neoplatonism is at first an innovative part of a publicly accepted religious scene with its public rituals which it can adopt or criticise; progressive marginalisation and gradual repression of pagan traditions turns the philosophical schools into religiously isolated close-knit networks of intellectuals trying to cope with these transformations and to uphold and intellectually support paganism as they understand and largely create it.” (Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013, p. 13.)

Some words have shifted their meanings from Plato to Damascius⁴¹. The classical πολιτεία, in the sense of political regime or “political constitution”, could also be understood in Late Antiquity as “way of life”⁴² in the sense not very dissimilar of what we would modernly call by the German word “*Kultur*” or even the Iberian “*cultura*”. The omnipresent λόγος, a term with more than 100 entries in the LSJ, Bailly and Pape, might have shifted significantly in meaning from Plato to the Neoplatonists, in fact it might even have meant something like “holy word” or magical formula depending on the context⁴³. A synchronic understanding of the text of Damascius in linguistic and philosophical terms would be very valuable, but that is only a part of what I am pretending in this work. I am planning to discuss an experience and to unfold a narrative based on that experience.

So I could say, in an attempt of demonstration, that what Damascius calls “true knowledge” might be more related to a typical late antique trend – in continuation of certain Hellenistic worldviews – of finding expression in an individual and private experience of the divine, an “utopian” search for personal salvation and related soteriological aims⁴⁴. That is a phenomenon that has been described by the historiography through the historical analysis of documents, worldviews and even material culture. The Greek philosophical and literary tradition, in that sense, is not understood as a closed system in which any element refers to one another, but as a dynamic tradition that is constantly in change through its internal movements and interactions with other cultural systems⁴⁵.

The reader must be warned that what is being discussed in this work, like in the *Philosophical History* at large, is not only “philosophical doctrine”, with philological analysis of words and their place as arguments in the Greek philosophical tradition. While Damascius do make some observations about dialectics, ontology, cosmology and metaphysics, the narrative style of the work and its rhetorical construction as a “history” is far more related with the transformative aspects that the work might have had in the mind of the ideal reader than with proper “philosophical arguments” in the modern sense. Even in the ancient sense of philosophy, if it can be discussed, the *Philosophical History* is

⁴¹ Not all though. Van den Berg has discussed how e.g. the word φιλοσοφία maintained a very similar meaning in Late Antiquity as it had in the Classical period (2017, p. 149-150).

⁴² Cf. Athanassiadi (1999a, p. 97. n. 40) and Hoffmann (2017, p. 743-744). Also, the entry in G.H.W. Lampe. (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961, p. 1113-1114).

⁴³ Cf. (Fowden, 1993, p. 6).

⁴⁴ Cf. (J.Z. Smith. *The Map is not the Territory*, p. 138-142.)

⁴⁵ That is, in general, the approach of Radcliffe G. Edmonds to Ancient Greek culture and religion, a type of *bricolage* that is always reconstructing itself based on who is narrating a myth, a story or a series of propositions. Cf. 2009, p. 1-5.

constructed with a far more “entheastic” sense, to use a Platonic term engaged by Dirk Baltzly⁴⁶, than with a univocal argumentative purpose in mind. The text tells the life stories and *experiences* of many individuals related to the Platonic groups of Alexandria and Athens, but as is obvious by reading the fragments many of those individuals were also involved in traditional cults, “syncretic” practices and “esoteric currents”, like Hermetic, “magical” and theurgic traditions.

Regarding literary genre, as Athanassiadi observed⁴⁷, the *Philosophical History* is a world in itself. No other exemplar of Ancient Greek literature exhibits its curious mixture of history of philosophy, philosophical biography, philosophical enquiry, chronicle and mythological narrative. In many senses, this work of Damascius is a solitary literary gem in the vast corpus of the Greek language. At the same time, it marks a shift from the “ancient” literary tradition to the Byzantine medieval literature and has many characteristics of the literary genres known as *patria*⁴⁸ and *paradoxa*⁴⁹. At the same time that the *Philosophical History* has an ancestor in Numenius’ *On the dissension between the Academics and Plato*, it also has a relation with works like the Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights* and its narratological structure – characterized by a recontextualization of many oral stories in its author’s memory – might predate Marcel Proust. Photius, a reader that had access to the whole work, notes in his testimony that the work is characterized by interminable digression and eccentricity of structure, punctuated by a general grandiloquence⁵⁰.

Such unique literary work can be approached through many perspectives: linguistic analysis, history of the ideas, micro-history, anthropology, comparative literature, history of philosophy, symbolism or comparative mythology. A single fragment, e.g. the fragment

⁴⁶ Cf. His review for Emilie Kutash, *Ten Gifts of the Demiurge: Proclus on Plato's Timaeus*. London/New York: Bristol Classical Press, 2011. x, 309. <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2011/2011.08.16/>

⁴⁷ (1999a, p.39-40 and p. 58-60).

⁴⁸ “According to the definition offered by the Suda, the *patria* deal with aspects of popular culture in connection with particular cities or sites. In the work of Damascius, as in that of his younger contemporary Malalas, one finds foundation myths, descriptions of monuments (*ekphraseis*) and accounts of local customs and traditions. The reason for the inclusion of such material in a work like the *Philosophical History* is easily understood: if the awareness of change urged Damascius’ Christian contemporaries to try and preserve as much of the fabric of the past as they could, he himself had additional reasons for feeling that the tradition to which he belonged and had the mission to perpetuate “now stood on a razor’s edge”.” (*Ibid.* p. 59).

⁴⁹ “Closely linked with the late antique genre of *patria* is that of *paradoxa* with its double affiliation with the miracles of saints and with marvelous tales, both of which were to develop into major genres, capturing the medieval imagination in East and West. Damascius indeed produced an independent work of paradoxography which comprised 572 marvelous stories classified in four books according to their typology of the miraculous and the bizarre. In the *Philosophical History* we not only encounter miracles and monsters from the author’s personal experience, but we hear him relate fantastic stories, often in the style of the original narrator, and describe men and animals which refer us to the world of the *Thousand and One Nights*.” (*Ibid.* p. 59-60).

⁵⁰ Cf. (*Bib.*, 181. 50-80).

87 of Athanassiadi⁵¹, in which Damascius describes his mystical experience in a sacred cave of Apollo at Hierapolis and his dream of becoming the god Attis in that experience, can be approached as a symbolic description of ritual initiation or a metaphorical ingestion of possible psychoactive substances. The deadly vapors of the cave (θανάσιμος ἀναπνοή) being part of a ritual of initiation in which one needs to metaphysically “die” in order to reborn as a divinized being, in a shamanistic trance that reminds someone both of the rites of incubation described by Peter Kingsley in Archaic Greece⁵² and modern rituals of entheogenic groups like the *Santo Daimē* or the Carlos Castañeda type of entheogenic neo-shamanism, not to say of symbolic expressions of the cave as the primordial vagina and the κατάβασις of Damascius as a penetration into the mysteries of the Goddess through rites that might have universal significance⁵³.

The fragment can also induce questionings regarding the relationship between Damascius’ narrative in his society⁵⁴, the symbolic description of divine assimilation, its relation with Platonic philosophy and its literary language or possible antecessors in Greek literature in texts like Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* or the dreams of Aelius Aristides. One can even dream with Jorge Luis Borges that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic and speculative literature and approach the text, alongside other Damascian fragments, as a fantastic narrative of metaphysical significance, an inquisitive exercise in the Byzantine genre known as *paradoxa* that might have reappeared in modern times as the Borgesian highly intellectualized type of metaphysical tale leading to perplexity. In short, the possibilities of reading just that single fragment are innumerable.

All or most of those aspects will appear as footnotes or passing streams into the main river flowing from this text. But what I am aiming here is to approach the *Philosophical History* in a specific setting: its importance for a historical and anthropological inquiry into the shifting “historical” modes of narrativization and

⁵¹ This fragment and its lexicon will be analyzed in depth in the second part.

⁵² Cf. (*In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 1999, p. 87-116).

⁵³ Cf. (Duerr, 1985, p. 16-30). It would be unnecessary to point all of the occurrences of the κατάβασις mytheme in Greek and Latin culture, from Odysseus, passing to Castor and Pollux to Orpheus, Aeneas, Adonis and Psyche. Interestingly enough the account of Damascius might have some Neoplatonic recontextualizations of the myth of Attis, a reading that has echoes in other Neoplatonic writers like the Emperor Julian in his *Hymn to the Mother of Gods*. The fragment 87 will be discussed in the second part of the dissertation and is .

⁵⁴ It would not be out of place to apply the theories of “shamanic” continuity of the German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr (1985) or the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (1989) to the experience narrated by Damascius. The tension between morphology and history is inherent to the discussion of any religious phenomenon and the problem between continuity and radical sociological locality will continue to hover around for many years.

expression of religious sensibilities between the declining “pagan” historical existence⁵⁵ and the ascending “Magian” or Abrahamic way of contextualizing the symbolic world and the sphere of experience. In the literary history of Eric Auerbach or the “micro-history” of Carlo Ginzburg there is the idea, totally strange to classical philology or traditional histories of literature, that through an “accidental event, a single life, a passage taken randomly, one can attain a deeper knowledge of the whole.”⁵⁶ The stories of the *Philosophical History*, intertwined with descriptions of myth, cosmology and the doomed or illuminated lives of different philosophers, pagan priests and theurgists in its “transcendental prosopography”⁵⁷ can serve to illuminate a whole world, a way of life that was crumbling and at the same could be transcended by the inevitable optimism of the Damascian Neoplatonic cosmic philosophy with its emphasis in “holy rites for all and philosophy for the few”⁵⁸.

The way in which Plato or Pythagoras are presented in the text is much more akin to illuminated sages or gurus, instead of “rational” philosophers arguing over what is true or not⁵⁹:

ὅτι τῶν μὲν παλαιάτατα φιλοσοφούντων
Πυθαγόραν καὶ Πλάτωνα θειάζει, καὶ τῶν
ἐπτερωμένων ἐκείνων ψυχῶν εἶναι, αἱ εἰς τὸν
ὑπερουράνιον τόπον, εἰς τὸ πεδίον τῆς ἀληθείας,
εἰς τὸν λειμῶνα τῶν θείων νέμονται εἰδῶν

Among the ancient philosophers he worshipped
as divine [θειάζει] Pythagoras and Plato, and
those he considered winged souls that inhabited
in the supra-celestial regions, in the plain of truth,
in the garden of the divine forms.

⁵⁵ I do not think it is inaccurate to use the word “decline” in reference to the historical period of Damascius and neither of believing that “paganism” was clearly in decline from the 4th century to the 5th century after the Roman Empire became Christian. The narratives of “continuity” between the pre-Christian world and the Christianized Roman Empire by historians of Late Antiquity such as Peter Brown (1979) have interesting perspectives, but they are restrained mostly by their focus in the Christian religion as a central cultural aspect of Late Antiquity. I do agree with G.W. Bowersock observation that talking about a decline intrinsic to paganism might be incorrect, but there was a “forced decline” or persecution as Bowersock recognizes himself. Cf. (1990, p. xii-xii and p. 1-15). As noted by Athanassiadi (2015, p. xi): “Both Henri-Irenee Marrou and Peter Brown - the two gurus of late antique studies - have constructed their narrative of late antique change around the spread of Christianity, with St Augustine as their edifice's foundation stone.”

⁵⁶ Cf. (Ginzburg, 2007, p. 173).

⁵⁷ (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 39.)

⁵⁸ (*Ibid.* p. 40).

⁵⁹ *PH*, 34D.

Ἀλήθεια returns here, this time in the company of some characteristic words of the Platonic lexicon, like ὑπερουράνιον τόπον⁶⁰, the accusative form of ὑπερουράνιος τόπος (the place beyond the heavens), and the ultra-Platonic εἶδος (form) in its genitive plural form. The lexicon of the passage is essentially Platonic, but can we say the same of the experience? Is there any passage of Plato in which some *antecessor* of him is called a divinized being dwelling in the place beyond the heavens?⁶¹ Can the lexicon encapsulate something about experience or is it constantly being rearticulated by historical experience?⁶²

To a student of comparative religion, the passage of Damascius might resemble the descriptions of Yoga practitioners that attained the ontological status of the traditional gods of the Vedic and pre-Vedic Indian pantheon in a text like the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali⁶³. Plato and Pythagoras could be faced, in that sense, as enlightened souls that attained the states of the gods and came to the earth in order to enlighten mankind. However, both for the Neoplatonic and the Yogic metaphysical cosmologies, the place equivalent to the ὑπερουράνιος is not the final “destination” or Source of all, but a stage in which some Neoplatonists located the Intellect (νοῦς) of the three Plotinian hypostases and an even more complex location in the very intricate cosmological schemes of post-Plotinian Neoplatonists. That passage of Damascius is a rearticulation of the Platonic lexicon

⁶⁰ *Phaed.* 247b-c.

⁶¹ The concept of the θεῖος ἀνὴρ was widespread in the Hellenistic period and Hellenic philosophers like Pythagoras or Empedocles were seen as the paradigmatic holy men. The borders between the Hellenistic world and Late Antiquity are not well defined and historians like Athanassiadi (2010) and Chaniotis (2018) make an explicit historical link between the period started with the conquests of Alexander the Great and the world in which Damascius lived. As will be discussed in the end of this section, many cultural features of Late Antiquity are already expressed in the Hellenistic world, while the “residual” Hellenic (i.e. pagan) element was being increasingly purged as we approached the world of Heraclius, Mohamed and the fall of the Sassanid Empire. As will be seen, that is the general assumption that goes behind this dissertation: the world of Damascius and the *Philosophical History* experienced the last blow against the Hellenic θεῖος ἀνὴρ and the mental conceptualizations that allowed for his existence as a teaching and religious figure.

⁶² A very interesting contrast between the content of a Platonic dialogue and its Neoplatonic interpretation is exposed by Van den Berg in his aforementioned article on the concept of φιλοτιμία in Proclus and Damascius in relation with the first Alcibiades (p. 152): “the term φιλοτιμία occurs only once and without much emphasis in the entire dialogue (Plato Alc. 1, 122c7). It thus tells us more about what was on the minds of the late Neoplatonists than about the actual content of the Alcibiades itself. Secondly, the Neoplatonists apparently thought that the sentiment of φιλοτιμία could fulfil a useful role in the education of the young, provided that it was properly directed. This is at odds with Plato, who, for example in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*, regarded φιλοτιμία for the most part as an undesirable emotion.” Despite the centrality of the Platonic corpus, the way that the Neoplatonists approached the dialogues was often more telling of their own agendas than of Plato’s context and discussion.

⁶³ In the *Yogasūtra* there is a category of beings called *Videha* or *prakṛti-layas*. The former, according to Vācaspatimīśra (*Tattva-vaiśārādī*, 1.19, 3. 26), are beings that might have been *yogins* or gods and attained temporary liberty from the from the eternal becoming due to their ascensional yogic practices. The *prakṛti-layas* are beings that attained an even longer liberty from the material world due to abilities of control over the mind, ego and the senses. They became dissolved (*laya*) in the non-manifest essence of *prakṛti* (*avyakta*) what entails a temporary spiritual liberation and higher states of consciousness.

through the influence of the Iamblichean theories about the human soul, a theory that is not dissimilar to Buddhist and Yogic theories, as noted by Dillon and Finamore⁶⁴.

But beyond the comparison with Yoga, an Indian spiritual technology that *might* share a similar *synchronic* development with the philosophy of Damascius regarding the dissolution of traditional forms of worship in early urban India⁶⁵, there is the most obvious late antique historical setting. As noted by Athanassiadi in her introduction to the *Philosophical History*, in the world of Late Antiquity there was a growing trend of the master-disciple relationship and an emphasis on the superiority of intuition and divine inspiration. In short, the world of Damascius is already seeing the light – or darkness, depending on the perspective – of the historical period often known as the “Middle Ages”⁶⁶. So, despite the Platonic affiliation and lexicographical aspects, the world of Damascius’ *Philosophical History* is closer to the world of the *Life of Severus*, by Zachariah of Mytilene, than to the world of the Greek *polis* in which Pythagoras, Parmenides, Anaximander, Plato, Aristotle, the sophists, the lyric poets and the tragic poets thrived and lived. The Platonists of the 5th and 6th centuries lived in the ruins of the Greco-Roman civilization.

Athanassiadi also claims that the biography of Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, by Zachariah is a “mirror text” to the *Philosophical History* “as regards events in Alexandria”⁶⁷. Several of the individuals cited in Damascius also appear as characters in the *Vita Severi*, like Horapollo, Heraiscus, Asclepiodotus, Ammonius and Isidore himself, the latter being described by Zachariah as “an overt magician and troublemaker”⁶⁸. In the point of view of Christian writers, the Neoplatonists in Alexandria were deluded magicians and sorcerers that served demons through philosophy and could not perceive the Incarnation of the Holy Logos that transfigured human history⁶⁹.

The perspective of my dissertation is that the remaining pagans and the victorious Christians indeed shared a somewhat “unitary space” of general thought, but the *épistème*

⁶⁴ Cf. (2002, p. 17). In the third chapter I will elaborate further on the theories of embodiment.

⁶⁵ Cf. (Samuel, 2008, 41-61.)

⁶⁶ “We are at the dawn of the Middle Ages, when the main sources of knowledge are the Master and inspiration or divine intuition.” (1999a, p. 24).

⁶⁷ (*Ibid.* p. 21. n.6)

⁶⁸ VS, 22.

⁶⁹ The story of Asclepiodotus and his barren wife, a narrative that occupies a substantial portion of Zachariah’s work and is briefly alluded in Damascius, is the focal point of the 4th chapter. The objective is to contrast shifting pagan and Christian perspectives of the same event.

of the pagans, to use a term of Michel Foucault's historical analysis⁷⁰, was still reflective of certain prolongations of the previous "Greco-Roman" *Weltanschauung* rather than totally conformed by the "Abrahamic" infused mindset. What happens here is that the pressure exercised by Christianity into the psyche of the pagans was so strong that the self-definition of pagan thinkers started to assimilate many aspects of that persecution and became equally embittered. More than that, Platonism had become the common currency of pagan religion at that time. John Dillon usually included the revelatory literature of the Chaldean Oracles, Hermetism and Gnosticism in what he called "Platonic Underworld"⁷¹, but Athanassiadi claims, on the contrary, that this is not an underworld, rather the theological *koiné* of Late Antiquity⁷². Those are opposite perspectives, but the perspective behind my text is that pagan Platonism only became part of any kind of underworld after the reign of Theodosius I and the official persecution against pagans.

Additionally, the worldview of pagan Platonists was affected by the destruction of the traditional temples and places of worship, the persecution against their religious practices – rites of theurgy e.g. could be punished with death⁷³ – and transmutations of the traditional conceptions of divinity and religious practice. In the world of Damascius, Pythagoras and Plato are like *Avatāras* of the divine principles that descended upon the world to guide humanity. This is an aspect, as already noted, that has its origin with Iamblichus' doctrines of the differences between the classes of souls. Isidore in the

⁷⁰ "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *épistémè* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice." (1970 [1966], p. 183).

⁷¹ Cf. (1996, p. 390-394.)

⁷² Talking about the work of Hans Lewy, Athanassiadi comments: "he recognized the unity of late antique revelatory literature and understood the contemporary procedures which tended towards the formulation of a dogma based on the orthodox interpretation of a canon of sacred texts. The angels of whom the oracle speaks, and among whom Apollo counts himself, also belong to the theological *koiné* of the period and it would be idle to attempt to identify them as of Jewish or Gnostic, Chaldaean or Platonic origin. It is only worth pointing out that by this demotion of the old pantheon and its identification with mere angels, philosophic monotheism could accommodate tradition. We possess a number of oracles from this period by which cities and individual priests enquire about the hierarchical position of gods and the honours due to them. The answers are consistent with the new theology: a more spiritualized form of piety than the one associated with blood sacrifices is expected by the prophetic shrines. "I do not want hecatombs and golden colossi, but sweet songs" proclaims the Didymaeon Apollo in the third century, repeating more or less the injunction of Ammon to a delegation from Cyzicus a hundred years earlier. Rather than in a (Platonic Underworld', we are in a universal Platonic world, what I would label (the late antique spiritual Commonwealth', which by the time of Damascius stretches from southern Arabia to the Black Sea coast and from Carthage to Harran. As has been recently argued by G. Bowersock, in its sweeping move towards unity and universality, Hellenism delivered the ethnic minorities of the Roman world from their parochialism-cultural, religious, and linguistic. Moreover, by integrating into one pyramidal monotheistic structure their local gods through the complementary processes of syncretism and hierarchization, Hellenism prepared the ground for the reception of another monotheism, Islam, and, I would add, not only in its external, but mainly in its mystical dimension." Cf. (2015, p. 180-181.)

⁷³ Cf. (Bradbury, 1995, p. 331-356.)

Philosophical History is appointed as one of those higher souls that came to the “world of generation” (γένεσις) in order to guide mankind⁷⁴.

The holy man Isidore is described as someone that contemplated the truths revealed by sages like Plato and Pythagoras in the form of philosophy and his existential and mystical practices of merging with the Divine, having out of body and divinatory experiences are all related to his “philosophical” practices. Even “theoretical” works on Plato’s dialogues by authors like Iamblichus, Proclus and Damascius are engaged in harmonizing Plato with the Chaldean Oracles and/or with Hermetic, Orphic, Phoenician, Babylonian, Ancient Egyptian and other “theological” or mythic traditions⁷⁵. In a narrative text about experiences and acts like the *Philosophical History*, in which a large part of the events and actions have been transmitted by oral tradition⁷⁶, that aspect of going beyond argumentation towards “transformation” and beyond discursive thought towards mystical experience is even more pronounced⁷⁷. The text can be approached, and that is probably the closest we will get to its meaning, as a “historical document” rather than just as a proposition of philosophical arguments.

In this sense, what I am aiming here is inspired by historical essays like Dodds’ *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Fowden’s *The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society*, *The Egyptian Hermes and Empire to Commonwealth*, Chuvin’s *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, Bowersock’s *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* and Athanassiadi’s *La Lutte pour l’orthodoxie dans le platonisme tardif*. While I do engage with the word philosophy multiple times – Damascius was a philosopher after all – I do not pretend to evaluate

⁷⁴ *PH*, 5A, B, C.

⁷⁵ The bibliography on religious syncretism among the Neoplatonists is vast, but I believe that in 2024 there are two main tendencies: the first is the “monotheistic” view represented by e.g. Athanassiadi and Van Nuffelen (2011) and the second is the “neopagan” of the likes of T. Lankila (2016) and E. Butler (2008). The first view, that can be seen in general lines above (note 72), sees the religious transformations of Late Antiquity as following a path leading to Christianity and Islam, while the neopagan perspective defends “the thesis of a fundamental break between ancient religions and new universal religions which became prevalent at the end of late antiquity.” Cf. (Lankila, 2016, p. 147.) While I do believe that Neoplatonic was significantly different from the monotheistic Abrahamic religions, I see Neoplatonism as a kind of universalism and the syncretic element of Hellenism as the unifying element of pagan *paideia*.

⁷⁶ Cf. Watts, E. *Winning the Intracommunal Dialogues: Zacharias Scholasticus’ Life of Severus*, p. 454. In: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, January 1, 2005.

⁷⁷ In the extant Syriac translation of the *Vita Severi*, Zacharias often equates the practice of philosophy with the activities of monks from the anti-Chalcedonian monastery called ἔνατον – known in Arabic as Dayr al-Zujaj or Dayr al-Zajjaj – and says that nothing can be more philosophical than the ascetic contemplation towards God: “As through a sign from God, they both received the yoke of true philosophy from the great Salomon, who was at the time [15] the leader of those who devoted themselves to philosophy in that convent [Enaton]; he was a man of healthy soul and of splendid monastic virtue.” Sorcery and magic are also associated with the practice of philosophy, as Zacharias makes clear when talking about Asclepiodotus: “Asclepiodotus the Alexandrian, by exercising sorcery and magic, and making [17] invocations of demons, had taken the opportunity to become admired by the pagans through philosophy”. Transl. Ambjörn.

Damascius' contemporary relevance for modern philosophical debates or his position inside the Greek philosophical tradition. If in some occasions I venture into personal interpretations of Greek philosophical terms like ὄχημα or πολιτεία it is mostly done in order to illuminate particular historical processes. As much of Neoplatonism was immersed in religious discourse, it is as a theological-mythological work that I present my reading of the *Philosophical History*. The term “philosophy of history” used in some parts of this work would be better thought as a narrative about the historical process, its meaning and position in the space. Indeed, Damascius does not use the word history with the same connotation as modern works in the philosophy of history tradition, but a type of speculative philosophy of history can be delineated based on his narrative. The relation between his narrative about the function, genesis and structure of what is modernly known as “history” will be discussed through my inevitable imposition of contemporary terms and discussions. As Croce's well cited trope attests, all history is contemporary history⁷⁸.

In contrast to the cited works of Fowden, Athanassiadi or Bowersock, that are essayistic works developed through the examination of a series of sources from disparate historical periods in the Braudelian *longue durée*, what is aimed here is an inverted perspective. Departing from the microscopical perspective of the lives and events of a small sect of pagan intellectuals, ecstasies and religious leaders in a critical stage for pagans in Late Antiquity⁷⁹, I believe it is possible to propose a phenomenology of what was the psychological and spiritual experience of the “last pagan generation”⁸⁰ of philosophers and initiates. As such, this dissertation is also indebted to the historical perspective of Carlo Guinzburg (“micro-history”) and the literary history of Eric Auerbach, alongside studies on the relationship of shapes of time, the concept of history as an ontological category and cosmology by religious historians like Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z. Smith.

⁷⁸ Athanassiadi deliciously affirms, in addition to that famous historical trope, that “if all history is contemporary history, all theology is autobiographical.” (Cf. 1999b, p. 165.)

⁷⁹ Someone could even place the historical period about which Damascius wrote as the dawn of the Middle Ages, what paradoxically makes much of the content of the *Philosophical History* asynchronous or heterotopical in the terms of the Foucaultian *épistème* discussed above.

⁸⁰ Alan Cameron (1968) coined the expression “last pagan generation” in reference to the political history of Rome and the generation that was born before or immediately after Constantine became the first Christian Emperor of Rome. He was referring to people like the senator Symmachus and the last social group of pagans to live in Rome as pagans still hold some political power. In more recent years (2015), Edward Watts wrote released a book dealing with Cameron's arguments, among many other issues in the subject. The expression final pagan generation here means simply the last known practitioners of paganism in philosophical and intellectual circles.

One last and long observation is needed before returning to the *Phaedrus* quote. The definitions of Late Antiquity, “monotheism” and “paganism” could merit entire chapters in themselves. Narratives of continuity between the ancient Hellenic polytheistic world and the Christian or Islamic empires, like the ones exposed by Athanassiadi⁸¹ – that great giant of late Platonic historical studies – , have the merits of showing continuities and survivals. At the same time, they can be used to obfuscate the fundamental differences in theological and spiritual orientation between the “henotheistic” world of Platonism and the “monotheistic” world of the Christian Empire in terms of ontological and historical differences. In her elegant and beautifully written works, the Neoplatonists are the spiritual precursors of Islam or Orthodox Christianity, with their sacred book written in superb poetic language (the Chaldean Oracles) being the Neoplatonic precursor to the *Koran*⁸², and the confrontations between orthodox interpreters and heretics, peregrinations to sacred places of the martyrs and embittered fights for the correct interpretation of Plato and the Oracles the forerunner of the theological debates from the Middle Ages. In such a world, the dialectical argumentation of Plato has already vanished from the scene and we are left with religious mystics and initiates fighting over their own experience of spiritual ascent and its legitimacy.

As much as such view might be delineated with historiographical rigor and immense knowledge of the appropriate sources, it is a biased interpretation of the events and documents and, as professor Athanassiadi knows too well herself when she paraphrases the ‘truism’ of Croce⁸³, a very personal one⁸⁴. I might be interested in exploring another perspective: the historical discontinuities between the pagan Greek, Egyptian, Anatolian and Near Eastern elements in the writings of Damascius – in this text the *Philosophical History* – and the world in which he journeyed and thrived, the radical estrangement between the “pagan” view of Damascius and the world around him and how Damascius, Isidore, Heraiscus, Sarapio, Asclepiodotus and other pagan sages and holy men chronicled in the *Philosophical History* suffered from a kind of historical schizophrenia: a

⁸¹ ⁸¹ Cf. (1993, p. 3; 1999a, p 39-42; 1999b, p. 182; 2015, p. 271-278)

⁸² (1999b, p. 149 and p. 152, n. 14).

⁸³ (1999b, p. 165): “Before approaching Damascius however it is worth remembering that, if all history is contemporary history, all theology is autobiographical. To these truisms one should add the no less obvious statement that any holy book addresses itself to many levels of understanding and piety, and the Bible of the Neoplatonists with its poetic diction and metaphorical language does not constitute an exception to this rule.”

⁸⁴ It would be frivolous to develop in length how much of this text is indebted to Athanassiadi’s work. Just for taking her edition of Damascius’ text as the basis for my interpretation, I am already bound to Athanassiadi’s hypothesis of reconstruction and categorization of the text’s meaning. Her articles and books also provide a large share of information and inspiration for my enterprise even from a formal point of view. As it turns out, any mediocre or short-sighted interpretation is obviously my exclusive responsibility.

sense of radical dislocation of living in a world in which everything their spiritual ancestors believed was true was simply crumbling. It is for no other reason that Damascius starts the *Philosophical History* with a description of the holy and venerable order of the Egyptians⁸⁵, in a passage that has been selected by Fowden⁸⁶ as representative of the Hellenophone writer nostalgia for a world that has been transformed so much that it needed a litany for its death.

One generation before Damascius was born, Libanius, in a letter to the emperor Theodosius, wrote about the devastating effects of Christianity on the Roman countryside⁸⁷:

They [the monks] are spreading out like torrents across the countryside; and in ruining the temples, they are also ruining the countryside itself at one and the same time. For to snatch from a region the temple which protects it is like tearing out its eye, killing it, annihilating it. The temples are the very life of the countryside; around them are built houses and villages, in their shadow a succession of generations have been born up until the present day. It is in those temples that farmers have placed their hopes for themselves and their wives and children, for their oxen and for the ground they have sown or planted. A country region whose temple has been destroyed in this manner is lost, because the despairing villagers no longer have the will to work. It would be pointless to exert themselves, they think, because they have been deprived of the gods who made their labors prosper.

The oration of Libanius had no effect. The “torrents” of Christian monks continued destroying the temples to a point in which, by the time of Damascius, the main living repository of paganism was in nature rather than in the temple⁸⁸. Reading the text comparatively from our times, the *Philosophical History* does sound like a litany. As said by E.M. Cioran, the absolute lyricism is the lyricism of the hindmost moments.

⁸⁵ *PH*, 1-2.

⁸⁶ Cf. (1993 [1987], p. 74, n. 117).

⁸⁷ Quoted by Gregory Shaw in (*Theurgy and the Soul*, 2014, p. 1).

⁸⁸ The whole journey of Damascius and Isidore from Alexandria to Athens (mostly, but not solely, the fragments 132 to 144) testify that reality in a world in which the “locative” places of traditional sacred geography was being reconstituted in a vertiginous way.

In the sense of that quotation of Libanius, the use of the term *pagan* in reference to the followers of the traditional Greco-Roman, Egyptian and Near Eastern traditions might be justified. Historians and philologists often discussed how the term might be a pejorative designation for the polytheists, based on prejudices of supposedly Christian city dwellers against peasants following the traditional religions: “*paganus*, the root of “pagan” as well as “peasant,” is consistently pejorative and poses a curious semantic problem.”⁸⁹ Chuvin goes on and explains the problem⁹⁰:

As it turns out, the best documented meaning of *paganus* seems to be “peasant.” Urban Hellenes in the East would therefore have had country people as their counterparts in the West, which would indicate two separate evolutions. It does not seem likely, however, that cities were Christianized more rapidly in the Western Empire than in the Eastern Empire. The Roman Senate, a highly aristocratic assembly, counted among its members numerous pagans up to the end of the fourth century, long after the term *paganus*, in its religious meaning, had entered the legal vocabulary. There was also no dearth of pagan intellectuals in the West. What is true is that in the West, Christianity remained for a longer time a religion of foreigners. At the end of the second century in Lyon, the local church was still predominantly made up of Easterners whose language was Greek. Greek was also the language of papal epitaphs in Rome in the third century.

The German New Testament theologian Theodore Zahn, Chuvin continues to tell us, proposed to understand the meaning of *paganus* as “civilian” in opposition to military, because Christians often referred to themselves as “Soldiers of Christ”⁹¹. Asking himself how a word could have such a large semantic field (“peasant”, “civilian” and “pagan”), the French historian finally defines “pagans” as those who belong to a place or a *locus*. To be a pagan is to be someone belonging to a traditional order (e.g. an order of poets) or simply to be “people of the place” as the “town or country, who preserved their local

⁸⁹ Cf. (Chuvin, 1990, p. 7).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 7-8.

⁹¹ (1990, p. 8).

customs, whereas the *alieni*, the "people from elsewhere," were increasingly Christian."⁹²

The pagans were those that have been systematically disenfranchised from their "way of life" and that were trying in a somewhat schizophrenic and tragic way to preserve a legacy – imaginary or real⁹³:

It also fits the predilection of pagans in Late Antiquity for everything that belonged to the legacy of their ancestors, *patria* in Greek⁹⁴. It defines paganism as a religion of the homeland in its narrowest sense: the city and its outlying countryside. And it predicts the diversity of pagan practices and beliefs. In some cases the entrenchment of those beliefs was accompanied by a sophisticated metaphysics. For Proclus as for Ibn Arabi, "sites have an effect on sensitive hearts."

The prominence of the place, the centrality of the temple, frequently called ἔδος (sitting-place, foundation, base) by Damascius⁹⁵, was fundamental for the religious culture of the so-called pagans. The temple is the *axis mundi* through which the cosmos can be actualized and the divine is manifested in the world. Alongside the destruction of the temples one can see that in the world of Damascius those who followed the same traditions as him witnessed "the gradual loss of political power, the exclusion, the assimilation, and ultimately – however painful the term and the reality it expresses – their physical elimination."⁹⁶

This brief reflection on the meaning of "pagan" leads me back to the *Phaedrus* quote at the beginning. In a good portion of the *Philosophical History*, we are presented to an outlook in which "supernatural" experiences and a mythical narrative are unfolded in response to a problem. That problem, obviously, is the predominance in the world of the state of affairs represented – but not necessarily encapsulated – by the "partisans and companions of the foreign creed" (οἱ δὲ τῆς ἀλλοφύλου δόξης ἑταῖροι καὶ συστασιῶται.)⁹⁷ The usage of the adjective ἀλλόφῶλος in reference to the Christians seems to confirm

⁹² (*Ibid.* p. 9)

⁹³ (*Ibid.*)

⁹⁴ As noted above, the *Philosophical History* shares many of the characteristics of the Byzantine literary genre called *patria*, in the last chapter that literary aspect will be analyzed in conjunction with the experience of mysticism through the selection of specific ensembles of textual reference.

⁹⁵ Cf. Photius comment in the *PH*, 75A: ὅτι τὰ ἔδη καὶ ἐπὶ αὐτῶν λαμβάνει τῶν τεμενῶν, τάττεται δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγαλμάτων· λέγεται δὲ ἔδος καὶ τὸ ἔδαφος τοῦ νεώ.

⁹⁶ (*Ibid.*)

⁹⁷ *PH*, 78C.

Chuvin's words about the meaning of pagan as someone that "belongs" to a community, a society, an order⁹⁸. However, the order of society in which Damascius and his comrades lived, excluded them from its center, they had to search a center elsewhere. For the society of the Christianized Roman Empire, the "pagan holy man" was increasingly a marginal figure. An outcast, a countercultural existence. Once part of the shining elites in a world that many believed to exist eternally in relation to the One⁹⁹, the Neoplatonists and theurgists were now seen as crackpots, liars, magicians, deluded men who believed in falsities and sorcery. Their outcast condition was not necessarily financial or bureaucratic¹⁰⁰, but certainly cultural, religious and 'existential'.

The myths and theories that for a long time furnished and were accepted as part of traditional *paideia* were being devoid of any ontological meaning. One could point out many continuities between the "pagan" world and the Christian world, and that has been done by historians of Late Antiquity like Athanassiadi or Peter Brown. But mine is a narrative of discontinuity and as Garth Fowden has pointed out, the psychological conditions of the political-theological project of Christian universalistic monotheism¹⁰¹ shaped the new historical era in a significant way¹⁰². The mechanisms of social legitimacy and the accepted places of power and divinity shifted significantly¹⁰³. An honest reading of

⁹⁸ In other passages of the text Damascius uses the same adjective or related adjectives in reference to Christianity and its followers: cf. *PH*, 66A and 118.

⁹⁹ Cf. (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010, p. 10.)

¹⁰⁰ They were still tolerated until Justinian's edict of 529. A proper discussion with the events of Damascius and his philosophical followers in Persia can be found in the first chapter. Possibly, some few pagans continued to exert the activity of teaching in places like Alexandria, as the activities of Olympiodorus in the 550s and 560s testify, but the circle was definitely closing for pagans as the activities of John of Ephesus bear witness Cf. (Bowersock, 1990, p. 2).

¹⁰¹ Cf. (1993, p. 8-9): "I believe that late antiquity had a "dynamic"— a direction and even to a certain extent a sense of direction. Beyond the characteristically "late antique" structural similarities among the Roman, Iranian, and Islamic empires, there was both a logical and a chronological sequence to developments. An episodic and inconclusive concern in polytheist Rome with the relationship between the structure of the divine world and that of secular political authority became, in Christian Rome, the centerpiece of public doctrine."

¹⁰² As noted, among others, by Fowden himself (*Ibid.* p. 9-10) and G.W. Bowersock (1990, p. 55-60), Hellenism was itself a universalism, but a cultural *koiné* mainly restricted to the literate classes, and the culture of Hellenism articulated in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests alongside the Greek language was to become the major way of self-expression for Hellenized "Orientals" like Manetho, Berossus, Chaeremon and men like Apollonius of Tyana, Philon of Alexandria, Plotinus, Iamblichus and Damascius himself. To be "Hellene" was to partake in the literary and linguistic cultural patterns inaugurated by Hellenism and polytheistic pagan culture, rather than to be "Greek" in modern ethnic terms. That is not to say, of course, that to be "Greek" is some kind of univocal identity, it was (and largely still is) an agglutinative identity based on cultural and linguistic elements. Even in the time of Classical Athens, someone like Isocrates could say something like that: "The name 'Hellenes' is given rather to those who share our culture (*paideia*) than to those who share a common blood." Cf. *Panegyricus*, 50. Transl. Fowden.

¹⁰³ Nevertheless, it should be clarified that what I am searching in this work is not a type of polemic or criticism against Christianity and its doctrines. The aim here is simply to try to understand the pagan experience of Damascius and his fellow travelers in the 5th and 6th centuries in a Christianized world.

the *Philosophical History* alongside the *Life of Severus* can show that the *épistème* of both texts is radically discontinuous, despite the fact that they share the same geography and time. As the argument unfolds, some events related by Damascius that have a counterpart in Zachariah work¹⁰⁴ will be discussed in comparison. The texts are ontologically foreign to one another.

That is the sense of the *Phaedrus* quotation that opens this section through Adluri and Bagchee. Just like Socrates had first to know himself rather than dealing with myriad definitions of the many mythical beings in the culture of Ancient Athens, the purpose here is to conceptualize an experience instead of searching for any “truth” in the chronicles of the *Philosophical History*. I am not necessarily concerned if Damascius’ stories about events that, in our modern outlook, can be qualified as “supernatural” are “true” or not, but aiming to develop an essay in historical understanding. If states of mind like becoming one with God¹⁰⁵, Isidore’s abilities of predicting the future¹⁰⁶ and experiences like being enveloped by flames¹⁰⁷ or seeing mystical hieroglyphs emanating in the funeral procession of an Egyptian mystic¹⁰⁸ and philosophers causing supernatural earthquakes¹⁰⁹ are “truthful” descriptions of events in the terms of our contemporary regimes of truth is not a direct concern of my attempt. The experiences surely looked real for the narrator, for the man that supposedly experienced them or knew the stories from the people involved. *It is the historical meaning and what it can tell about the world of late pagans that I am searching for.*

Then it could be said, in short, that the methodological concern of the present work is to judge the main sources, i.e. the fragments of the *Philosophical History*, in light of the historiography of Late Antiquity and other works of the same historical period – like the *Vita Severi* or the *Theosophia Tubingensis* – in order to uncover a literary experience of being a philosophical pagan in Alexandria or Athens in the 5th and 6th centuries. To reach that goal I will conceptualize the work in two parts: 1) look into Damascius’ life, delineate his perspective of historical time in his contemporary world and finally look at the Iamblichean theory of embodiment as the ideological justification for the mission of the pagan holy man; 2) examine Damascius’ syncretic cosmological claims of the Egyptian

¹⁰⁴ Like the story of Asclepiodotus’ barren wife or the unveiling of the temple of Isis, events that are discussed by both works and offer a special opportunity for comparative approaches.

¹⁰⁵ PH, 4C and 22.

¹⁰⁶ 9A, B, C, D, E, F; 10A, B.

¹⁰⁷ 51A.

¹⁰⁸ 76E.

¹⁰⁹ 104A.

origin for the hieratic arts, philosophy and the doctrines of metempsychosis while discussing their relation with his cyclical historical cosmology that is reflective of the “Great Year myth” of pagan religions and, finally, discuss how certain mystical experiences described in the *Philosophical History*, both philosophical and hieratic (theurgic), might have been typical of the pagan holy man in the twilight of the “pagan” way of life, a transformation that Damascius accurately perceived that was happening and on which he tried to exert an influence.

As it turns out, many concepts employed in this dissertation have been taken from the works of historians, ethnologists, continental philosophers and literary theorists, rather than from the more traditional field of classical philology. Of particular importance I can list some influences that are going to appear in my toolbox: Michel Foucault and his concepts of *épistème* and *hétérotopie*¹¹⁰, the conceptualization of the relationship between history, time and myth made by Mircea Eliade¹¹¹ and Jonathan Z. Smith¹¹² and G.W. Bowersock’s conception of Hellenism as a cultural *paideia* that could incorporate in its literary expression elements of the disparate cultures of the ancient Mediterranean¹¹³. In that sense, the “last pagans” of Chuvin which I discuss through the *Philosophical History* are the last representatives of the *épistème* of Hellenism while being constantly pushed away towards a non-place, an experience of liminality, something approaching a heterotopia. The practice of philosophy and theurgy in the communities presented by Damascius was a form of “escaping” the tides of history and the darker side of reality reflected in the Christianized Roman Empire. “Mysticism” can be defined as such escape from history¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁰ Cf. (2021, p. 19-30.)

¹¹¹ Cf. (1971, p. 49-73.)

¹¹² Cf. (1978, p. 147-189.)

¹¹³ Also, the definition of paganism employed here is directly indebted not only to Chuvin but also to Bowersock and Robin Lane Fox (1988) in a sense somewhat opposite to that of Athanassiadi. While the Greek historian sought to show how the pagan Platonism of Late Antiquity prepared the religious scene for the arrival of Islam and Christianity through her concept of “monodoxy” (2016, p. 95-115) and has been evolving such ideas at least since her biography of the Emperor Julian, Bowersock considers Julian an oddity among pagans, an excentric individual that probably thought of a pagan church for having a Christian upbringing (1990, p. 6). He also summarizes his notion of paganism: “The reason for these sharply differing conceptions of paganism on the part of Christians and the pagans themselves is that paganism was not (and never was) a church. Polytheism is by definition tolerant and accommodating. Although some cults might be officially adopted by a state, as at Rome, local cults throughout the provinces went their own ways on their own terms. In the territories where Greek was known to a greater or lesser extent from the time of Alexander the Great, if not before, local deities became more comprehensible and more widely known through an assimilation with Greek deities. But there was never a pagan church. Only Julian ever had the mad idea of trying to establish one.” (*Ibid.*)

¹¹⁴ That idea is influenced by the historian Michel de Certeau and his idea of mysticism as the dissolution of historical experience. Cf. (1982, p. 11-25.)

I am not claiming, however, that the *Philosophical History* has been written with an overtly polemic purpose or as some kind of literal apology to the pagan religion, in the sense that Arnaldo Momigliano understood the works of later paganism.¹¹⁵ The public for which the work was written was already pagan and did not need to be convinced. Even though paganism was already dwindling by the 5th and 6th centuries¹¹⁶, at least from the political and institutional point of view. The work also is not overtly pessimist, rather the contrary, with its belief in the possibility of transcending any strife of the Typhonian age through the mystagogy of Platonic philosophy and hieratic rites, the belief of the metaphysical restoration of philosophy and the complementarity between *ιερατική* and *φιλοσοφία*.

As a concluding remark, I hope to be able to show, without forcing too much the sources, that the “heterological” pagan mystical writings of Damascius in the *Philosophical History* partake in the same experiences of liminality, transgression and subversion identified by Michel de Certeau¹¹⁷ as the roots of the mystical movements of the 13th through 17th centuries. The hypothesis is that mysticism emerges at the moments of historical crisis, of institutional decay for an established tradition of poetics, mythology or religion¹¹⁸. The “hieraticized philosophy”¹¹⁹ of Damascius – his almost poetic *religio*

¹¹⁵ E.g. his interpretation of the *Lives of Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, in the words of Bowersock (1989, p. 207): “He was thus able to argue most implausibly that Diogenes Laertius wrote his *Lives* of the Greek Philosophers as a defense of Greek paganism against the increasingly sophisticated Platonic theologians of early Christianity. But the shrill polemics of the early Christian apologists reflected their status as a minority wanting to be recognized. The pagans had no need for such diatribes and chose most of the time not to notice the Christians unless they got in the way-something the martyrs learned to do with ever-increasing skill.”

¹¹⁶ However, as Bowersock demonstrates (1990, p. 1-14) with a great amount of evidence, the pagan world was alive and well in the folk communities, in the small villages scattered around Anatolia and other places in the Eastern Mediterranean. The liveliness of paganism is also demonstrated by some passages of the *Philosophical History* and the *Life of Severus* that will be discussed accordingly. But in terms of socially instituted and accepted ritualized practices the pagan religions were on the outskirts of society. No degree of “continuism” can obfuscate this fact that has been demonstrated by a myriad of sources (including the *PH*), commentators and historiographers. If in some places the cults of pagan gods remained transformed into the cults of certain Christian saints, the fundamental anthropology of myth and folklore has been forever transformed.

¹¹⁷ In his analysis of mystical experiences and social practices in the 16th and 17th centuries, de Certeau was guided by the intuition that the mystical discourse is a fruit of the setting sun, of the collapse of certain structures of thought and ritual, of the buildings in which certainties were constructed. His analysis focused on the “fall” of the metaphysically constructed world of the Christian Middle Ages and the existential anxiety and mournful longing unfolded by such “setting sun”. Cf. (1986, p. 35-47 and 80-101). For the comparison with the Foucaultian concept of *épistème* cf. (*Ibid.* 171-185).

¹¹⁸ Cf. (Sheldrake, 2001, p. 41.): “De Certeau's interest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mysticism arose from the parallels he perceived between this period and his own time when the word, especially of Scripture, could no longer be spoken to believers in the old ways. The world was increasingly seen as opaque and unreadable. In response to this disenchantment the people we refer to as mystics sought to invent a different kind of place, that was not a fully formed or complete place at all. As de Certeau says himself, this 'is only the story of a journey' that is necessarily fragmented and ultimately defies conclusive investigation. In his

mentis – might have been a sign that in the periods of crisis, language opens a path to the infinite abyss.

To finish the theoretical and general considerations, I must confess that after advancing in the writing of this text I have been confronted by a theme that fascinates me since my teenage years: the decadence of cultures, the dissolution of myth into the strands of history. A fascination with the world that existed “before” the doctrines of the Christian Church became the axis of my obsessions, a world that vanished and that remained in silence for so long. As Fowden has noted, the historians, philosophers and classicists were not really kind to the holy men of late paganism¹²⁰. The world that always fascinated me was not the one of the politicians and generals that continued to be idealized by official and well-behaved manuals of history, not even the times and feelings of Homer, Plato or the tragic poets, but the world in which the Greek myth turned to ashes, confronted by the depth of its own mortality.

I believe that the *Philosophical History* can be read as the chronicle and experience of that world, the closest text we can have of someone that experienced those fatal events and felt something like the “Brazilian emotion of Saudade”¹²¹ just like the Christian mystics of Michel de Certeau longed for the High Middle Ages. For as much as Damascius was an unrelenting fighter, and there is no doubt of his tenacity, he was also a man of highly poetic diction haunted by metaphysical perplexities. The metaphysical construction and destruction of systems in his theoretical works is, in a great amount, the counterparts of the miraculous, persecutory and dramatic events described by him in the *Philosophical History*. The heavy use of terms like σκότος (darkness, gloom) and other words of the same family in his metaphysical inquiries¹²² is perhaps the counterpart of the “sunset” that he perceived to be taking his world by assault: καὶ δύσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἅτε οὐ δυναμένοις αὐτοῦ φέρειν τὴν θεῖαν ἀνατολήν¹²³. The experience of cryptic and Hermetic inspired passages like this one is what constitutes the search of this endeavor.

somewhat opaque words, 'it overpowers the inquiry with something resembling a laugh'. Mystic literature offers routes to whoever 'asks directions to get lost' and seeks 'a way not to come back'.”

¹¹⁹ Cf. (Krulak, 2017, p.

¹²⁰ Cf. (1982, p. 1).

¹²¹ Cf. (de Certeau, 1992, p. 2.)

¹²² *De Princ.* II. 11. 4; II. 30. 9; III. 167.5.

¹²³ *PH*, 36C. Athanassiadi translates the passage as “Men will experience its sunset since they are unable to endure its sacred dawn.” She relates that fragment [Φ 244] with another one from the Suda: κινδυνεύει ἀποσβῆναι τῆς ἀληθείας τὸ χρῆμα (“Truth itself is in danger of being extinguished”). The relation is established in light of their “typical Hermetic language” (1999a, p. 117, n. 78). Both fragments seem to be related to the fragment 18 and with 36A. As will be unfolded, the cyclical cosmology presented by Damascius in Hermetic lens is also related with *religio mentis* as a form of mysticism.

*Hieratic Art, Philosophy and Mysticism: Brief Theoretical Discussion

History shows that the thinkers who mounted to the top of the ladder of questions, who set their foot on the last rung, that of the absurd, have bequeathed to posterity only an example of sterility, whereas their confreres, stopping halfway up, have fertilized the mind's growth; they have served their kind, they have transmitted some well-turned idol, some polished superstitions, some errors disguised as principles, and a system of hopes. Had they embraced the dangers of an excessive progression, this scorn of charitable mistakes would have rendered them disastrous to others and to themselves; they would have inscribed their names on the confines of the universe and of thought—unhealthy seekers and arid reprobates, amateurs of fruitless dizziness, hunters of dreams it is not permitted to dream...

E.M. Cioran, *Obsession of the Essential*. in: *A Short History of Decay*

It is necessary to discuss the fundamental concepts of “theurgy”, “hieratic arts” and mysticism before going ahead in this trail. This work is not directly concerned with defining what was Neoplatonic theurgy. The problem to be unfolded in this section is based on an inquiry into Damascius’ conception on the aim of the hieratic arts (ἱερατική), what mental states it entailed and its relationship with “mystical states” of experience and how it can be delineated based on a reading of the *Philosophical History*. The problem is a considerable one, considering that Damascius seems to be ambiguous in his appreciation of theurgy¹²⁴ and the subject itself is permeated by many theoretical discussions regarding the relationship between philosophy and ritual and rationality vs irrationality, also entailing questions about “Oriental” influences into Greek thought, altered states of consciousness and the use of psychoactive substances. Moreover, as Gregory Shaw has noted, the primary sources for the theurgic practices have reached our days in a fragmentary state, with the immediate sources and rites being mostly inaccessible to direct investigation¹²⁵.

¹²⁴ E.g. in his appraisal of Asclepiodotus in fr. 85A he considers the Alexandrian philosopher as deficient due to his lack of knowledge in “Orphic and Chaldean” practices that are probably related with theurgy, but in some other fragments (e.g. 50 or 150) Damascius directly or Isidore through him are shown devaluating theurgy or the hieratic arts.

¹²⁵ (2014 [1995], p. 18-19.) Georg Luck also comments on the inaccessibility of the theurgic rituals for the modern reader: “Obviously, we know only a part, perhaps only a very small part, of the whole procedure, and we can only guess at how and why it worked. No introduction to theurgical operations has survived. We know that Iamblichus, Proclus, and others practiced a kind of theosophy, which, by ascetic exercises, special rites, and certain material objects could bring the deity down to earth or make the soul ascend to the higher

A history of the scholarship on theurgy alongside an analysis of theurgy as a diachronically constructed tradition has been made by Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013). Her approach follows the concept of “invention of tradition” delineated by the historian Eric Hobsbawm and try to understand the theurgic ritual separated from Platonist philosophy and ontological, cosmological and metaphysical discussions, with a heavy focus on social history and ritual theory¹²⁶. Ideally, I do not oppose such an approach, but her extremely historicist outlook sometimes loses track of subtleties. The main issue that I can point in her specific appreciation of Damascius¹²⁷ is based on a simple historical point: as much as it holds true that theurgy, in her particular definition of ritual pertaining to the Chaldean Oracles¹²⁸, is not as strongly associated with philosophical activity as a ritual practice as in Proclus, her outlook and other similar conceptions heavily focused in the internalist analysis of the texts let aside a basic historical fact: Damascius wrote most of his works under the reign of three particular emperors: Anastasius I Dicorus, Justin I and Justinian. The persecution against pagans, that was somehow “cyclical” in the 5th century, became less sporadic and more intense in the 6th century, especially under Justinian, and the lack of references to more explicit “theurgic” activities might as well have been an act of self-preservation.

Two more recent introductions to the scholarship, with a heavy emphasis on the conceptual continuities between theurgy and magic, are those of Radcliffe G. Edmonds (2019) and Sarah Iles Johnston (2018). Something that seems to be certain is that Damascius is dealing with his own hermeneutics of Iamblichean theurgy and is not returning to a supposedly Plotinian way of atheurgical mysticism. Damascius works as they have come to us, the *Philosophical History* foremost, but all of his extant writings, only allow a limited philological understanding of his motivations and overall aims, but based on those same extant works it is possible to reach some islands of certainty before arriving in the immense and as yet mostly unexplored continent of his thought.

regions. Even if we had Iamblichus’s voluminous work on the Oracles, which the Emperor Julian was so anxious to read in a good edition, we would probably not understand much more, and we could hardly expect to be able to reproduce these procedures and obtain the same effects, even if we wanted to. I have collected as many specific details as possible and tried to piece together a picture, but much of it remains a puzzle. One clearly had to be initiated, as Julian was himself, by a master. Part of the technique appears to have been a closely guarded secret handed down in certain families, but also in the philosophical schools—they were, after all, like families.” (1989, p. 187-188.)

¹²⁶ (2013, p. 15-18.)

¹²⁷ (*Ibid.* p. 265-273.)

¹²⁸ (*Ibid.* p. 17.)

The Greek lexical terms associated with theurgic practices in Damascius are also a subject of discussion. Theurgy is a term that has been coined as a neologism in the cryptic and now fragmentary Chaldean Oracles. The Chaldean Oracles are a series of hexametric verses in Greek attributed to a certain Julian the Chaldean and/or to his son Julian the Theurgist, both of whom flourished in the 2nd century of the Common Era in Apamea, Syria. Most of the original text was lost and the remaining fragments came to us through Michael Psellus' rendition of the works of Proclus and the numerous commentaries by late antique Neoplatonic authors, mainly Proclus and Damascius. According to tradition, the Oracles (λόγια) were compiled by Julian the Father as Julian the Son recited them in a trance-like state while conjuring the soul of Plato. The verses were considered divine in nature (θεοπαράδοτα) and were even called by some classicists "the Bible of the Neoplatonists"¹²⁹. It is through the dactylic hexameters of the Oracles that the term theurgy enters the Greek lexicon¹³⁰.

Fernández-Fernández discussed the lexical aspects of theurgy in a doctoral dissertation published in 2011¹³¹, so the exposition here will be minimal. In the case of Damascius, and specifically of the *Philosophical History*, the main term used throughout the extant fragments that is usually associated with theurgy by most scholars is ιερατική¹³², a word that appears already in the first fragments of the *Philosophical History* alongside its relation with philosophy¹³³, soon after Damascius makes some anthropological and cosmological commentaries on the antiquity of the Egyptians and the Osiris-Dionysus myth. What caught my attention is that his description of the Osirian myth is endowed in

¹²⁹ F. Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*. Londres, 1911; reimp. New York, 1956, p. 279, n. 66; W. Theiler, "Die Chaldaischen Orakel und die Hymnen des Synesios," *Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft*, 18, 1942, p. 1; M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion*, II. Munich, 1961, p. 479; E.R. Dodds, *New Light on the Chaldean Oracles*, *HTR*, 54, 1961, p. 263.

¹³⁰ OC, 153, ed. des Places, 1971. There is controversy among scholars whether the term should be translated as "work of the gods" (denoting divine action as a fundamental factor) or as "work on the gods" (denoting the action of the theurgist as main factor), cf. (R.G. Edmonds III, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 315). The controversy is sustained both on philological arguments and on interpretations of a religious nature regarding the function of the theurgic rite and its relationship with magic. Additionally, there is also the possibility of the term entering the lexicon of the Greek language through the Pythagorean mathematician Nichomachus of Gerasa in a disputed passage of his *Excerpta de Musica*, in which θεουργοί are supposedly alluded. The authorship and authenticity of the text are doubted by many scholars. Cf. (Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013, p. 21.)

¹³¹ Cf. Especially the p. 206-269.

¹³² According to the LSJ, ιερατική means "priestly, sacerdotal" and appears in multiple contexts of the Greek language in reference to many types of religious ritual. Iamblichus used ιερατική in conjunction with theurgy: Ἀυτή μὲν οὖν νοείσθω σοι <ή> πρώτη τῆς εὐδαιμονίας ὁδός, νοερὰν ἔχουσα τῆς θείας ἐνώσεως ἀποπλήρωσιν τῶν ψυχῶν· ἢ δ' ἱερατικὴ καὶ θεουργικὴ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας δόσις καλεῖται μὲν θύρα πρὸς θεὸν τὸν δημιουργὸν τῶν ὅλων (De. Myst, X. 5.14.)

¹³³ PH, 4A, B, C.

Chaldean language¹³⁴ and that after exposing a somewhat Chaldean and Hermetic synthesized cosmology he goes on to show the complementarities and differences between philosophy and *ιερατική*, finishing the discussion with the state that might be achieved by the practitioners of these disciplines: *θεοκρασία*, mixing or absorption into the gods or god¹³⁵. Now, that seems to be a technical term that, to my knowledge, has not appeared prominently in other Neoplatonic philosophers¹³⁶ nor in Plato, but appears in the *Suda testimonia* on Pherecydes of Syros¹³⁷.

Any direct transmission from Pherecydes to Damascius without passing to other authors in the Platonic or Pythagorean traditions is extremely difficult to argue, beside the fact that it is not possible to know if Pherecydes really ever used that word. What is intriguing, however, is that in the *Philosophical History* the term is related with a “perfect union” (*ἔνωσις παντελής*) with the divine: *Καὶ τοῦτ' ἂν εἴη θεοκρασία, μᾶλλον δὲ ἔνωσις παντελής*¹³⁸. Damascius uses *θεοκρασία* again, in reference to mystical unions between gods, in the section about the Egyptian mystic Heraiscus and his ability to perceive if statues were animated or not with the energies of the gods in (possible?) theurgic rituals¹³⁹:

οὕτω διέγνω τὸ ἄρρητον ἄγαλμα τοῦ Αἰῶνος ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ κατεχόμενον, ὃν Ἀλεξανδρεῖς ἐτίμησαν, Ὅσιριν ὄντα καὶ Ἄδωνιν ὁμοῦ κατὰ μυστικὴν ὡς ἀληθῶς φάναι θεοκρασίαν.

In this way, he distinguished that the ineffable statue of Aion was possessed by the god that is revered by the Alexandrians, being at the same

¹³⁴ Typical Chaldean terms like *ἀμέτρητος*, *ζωή* and *ὀχετός* are used by Damascius with a certain frequency and are prominent in those fragments.

¹³⁵ *PH*, 4C.

¹³⁶ The only Neoplatonic lexical reference, according to research that I did in the corpus of the TLG, can be found in Iamblichus' biography of Pythagoras (33.240.6): *οὐκοῦν εἰς θεοκρασίαν τινὰ καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἔνωσιν καὶ τὴν τοῦ νοῦ κοινωνίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς θείας ψυχῆς ἀπέβλεπεν αὐτοῖς ἢ πᾶσα τῆς φιλίας σπουδὴ δι' ἔργων τε καὶ λόγων.*

¹³⁷ Collected in DK, fr. 2.9: *ἔστι δὲ ἅπαντα ἃ συνέγραψε ταῦτα: Ἐπάμυχος ἦτοι Θεοκρασία ἢ Θεογονία. ἔστι δὲ <Θεολογία> ἐν βιβλίῳς <ι> [?] ἔχουσα θεῶν γένεσιν καὶ διαδοχάς.*

¹³⁸ 4C.

¹³⁹ 76E. It must be stressed that Heraiscus' ability occurred to him naturally, without any ritual act or previous preparation: “Heraiscus had the natural gift of distinguishing between animate and inanimate sacred statues” (*ὁ μὲν δὴ Ἡραῖσκος αὐτοφυῆς ἐγένετο διαγνώμων τῶν τε ζώντων καὶ τῶν μὴ ζώντων ἱερῶν ἀγαλμάτων*). I speculate about theurgic “rituals” because theurgy usually involved the animation of statues. The use of *θεοκρασία* in 76E does not indicate a reference to mystical experience of the philosopher, but a union between gods. However, it must be stressed that in a certain sense that word might have meant in the fragment 4C the union of the already divinized philosopher with the Ineffable or what lies beyond the One. In order to reach *θεοκρασία* the philosopher must have mastered the hieratic arts. Considering its rarity in the Greek lexicon, I do not think that Damascius picked the word randomly.

time Osiris and Adonis as a truly mystical manifestation of enstasis [θεοκρασία].

As is clear by my translation, I prefer to translate θεοκρασία as “enstasis” rather than as “union” in the manner of Athanassiadi¹⁴⁰. I believe, as stated in the note 139, that it might have been a type of union between beings with divinized or divine ontological status and can mean a type of “absorption” of divine properties into the initiate or the fusion of divine natures towards the “doors to the Ineffable”. I am conscious that a modern concept derived from the discipline history of religions, specifically the works of Mircea Eliade on Yoga and Shamanism¹⁴¹, might not have the exact connotation of the late antique usage, but the English noun “union” does not constitute any particular improvement. Considering the word’s rarity in the Greek lexicon, I suspect that enstasis might even be a more accurate translation¹⁴².

The terminological discussion is important because θεοκρασία seems to be the description of a metaphysical state or experience, rather than an act or properly ritualized activity. It is the consequence of something that was being discussed in the previous lines of the text. Then, the remaining passages of the PH’s *Proemium* hold the key to understand that state and as the adverb μᾶλλον (“as much as, quite, doubtless, indeed”) indicates, the experience is not unlike the more extensively discussed ἔνωσις. The passage of Iamblichus quoted above in note 140 in which the word also makes an appearance refers to the state of immersion into the divine (θεοκρασία) leading to ἔνωσις propitiated by the Pythagorean behavior and φιλία. The presence of some type of “ritual” is not necessarily associated with that state of existence¹⁴³ and a proper identification of its nature in the literary work of Damascius is the subject of the last chapter, after I hope to have passed through the lives,

¹⁴⁰ “It was in this way that he recognised that the ineffable statue of Aion was possessed by the god who was worshipped by the Alexandrians, being at the same time Osiris and Adonis as a result of a truly mystical act of union.”

¹⁴¹ Enstasis means a “standing within” and Eliade (1954) coined the term to denote a state of “absorption” of consciousness in the ultimate phase of the yogic meditation, when all preparatory steps have been transcended and only the purity of *samadhi* remains. It is a “going inside oneself” and what is found inside is the absolute nature of reality or, in Neoplatonic terms, God. Eliade contrasted the enstatic with the ecstatic, the latter being the typical shamanic trance and a “going outside oneself”. Both types of experience seem to exist among the Neoplatonists, in order that applying the concepts with rigidity to define a singular and ahistorical type of “Neoplatonic mysticism” would be fruitless.

¹⁴² On the whole TLG corpus θεοκρασία happens only two times in Damascius, one in Iamblichus and one in the Suda’s entry on Pherecydes.

¹⁴³ However, as Tanaseanu-Döbler points out (2013, p. 16-20), any human activity can be ritualized or considered “ritual” and the definition of ritual as merely meaning religious ritual is not necessarily correct. And it is unnecessary to say that many features of the modern world, like the academic presentation of a PhD dissertation to be analyzed by a committee, are also “ritual”.

events and cosmologies that might have led pagan holy men like Isidore or Sarapio to reach states that are at least similar to the enstatic meditation.

There are many Greek words that seem to be equated with *ιερατική* in the Neoplatonic lexicon¹⁴⁴ and it is not clear if Damascius means that the practices and experiences related to those words are all the same, they are all contextual and depend on a lot of different factors and in the superimposition of modern theories. As noted by Luck, “in this area all research must remain more or less tentative.”¹⁴⁵ In terms of *ἔνωσις* the discussion is vast but the point of asserting if the experience of *θεοκρασία* is exactly the same as the Plotinian *ἔνωσις* is far more speculative. The union with the divine or God is shown in the doctrines of the Chaldean Oracles to be an experience of sexual transcendence and primordial androgyny, an overcome of the divided state in which the human being is bound due to its embodiment in material conditions¹⁴⁶:

<Ἀμπαμένη> ψυχὴ μερόπων θεὸν ἄγξει εἰς αὐτήν, <κ'> οὐδὲν θνητὸν ἔχουσα ὅλη <θεόθεν> μεμέθυσται· ἁρμονίαν αὔχει γάρ, ὑφ' ἧ πέλε σῶμα βρότειον.

Having flown upward, the human soul will embrace God vigorously. Free of any mortal element, she will be wholly intoxicated by God. Therefore, boast of the harmony under which the mortal body exists.

The “mysticism” of the Chaldean Oracles is fundamental to all post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists. Despite being rooted in Platonism, emerging from the same Platonic “underworld” of Hermetism and Gnosticism, the “Chaldean doctrine may have had roots in Platonism, but it is really a new development.”¹⁴⁷

Damascius famous division between philosophers and theurgists on the *In. Phaed*¹⁴⁸ should not be understood as a statement of value, but rather as a statement of fact

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Luck's (1989) discussion in pages 186-187. Fernández-Fernández compilation above.

¹⁴⁵ (1989, p. 188.)

¹⁴⁶ Fr. 97. Some of the words in that Oracle are hypothetical according to É. des Places, but it is interesting to note that as the Greek word for God is masculine and the world for soul is feminine, the existence of possible sexual undertones cannot be discarded.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. (Luck, 1989, p. 190.)

¹⁴⁸ I.172. ὅτι μὲν τὴν φιλοσοφίαν προτιμῶσιν, ὡς Πορφύριος καὶ Πλωτῖνος καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ φιλόσοφοι. οἱ δὲ τὴν ἱερατικὴν, ὡς Ἰάμβλιχος καὶ Συριανὸς καὶ Πρόκλος καὶ οἱ ἱερατικοὶ πάντες. Besides, in this same text,

and, in reality, the divergences between a “philosophical” (i.e. mystical) and a “theurgic” path in Damascius, as stressed by Athanassiadi and Tanaseanu-Döbler¹⁴⁹ and his supposed preference for “philosophy”, is somewhat overblown. Damascius, in a great number of occasions, state that he is following Iamblichus¹⁵⁰ and also believed in the theory of the vehicle of the soul (ὄχημα)¹⁵¹. What can be argued and discussed, in my opinion, is the meaning of theurgy or the hieratic arts in his thought, to what processes and acts he is referring when using these terms. It seems to me that for Damascius *ιερατική* is part of the religious practices attached with the syncretized paganism of the philosophers and other intellectual elites existent at his time, it is seen by Damascius as a complementary path in order to lead the soul to its anagogic path, but it is not clear if it is in itself soteriological – thus leading to *θεοκρασία* – like the *θεουργία* of Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis*¹⁵².

The subject of mysticism is more complicated and needs some clarification. Usually, in Neoplatonic studies, the division between a mystical (Plotinian) and theurgical (Iamblichean) school is, as noted above, sustained by some scholars. I believe that the question should be directed more to the place and emphasis of ritual and the Mediterranean mythical material – Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, etc. – in specific philosophers rather than in mysticism *contra* theurgy. The practices called theurgy with their “ineffable words” and textual recitations¹⁵³ can induce mystical states of being and trance that could be analogous or exactly the same as “philosophical mysticism”. As noted by Winston in his study of the mysticism of Philo¹⁵⁴:

after this much quoted passage, Damascius says that Plato went beyond and unified both ways and that is why he called the philosopher a Bacchus: ὁ δὲ Πλάτων τὰς ἐκατέρωθεν συνηγορίας ἐννοήσας πολλὰς οὐσας εἰς μίαν αὐτὰς συνήγαγεν ἀλήθειαν, τὸν φιλόσοφον ‘Βάκχον’ ὀνομάζων

¹⁴⁹ (1999a, p. 56-57) and (2013, p. 272.)

¹⁵⁰ In the *Philosophical History*, in the fragment 34A, Damascius says that, for his master Isidore, Iamblichus only stood behind Plato in the philosophical hierarchy: “He was rooted in the very purity of the Platonic ideas, which he interpreted not in the usual manner of the majority of philosophers, but like Plato and the marvelous subtleties of Iamblichus.” (αὐταῖς γε ταῖς Πλάτωνος ἀκηράτοις ἐννοίαις οὐ κατὰ τὰς συνήθειαι τῶν πολλῶν φιλοσόφων ἐπιβολὰς ἐνεφύετο, μετὰ δὲ γε Πλάτωνα καὶ ταῖς θαυμασταῖς Ἰαμβλίχου περινοίαις.) Of special importance here is the word ἀκήρατος, which means “pure, undefiled” and is the Iamblichean usual term for the state of the enlightened soul of the philosopher in his embodiment. The theory behind embodiment will be discussed in the 3rd chapter.

¹⁵¹ That, again, is a subject that will be further developed in the 3rd chapter. For now, it is important to note that for many interpreters, like Gregory Shaw, the theory of the vehicle of the soul is at the root of the Iamblichean defense of theurgy.

¹⁵² In 4A it is said that *ιερατική* καὶ φιλοσοφία οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἄρχονται ἀρχῶν, this will be discussed further along the path.

¹⁵³ And also the use of herbs, stones, vapors, incenses and other natural objects that might be symbols in the doctrines of universal correspondence, as can be seen in the fragment 80.

¹⁵⁴ (1981, p. 21.)

Although it is notoriously difficult to define mysticism, most students of the subject agree that it involves a timeless apprehension of the transcendent through a unifying vision that gives bliss or serenity and normally accrues on a course of self-mastery and contemplation.

The apprehension of the transcendent might be experienced as a type of ecstatic experience, but another type of mystical experience can also be defined in the studies of mysticism: the so called enstatic type of mystical experience, that we have seen to be characterized by an internal absorption of the self into the soul, spirit or consciousness¹⁵⁵. In the *Philosophical History* both types of experience can be found, what is not very surprising considering the Neoplatonic emanationist and correlative worldview. The absorption into the Self can lead to the dissolution of the Ego and the enstatic contact with the fundamental source of everything. Isidore is described as having such types of experiences in multiple passages¹⁵⁶. In light of the theory of the six virtues exposed by Damascius¹⁵⁷, it might be said that different types of mystical experience are induced by different degrees of virtuosity.

In the understanding of the two types of mysticism exposed here I will work with a synthesis of the reading strategies of Sara Ahbel-Rappe, Algis Uždavinys and Pierre Hadot. As Ahbel-Rappe argues¹⁵⁸:

the Neoplatonists refused to grant that truth could ever be fully disclosed; truth is itself a veil for an origin that falls outside of all representation. [...] The discursive strategies that inform Neoplatonic texts are a configuration of non-discursive truth, just as the tradition as a whole is a record of its own appeal to what can only be called an unwritten tradition.

The texts of the Neoplatonists can only be comprehended in light of this paradox of language. They are written as a configuration, as an exercise, to assist the reader in his anagogic ascent, and reading the texts also involves the hermeneutic act of interiorizing

¹⁵⁵ Cf. (Eliade, 1990 [1954], p.91-100.)

¹⁵⁶ Cf. PH, 9C, 9D, 9E, 9F; 10A, 10B; 12A, 12B, 12C and especially the fragment 22. This last fragment will be among the “stars” of my conclusions.

¹⁵⁷ Natural, ethical, political, cathartic, paradigmatic and theurgic. *In. Phaed.* I. 138-151.

¹⁵⁸ (2000, p. 15.)

theurgic rituals, ecstatic and enstatic journeys, visual exercises of out of body experiences, geometrical and mathematical mysticism and similar configurations of “non-discursive truth”. The text in itself is a tool, rather than the final product. The understanding of Ahbel-Rappe correlates with Hadot’s interpretation of the meaning and function of ancient philosophical texts and their literary goals. According to Hadot, philosophy in the ancient world ought to be interpreted as “a way of life” rather than a mere corpus of doctrines and the texts might be decoded as auxiliaries for the philosopher’s spiritual exercises¹⁵⁹.

Such a view of philosophy as a way of life is able to cast a light in some portions of the *Philosophical History* that might have been otherwise obscured, such as the heavy criticism that Photius attributes to Damascius against all his contemporaries. The extreme “criticism” present in the work is actually a reading of the virtues of men in an age of strife, a treatise in practical mysticism and the Neoplatonic scale of virtues for Theodora, disciple of both Damascius and Isidore, to whom the work was dedicated¹⁶⁰. The *Philosophical History* can be read as a practical anagogic manual for a Neoplatonic philosopher-mystic of Hellenic – i.e. “pagan” – religious orientation in an age dominated by the forces of vice that Damascius associate with the Christian Byzantine Empire. The events and techniques described also have multiple analogies and terminological similarities with the alchemical works by Zosimus of Panopolis¹⁶¹ and some Hermetic treatises. The mystical experience is essentially a non-discourse, an approximative symbolic form to the ascension of the philosophical ladder that might be apprehended through the mythical patterns of Hellenic religion turned mystical through its historical dissolution¹⁶².

The Golden Age discussed in the first fragments, marking the establishment of rites and initiations by the Egyptians, is in some sense a symbol of the mystical technique of ascent, showing that the historically distant time of the Golden Age has a metaphysical counterpart and can be reached by those that are devoted to the intertwined science of

¹⁵⁹ (1995, p. 47-79.)

¹⁶⁰ *Bib. Cod.* 181. III. 3-10.

¹⁶¹ Zosimus used to refer to his alchemical works as *ἱερατική τέχνη*, the same terminology that is associated with theurgy in the works of Damascius. (Cf. Grimes, 2018, p. 19.) The association between Iamblichean theurgy, hermetism and alchemy has also been asserted by scholars such as Fowden (1993), Bull (2018) and Hanegraaff (2022).

¹⁶² In *La Fable Mystique* (1982, p. 48-71), de Certeau dedicates a whole chapter to the relation between place and mystical sensibility, showing how the Catholic mystics of the early modern world have also been affected by the changes of religious landscapes and “delocalizations” of the religious landscape provoked by the configuration of cities around the secular palaces and centers of power, that absorbed from the religious sites of the Middle Ages their center of significance. It is an excellent analogy also to understand the historical experience of pagans in the 4th to 6th centuries.

contemplation and the hieratic arts. The Neoplatonic philosophy of history of Damascius is also a mystical doctrine. Still in the question of mysticism, I am very fond of the notion of “Platonic Mysticism” introduced by the historian of religions Arthur Versluis¹⁶³. The central idea is that Platonism is a mystical doctrine and hermeneutical technique that underlies the history of the transmissions of texts and ideas that we call “Western”¹⁶⁴. Versluis defines mysticism – he admits that he also thought about using the term “contemplative science”, borrowed from Buddhist scholar B. Allan Wallace – as “direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object”¹⁶⁵. Descriptions of such experiences are abundant in all parts of the *Philosophical History* and are directly intertwined with the philosophy of history exposed by Damascius.

Absorption in God, the total union (ἔνωσις παντελής), is considered as the final meaning of the Egyptian philosophy transferred by the Pythagoreans to the Greeks¹⁶⁶ and it was still accessible to mankind in the times of darkness for the pagan communities in the former territories of the Roman Empire. Versluis defines Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite as the “source of Western mysticism”¹⁶⁷ but I would go further and claim that those mystical doctrines originate among the pagan Neoplatonists and their immediate sources: the Chaldean Oracles, Hermetism and other “Eastern” philosophies and ritualistic traditions. To not say of Plato himself and his ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν¹⁶⁸.

The apophatic theology associated with mystical experience by Versluis is present in the Chaldean Oracles, the sacred text that is the source for the Neoplatonic theurgic rituals and much of their theology¹⁶⁹, as the fragment quoted by Damascius himself certify¹⁷⁰:

¹⁶³ *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature and Art*. State University of New York, 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Platonism influenced the Islamic World as well and many fundamental ideas of the Neoplatonists have reached thinkers in the world of Islam through conversions and translations of previous Byzantine territories like Egypt, Syria and Anatolia. Cf. (Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*. FOLIO Essais, 1999.)

¹⁶⁵ (*Ibid.* p. 3.)

¹⁶⁶ *PH*, 4C.

¹⁶⁷ (*Ibid.* p. 3-4.)

¹⁶⁸ *Theaetetus*, 176b. However, it can be argued that the homology with the divine in Plato is substantially different from the same phenomenon in the Neoplatonists and that Plato’s assertion was just to become similar to God as much as possible (κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν) rather than a complete union with God as in the ascensional Neoplatonic literature.

¹⁶⁹ Damascius himself dedicates a significant part of the *De Princ.* (III. 108–59) to analyze the theological meaning of the Chaldean Oracles and its correspondences with the different theologies known by the Neoplatonists and the arguments of Greek philosophical schools.

¹⁷⁰ *De Princ.* II, p. 105. 313 Combès-Westerink. *Or. Ch.* Fr. 1 [É. Des Places].

ἔστιν γὰρ τι νοητόν, ὃ χρή σε νοεῖν νόου ἄνθει· ἦν γὰρ ἐπεγκλίνης σὸν νοῦν κάκεινο νοήσης ὡς τι νοῶν, οὐ κείνο νοήσεις· ἔστι γὰρ ἀλκῆς ἀμφιαοῦς δύναμις νοεραῖς στράπτουσα τομαῖσιν. Οὐ δὴ χρή σφοδρότητι νοεῖν τὸ νοητόν ἐκεῖνο ἀλλὰ νόου ταναοῦ ταναῆ φλογὶ πάντα μετρούση πλὴν τὸ νοητόν ἐκεῖνο· χρεῶ δὴ τοῦτο νοῆσαι οὐκ ἀτενῶς, ἀλλ' ἀγνὸν ἀπόστροφον ὄμμα φέροντα σῆς ψυχῆς τεῖναι κενεὸν νόον εἰς τὸ νοητόν, ὄφρα μάθης τὸ νοητόν, ἐπεὶ νόου ἕξω ὑπάρχει.

For there exists a certain Intelligible which you must perceive by the flower of mind. For if you should incline your mind toward it and perceive it as perceiving a specific thing, you would not perceive it. For it is the power of strength, visible all around, flashing with intellectual divisions. Therefore, you must not perceive that Intelligible violently but with the flame of mind completely extended which measures all things, except that Intelligible. You must not perceive it intently, but keeping the pure eye of your soul turned away, you should extend an empty mind toward the Intelligible in order to comprehend it, since it exists outside of (your) mind (Transl. Majercik).

That passage, selected by É. des Places as the beginning of his edition of the Chaldean Oracles (1971)¹⁷¹, takes place in a discussion of Damascius about a God or Principle existent even before the One and is in fact a discussion derived from Iamblichus¹⁷² and that

¹⁷¹ In due time I will discuss how certain aspects of Chaldean mysticism influenced the narrative of the *PH* and Damascius philosophy of history. Cf. fr. 153 or the fragments 39-47 and their erotic allusions.

¹⁷² Iamblichus postulated an even more ineffable and indescribable One beyond the One that is the first hypostasis in the Plotinian system. Some scholars, like Gregory Shaw, emphasize the difference between Plotinus and Iamblichus regarding some aspects of metaphysics and the type of anagogic tools necessary for the ascension, and attribute the larger fame of Plotinus to his more “neutral” philosophy as regards Christianity: “I begin with the context of 3rd and 4th century Platonism and the tension between the teachings of Plotinus as transmitted and promoted by Porphyry and the Platonism of Iamblichus. They have a great deal in common; in fact, I suspect that the differences Iamblichus had with Plotinus might have been exaggerated by the fact that when Porphyry edited and promoted the *Enneads* and his *Life of Plotinus* he was competing with Iamblichus for leadership of the Platonic school (Porphyry 2012: xlv). Even though most Platonists followed Iamblichus and adopted the disciplines of theurgy, these practices require a living tradition. They are more a way of life than a set of doctrines, so when that way of life ended in the 6th century, Iamblichean theurgy disappeared, at least in its platonic form. Plotinus’ Neoplatonism – which lacked an explicit ritual component – could more easily be appropriated by Christianity, so the Platonism we have received is Christian and in important respects is quite unlike Iamblichean Platonism. Scholars have only recently come to an understanding of Platonic theurgy. It was, after all, initially condemned as demonic by Augustine (Augustine 1950: 10.10), as “irrational” by Enlightenment thinkers, and is now virtually unthinkable in our materialist age. But thanks to the scholarship of Jean Trouillard, John Dillon, Polymnia

also has resonances among the Hermetists, some Gnostics and Numenius of Apamea. The idea of the ineffable God and the mystical union with Him emerges among the pagans and later influenced the late antique Christian writers. That experience is unutterable and language can communicate it only through metaphors and allusions. Damascius devotes a substantial portion of the third book of the *De. Princ.* to the Chaldean Oracles and its theological and mystical questions.

Thus, the theme of mysticism as direct cognition of a transcendent reality is at the basis of the Neoplatonic conception of the world, being the aim of the philosophical and theurgic practices. And since Iamblichean theurgic Platonists like Damascius believed in the theory of the vehicle of the soul and that the soul descends wholly to the material realm¹⁷³, certain practices known as theurgic or hieratic are necessary to re-establish the chains through which anagogic union with the divine must be achieved. In a time characterized by the persecution against pagan ritual – making traditional theurgic practices far more dangerous – Isidore and Damascius had to reconfigure and interiorize the ineffable mysteries of the rites.

As if the circle had been complete, pagan mysticism returned to its etymological roots in the Greek μύσθης¹⁷⁴, an initiate into the mysteries, like the cults in Eleusis or Samothrace. According to Walter Burkert, there was a significant cosmological and magical component in the secretive ceremonies of the mystery cults¹⁷⁵ and this cosmogonical secrecy might have been reconfigured by the mystical and theurgic rites. The mysticism of Damascius is not merely an abstract contemplation of consciousness, it involves – in its truly Iamblichean sense – a truly transformative experience in the flesh, an experience that might be called “supernatural” by a modern anthropological *Weltanschauung*¹⁷⁶.

Athanassiadi and others, we can still savor the smoke of ancient theurgic altars. By following these scholars, we can feel the fire and warmth of those Platonists who embodied gods.” Cf. (2017, p. 272.)

¹⁷³ Cf. the third chapter of the first part for a proper discussion of the theory of the vehicle of the soul.

¹⁷⁴ In the LSJ, the basic meaning of the word is “initiated” and it is derived from the verb μύω, to shut, to close, especially associated with closing the eyes. The term is cognate to the Latin *mutus* and the Sanskrit मूक (*muka*). Hittitologist and Indo-Europeanist Jaan Puhvel (1984) states that the Greek term derives from the Hittite verb *munnae*, “to conceal, to hide”.

¹⁷⁵ (1987, p. 18-25.)

¹⁷⁶ Thus, experiences like the radiation of mystical light from the body of the Ostrogoth Valamer, a companion of Attila the Hun, and of Damascius body itself as described in *PH* 51A, are to be understood as part of the possibilities in the cosmos, just like divining the future, levitating, acquiring supernatural powers and so on. Isidore is reported to be able to speak the “language of the birds”, something that impressed Proclus in their practices of Chaldean rituals. *PH*, 59F: “Proclus was intrigued by Isidore’s imitation of the sounds and echoes produced by birds. Sometimes, in the Chaldean practices, he gave a display of the

Not all “supernatural” elements in the *Philosophical History* need to be called mystical though. It is clear that there are degrees of intensity, a progression from normal cognitive states to the final union with the cause beyond being. The virtuosity of Hypatia e.g. cannot be called, at least based on the fragments available to us, mystical. The famous Alexandrian “pagan martyr” reached the highest goal a Platonic sage can reach in embodied life, the political virtue¹⁷⁷. In the progression of states characteristic of the narrative, the experiences of the supernatural/miraculous powers, out of body experiences and superhuman cognition – emerge after the ladder of the Bacchic frenzy has been ascended through the cathartic or purificatory virtue¹⁷⁸. Once the soul has been purified, certain aspects of reality, that were hidden by the constraints of time and embodied existence, became clearer and available to the sage¹⁷⁹. That is a reason for the necessity of hieratic rituals, with the soul fully embodied it is necessary the performance of some unutterable acts in order to raise to the level of purification, as Iamblichus remarks¹⁸⁰:

It is not thought that links the theurgist to the gods; else what should hinder the theoretical philosopher from enjoying theurgic union with them? The case is not so. Theurgic union is attained only by the perfective operation of unspeakable acts correctly performed, acts which are beyond all understanding, and by the power of the unutterable symbols intelligible only to the gods. (Transl. Luck, 1992).

imitation of sparrows and hens and other birds erecting their wings as they prepare themselves to fly” (διαπορουμένω γοῦν τῷ Πρόκλῳ περὶ τῶν Ἰσιδώρου μιμήσεων τῶν ὀρνέων {καὶ} τῶν φωνῶν <καὶ> τῶν ἀπηχημάτων ἐνίοτε ἐν τοῖς Χαλδαϊκοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασιν αὐτὸς ὑπεδείκνυε τὴν ὁδὸν τῆς μιμήσεως ἄλλων τε καὶ στρουθῶν τῶν μικρῶν τούτων καὶ κατοικιδίων τῆς πτήσεως, οἷα ψοφοῦσι ταῖς πτέρυξιν ἐγειρόμενοι πρὸς τὸ πετᾶσθαι.) This supernatural event seems trivial, but Shaw enlightens its meaning: “Controlling the weather, seeing without eyes and hearing without ears, repelling spells, such phenomena are not highlighted in our histories of ancient philosophy; in fact, they are rarely mentioned at all. They are something of an embarrassment, most often dismissed or explained away as the superstitious residue or cultural baggage of otherwise intelligent thinkers who, like us, knew better than to believe such things. But such events were an integral part of their experience. Supernatural abilities were understood to be the result of having lived a philosophical life nurtured by the theurgic purification of the etheric body. Describing the culmination of this art, Iamblichus says theurgists ritually weave themselves into all the powers of the cosmos until the soul «is fully established in the demiurgic god» (Iamblichus 2003: 292.12-13)”. Cf. (2017, p. 271).

¹⁷⁷ Cf. (O’Meara, 2006, p. 83-85).

¹⁷⁸ Cf. (Miles, 2018, p. 62-63).

¹⁷⁹ That is also the theory behind Isidore’s apparent deficiencies in some practical matters, but high elevation of the soul in the fragment 14, it is not a criticism against Isidore, as Photius supposes, but a statement that Isidore was way beyond practical concerns and had transcended the normal human state in the body.

¹⁸⁰ *De. Myst.* 2-11.

The degrees of intensity for the mystical experience in Damascius correspond to the levels of disengagement between the inner essence and the lowest levels of the cosmos, corresponding also to the different degrees of reality in historical existence. The men of the Christian state of the 5th century, for example, were so entrenched in their material existence that their natural state was predominantly Typhonian while the men of the Golden Age of Egyptian Pharaonic Theocracy were predominantly spiritual, with an easier access to the primordial realities that transcend space and time.

Georg Luck describes the roots of theurgy in the need of pagan believers to codify certain techniques in order to enter in direct contact with their gods at the time of Marcus Aurelius¹⁸¹. As I will argue briefly in the chapters 5-7, this union with the gods might have deeper overlaps, in the Chaldean Oracles, with Mesopotamian and Egyptian alchemical or magical works that also inform the writings of philosophical Hermetism. The mysticism of post-Iamblichean Neoplatonic philosophers might have been influenced by Egyptian or Mesopotamian currents of thought through these traditions, or rather the Neoplatonists acted like syncretic cultural agents, uniting disparate traditions in their *paideia*. In the chapter about the Hermetic *topoi* at the opening of the *Philosophical History*, I outline a brief analysis on how Damascius uses his Neoplatonic theory of myth to reshape the *topoi* also found in the Latin *Asclepius* and the *Korē Kosmou*. The urgency to preserve the waning traditions of the gods made them “relics” that needed to be integrated into a larger cultural synthesis.

Athanassiadi suggests that the origins of the Chaldean Oracles may lie in the connections between the priests of the Babylonian god Bel in Apamea of Syria and Platonic philosophy in the 2nd century¹⁸², Edmonds admits the existence of Hellenized Egyptian priests among the first practitioners of theurgy¹⁸³, Fowden relates theurgy with rites associated with the aretologies of Isis¹⁸⁴ and Uždavinys¹⁸⁵ attributes Pythagorean mysticism and even Platonic philosophy itself to Egyptian influences in Greek culture, as if both φιλοσοφία and ιερατική were continuations and interiorizations of the sacred rites of

¹⁸¹ (1992, p. 184).

¹⁸² (1999b, p. 153-158).

¹⁸³ (2019, p. 322).

¹⁸⁴ (1993, p. 45-52 and 126-131).

¹⁸⁵ (2014, p. 5-14). The hypotheses of this author, however, are far more speculative and based on some hermeneutical strategies that are not those of historical scholarship, but rather in metaphysical correspondences of symbols and patterns. I think that this approach is interesting in order to raise questions and to go beyond the more cautious affirmations of most scholars, but at the end of the day, it usually ends up producing works closer to literary fiction than to what is called scholarship.

Egyptian temple rituals and cosmogonic mystagogies. Some of those opinions seem to be justified if we follow the hints present in the so called Proemium of the *Philosophical History*. In this brief section, Damascius describes the meaning of Egyptian rites, their relation with philosophy, with the immortality of the soul and reincarnation, the multiple states of being, their transmission to the Greeks by the Pythagoreans and their final effect: absorption in God, total union with the Divine.

It is necessary to return briefly to the discussion on the meaning of the word *ιερατική*. In her book on theurgy, Tanaseanu-Döbler has argued that Damascius viewed philosophy as a mean of access to the First Principle while *ιερατική* was to be understood as pertaining to the priestly caste of the pagan cults and their practices¹⁸⁶, instead of the proper “theurgic” sense of the Chaldean Oracles, having its efficacy limited to the encosmic realm. In the *Philosophical History*, though, Damascius seems to use the term to denote both the practices of the traditional priests and the Neoplatonic tradition of theurgy. In fact, what Damascius is doing in the beginning of the book is a claim about the antiquity of theurgy and its derivation from the practices of the Egyptian priests, what he calls Egyptian philosophy¹⁸⁷. As a matter of fact, one of the main objectives of our author was to prove the existence of a perennial philosophy, a universal mystagogy that manifested itself through the writings and sacred rites of all peoples¹⁸⁸. The meaning of *ιερατική* for Damascius seems to incorporate theurgy, since the same word is used by Proclus in his treatise known as *De Sacrificio et magia* (περὶ τῆς καθ’ Ἑλληνας ἱερατικῆς τέχνης), in the *Platonic Theology* and in fact all over his works with meanings that are very similar to the *PH*, 4A.

Regarding Damascius position on hieratic ritual, some scholars pretended to present Damascius as a “sober rationalist” that revolted against Proclus emphasis on theurgic practices¹⁸⁹ and advocated a return to philosophy. Apart from the fact that for Damascius philosophy would have a far different meaning than some scholars might imply, as his characterization of Egyptian rites as “philosophical” seem to imply, there is also the fact,

¹⁸⁶ “a term used for the sum total of living pagan cults” (2013, p. 271).

¹⁸⁷ *PH*, 4A:

¹⁸⁸ Thus, the third book of the *De Princ.* is devoted to find correlations between Damascius aporetic philosophy and the traditions of the Chaldean Oracles, of Greek theology (Hesiod, Orphism, pre-Socratics), the Babylonians, the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. The perennial philosophy of Damascius and other Platonists differ in sensibility, however, from a Christian sensibility permeating the modern *philosophia perennis* of the Italian Renaissance, like the philosophy exposed by the Catholic priest Agostinus Steuchus or the so-called “Traditionalists” like René Guénon. Cf. (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 70). The main notable difference, of course, is the total irrelevance of the Christian writings for Damascius metaphysical system.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Krulak’s discussion, (2017, p. 455-456).

noted by Krulak¹⁹⁰, that Damascius did not disregard the efficacy of theurgy or hieratic art, instead saw philosophy and theurgy as complementary paths in the ascension of the Soul towards the One. As I hope to be able to discuss in the second part of the dissertation, in the *Philosophical History* philosophy means the perennial philosophy capable of elevating the soul towards the Unnamable, while *ἱερατική* is the sum of techniques (mental, practical, alchemical, theurgic, poetic) that allow someone to reach the disembodied state, towards the purificatory virtue, in order to be able to ascend to the final destination. In a certain sense, both are mystical disciplines, but while philosophy is enstatic the hieratic art is ecstatic. That might be the root of Damascius' condemnation of Christianity, because while exposing a theology – usually ignored by most Neoplatonic philosophers – that is not very dissimilar to Neoplatonism, the Christians disregarded the hieratic arts, thus maintaining the portion of mankind governed by the Christianized Byzantine Empire in the darkness of the Typhonian *πολιτεία*. The techniques of *ἱερατική* are the cultural argument of pagans against Christianity.

As a final word before turning to the first chapter, I would like to introduce briefly the possible relations between Damascius and a very recent perspective on Neoplatonic theurgy and mysticism that have been exposed by Wouter Hanegraaff¹⁹¹. In his book on Hermetic spirituality and altered states of knowledge, Hanegraaff argues that the Iamblichean tradition of theurgy is related to the alchemical practices of Zosimus of Panopolis and that both are among the few known – in the sense of known as individuals with established biographies – practitioners of the “Way of Hermes” alongside Theosebeia, a female disciple of Zosimus¹⁹². The implications of such view for the study of Damascius are numerous. In the first place, Hanegraaff's affirmation that Iamblichus must be understood as part of the Hermetic tradition also has consequences for an interpretation of all post-Iamblichean Neoplatonic philosophers, from Theodore of Asine to Olympiodorus. Secondly, if that affirmation holds true, it seems that works like the *Philosophical History*, a text embedded with Hermetic influences, must also be understood as being part of what the Dutch scholar calls “Hermetic spirituality”, a category that seems to encompass much of the religious-philosophical syncretism of Late Antiquity. Thirdly, the problematic relationship between “spirituality” and altered states of consciousness, as defined by

¹⁹⁰ (*Ibid*, p. 476).

¹⁹¹ *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination. Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

¹⁹² Cf. (2022, p. 9).

Hanegraaff as being the final destination of the Hermetic practitioner, and philosophy must be reassessed.

Hanegraaff affirms that the traditional scholarly divide of the Hermetic material into philosophical and technical (magical, alchemical, astrological etc.) *Hermetica* is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of the Hermetic writings associated not only with the eighteen treatises of the remaining *Corpus Hermeticum* but also with the so called technical *Hermetica* and the fragments of Stobaeus. He begins his exposition by considering problems inherent to translation and linguistic apprehension of terms like spirituality and mysticism, saying that much of what is considered “philosophical” in such texts could be also rendered as “religious,” “theological,” “mystical,” or “theosophical.”¹⁹³ For that reason, the texts associated with Hermetic philosophy should be understood as being part of a phenomenon called “spirituality” rather than philosophy, arguing that their goals were transformative instead of merely theoretical as is the modern idea of philosophy. Considering that Hanegraaff also includes Iamblichus in his canon of Hermetic practitioners, saying that he is even more representative of that tradition than many of the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum*¹⁹⁴, the consequences of such view would have the potential to alter the way the philosophies of Proclus, Damascius and other post-Iamblichean Platonists are interpreted.

The core of Hanegraaff’s inquiry into late antique mystical experiences comes from the perplexities instigated by the ambiguities of language. As he comments a quotation by A.J. Festugière regarding the ambiguity of the Greek term νοῦς¹⁹⁵ he faces the hermeneutical abyss of how to translate to modern readers the core of an experience of the world that might be untranslatable. His preference for “spirituality” over “philosophy”, however, is not totally convincing in my opinion. He only uses a single quote from Plato (!?) to justify that what he calls “Hermetic spirituality” diverges not only from modern but

¹⁹³ Cf. (p. 16).

¹⁹⁴ (*Ibid.* p. 22).

¹⁹⁵ “The philosophical language of Platonism lacked a specific term for referring to an organ of perception meant exclusively for mystical intuition. If one divides all that exists in *noēton* [that which can be thought] and *aisthēton* [that which can be perceived by the senses], then God belongs evidently on the side of the former. But by calling him that, one simply wants to make clear that he does not have a body – one does not mean to say that he can actually be known or understood through discursive language and can be named. This ambiguity of the word *noēton* comes from the ambiguity of the Platonic *nous*. Its function is to perceive realities that can be thought. However, when we are dealing with that particular *noēton* referred to as God, then the *nous* is no longer the human “intellect” properly speaking but a pure faculty of intuition or spiritual apprehension.” RT IV, 138-139, transl. Hanegraaff, p. 12.

also from the ancient understanding of philosophy¹⁹⁶. That seems to be the weakest part of his repositioning of Iamblichus – and thus the post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists – as part of the Hermetic spirituality that he aims to describe. I take his approach of including Iamblichus in the Hermetic tradition as a very refreshing perspective, and I would also try to position Damascius – at least in the *Philosophical History* – as being somewhat related to Hermetism, but I disagree with his distinction between spirituality and philosophy. The interplay between φιλοσοφία and ἱερατική is fundamental to understand the narrative and its relation with the embodiment of the soul and the cosmic order. Moreover, the *Philosophical History* is one of the most important texts for those trying to demonstrate the practical aspect of philosophy in Late Antiquity¹⁹⁷.

As Hanegraaff himself admits, there is a conception of philosophy that consider it as something similar to his idea of “spirituality”, the notion of philosophy as a way of life based on spiritual exercises as delineated by Pierre Hadot¹⁹⁸. It has been applied to the study of ancient Hermetism by Belgian historian Anna Van den Kerchove¹⁹⁹. In 2018, Christian Bull published his PhD dissertation on “The Way of Hermes”, including Hermetic philosophy, as being a Greek translation of Egyptian ritual practices by Hellenized Egyptian priests²⁰⁰. Hanegraaff is well aware of those developments and that makes me suspicious that his quarrel with the term philosophy has two distinct objectives. The first, and more obvious, is a repositioning of the modern debates over the mystical textual traditions of Late Antiquity associated with Hermes Trismegistus and extending to Neoplatonism.

The field was/is traditionally dominated by scholars trained in classical philosophy, like Festugière, either from philosophy or classical philology departments, a tradition that tends to derive the doctrines and experiences of Late Antiquity’s mystics from previous discussions in the field of Greek philosophy rather than searching for historical inquiries or

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 15.

¹⁹⁷ There are many examples throughout the work, and they all will be discussed, but one particularly interesting moment is the conversion, perpetrated by Isidore, of the Arabian peripatetic Dorus from technical and dialectical Aristotelian philosophy to “divine philosophy” (i.e. Platonic) in the fragment 134A. Cf. the discussion of that fragment in my chapter number 3.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. (*Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Études augustinienes, 1981. English transl. *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁹⁹ Cf. (*La Voie d'Hermès: Pratiques Rituelles Et Traités Hermétiques*. Brill, 2012). Some aspects of the master-disciple relation in Hermetism discussed by Van den Kerchove could also be applied to Neoplatonism and to the narrative in the *Philosophical History*.

²⁰⁰ (*The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom*. Brill, 2018).

anthropological considerations. As a historian trained as a specialist in religions and esotericism, Hanegraaff can operate a dislocation in the field and posits himself as a privileged hermeneut of the texts in the act of exchanging the word *philosophia* by spirituality. I do not disagree with such a theoretical aim in principle, but I think that his understanding of “philosophy” is somewhat skewed by some modern rationalist preoccupations.

Second, despite being aware of the studies of Pierre Hadot on the differences between the ancient and modern philosophical attitudes, Hanegraaff thinks that philosophy is a term that carries a too heavy semantic field and therefore can mislead readers of the “translations” that the historian needs to make from the ancient to the contemporary world and that can lead to a certain deviation of meaning. It is a sort of Protestant preoccupation with language as the fundamental purveyor of meaning. But in this work, I take Hanegraaff’s perspective in confluence with Hadot and Henry Corbin²⁰¹:

Any philosophy that does not lead to spiritual experience is an empty waste of time. And in reverse, any mystical experience that is not preceded by serious philosophical training is a prey to illusions, aberrations and other maladies of the soul.

I am quite sure that Damascius would agree with Corbin if he was, at this present moment in time, embodied in this world.

²⁰¹ Cf. (1986, p. 12).

Part 1. Biography, History and Embodiment

1. Life, Works and the Spirit of the Time

Οὐδ' ὀνομάζεται ἄρα οὐδὲ λέγεται οὐδὲ δοξάζεται οὐδὲ γινώσκεται, οὐδέ τι τῶν ὄντων αὐτοῦ αἰσθάνεται.

Plato, Parmenides (142A)

The life and works of Damascius are filled with both spiritual and physical journeys, adventures and explorations. From his spiritual itinerary through the sacred shrines in ancient Middle East to the Proclean Academy at Athens and from his conversion from rhetorician to a metaphysical philosopher and writer of fantastic narratives. Apart from the field of specialists in Neoplatonic philosophy, his status in contemporary times is no match for his influence in the late antique world. He is usually considered the last name of Greek philosophy, those coming after him in the Greek language being either Christian thinkers or “mere commentators”²⁰². Being among the last representatives of a literary tradition that was supposedly initiated by Thales of Miletus in the coast of Asia Minor in the VI century BCE²⁰³, Damascius was the last ‘diadoch’ of the Platonic academy. The strictly personal aspects of his early life are not well known but he was probably from a well-off family, as most Neoplatonists belonged to the elites of the Mediterranean οἰκουμένη²⁰⁴. Most of the information we have regarding the life of Damascius is provided by the *Philosophical History*.

²⁰² Cf. (Galpérine, 1987, p.2). Authors like Simplicius and Olympiodorus have been unfairly called commentators with no real innovations by many modern scholars, but it is necessary to stress that for the Neoplatonists themselves and for most of the ancient world the modern perception of “innovation” was scorned and the most important was to remain faithful to literary and philosophical canons. Just as in literature, imitating the style of a famous author was something to be prized. In philosophy, especially in Neoplatonism, it was desired to follow the footsteps of “divinely inspired” figures like Plato, Aristotle, the Orphics and the Chaldeans (i.e., the Chaldean Oracles). It is unnecessary to say that in their zealous attempt of emulating Plato, the Neoplatonists developed plenty of innovations and deviations from the Platonic παιδεία. Philosophy and the arts for much of the ancient world were practices of imitating divinely inspired poets and sages.

²⁰³ That is true if we follow the conventional narratives of philosophy’s dawn. In reality, the tradition to which Damascius considered himself to be a representative was a late blossoming started many centuries before, with the first poets and human musicians, even before the Pre-Socratics, the Orphics and the “seven sages”, as some scholars like A. Uždavinys (2011, 2014) have argued. Indeed, the true tradition existed forever.

²⁰⁴ cf. (Fowden, 1982, p. 34-35); (Westerink-Combès, 1986).

Damascius, as his name indicates, was born in Damascus around 458-462²⁰⁵ and probably lived 17-18 years in his native Syria before arriving in Alexandria. It is very likely that he was ethnically Arab-Nabatean, like his predecessor Iamblichus, and was part of some kind of priestly or cultic involved family. As a young man Damascius probably left his native Damascus for Alexandria, in Egypt, by then one of the main centers of learning activity in the Roman Empire, with the objective of studying rhetoric. There he dedicated himself to rhetoric in Horapollon's school for some years before turning to philosophy and met an environment with students from all over the Mediterranean world, composed of Christians and Pagans. Horapollon himself was known at the time as a famous champion of Hellenism²⁰⁶ and had a strong interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs, being the author of one treatise on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.

In Alexandria he met Isidore, whose master, Sarapio, constituted the model for the late antique Neoplatonic "holy man". A devotee of the hymns of Orpheus, Sarapio spent most of his life in reclusive study of the "teachings of Orpheus"²⁰⁷. A real man from the Golden Age of Cronus in the decadent times in which mankind was losing more and more the proximity to the gods and the perennial source of knowledge and contemplation. The discussion by Damascius of a "Cronian" age of golden light opposed to his current "Typhonian" times is indicative of a certain type of cyclic cosmology that has many consequences for a comparative cosmological ontology between Neoplatonic accounts of

²⁰⁵ Cf. (Athanasias, 1999, p. 19); (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010, p. 3). It should also be stressed, as noted by Athanasias, that Damascus was a place notable for combining "the Aramaic, Nabataean and Hellenic traditions in a way which has been superbly encapsulated by the personality of Damascius himself" (*ibid.*, p.20) and that even in his personal life Damascius showed elements of "the indissoluble synthesis of the three elements which are foremost in the make-up of his native city, but one can nonetheless detect the dominance of each one in turn in Damascius' behaviour and decisions at the most critical moments of his existence. ' Thus, the nomadic instinct is foremost in Damascius' life-long wanderings in search of inner freedom, the ineluctable attachment to the Aramaic homeland marks his decision to end his life in Syria, and finally the Greek ingredient is uppermost in his exceptional understanding of Plato and in the extreme ease with which he settled himself in Alexandria and especially Athens, whose ultimate flowering was brought about by Damascius himself" (*ibid.*). Not surprisingly, the religious philosophy of Damascius reflects the synthesis of the disparate elements that were common at the Eastern Mediterranean at the time. It is not a coincidence that such desire for a 'supreme' religious-cultural synthesis were manifest in a man born amidst the presence of multiple cultures and ideologies. Platonic philosophy, in such a context, offered a very powerful hermeneutics to 'harmonize' tendencies that were apparently very different.

²⁰⁶ Hellenism in that case often meant the amalgam of religious, philosophical and scientific writings attributed to the ancient Greeks before the rise of Christianity, but also the late antique syncretic knowledge of pre-Christian religions of the Babylonians, Egyptians, Phoenicians and other Eastern peoples by Greek speaking authors. In a certain sense the meaning of Hellenism was becoming almost a kind of archaist perennialism in Late Antiquity. In broad historiographical terms the times of Damascius are often included in the so called "ancient" period of world history but the distance of Damascius from Hesiod or the Babylonian writings, for example, is roughly the same as the temporal distance between Damascius and the French Revolution. Many historians in recent times are keen to consider Late Antiquity as being its own historical epoch (e.g. Fowden, 2013) or as a prelude to the Middle Ages rather than a continuation of "classical antiquity" (e.g. Athanasias, 2006).

²⁰⁷ *PH*, 111 and 112.

history and parallel doctrines from the Orient, like the four Hindu cosmological cycles of the *yugas* and the conceptions of temporality linked to the fate of the human soul, like the ones described in Vyāsa's *Bhāṣya* to the *Yogasūtra*. Sarapio's story also highlights the natural qualities of the Platonic sage and the attribution to him of Cronian virtues is indicative that he was able to achieve final liberation from the bonds of generation and theurgic virtue, the maximum virtuosity in the Damascian scale of virtues. I will deal with his hagiography by Damascius in the last chapter, showing that pagan ascetic mystics like him constituted "gifts" by the gods to an age in which true knowledge about divinity and reality was constantly being weakened by the forces of generation. In a certain sense, Sarapio, the exemplary master of the master of Damascius, could be compared to the liberated sage of the Indian mystical texts.

In Alexandria, a city that was in constant strife between the Chalcedonian Christian creeds and the many Monophysite groups, besides the persecution against the followers of the traditional religions and the philosophers²⁰⁸, Damascius felt unsafe and so he departed in a religious peregrination through holy places in the Near East in the company of Isidore, that was being chased by the Christian authorities. That religious travel marked his definitive conversion from rhetoric to philosophy as he was inspired by the *exemplum* of Isidore and became more and more distrustful of rhetoric²⁰⁹. The surviving evidence from the *Philosophical History* allow us to reconstruct in parts their sacred peregrination. They passed from Egypt to Gaza and then reached the town of Bostra²¹⁰. In Bostra they were joined by the peripathetic Dorus and with him they visited holy sites, and at the banks of the "Styx" in the Yarmuk valley Damascius experimented a religious ecstasy of the *mysterium tremendum* type contemplating the beauty of the natural waters²¹¹. The passage from rhetoric to philosophy was then consummated²¹².

²⁰⁸ As witnessed by the generation before Damascius in the murder of Hypatia, an event so brutal that even writing more than 100 years after the woman's tragic fate, the Syrian philosopher still regarded the event as one of the great atrocities committed by the Christians against the worshippers of the gods and the followers of philosophy. (cf. *PH*, 43E).

²⁰⁹ The conflict between philosophy and rhetoric is a famous trope of ancient philosophy at least since the confrontations of Plato-Socrates with the Sophists, it might even be said to be a foundational demarcation of philosophy. In terms of the *Philosophical History*, however, the ascension from the realm of rhetoric to the realm of "philosophy" marks Damascius' mystical conversion, as I argued in the chapter 7, in the discussion of fragment 87.

²¹⁰ *PH*, 130-133.

²¹¹ *PH*, 135B.

²¹² "How pernicious an activity was rhetoric, focusing all my attention on the mouth and the tongue and turning it away from the soul and from the blissful and divine lessons which purify it." (*PH*, 137B). Transl. Athanassiadi.

After the mystical experiences at Bostra both moved to Heliopolis (modern Baalbek), where Isidore was arrested and tortured and Damascius spent a great part of his time contemplating and praying in the local temples and engaged in activities to free Isidore. From Heliopolis they reached Aphrodisias and were received by Isidore's tutor, Asclepiodotus. With him they travelled again to holy natural places and Damascius had more spiritual experiences in his contact with nature, as in the travel to Phrygia (87A). The spiritual journey of Damascius in his conversion from rhetoric to philosophy might be seen as a mere curiosity by some people, but in terms of my purposes here it raises a very interesting question: many of the places visited by Damascius were actually natural landscapes in which he and Isidore could flee from the cities and (curiously) from older and established oracles and ritual centers. Finding the contemplation of the Divine mostly in the natural world could have been both a shifting experience in terms of traditional "pagan" customs, also a sign of a clear-cut consciousness of living in a world in decline. Michel Tardieu argued that the late pagan Neoplatonists have found a refuge for their religious sensibilities in nature, seeing sacred natural places as theophanic dwellings of the gods and *daemons*, like living relics of immensely divine power²¹³.

As noted by Ahbel-Rappe, the pilgrimage narrative of Damascius in his accounts of the PH is directly connected to the origins of the Greek word *θεωρία* (sightseeing):

As sightseer, observer of lands, shrines, and customs, the sage embarks on hazardous or arduous journeys to distant realms. Among such time-honored travelers, one might number Odysseus and Plato (according to the Seventh Letter, which has Plato traveling to Egypt to learn a more pristine wisdom), along with Plotinus, whom Porphyry has joining a military expedition in hopes of a voyage to India, and perhaps even Pausanias, whose *Periegesis* has been likened to a tour guide for Hellenic pilgrims. The "Lives" of the Neoplatonist philosophers are notable for such pilgrimage accounts: the excursion of Iamblichus' school to the hot springs of Gadara, where pupils bathed with their professor; Proclus' visit to the temple of Adrotta in Lydia. (2010, p. 10)

²¹³ *Les paysages reliques. Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius*. Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1990.

So, the act of theorizing, sightseeing, is a fundamental aspect of religious transformation. It is something that occurs in the confrontation between individual consciousness and the exogenous *mysterium* in a homeostatic amalgamation to the powers hidden beyond nature. It is significant that “Damascius and Isidore presumably traveled to ancient cities whose sanctuaries had been closed, whose oracles were muted” (*ibid.*) and that the spiritual *locus* of their journey takes place in a different metaphysical cartography when compared to the ritual maps of ancient paganism. Ahbel-Rappe and Athanassiadi both attribute such happening to the more prosaic fact that the sanctuaries have been closed and that pagan religions were constantly under attack in the end of 5th century²¹⁴. The shift from the sacrificial holy places in urban sacred temples to the natural wonders of the gods and the internalization of the divine could be a social pressure similar to the one described by G. Stroumsa that led the Jews to abandon bloody sacrifice and revert the polarities of archaic religions after the destruction of the Second Temple²¹⁵.

While the decline and persecution of the so called “pagan” religions is an undeniable fact of that age, inside the more proper pre-Christian Greco-Roman thought a shift from the agrarian festivals, folk religions and other socially cohesive sacrificial-based rites have been taking place at least since the times of Middle Platonism and one could even argue about a supposedly “Orphic-Pythagorean” revolution that has taken place in the Archaic period and remained as a countercultural ideology to the more widespread folk and state based sacrificial practices for centuries, like an incubating alchemical newborn that has taken a certain time to be transformed from copper to gold. It is not mere speculation on my part and it is a phenomenon that has been noted even by the opposing views of Festugière (1949) and Fowden (1993).

If the Neoplatonists claimed total orthodoxy in the realm of traditional Hellenic religion it also meant that in their own perceptions they knew something more profound and more saturated of truth than the vast majority of men, the οἱ πολλοί, as Plato would say. The transformation of the *material and carnal based religious experience* of the traditional paganism into the mentalist tradition of the First God or Hidden God and its “internal sacrifices”²¹⁶ is something that I will elaborate better in later sections. For now, it

²¹⁴ Thus, says Ahbel-Rappe: “Damascius was aware that he was writing in the twilight of a world his predecessors had philosophized as continuing to exist eternally in relation to the One” (*ibid.*).

²¹⁵ Cf. (2005, p. 148-155).

²¹⁶ The proper comparison of the “internal” or mentalist sacrifices found on Greco-Roman thought and practices to the parallel development of such notions in India, a place where historians of religion and sanskritists noted such a phenomenon in the transition of the Vedic period sacrificial culture to the first Upaniṣads and Buddhist literature. The notion of an interiorization of ritual sacrifice in the ascetic practices

is interesting to note that in Damascius autobiographic tale about his own spiritual and philosophical development many of such parallels can be found²¹⁷.

From such a peregrination and experiences with the ἀπόρρητα of landscapes and mysterious wonders of pagan Near East, Damascius and Isidore arrived at Athens, where they met the successors of Proclus in the Athenian Academy. Isidore occupied himself with the intricacies of the diadochy while Damascius was definitely converted from rhetoric to philosophy.²¹⁸ While being critical of Marinus and Zenodotus, the inheritors of Proclus, Damascius ended up as diadoch himself c. 515²¹⁹. His time at the Academy was a time of immense success and tireless reforms of the Platonic curriculum, with his leadership being so strong that by 529 it even motivated an imperial decree against philosophical activity in that city, probably motivated in part by the success of Damascius and his circle.

There is too much speculation about what happened with the Platonic philosophers active in Athens after Justinian's decree. The first decree²²⁰ excluded heretics, Jews and pagans of the army and reserved the public salaries only to Christians. The second decree²²¹ prohibited all those who were "sick of the madness of the Hellenes"²²² of teaching positions, effectively ending any possibility of continuity for the Platonic School of Athens. The historian Agathias listed seven philosophers among the ones that left Athens: Damascius of Syria, Simplicius of Cylicia, Priscianus of Lydia, Eulamius of Phrygia, Hermias and Diogenes of Phoenicia and Isidore of Gaza (not to be mistaken with Damascius' teacher Isidore). They likely left Athens for Persia, where the young king Khosrow I acquired a reputation of being a "philosopher king". It seems that after some

associated with the *Yogins*, *Vratyās* and *Śramanas* is widespread in the historical interpretation of Indian religions. Cf. (Sarbacker, 2021).

²¹⁷ "Damascius writes: "without gods, without oracles, a philosopher has no place." Damascius and Isidore had come to witness the *aporrheta*—the prodigies or phenomena that now took the place of elaborate temples. The water of the Styx, local deities, and dreams *en route* all figure into what is purportedly Damascius' travelogue. The geographic settings of the ancient world become landscapes of the spirit, where local shrines and caves form a pagan cartography. Damascius was aware that he was writing in the twilight of a world his predecessors had philosophized as continuing to exist eternally in relation to the One. Damascius followed a venerable tradition of asserting the primacy of landscape in the location of shrines. As pagans witnessed the destruction of their temples, they attempted to prevent what they saw as a spiritual drought from decimating the sanctity of the world. One must appreciate the importance of this tradition in light of the general purpose of the PH: to commemorate the sanctity of the Hellenic religion" (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010, p.10).

²¹⁸ "At the end of his pagan pilgrimage to people and places Damascius had given up rhetoric for philosophy as a professional pursuit, a decision which meant the change from a life of cultivated inanity to the passionate search for God through the wonders of nature and the words of inspired men; to this goal he dedicated himself with missionary zeal. In Athens, he became a full-time student of the Academy, reading mathematics with its head, Marinus, and theoretical philosophy with Zenodotus, who may have been Marinus' successor." Cf. (Athanasias, 1999, p. 39).

²¹⁹ W-C, 1: xix.

²²⁰ Codex Justinianus, I, 5, 18, 4, ed. P. Krüger, p. 57.

²²¹ Ibid., I, 11, 10, 2, p.64.

²²² I.e. "pagans".

time spent in Persia, Damascius and his colleagues became disillusioned with the *Shah* and tried to return to the Roman Empire. Khosrow signed a treaty with the Byzantines demanding that they could return without being harmed or forced to convert to Christianity²²³.

The fate of the philosophers after the return from Persia is among the most disputed questions in Platonic scholarship. In a now very disputed book²²⁴, Michel Tardieu speculated that Damascius and some of his followers installed themselves in Harran, a city located at the border of the Roman and Sassanid empires and founded by Sumerian traders near 25 centuries before Damascius was born. Harran was famous in the Islamic Middle Ages (or Islamic Golden Age) as a place in which astrologers claiming to follow Hermes Trismegistus were among the leading elites, and in modern scholarship as a place in which paganism thrived well into the 12th century²²⁵.

Tardieu believed that those astrologers were actually the inheritors of a Platonic school of thought founded by Damascius there in the 6th century. Analyzing the writings of Simplicius, he came to the conclusion that a certain geographic vocabulary used by the Cyprian philosopher could only mean that he took exile in Northeastern Syria. For Tardieu, the representatives of the Sabians of Harran in the 8th and 9th centuries – practitioners of a type of very Platonized astral religion in the Syrian city – were the inheritors of the Platonic school founded by Damascius after his demise from Persia. The famous mathematicians and sages Thābit ibn Qurra and al-Battānī were to be thought of as the rightful successors of the Athenian Platonists.

Tardieu's hypothesis of a direct transmission from Athenian Neoplatonism to Islam also rests on the accounts of the scholar al-Mas'Udi's visit to the region of Harran three centuries after the supposed exile of Damascius. In that travel al-Mas'Udi describes the presence of a supposed meeting place of the Sabians in which the Platonizing inscription "He who knows himself becomes deified" figured prominently.²²⁶ Some scholars of Islamic studies often contest Tardieu's claims, on the basis that in his translations of al-Mas'Udi he often claims without substance that the so called gathering place of the Sabians was a kind of organized school or that between the 6th century when Damascius

²²³ II.31.

²²⁴ *Les paysages reliques. Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius*. Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1990.

²²⁵ The city was also famous in Antiquity for being a place of worship of the Semitic Goddess *Sin*. Cf. (Tardieu, 1990, p. 44).

²²⁶ Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999a and 1993, p. 24-29).

supposedly established the school at Harran and the account of al-Mas'Udi three centuries later there are no references to the astral worshipper Sabians²²⁷.

I. Hadot and Athanassiadi, on the other hand, seem to support that at least part of Tardieu's thesis might be right. Hadot argued that Simplicius wrote a significant part of his surviving works in Harran²²⁸, while Athanassiadi relates an anecdote by Procopius in which the Sassanid Emperor while campaigning against the Romans in many border towns may have been abstained of ransoming Harran due to the presence of his previous illustrious guests, the Platonic philosophers²²⁹. Another interesting argument for the survival of at least some kind of Platonic influences at Harran comes from the observations of Henry Corbin regarding Sabian rituals and spiritual temples²³⁰.

The French scholar, himself a modern Platonist, comments on multiple interesting themes regarding the sacred and spiritual architecture of the Sabian temples. The architecture of the Sabian temple described by al-Mas'Udi has many astral Platonic correspondences in the sense that the temple seems to be constructed in a macrocosm-microcosm analogy and is a prolongation of the Syrian or Syrian-Babylonian cults in a Neoplatonic fashion²³¹. Regardless of the factual aspect of the Sabian temple, what really matters for Corbin is the hermeneutical correspondence between the Sabian religion and the Neoplatonic metaphysical geography. Be that as it may, it seems that Damascius has really died in his native Syria considering that a funerary stele dated at around 538 and rediscovered at Emesa (modern Homs) includes an epigram to a deceased slave attributed to Damascius by the historian Agathias²³²:

²²⁷ Cf. (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010, p. 425, note 32).

²²⁸ (*Ibid.* p. 8).

²²⁹ Cf. (1999a, p. 52). In another work, Athanassiadi shows how the writings of Thābit ibn Qurra are similar to the *Philosophical History*, with passages like this one: "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." I am not competent in Arabic or Syriac to know if Athanassiadi's rendition of the passage is faithful, but she also says that Qurra subsequently said that "that all the culture and civilisation of which this world can boast is the gift of the pagans to humanity." (Cf. 1993, p. 28). In the same page, Athanassiadi quotes al-Mas'Udi: "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." Indeed, those words do resonate the sensibility of Damascius.

²³⁰ (*Temple Sabéen et Ismaélisme*, p. 171-174. In: *Temple et Contemplation*. Paris: Éditions Médicis-Entrelacs, 2006-2015).

²³¹ (*Ibid.* p 175).

²³² *Anthol. Gr.* VII. 533.

Ζώσιμη, ἡ πρὶν ἐοῦσα μόνῳ τῷ σώματι δούλη
Καὶ τῷ σώματι νῦν ἡῶρον ἐλευθερίην.

I, Zosime, who was before a slave in body only

Have now gained freedom for my body too.

The works of Damascius are so representative because they summarize “a compendium of pagan philosophical and religious traditions as they existed at the close of an epoch.”²³³ His treatise *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* probably is the last major work of the Platonic tradition in philosophy. Damascius work is at the same time the peak and the total destruction of ancient Platonic metaphysics, his aporetic analysis of problems relating to the One, procession and reversion, the triads and the significance of mythologies is the swan song of a world that was perceived to be rapidly disappearing. At the same time, his writings reconfigured thousand-year-old mythologies, philosophies and spiritual technologies while affirming the fundamental Platonic orthodoxy. Besides the *De Principiis* and other works in which his authorship is widely accepted by most scholars and that I will discuss shortly, there is also a polemic stance that the treatises of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite are a *bogus* conceived by Damascius in order to allow Platonic philosophy to survive disguised as Christianity. That thesis was first conceived by the Italian byzantinist Carlo Maria Mazzucchi²³⁴ and followed with some disagreements by Tuomo Lankila²³⁵. That is a very interesting thesis for the purpose of investigating Damascius’ position to the crisis of his times and his relationship with Christianity.

Lankila’s reading of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as a deliberate forgery of Damascius in order to preserve Proclean metaphysics is opposed to Mazzucchi’s thesis of the *Corpus* as a creation of pagan philosophers at the Academy of Athens in order to compromise with Christianity at the expense of “polytheism”. Lankila’s claim is that the forgery was a way of undermining Christianity through the introgression of Proclean metaphysical schemes. Such disagreement depends on the definitions of many notions (like that of polytheism

²³³ (Ahbel-Rappe, 2009, p. 198).

²³⁴ (DAMASCIO, AUTORE DEL CORPUS DIONYSIACUM, E IL DIALOGO ΠΕΡΙΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΗΣ. In: Aevum, Anno 80, Fasc. 2, Maggio-Agosto 2006, p. 299-334.)

²³⁵ (THE CORPUS AREOPAGITICUM AS A CRYPTO-PAGAN PROJECT. In: JLARC 5, 2011, p. 14-40).

itself) and if they can be applied to the Neoplatonists without questioning fundamental concepts. Moreover, Damascius seems to disagree with Proclus on multiple instances regarding metaphysical themes like the Henads, the relationship between the Limited, Unlimited and the Mixed and the nature of the First Principle²³⁶.

Claiming that he was trying to guarantee survival for the “Platonic vision of the great Proclus”²³⁷ seems to be a stretch to say the least. The possible fraudulent nature of the text has indeed been noted by some 20th century commentators like E.R. Dodds²³⁸ but the argument that Damascius was trying to safeguard Proclean metaphysics and paganism seems unsubstantiated, especially considering his hostility towards Pamprepus in the PH²³⁹. I believe that it is possible that Damascius was involved in the forgery of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, but Lankila’s arguments, as interesting as they are, of non-compromise with Christianity seem to be motivated by a militant anti-Christian “Neo-Pagan” stance disguised as scholarly *laïcité*. G. Curiello argued against the ideas of ascribing the Dionysian corpus to Damascius, but he deals only with Mazzuchi’s thesis, not the one by Lankila²⁴⁰. In view of the philosophy of history exposed by Damascius in the *Philosophical History*, it is not totally unreasonable that such “forgeries” – I prefer to say “transmissions” – might have happened. In a new Golden Age, under the guise of Cronus, mankind would rediscover the truths hidden in the depths of Dionysus the Areopagite and set up again a holy order based on philosophy as the Neoplatonists understood it.

Damascius’ known works can be grouped in literary and philosophical works, the former being represented by the *Philosophical History/Vita Isidori* and the *Paradoxa* and the latter by the *De Primis Principiis* and some few extant commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, with latter being mostly fragmentary. Regarding the so-called literary works, the PH, as we have seen, is preserved in fragments scattered through Photius’ *Bibliotheca* and the *Suda*²⁴¹, while the *Paradoxa* is unfortunately lost. The latter is regarded by Photius, who was able to read it²⁴², as a series of tales and narratives concerning the miraculous in

²³⁶ e.g., *De Princ.* II. 43.1-2; II. 93; II.97.

²³⁷ (2011, p. 16).

²³⁸ (1963, p. xxvii, note 1).

²³⁹ Pamprepus was a pagan poet, probably a follower of Nonnus of Panopolis, that revolted against the emperor Zeno and issued many prophecies about the restoration of paganism. In the PH, 112A, Damascius compares Pamprepus with the chaotic beast Typhon and contrasts him with the wise Cronian Sarapio. Such comparison must be a reflection of Damascius particular conception of holy action and just behavior, as he believed that the wise man seeks inner freedom and intellectual fruition more than excessive focus on words and vain actions in the journey back to the place from which the higher souls came from.

²⁴⁰ (2013, Dionysius (Halifax), XXXI n.s.)

²⁴¹ 1928–38. *Suidae Lexicon*, I-V ed. A. Adler. Leipzig

²⁴² (Athanasiasi, 1999a, p. 40).

Near Eastern folklore and mythology. The loss of such work is indeed a downside for a work like mine, considering that the intersection between fantastic tales, folklore and metaphysics is at the heart of my appreciation and discussion of the dynamics of mysticism in the Neoplatonic narratives of Damascius. Athanassiadi claims, probably invoking the Arab-Syrian background of Damascius, that the *Paradoxa* contained stories about *Jinns* and other fantastic beings of Oriental folklore, a Greek literary predecessor to the *One Thousand and One Nights* of the Arabic language.

The extant philosophical works of Damascius are mostly commentaries on Plato's works and the *De Principiis*, the most representative treatise of mystical apophatic philosophy in the Neoplatonic tradition that has come down to our age²⁴³. Among the commentaries on Plato's works one can find extant analyses and philosophical exercises on the first *Alcibiades*, *Philebus*, *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*. From the internal evidence in the works of Damascius, other commentaries on the *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Laws* I and II and the *Republic* can also be deduced²⁴⁴. Damascius also wrote lost commentaries on Aristotle and lessons on the Chaldean Oracles. The commentarial works will be quoted when necessary to complement the arguments or explain some more obscure passages of the *Philosophical History* that might be enlightened by the recurrence to other works of Damascius.

So far, in this brief biographic sketch, it was possible to make a flight through some aspects of the life and works of Damascius and how they fit in the overall outlook of the age. In the next chapters, the historical argument will be deepened and more recurrent quotations and analyses of the *Philosophical History* will take place. The only conclusion that one can take from the path trodden until this point is the fighting and unrelenting nature of Damascius' life, considering his possible journey to Persia after Justinian's edict and all the persecutions and torments that he had to pass through in order to maintain his philosophical and human integrity.

²⁴³ "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." Athanassiadi, 1994, p. 2. In contrast to Athanassiadi, I believe that many works by Proclus can also be called "original works of systematic theology", especially the *Platonic Theology* and the *Elements of Theology*.

²⁴⁴ Ahbel-Rappe, 2018, p. 516.

2. Damascius' Neoplatonic View of Contemporary History

The hypothesis of C. Mazzuchi discussed above may have problems in some stances, as his critics, Curiello above all, have argued. At the same time, based on a reading of the *Philosophical History*, some of his arguments seem possible. In many parts of the work Damascius discusses individuals and plans to restore the traditions of the gods. As I plan to demonstrate in the second chapter, that discussion is indeed related to a cyclical understanding of the nature of the cosmos, as argued by Mazzuchi²⁴⁵. The works of the Ps. Dionysus are filled with theurgy and negative theology and both seem to be related to a cyclical cosmological worldview in Damascius thought. Moreover, in the *Philosophical History* Damascius demonstrate some knowledge of Christian doctrine when he ironizes the double nature of Jesus as man and God²⁴⁶. To understand what Damascius probably thought about the possibilities of a “pagan restoration” in a political sense it is necessary to analyze his references to three individuals: Severus, Anthemius and Marcellinus. The comparisons between the destinies of those individuals, praised as pious men in many fragments, and the ill-fated Pamprepius, the beastly Typhonian pagan poet, is enough to hint at the impossibility of restoring the “old ways”.

Severus is described as a native Roman, a consul in the sect of Anthemius, the Western *Caesar*, an emperor that seemed to be a crypto-pagan. After the failure of “resurrecting fallen Rome” he established himself in Alexandria²⁴⁷. Disillusioned with the possibility of restoring Rome and its traditions, Severus turned himself to philosophy:

Τῶν πολιτικῶν πραγμάτων ἀποτυχῶν, ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ δὲ ἀφικόμενος ἐπὶ τὸν ἡσυχιον καὶ ἀπράγμονα βίον ἐτράπετο, μίσει τῶν ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ δυσχερασμάτων - πολλά δὲ τοῦ δήμου τῶν Ῥωμαίων καὶ τῶν αὐτοκρατόρων κατεβόα – φιλοσοφῶν, ἐν βιβλίῳ ἀφθόνοις οὐσιν αὐτῷ καὶ παντοδαποῖς. Εἴπερ δὲ τις ἕτερος ἰκανὸς ἦν ἐπαγαγέσθαι τοὺς ἐπὶ παιδείᾳ διενεγκόντας ὡς ἑαυτὸν ἰέναι πολλάκις. ἐπιεικῆς τε...

Failing in political affairs, he came to Alexandria and turned to a more contemplative existence due

²⁴⁵ Cf. (2013, p..

²⁴⁶ *PH*, 111. The Neoplatonists mostly ignored the Christian theological debates, at least openly. The Christianity alluded by Damascius in most cases is the “real Christianity” of political power and persecutions, as argued by P. Hoffmann. Cf. 2017, p. 736.

²⁴⁷ *PH*, 51A.

to his disgust with the political life – he constantly complained about the people of Rome and its rulers – and he pursued philosophy through the many books he possessed. He was more capable than any other in attracting those of great learning and they constantly came to him. And he was pious...

A man bestowed with ἐπιείκεια (fairness, pious devotion) towards the pagan παιδεία, the misfortunes of Severus in service of Anthemius resemble somewhat the failures of the emperor Julian in his vain attempt to revive and synthesize the pagan traditions through Hellenism and Platonic philosophy. The praise Damascius exerts towards him is indicative that for our Platonist only the refuge in the sacred practices of philosophy and hieratic arts could offer an escape from the decadence of his times, it is confirmed by Athanassiadi's fragment 7 – a synthesis of Photius 9 and 233 – in which Severus is presented as being someone with knowledge of miraculous stones and their mystical powers, taking a refuge of politics in the alchemical contemplation of nature.²⁴⁸

Severus is described as being so wise that even the Indian Brahmins residing at Alexandria visited him many times. Who exactly were those Brahmins, what they were doing in Egypt and what type of activities they were engaging in is a mystery, but based on the commentary of Damascius²⁴⁹ one can speculate that knowledge of the doctrines and ascetic sages of India was not uncommon among the circles of elite pagans in the Eastern Roman Empire. In my opinion, the knowledge exhibited by Damascius of the different sects of Indian religious groups hint at something more. Be that as it may, Severus is the example that direct political action against the “forces of generation” (i.e. the Christians

²⁴⁸ The original fragments used by Athanassiadi in her edition are the following: ἦν δ' ὁ Σεβήρος Ῥωμαῖος καὶ Ῥωμαίων πατὴρ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ νόμου ἀξίωσιν· ὃς ἔλεγε καὶ λίθον ἰδεῖν, ἐν ᾧ σελήνης ἐγίνετο σχήματα μεταμορφουμένης παντοῖα μὲν, ἄλλοτε δὲ ἄλλα, καὶ πρὸς ἥλιον αὐξομένης καὶ μειουμένης, ἐνόητα τῷ λίθῳ, καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν ἥλιον. [9] and Καὶ δὴ Σεβήρος, ἀνὴρ τῆς Ῥώμης πατρίκιος, ἄλλα τε διηγείτο ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ συνδιατόμενος, καὶ ὅτι λίθον ἐθεάσατο ἐν ᾧ σελήνης ἐγίνετο σχήματα μεταμορφουμένης παντοῖα μὲν, ἄλλοτε δ' ἄλλα πρὸς ἥλιον αὐξομένης καὶ μειουμένης ἐνόητα τῷ λίθῳ καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν ἥλιον· ὅθεν ἡ φήμη τοὺς τοιούτους λίθους καλεῖ συνοδίτας. καὶ ἠλίτην δὲ λίθον ἔλεγεν ἑωρακέναι, οὐχ οἷον οἱ πολλοὶ ἑωράκαμεν, ἀκτῖνας διαφαίνοντα ἀπὸ τοῦ βάθους χρυσίτιδας, ἀλλὰ δίσκον ἡλιοειδῆ κείμενον μέσον τοῦ λίθου, σφαῖραν αὐτόθεν πυρὸς ὡς ἰδεῖν· ἀπ' αὐτῆς δὲ τὰς ἀκτῖνας ἐκθρόσκειν ἕως ἐπὶ τὴν ἴτυν· εἶναι γὰρ σφαιροειδῆ καὶ ὄλον τὸν λίθον. ἰδεῖν δὲ καὶ σεληνίτην, οὐ τὸν ὕδατι τεγγόμενον, εἶτα ἐκφαίνοντα τὸν μηνίσκον, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ὕδροσεληνίτην καλούμενον, ἀλλὰ κατὰ φύσιν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ τρεπόμενον ὅτε καὶ ὅπως ἡ σελήνη τρέποιτο, θαυμάσιον χρῆμα τοῦτό γε φύσεως. [233]

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 51D.

and the Empire²⁵⁰) was to be regarded with extreme caution and was, in essence, unfeasible.

The other two men, Anthemius and Marcellinus, practical men dedicated to governing and exercising practical virtues are wholly praised by Damascius and described as “Hellenes” (pagans). Photius summarizes Damascius²⁵¹:

ὅτι Ἀνθέμιον οὗτος τὸν Ῥώμης βασιλεύσαντα ἑλληνόφρονα καὶ ὁμόφρονα Σεβήρου τοῦ εἰδώλοις προσανακειμένου λέγει, ὃν αὐτὸς ὕπατον χειροτονεῖ, καὶ ἀμοιβὴν εἶναι κρυφίαν βουλὴν τὸ τῶν εἰδώλων μύσος ἀνανεώσασθαι.

He says that Anthemius, the Roman Emperor, “hellenized” [i.e. was a pagan] and was in agreement with Severus, the worshipper of idols that he made consul. And that together they had a secret plan to renew the impurity of idolatry.

For as much as the restoration of Hellenism was to be seen as a noble enterprise, it was, in the grand scheme of things, a futile and romantic extravagancy. The cosmic order had already flowed and Damascius understood that well when he wrote the *Philosophical History* anytime between 515 and 529. Marcellinus, the independent ruler of a principate in Dalmatia, is described as ἀνὴρ ἐπιεικῆς καὶ γενναῖος (a pious and noble man) exercising a fair rule in the Illyrian lands devastated by Germanic and Inner Asian tribes like the Ostrogoths and the Huns²⁵². Those examples of pious political men also say something about how Damascius understood the possibilities of life and reality.

Damascius also talks about other previous attempts of restoring paganism, showing again that the failures were bound to happen²⁵³:

ἐπεχείρησε μὲν γὰρ καὶ Ἰουλιανὸς ὁ βασιλεύς, ἀλλ' ἐτέων οὐκ ἐπέβη πισύρων, ἐπεχείρησε δὲ χρόνοις ὕστερον καὶ Λούκιος, ἀνὴρ ἐν Βυζαντίῳ τὴν στρατηγίδα ἀρχὴν ὑπὸ βασιλεῖ Θεοδοσίῳ κοσμῶν, ὃς πειραθεὶς τὸν βασιλέα ἀνελεῖν εἶσω

²⁵⁰ The expression “forces of generation” is usually a translation employed by Athanassiadi in order to define the active powers in the historical world that are an embodiment of what the Neoplatonists termed γένεσις, the world of becoming, in opposition to being.

²⁵¹ *PH*, 77A.

²⁵² *Ibid.* 69A.

²⁵³ *PH*, 115A.

τῶν βασιλείων παρήλθε, καὶ τρεῖς θελήσας ἐξελκύσαι τοῦ κολεοῦ τὸ ξίφος ἀπετρέπετο καταπεπληγμένος· ἑώρα γὰρ ἐξαίφνης γυναῖκα μεγάλην καὶ βλοσυρὰν περιπτυσσομένην κατὰ νότων τὸν Θεοδόσιον. μετὰ ταῦτα ὁ μέγας τῆς ἕως στρατηλάτης ἐπεχείρησεν, ἀλλ' ἐπεσχέθη βίαιον εὐράμενος θάνατον· ἀπὸ γὰρ τοῦ ἵππου πεσὼν καὶ τὸ σκέλος κακῶς διατεθεὶς ἐτελεύτησε τὸν βίον. εἶτα Σεβηριανός, φησὶν, ὁ πολίτης ἡμῶν ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνοις μετὰ καὶ ἄλλων συχνῶν· ἀλλ' ὀλίγου δεῖν θανάτῳ ἐξημιώθη δι' ἀπιστίαν τῶν συνειδῶτων, ἄλλων τε ἴσως, καὶ Ἑρμενερίχου τοῦ Ἄσπερος παιδὸς ἐξειπόντος τὴν συνωμοσίαν τῷ Ζήνωνι. πρὸς οἷς Μάρσος καὶ Ἴλλους· ὃν ὁ μὲν Μάρσος ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ἐπαναστάσει νόσῳ τέθνηκεν, ὁ δὲ Ἴλλους συλληφθεὶς ξίφει τὸν βίον κατέστρεψεν.

An attempt was made by the Emperor Julian, yet his reign did not last for as long as four years; another attempt was made some time later by Lucius who held the office of *magister militum praesentalis* in Constantinople under Theodosius. He came into the palace with the intention of killing the emperor and, attempting to draw his sword from its sheath three times, he was deterred from doing so in his amazement at suddenly seeing a grim and powerful woman who clasped Theodosius from behind. After that there was an attempt by the Great General of the East, but he was prevented by a violent death: he fell from his horse and injuring his leg, he died. Then Severianus, my own fellow-citizen, made an attempt in our own times together with many others; but he was betrayed by his accomplices and camee close to being condemned to death, Ermenaric, son of Aspar and probably some others too – having divulged the plot to Zeno. In addition to these were Marsus and Illus; Marsus died of disease during the revolt itself, but Illus was arrested and killed himself with his sword. (Transl. Athanassiadi)

The many attempts of restoring paganism in the political sense since the Emperor Julian (361-363), all failed and were all bound to fail by cosmic necessity. All of those individuals died in tragic ways and could not even come close of any “restoration”.

As Athanassiadi noted, the outlook of the Neoplatonists was essentially optimistic and positive²⁵⁴. Even in the darkest historical times, the access to the higher spheres of reality is possible and the cosmos is an ordered whole. The cycles of time are part of the nature of existence, just like there are different types of souls²⁵⁵ and reaching for the highest heavens is possible at any given time of cosmic history. The dance of cycles in the cosmo-historical time does not affect the structure of the sacred space. Time is a “cosmification” of the unnamable mysteries of eternity as could be disclosed – but it is expressly *not* done by Damascius – in the esoteric symbols of the god Aion²⁵⁶. The prophetic and mystical states of existence manifest themselves as symbols that need to be interiorized and comprehended by the soul in order to reach a state beyond the chains of profane time.

The *Philosophical History* was incubated in the same circles of debates and intellectual confrontation that generated the *New History* of Zosimus and the so called *Theosophia Tubingensis*. With the former, it shares the general theme of the Roman decline, the Egyptophilia and many lexical similarities, while with the *Theosophia*²⁵⁷ it shares the association between cosmic history, prophecy and mystical practices. “An injunction to the pagans to convert to Christianity”²⁵⁸, the *Theosophia* pretends to interpret the traditional oracular and prophetic tradition in order to show that the decline of the pagan world is not a sign of darkness and destruction but the incubation of a new revelation that was foreshadowed by the oracles of the Greek gods, Greek and Egyptian sages and philosophers, the Sibylline Oracles and announced in the Christian Bible²⁵⁹. Athanassiadi associates the *Theosophia* with a certain Christian propagandistic sensibility conceived in the Alexandrian debates involving the Neoplatonists and Christians, exposing

²⁵⁴ “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. 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 systematized popular tales in an attempt to reveal and spread the spiritual truth lurking behind the veils of extravagance and incongruity”. 1993, p.8.

²⁵⁵ E.g. the fragment 18, that will be analyzed in the sixth chapter.

²⁵⁶ *PH*, 41.

²⁵⁷ The text is an epitome of an appendix to the lost treatise *Περὶ τῆς ὀρθῆς πίστεως* (On the True Belief) written around 500 CE. Cf. (Beatrice, 1995, p. 403): ὁ τὸ βιβλίον συγγεγραφώς, ὅπερ ἐπιγράφεται ΘΕΟΣΟΦΙΑ, διαλαμβάνει κατ’αὐτὸ τὸ προοίμιον, ὅτι συνέγραψε μὲν πρότερον ἑπτὰ βιβλία περὶ τῆς ὀρθῆς πίστεως· ἄρτι δὲ τὸ ὄγδοον καὶ τὰ ἐφεξῆς συγγράφει κτλ. “The man who has written the book which is entitled Theosophy exposes, in the very same proem, that he first wrote seven books On the True Belief, then book eight and the following etc”. Theos. § 1, 2-5 Erbse = ἐπιτομή 1 Beatrice. Transl. Carrara, slightly altered, 2019.

²⁵⁸ (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 354.)

²⁵⁹ (Beatrice, 1995, p. 403-404.)

a fundamentally Eusebian philosophy of history, in opposition to a proper Neoplatonic one like the philosophies exposed in the works of Damascius and Zosimus²⁶⁰.

The work of Damascius, then, takes place in a pivotal moment of the ongoing debates between Christians and pagans on the meaning of oracles, on the nature of time and the universe and its relation with philosophical and religious practices. As noted by Chadwick²⁶¹ “the Christians were sure that the pagan cults were paying homage to inferior and evil daemons” and that point was, in my opinion, related to the main reason of divergence between the pagan philosophy exposed by Damascius and Christianity. The rites associated with the hieratic arts – or theurgy – were seen by many Christians as cults of evil or inferior demonic beings while by Damascius the hieratic arts were a fundamental aspect of the ascension of the soul in the cosmic ladder and union with divine principles. In that sense, the Christianity of his time and the followers of that religion could not escape the material realm and neither establish contacts with higher planes of the spatial reality, they were restricted to the corruption and degeneration of time, being repeatedly associated with the “forces of generation” throughout the *Philosophical History*²⁶². In due time I will discuss how some intellectual pagans saw Christianity as a cult of evil necromancers worshipping a *κακοδαίμων*.

Nevertheless, the comparison with the *Theosophia Tubingensis* is obviously dependent on how “Orthodox Christian” the text really is and how representative it would be of the Christian “adversaries” of Damascius or Zosimus²⁶³. Most of the remaining text is a Byzantine epitome from the 8th century²⁶⁴ and nothing can guarantee that certain parts of the epitome are in accordance with the author of the treatise, that might have been Aristocritus “the author of a syncretistic Theosophy which tried to demonstrate that Judaism, Paganism, Christianity, and Manichaeism are one and the same doctrine.”²⁶⁵ Pier Franco Beatrice, the most recent editor of the text, thinks that “the Theosophist intends to oppose the salvation brought about by the true religion of Christ to the obscurity of

²⁶⁰ (1999a, p. 356).

²⁶¹ *Oracles of the End in the Conflict of Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, p. 126. In: E. Lucchesi - H.D. Saffrey (eds.), *Memorial Andre-Jean Festugière. Antiquité païenne et chrétienne. Cahiers d'Orientalisme*, 1984.

²⁶² In the analysis of fragment 18 in the sixth chapter, that theme will be developed alongside Damascius theory of the ages of mankind.

²⁶³ Italian scholar Teresa Sardella, for example, argued that the work is a fruit of “Gnostic elitists” rather than an Orthodox Christian text. Cf. (Beatrice, 1995, 405).

²⁶⁴ (Carrara, 2019, p. 196-198).

²⁶⁵ (*Ibid.* 1995, p. 405).

paganism.”²⁶⁶ The same author notes that some key elements of the *Theosophia* reflect Christian apologetical and eschatological views already exposed by Justin Martyr, Lactantius, Eusebius and Cyril of Alexandria. The presence of Cyril is interesting because he was directly involved in some events described by Damascius²⁶⁷ and quoted some Hermetic texts that resonate in the *Philosophical History*.

The most obvious metaphysical distinction between a work like the *Theosophia Tubingensis* and the *Philosophical History* is the basic – and radical – difference between a creationist and an emanationist metaphysical scheme, between *creatio* and *πρόοδος*. The Neoplatonists did not believe in a creation of the universe like the Christians, everything was bound to an infinite procession of creation and reversion following the Plotinian hypothesis of the three hypostases²⁶⁸ and later Neoplatonists added more complexity to the fundamental hypostasis of the One – Intellect – Soul. Damascius system was a derivation and interpretation of the Iamblichean system influenced by Plotinus, Porphyry and the Chaldean Oracles. In such exegetical exercises, “the Neoplatonists tried to make a term-by-term correspondence of the classes of gods found in the Oracles and [...] the various notions found in Plato’s dialogues”²⁶⁹. For Damascius and his particular view of the emanative Neoplatonic metaphysics, the historical time in which he was living was bound to a temporal decay, an idea that might be seen as shared by the *Theosophia*²⁷⁰, but the extra-historical spatial reality of the cosmos, the foundation of the sacred traditions, did not change with history.

That is a key to understand not only his evaluation of brave and pious men like Severus, Anthemius and Marcellinus, but also his harsh criticism of Pamprepius, the Egyptian pagan poet – often regarded as “the last Roman pagan poet” and a student of Nonnos of Panopolis – who spawned prophecies about pagan restoration and tried to

²⁶⁶ (*Ibid.* p. 406).

²⁶⁷ The most obvious being, logically, the death of Hypatia narrated in *PH* 43E, where Cyril is described as a very envious and abominable man.

²⁶⁸ Cf. *Enn.* V.I.8.11-15 where Plotinus discusses the eternal emanation of all beings from the One.

²⁶⁹ Cf. (Mihai, 2014, p. 461-462).

²⁷⁰ But for the Christian author of the *Theosophia* the times were being fulfilled by the initial act of Creation and thus the decline of paganism was merely a decline of form, because its doctrinal essence was already announced in the Creation of the Universe by God and the mystery of Incarnation as the numerous oracles (*χρήσεις*) of the Greek sages and the Persian king Hystaspes testified. Cf. Beatrice, 1995. Damascius could not have shared such perspective, the spatial element upon which the sacred traditions are dependent do not change with historical form, in his worldview there is no teleology bounding historical and cosmic history from a creative beginning to its eschatological fulfillment.

engage in a revolt against the emperor Zeno. Athanassiadi comments on the primacy of space in relation to time in the *Philosophical History*²⁷¹:

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 [...] 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.

Time as the “purveyor of decay” could not be reversed, as was promptly understood by the wise and noble Severus, the cycles of historical time should be understood as being theophanies specific to the manifestation of the cosmos in history or *the cosmos as history*. As the Golden Age was to be regarded as a manifestation of Cronus, the Christian Age was a manifestation of Typhon. To “combat history with history” would mean an impossible attempt of going against the divine order, an incurrence into a Christian *historiolatrical*²⁷² way of thinking.

Before passing to Damascius' comments about Pamprepis it would be interesting to point a passage in his *Commentary to Plato's Phaedo* that might be of relevance to the subject discussed here. Even though continuity of opinion between his works cannot be assumed, after all we know little about the personal intellectual development of all Neoplatonic philosophers, Damascius seems to be focused on similar themes throughout his works. The remaining text of the *Phaedo* commentary starts with an interpretation of the Orphic myth of Dionysus and the Titans. That is especially important because Pamprepis is associated with both the Typhonian and the Titanic way of life. The interpretation of that particular myth seems to be central to the Neoplatonic understanding

²⁷¹ (1993, p. 3).

²⁷² In the sense of an idolatry of history, as if history embodied in a temporal process the theophanic element of the universe, as if history “incarnated” the divine principles.

of the anthropogony²⁷³ and is related to the Osiris-Dionysus myth in the opening pages of the *Philosophical History*²⁷⁴.

Ἵτι οὕσης διττῆς δημιουργίας, ἢ ἀμερίστου ἢ μεμερισμένης, ταύτης μὲν προεστάναι φησὶ τὸν Διόνυσον, διὸ μερίζεσθαι, ἐκείνης δὲ τὸν Δία, καὶ πλῆθος ὑποτετάχθαι οἰκεῖον τῷ μὲν Ὀλυμπίων θεῶν, τῷ δὲ τῶν Τιτάνων, εἶναι δὲ ἑκατέρωθι καὶ μονάδα καὶ τριάδα δημιουργικὴν.

Creation being twofold, either indivisible or divided, the latter, according to the commentator, is ruled by Dionysus, and therefore divided, the former by Zeus; each of the two has his own multitude of subordinates, Zeus of Olympian Gods, Dionysus of Titans; and in both cases we have a monad as well as a triad of Creators. (Transl. Westerink)²⁷⁵

Creation, the word used by Westerink in his translation, might imply, for our Abrahamic consciousness, a type of *creatio ex nihilo*, but it is not what the word δημιουργία used by Damascius really means, especially because it is accompanied by οὕσης the present participle of the verb εἰμί. The creation that Damascius talks about is a constant creation, something that has *spatial* meaning. The act of creation and assemblage of the world by the Platonic Demiurge is something that is part of an ongoing metaphysical process, not an act of temporal significance as a mark 0 of history and the historiological process engendered with meaning by the voluntary will of God's creation. The domain of history is part of a twofold space-time complex in which time, in the sense of *historical* time, can be seen as being part of the Titanic nature in the aspect of reality ruled by Dionysus and his subordinate Titans.

The meaning of this for the *Philosophical History* is that sacred space, the ἄδύτον where the boundaries of the historical aspect of humanity as divided and Titanic can be overcome, like a temple or the inner heart of the philosophical and dialectical man or woman²⁷⁶, is a sanctuary that actually overcomes our historical nature. Damascius and the

²⁷³ Cf. Brisson, L. *Damascius et l'Orphisme. Orphisme et Orphée: En l'honneur de Jean Rudhardt*. P. Borgeaud. Geneva. 3: 157-209, 1990 and *Orphée et l'Orphisme dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine*, Variorum Collected Studies Series, Ashgate Publishing, 1995.

²⁷⁴ *PH*, 3A, 3B, 3C.

²⁷⁵ *In. Phaed.* I. 3.

²⁷⁶ Cf. *In Phaed.* I. 165-172.

Neoplatonists are conscious about history and its theophanic process, but in their hierarchy of Being it is part of the divided and ontologically inferior aspect of reality. Thus, it is subject to cycles and degradation, in a constant movement of procession (πρόοδος) and return (ἐπιστροφή). Understanding this “transcendent mystery” (ἀπόρρητα) of emanation (ἀπορροή) is fundamental for the rightful act and virtuous activity in the time that one is allowed to live²⁷⁷. Severus understood it or “embodied” it in his historical existence, Pamprepius did not. Moreover, human personalities themselves are part of the infinite dance of the myriad aspects of cosmic procession, being embodiments of particular transhistorical formations²⁷⁸.

Pamprepius is described as a dark, oily and very fat Egyptian²⁷⁹ grammarian and rhetorician²⁸⁰, with exhibitionist personality²⁸¹, a tendency to tell extravagant stories and a treacherous behavior²⁸². He arrived in Athens through marriage with someone from the upper class and soon enough moved to Constantinople, where through his pro-pagan activity he tried to instigate a revolt against the Christian Byzantine Emperor Zeno, exerting his influence over Illus and Leontius²⁸³. As a representative of rhetorical and poetic arts, the “last Greco-Roman pagan poet”²⁸⁴, Pamprepius is also a symbol for Damascius division between rhetoric and philosophy. Athanassiadi claims that one of the *Philosophical History* most constant themes is “an attack on rhetoric”²⁸⁵ by the former rhetorician turned philosopher Damascius. It seems that rhetoric here is also a *topos* for the historical condition of man, for historicity and materiality. Rather than simply a discipline involved with the arts of persuasion, rhetoric is something that attaches mankind to time and closes the doors to the infinite space beyond the One. It seems that Damascius is a distant philosophical ancestor of the Friulian thinker Carlo Michelstaedter in his understanding of rhetoric.

²⁷⁷ “The symbolism suggested by the passion of Dionysus dramatizes the Platonic doctrine of manence-progression-return (μονή-πρόοδος-ἐπιστροφή) and is thus a reminder of the dichotomy unity-plurality or being becoming, which rules human life, and of the lonely struggle that each incarnate soul has to engage in to be restored to unity.” (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 71).

²⁷⁸ E.g. Isidore and other philosophers and mystics, that are described as being part of a “Hermaic chain” even in physical appearance. In *PH*, 13, Damascius describes Isidore as an embodiment of certain divine attributes like having a square shaped face and divine gaze.

²⁷⁹ *PH*, 112A.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 77C.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* 66A.

²⁸² ὅτι Παμπρεπίου τὸ τερατολόγον καὶ ἀπιστότατον φίλοις, καὶ τὸν βίαιον θάνατον, ὁμοίως τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ αὐτὸς ἰστορεῖ· ἦν δὲ Αἰγύπτιος γένος, τέχνην γραμματικὸς ὁ Παμπρέπιος. 77C.

²⁸³ ὅτι καὶ Ἰλλουν οὗτος καὶ Λεόντιον ὃν ἐκεῖνος ἀντιχειροτονεῖ Ζήνωνι βασιλέα, τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ φρονεῖν καὶ βούλεσθαι πρὸς ἀσέβειαν, Παμπρεπίου πρὸς ταύτην αὐτοῦ ἐλκύσαντος, διατείνεται.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Nagy, 2001, p. 499-500.

²⁸⁵ (1999a, p. 35). Cf. (*PH*, 137A, B, C).

For Michelstaedter, that completed his *tesi di laurea* on classical philology and killed himself soon after in early 20th century Italy²⁸⁶ – the thesis being *almost* the only trace left of his thought – rhetoric and persuasion had different meanings in the world of the Pre-Socratics, Socrates, early Plato and some other “persuaded” individuals not restrained to the “rhetorical” nature of everyday common reality, an instance of being marked by suffering and endless banality. In that sense, it is not paganism as a historical (rhetorical) tradition that is necessarily important for Damascius thought, but the means of escaping from the forces of the Rhetorical-Typhonian world of historical time²⁸⁷. The hieratic arts are essentially the wings for the soul to ascend beyond the measures of the Titanic into other parts the immense Platonic-Chaldean cosmos of Damascius. In a Neoplatonic Damascian perspective, the universe is far larger than what can be captured and measured by historicity.

In contrast with the Christian Monophysite *Theosophia Tubingensis*, the *Philosophical History* proposes a mystical view of the cosmos that views the different gods, *daimones*, heroes and metaphysical entities of paganism as locative elements of an ordered whole, rather than incarnated realities prefiguring the Incarnation of the Holy Spirit of God as Jesus Christ in History, in the historical process. In a certain way, the pagan thought of Damascius can be seen as “cosmolatric” while the Christian mystic behind the *Theosophia* is “historiolatric”. Idolatry for the cosmos *versus* idolatry for history, a curious historical antithesis that unfolds as a fundamental division between the pagan and the Christian worlds²⁸⁸.

Damascius was continuing and expanding the Iamblichean tradition of the centrality of intuition and, as L.G. Westerink remarked²⁸⁹, making:

Plotinus' belief of the superiority of intuition to reason the guiding principle of a new systematic approach to Plato. [...] Intuition, which is a superior form of sight, does not proceed from point to point, but has a unified vision of the structure of all reality. [...] The inspired thinker

²⁸⁶ *La Persuasione e la Rettorica*. Formigini, 1913. English Transl. *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. Yale University Press, 2004.

²⁸⁷ By “historical time” what I mean is the divided nature of the Titanic world ruled by Dionysus. It is, more or less, what modern philosophers of history like Hans-Georg Gadamer call “historical consciousness”. Cf. “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in “H.-G. Gadamer,” special issue, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, New School, 5:1 (1975), pp. 8–52.

²⁸⁸ Cf. (Eliade, 1971, p. 112-125.)

²⁸⁹ *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo I: Olympiodorus*. North Holland Publishing. 1976, p. 15.

will, from his high point of vantage, be able to discern the same essential patterns everywhere. He will find in all perfect literature (whether Plato, the Chaldean Oracles, Orpheus or Homer) the faultless reflection of the entire transcendental, physical and moral world.

In the *De. Princ.* III.119, 6, Damascius claims to be following the divine teachings of Iamblichus. In the book VIII of the *De. Myst.* Iamblichus established a locative correspondence between the Neoplatonized Chaldean metaphysical and cosmological principles and the gods of Egypt, just like Damascius used the theology of the Chaldean Oracles to interpret Babylonian, Phoenician, Homeric, Orphic and Egyptian mythological traditions in the third book of the *De. Princ.*²⁹⁰.

The problem, as developed here, is a tentative of showing how Damascius elaborated a narrative of the (factual) history of his times based on a cosmic-spatial understanding of reality that opposes historicity as the central *locus* of theophanic activity. The restoration of the many strands of Greco-Roman paganism as a *de facto* tradition for the Roman Empire was not necessarily something that should be achieved on the political and pragmatic plane. As I plan to demonstrate in the second part, that metaphysical understanding manifested itself as a narrative of correspondence between the structure of the cosmos, the human soul and the cycles of history that is a syncretized cosmology derived from Plato, Hesiod, the Chaldean Oracles, Orphism and Hermetism. Such understanding requires the double relation between φιλοσοφία and ιερατική as different means of accessing the higher realities of space, a *locus* that is infinitely vaster than the “time as chronological history” sphere of reality. Some few individuals, like Isidore and Severus, can move²⁹¹ to different layers of cosmical space through their philosophical, theurgic or alchemical understanding of cosmic space. The Damascian historical narrative is the remote philosophical ancestor of the Spenglerian historian²⁹² and also, in many ways, of the so-called post-structuralists with their multiplicity of ontologies.

In the next chapter a brief sketch of Damascius’ philosophical system and perspectives on embodiment will be made. Many terms discussed in this section like

²⁹⁰ Cf. (Athanasiasi, 1999a, p. 54-55.)

²⁹¹ In different degrees, of course, just like there are 6 virtues in Damascius though, the levels of reality are as multiple as the levels of virtue. Cf. O’Meara, 2006.

²⁹² Oswald Spengler postulated the existence of an infinity of incommensurate cultures existing in the darkness and vastness of infinite space. Only a few enlightened individuals, like himself, could have access to transcultural and transhistorical knowledge. Cf. *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. C.H. Beck, 1918-1922.

πρόοδος, ἐπιστροφή or ἀπορροή have a history in the Neoplatonic systems of exegesis to Plato and the Chaldean Oracles related to the doctrines of the descent of the soul and need a better clarification. Like all the Neoplatonic philosophical systems, Damascius' one is a great scheme of different degrees of reality being emanated from the fundamental reality or Source. It is a scheme of "Great Chain of Being" derived from Plotinus three fundamental hypostases, as seen above, but with an increasing complexification in many degrees of reality since Iamblichus. The purpose of my task in the next step is to clarify the relationship between such system and Plato, Iamblichus and other later Platonists, in order to understand the minimal basis for the syncretized cosmological theory analyzed in the second part. As the proper interpretation of the very complex Damascian system of metaphysics goes well beyond the scope of the present work, I will rely mostly on the interpretations of other scholars. I will also provide a visual representation of the universe in an image that is an approximate representation of the universe as conceived by Iamblichus in the next section when discussing embodiment and the different ontological layers of reality.

The conclusion that can be reached through the fragments analyzed so far is that Damascius was not an active militant pagan in the political sense. Considering the circumstances of political history in his own times, the spiritual fulfillment of pagan intellectuals had to be searched elsewhere. Damascius was not a pessimist, but was conscious of the inevitable decline that was the fate of certain historical forms and the form of history itself is related to the Neoplatonic doctrines of emanation, procession and reversion. Some aspects of the Christian-pagan difference have been analyzed, in preparation for the theory of embodiment and its relation with the mysticism exposed in the text.

3. Embodiment, the theory of the soul and the liminality of the pagan holy man

The metaphysical scheme in which the personalities described in the chapter above circulate presupposes a certain theory about human souls and how they experience embodiment in the overall scheme of the cosmic order. This theory was an innovation of Iamblichus, that claimed to be following the *Timaeus* of Plato and “ancient religious authorities” (the Chaldean Oracles, the Egyptians etc.) against a whole philosophical tradition that supposedly misinterpreted and deviated from the true teachings about the nature of the soul²⁹³. In the extracts of his “*De Anima*” and in other writings, Iamblichus develops a theory of classes of souls that experience embodiment in different ways. As noted by Dillon and Finamore²⁹⁴

in his theory of the soul he is following the true philosophical tradition that included not only Plato and Aristotle *but also a whole host of ancient sources from the Egyptians and Chaldaeans through to Orpheus*. Second, all philosophers since Aristotle have misconstrued this true psychology. The *De Anima*, therefore, is a polemical work aimed against a host of writers (Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans, Middle Platonists, and in particular his own immediate predecessors Plotinus, Amelius, and Porphyry) but one that aims to place in clear light Iamblichus’ doctrine of the soul.

In the establishment of his theory of the soul Iamblichus had a preoccupation of avoiding dualisms, his thought had the goal to avoid the vilification of matter and the devaluation of the physical cosmos against a perceived Plotinian and Porphyrian fall into dualism²⁹⁵.

²⁹³ According to Dillon and Finamore, Iamblichus created a kind of dichotomy between his own theory, based on ancient and sacred traditions, and the theories of Aristotle, Plotinus, Amelius and other thinkers. He was not directly concerned with the subtleties of those theories, but arguing in a way that could make them simply “look wrong” (2002, p. 13).

²⁹⁴ (*Ibid.*, p. 10).

²⁹⁵ The subtleties of the discussion between Iamblichus and the theories of Plotinus/Porphyry go far beyond the scope of this work, but summarizing the problem it all falls down to the nature of the human soul in the overall scheme of the spatial cosmos: Plotinus considered that the soul do not descend wholly to the world of matter, while Iamblichus believed that in the process of descent the soul suffered a damage and had to be encapsulated in the corporeal world through a vehicle or carrier called ὄχημα. Cf. *De Anima*: 6.8-15; 89.38-90.7; 241.8-12. The essence of the soul was then ontologically altered after its descent from the realm of the ὑπερουράνιος to the realm of generation (γένεσις). The danification of the ontological structure of the soul is

Those themes do have a strong resonance in the *Philosophical History*, but before showing the relevance of the doctrines of the classes of souls and the theory of the vehicle of the soul (ὄχημα) in the text, it is necessary to explain very briefly the Iamblichean perspective.

The doctrines on the embodiment, release and destiny of the human soul are directly intertwined with the justification for theurgy and the holy rites in the philosophy of Iamblichus. In this exposition I will rely mostly on the developments made by A.J. Festugière²⁹⁶, Gregory Shaw²⁹⁷, John Finamore²⁹⁸ and John Dillon²⁹⁹. The position of Iamblichus in the establishment of Neoplatonism is central, his teachings on the soul, the cosmos and the relation between philosophy, theology and the sacred rites are the foundation for most thinkers that came after him and his position in the late Platonic world can be said to have been more relevant throughout Late Antiquity than the position of Plotinus³⁰⁰. Despite the claim of synthesizing Plato's creation myth in the *Timaeus*, the soul's charioteer in the *Phaedrus* and Aristotle's ideas about the soul, the doctrine of the ὄχημα is a purely Neoplatonic innovation that probably has more consonance with the mystical hexameters of the Chaldean Oracles than with the Platonic or Aristotelian *corpus*.

As noted by Kissling³⁰¹:

The theory of the ὄχημα-πνεῦμα, as met with in the Neo-Platonic writers, represents the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle on a subject which the former never taught and the latter was incapable of defining intelligibly.

what justify Iamblichus' defense of theurgy as a fundamental path of union with the divine and transcendence from the "forces of generation". Cf. (Bussanich, 2005, p. 8; Finamore; Dillon, 2002, p. 79-83 and Shaw, 2014, p. 35). Damascius seems to believe in the efficacy of theurgy, but its position seems to be less "fundamental" than in the work of Iamblichus, as will be seen.

²⁹⁶(*La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* vol. III: Les Doctrines de L'Ame. Les Belles Lettres, 1953).

²⁹⁷(*Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Angelico Press, 2014 [1995]).

²⁹⁸(*Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*. Scholars Press, 1985).

²⁹⁹(Introduction. In: *Iamblichus De Anima*. Brill, 2002. With Finamore).

³⁰⁰ Damascius himself barely quotes Plotinus or even mentions him. In the *Philosophical History*, Plotinus is not mentioned a single time and even in a proper historical work, like Eunapius' *Lives*, Plotinus is briefly discussed in some few lines while Iamblichus and his life occupy a considerable amount of the text. Despite the originality of Plotinus in sparking the metaphysical doctrines of Neoplatonism, his influence was stronger in post-pagan times, precisely because his metaphysics was more adaptable to conform to Christian and Islamic theological tenets in comparison with thinkers like Iamblichus or Damascius. In the Middle Ages, a paraphrase of Plotinus *Enneads* known in Arabic as *Theology of Aristotle* (*Athulujjiya Aristu*) circulated in the Islamic world, influenced al-Kindi and Avicenna and through them a whole lot of Islamic and Christian philosophers. Cf. (Adamson, P. *The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the "Theology of Aristotle"*. Duckworth, 2002).

³⁰¹(1922, p. 318).

The Neoplatonists ascribed such theory to Plato mainly through the creation myth of the *Timaeus*³⁰² in which Plato says that the Demiurge "distributed each soul to each star, and having mounted them as if on a vehicle [chariot], he showed them the nature of the universe."³⁰³ The subtleties of the Platonic interpretation by Iamblichus and the "orthodoxy" of his reading of Plato are not a direct object of my concern, but his interpretation of the *Timaeus* as giving a base for the ὄχημα theory is fundamental to understand the *Philosophical History*. The vehicle of the soul is neither a material entity nor a spiritual one, but something in between³⁰⁴:

The vehicle is intended to join together two diametrically opposed entities: the incorporeal soul and the corporeal body. It is, therefore, neither material nor immaterial, but a mean between these two extremes. Later philosophers claimed that ether, mentioned in *Epinomis* 981c5-8 (a work they believed to be by Plato) and in Aristotle's works (e.g., *De Caelo* 270b20-26), was the substance comprising the vehicle. For Neoplatonists, the vehicle fulfills three functions: it houses the rational soul in its descent from the noetic realm to the realm of generation; it acts as the organ of sense-perception and imagination; and, through theurgic rites, it can be purified and lifted above, a vehicle for the rational soul's return through the cosmos to the gods.

The interpretation outlined above by Finamore shows that in order to ascend back to the astral realm the soul needs to perform certain acts of physical nature since it became tainted with material garments in its descent to the sublunar world. The way to lead the soul back to its divine and astral origin thus became of fundamental concern.

According to Festugière, the cosmological doctrines of the *Timaeus* and the astral origin of the soul were mostly ignored in the Hellenistic period, reemerging again only in the brink of the Imperial period with a revival of Platonism and a reconsideration of spiritualism as a fundamental soteriological concern by pagan thinkers³⁰⁵. In his historical

³⁰² Cf. (Finamore, 1985, p. 1-2).

³⁰³ *Tim.* 41e. Cf. *Laws*, 10, 899a: αὐτοῦ δὴ ἄμεινον ταύτην τὴν ψυχὴν, εἴτε ἐν ἄρμασιν ἔχουσα ἡμῖν ἥλιον ἄγει φῶς τοῖς ἅπασιν, εἴτε ἔξωθεν, εἴθ' ὅπως εἴθ' ὅπη, θεὸν ἠγεῖσθαι χρῆσθαι πάντα ἄνδρα. ἢ πῶς; This soul, — whether it is by riding in the car of the sun, or from outside, or otherwise, that it brings light to us all— every man is bound to regard as a god. Is not that so? (Transl. R.G. Bury).

³⁰⁴ (Finamore, 1985, p.1.)

³⁰⁵ Cf. (*Rev.* III, p. 1317).

considerations, he outlines a series of developments leading to Iamblichus, showing how the doctrine of the celestial and divine soul was articulated in Cicero, Albinus, Numenius, Tertulian, Plotinus, Hermetism and the Chaldean Oracles³⁰⁶. In historical terms the passage from the world of the cities and kingdoms to the world of the Empire opens the way to new anxieties³⁰⁷, existential angst and the belief in ontological concepts hypostasized as mythical beings³⁰⁸. The supposedly abstract concepts of Hellenic philosophy are turned into universal forces that determine the destiny of men, escaping the torrents of those forces is turned into the greatest problem of existence for the philosophical or mystically inclined individual. Indeed, it becomes widespread not only for the learned but also for the common folk, as the myriad of mystery cults and religions of salvation testify.

In the Chaldean Oracles, this force is manifested as the εἰμαρμένη³⁰⁹, an ontologized form of the verb μείρεσθαι, that is directly related to the word μοῖρα, denoting the three sisters that in classical Greek religion are responsible for determining the fates of men. As noted by Dodds³¹⁰, the belief in the overwhelming force of destiny – either represented as the *Moirai*, *Tychē* or *Anankē* – ruling over the sublunar world was widespread in Late Antiquity. As a form of escape, spiritual ascension beyond the sublunar world, the world of generation (γένεσις), was the spiritual goal of the sage or mystical practitioner: οὐ γὰρ ὑφ' εἰμαρτῆν ἀγέλην πίπτουσι θεουργοί³¹¹. This Chaldean fragment is discussed extensively in the scholarship as the first occurrence of an allusion to theurgy or theurgists in the Greek lexicon³¹². The theurgist is presented as someone that can escape from the constraints of reality fixed by fate (εἰμαρτός) or ascend to the higher levels of the ontological sphere in a spatial sense – in opposition to the masses of men (ἀγέλη) determined exclusively by their sublunar or, in terms of this work, “historical” existence³¹³.

Indeed, the greatest innovation of Iamblichus’ theory of the soul that concerns the discussion on the *Philosophical History* here is the theorization of an ontological

³⁰⁶ (*Ibid.* p. 1333-1356).

³⁰⁷ Cf. (Dodds, 1991 [1965], p. 14-18).

³⁰⁸ “a mythologizing tendency that hypostasizes various abstractions into quasi-mythical beings.” (Majercik, 1989, p. 4).

³⁰⁹ The εἰμαρμένη is also prominent in the Latin Asclepius and stands there as among the key non-translated Greek terms, alongside other 10 words: Ἄιδης, ἀριθμητική, ἰδεῖν, κόσμος, οὐσία, οὐσιάρχης, οὐσιώδης, Παντόμορφος, ὕλη, ὕλικός. Of those 11, εἰμαρμένη and οὐσιάρχης appear also in the extant Greek fragments of the Latin translation. Cf. (Pessoa de Lira; Quintella Viana, 2021, p. 155).

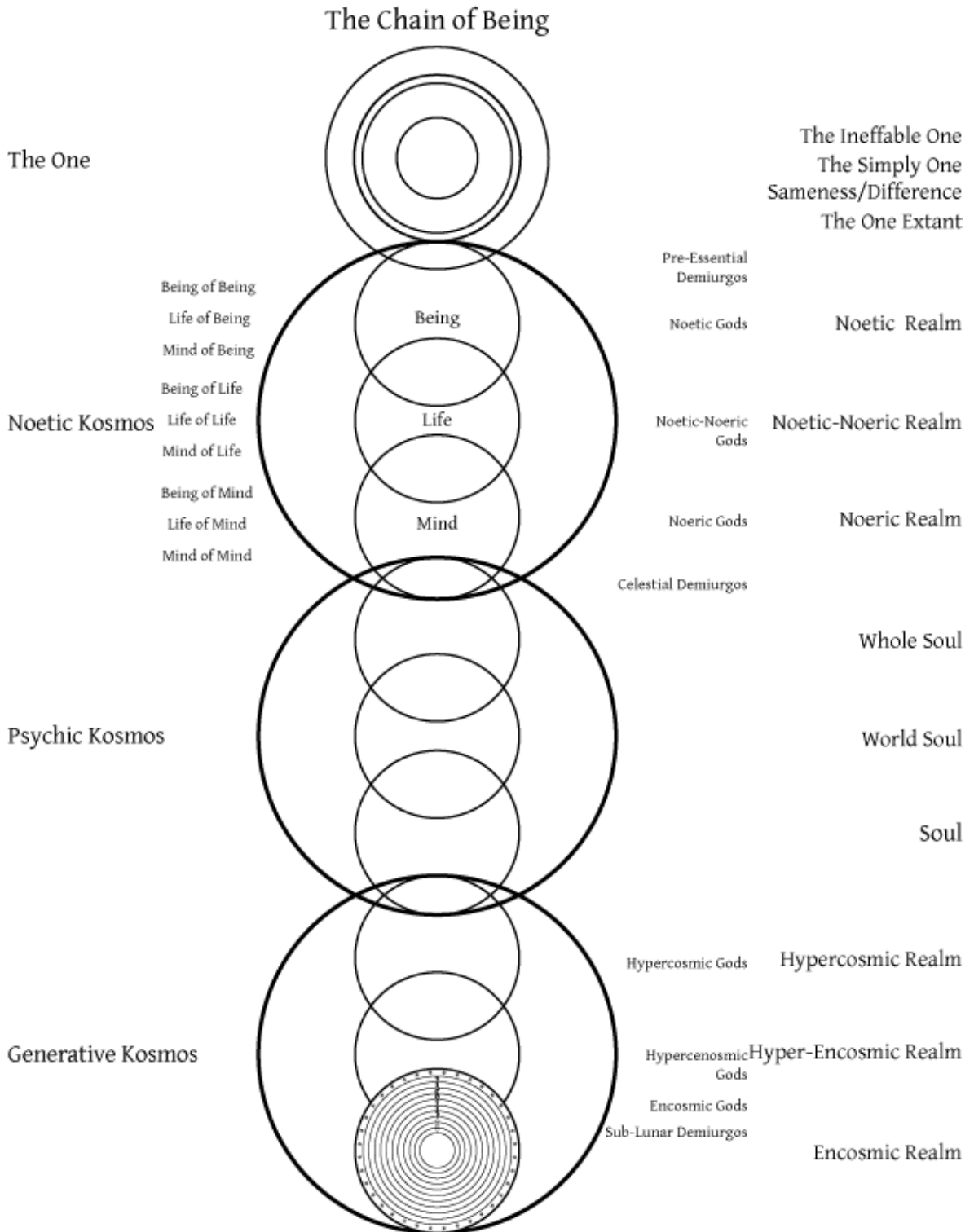
³¹⁰ Cf. (Dodds, 1991 [1965], p. 18-30).

³¹¹ *Or. Ch.* Fr.153 (Des Places) and also 106, 107 and 198.

³¹² Cf. the theoretical discussion above.

³¹³ The fragments 102 and 103 also make allusions to “Destiny” or “Fate”.

difference between classes of souls attached to its double nature as material and spiritual. A visual representation of the Iamblichean system of the universe might shed some light on the different ontological scales that the soul must pass in the endless process of procession and reversion³¹⁴:



³¹⁴ Based in (Kupperman, 2014).

The subtleties of the system, of course, do not concern us directly, but the image is illustrative of a gradual complexification of the Neoplatonic system of metaphysics after the *Enneads* of Plotinus and its relatively simple system of three hypostases of One-Intellect-Soul. From the Ineffable One to the Encosmic realm three triads that are themselves triadic follow hypostatically in the creative demiurgy of the cosmos, a creation that is constant and does not have a point in time. The systems exposed by Proclus and Damascius are even more complex, but both revert ultimately to a tentative of making sense of the Iamblichean scheme, its correspondences with the mystical poems of the Chaldean Oracles and the theologies of Homer, Hesiod, the Orphic poems, Plato, Aristotle, Hermetism, Phoenician, Egyptian and Babylonian mythologies.

The world in which the figures discussed in the preceding “historical” section inhabit is the Encosmic realm, a tiny fraction of the hierarchical cosmic space. What is understood in modern terms as “historical time” would be considered by the Neoplatonists as participating only in that fraction of the cosmos and the cycles of history that will be dealt with in the second part are actually hypostatizations of different parts of the whole cosmos beyond the heavens in the Encosmic realm. For now, it is necessary to understand the position of the soul in the scheme and also how it is articulated by the narrative of Isidore’s embodiment by Damascius. The cosmos is not a temporal procession, but an emanation of universal space.

Gregory Shaw has remarked that Iamblichus’ defense of theurgy is endowed with his perception of a decline in Platonism associated with the predominance of dualisms based on the idea of the undescended soul and/or a radical separation between soul and matter. The position of Iamblichus must be understood in terms of his own cosmology and soteriology and in his debate with Porphyry, a supposedly representative of Plotinus’ views, is based on Iamblichus’ refutation of the doctrine of the undescended soul³¹⁵. The cosmology of Iamblichus is reminiscent of the “locative” view expressed by Plato in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*³¹⁶. In the *Laws* Plato says that in the Golden Age humanity was ruled by Cronos³¹⁷:

³¹⁵ “I would argue that Porphyry’s repudiation of the value of cult sacrifice and his belief that man can save himself depend entirely on his accepting the doctrine of the undescended soul and its corollary that the human self is identical to the divine Nous.” (2014 [1995], p. 15).

³¹⁶ “For Iamblichus, Plato’s *Laws* provide the model of a community properly placed in the cosmos.” Cf. (Ibid. p. 8).

³¹⁷ 713ab.

τῶν γὰρ δὴ πόλεων ὧν ἔμπροσθε τὰς συνοικήσεις διήλθομεν, ἔτι προτέρα τούτων πάμπολλυ λέγεται τις ἀρχή τε καὶ οἴκησις γεγονέναι ἐπὶ Κρόνου μάλ' εὐδαίμων, ἧς μίμημα ἔχουσα ἔστιν ἡτις τῶν νῦν ἄριστα οἰκεῖται.

Long ages before even those cities existed whose formation we have described above, there existed in the time of Cronos, it is said, a most prosperous government and settlement, on which the best of the States now existing is modelled. (Trans. R.G. Bury),

Plato in his mythmaking was discussing the ideal government and how a human society must be organized based on cosmic principles, but in Late Antiquity at the time of the Empire the discussions over the “ideal community” in political terms shifted from political theology to soteriology and personal salvation³¹⁸.

The main preoccupation of Iamblichus’ theory of the soul and the cosmos was not with a politico-theological debate but with the right constitution of religious rites and the position of human soul in regards to it. In the Platonic text the sum of perfection in existence was actualized in the ideal πολιτεία³¹⁹ through the Cronian ordering of the human society in cosmic terms, with *Daimones* ruling over men. In a Neoplatonic sense of Damascius, as will be seen, it is turned into a philosophy of history in which the Cronian is a manifestation of the highest degree of order in a historical-temporal process that reproduces in its structure the whole structure of the ordered whole in the Iamblichean cosmos of the image above. It is also related with one of the main tenets of the *Philosophical History*: the demonstration that human souls reflect the cosmic order and that the scale of virtues is a microcosm of the macrocosm. As Pamprepus’ soul is reflective of the lowest of elements in reality, the soul of Isidore and other spiritual masters

³¹⁸ In the second part I will return to the mytheme of the Cronian Golden Age in the discussion of the fragment 18 (Athanassiadi) of the *Philosophical History*. It must be noted however, that all the individuals discussed in the chapter 1 and 2 are bound to exhibit features of the different scales or degrees of cosmic reality and even the forms of humans reflect somehow the mystical properties of geometric figures and the numbers. In the *Commentary on the Parmenides*, “Damascius stresses the theological dimension of geometrical figures, refers to the Pythagorean practice according to which particular geometric figures were consecrated to particular gods, and cites the specific connection between Hermes and the figure of the square (127)”. Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 89).

³¹⁹ “Cronos gave our communities as their kings and rulers, not men but *Daimones*, beings of a more divine and superior kind just as we still do the same with our flocks of sheep and herds of other domesticated animals. We do not set oxen to manage oxen, or goats to manage goats; we, their betters in kind, act as masters ourselves. So, the god, in his kindness to man, did the same; he set over us the superior race of *Daimones*.” (713c-d; Transl. A.E. Taylor)

is embodied for a very specific purpose: to guide humanity in its quest towards the One beyond the One, the Sanctuary of Silence, the Primordial Abyss³²⁰.

This is also a development of an Iamblichean construction on the nature of the soul. In his *De Anima* (26.13-14), in a passage concerning the creation of the souls in the *Timaeus*, Iamblichus claims that Plotinus, Porphyry and Amelius assign equal status to all souls and “and bring them forth from the supracelestial soul to reside in bodies” (Πλωτῖνος μὲν καὶ Πορφύριος καὶ Ἀμέλιος ἀπὸ τῆς ὑπὲρ τὸν οὐρανὸν ψυχῆς καὶ πάσας ἐπίσης εἰσοικίζουσιν εἰς τὰ σώματα). Then Iamblichus proceeds with the claim that Plato’s account of creation in the *Timaeus* is very different³²¹:

τὸν δημιουργὸν διασπείροντα περὶ πάντα μὲν τὰ κρείττονα γένη, καθ' ὅλον δὲ τὸν οὐρανόν, εἰς ὅλα δὲ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ παντός. Ἔσται δὲ οὖν καὶ ἡ σπορὰ ἢ δημιουργικὴ τῶν ψυχῶν διαιρουμένη παρὰ τὰς θείας δημιουργίας καὶ ἡ πρώτη τῶν ψυχῶν πρόοδος συνυφισταμένη, μεθ' ἑαυτῆς ἔχουσα τὰ δεχόμενα τὰς ψυχάς· ἢ μὲν ὅλη τὸν ὅλον κόσμον, αἱ δὲ τῶν ἐμφανῶν θεῶν τὰς κατ' οὐρανὸν σφαίρας, αἱ δὲ τῶν στοιχείων αὐτὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα μεθ' ὧν καὶ ψυχὰι συνεκκληρώθησαν καθ' ἑκάστην τοιαύτην λῆξιν, ἀφ' ὧν δὲ αἱ κάθοδοι γίνονται τῶν ψυχῶν ἄλλαι ἀπ' ἄλλων διακληρώσεων, ὡς βούλεται ἐνδείκνυσθαι σαφῶς ἢ τοῦ Τιμαίου διάταξις.

The Demiurge sows them among all the superior classes, throughout all the heaven, and into all the elements of the universe. Thus, the demiurgic sowing of souls will be divided around the divine creations, and the first procession of souls will come into existence along with it and will comprise the receptacles for the souls. The Whole Soul will take up its abode in the whole universe, the souls of the visible gods in the heavenly spheres, and the souls of the elements in the elements themselves to which souls were also assigned in each such allotment. From these places occur the souls’ descents, some from some allotments, others from others, as it is clearly the

³²⁰ Cf. *Or. Ch.* 18: “You (gods) who know the supermundane, Paternal Abyss by perceiving it” (οἱ τὸν ὑπέρκосμον πατρικὸν βυθὸν ἴστε νοοῦντες) Transl Majercik. The fragment is quoted by Damascius in the *De Princ.* (II, 16, 15-16) in a discussion about the “intellectual gods”, Athanassiadi suggests a different translation for the fragment, but she does not do it herself. Based on her indications, I would translate the fragment as “You (gods) that feel with the mind the Hypercosmic Abyss of the Father” (ὑπέρκосμον πατρικὸν βυθὸν).

³²¹ *De Anima*, 26.13-14

purpose of the account in the *Timaeus* to show.
(Transl. Dillon-Finamore)

Iamblichus here is alluding to an important Platonic doctrine about number, voice and sound as the fundamentals of the universe shaped by the polysemic word στοιχεῖον³²², firstly used as a concept³²³ of ‘element’ by Empedocles and related by Iamblichus with the natures of souls in the process of demiurgy. The passage makes it clear that the Demiurge scatter (διασπείροντα) the souls of the τὰ κρείττονα γένη (the mightier/superior classes) in conjunction with all the elements (στοιχεῖον) of the universe. The consubstantiality of the elements and the spiritual nature of the soul is something that might have deeper roots in the Greek tradition.

An important quality of the elements in the Empedoclean writings is their “halfway ontological status, being intermediary between the transcendent and the material”³²⁴, just like the soul for Iamblichus has both material and spiritual natures³²⁵. Empedocles characterizes the στοιχεῖα as πρῶθ’ ἥλικά τ’ ἀρχήν (primordial and jointly originating) and in the allusions of the concept by Aristotle it is not clear if the elements are in any sense easily distinguishable from origin and cause (ἀρχή and αἰτία)³²⁶: στοιχεῖον λέγεται ἐξ οὗ σύγκειται πρώτου ἐνυπάρχοντος ἀδιαιρέτου τῷ εἶδει [εἰς ἕτερον εἶδος] (Element means a

³²² According to the LSJ entry, the word στοιχεῖον in the sense of a fundamental principle or element might have been first used by Empedocles in relation to physics: “στοιχεῖα were the components into which matter is ultimately divisible, elements, reduced to four by Empedocles, who called them ῥιζώματα, the word στοιχεῖα being first used (acc. to Eudem. ap. Simp. in Ph. 7.13) by Plato, τὰ πρῶτα οἰονπερεὶ σ., ἐξ ὧν ἡμεῖς τε σγκείμεθα καὶ τᾶλλα Th. 201e.” In the Platonic dialogue that bears his name: “Timaeus mocks earlier philosophers who referred to the elements as στοιχεῖα [...], ‘letters’, observing that those στοιχεῖα ‘are not even syllables’ of reality, meaning by this that these ‘so-called elements’ (τὰ καλούμενα στοιχεῖα) are already compounds and far from elemental.” Cf. (Acevedo, 2018, p. 14) The concept itself sparked many discussions and shapes from the time of the Greek *polis* to the High Middle Ages, passing through the Renaissance and reaching the modern world in discussions over what is the first and the perfect language. A good summary can be found in (Eco, 1995, p. 7-20).

³²³ There are previous lexical uses, of course, and the comparative exploration of the concept alongside the Latin *elementum* in (Acevedo, 2018) is a great recent contribution to its history. For the themes discussed in this section the pages 28-33 and 135-157 are the most important.

³²⁴ (Acevedo, 2018, p. 30).

³²⁵ Cf. (Dillon; Finamore, 2002, p. 15): “From these passages it becomes clear that Iamblichus held not only that the soul was a mean but also that, since the activities of the human soul differ when it intelligizes above and when it acts in a body, the very essence of the soul is double. The human soul is both Intellect-like and animal-like, but is neither permanently. The essence of the soul is double and at variance with itself. It is this conception of the soul that defines Iamblichus’ unique psychological theory. Iamblichus thereby makes the soul a mean in the strongest sense possible, verging on a Heraclitean explanation of its duality. The soul is not in essence always intelligizing (or it would be Intellect), nor is it always involved in activities in Nature (or it would be animal soul). The soul therefore is both at once. This mediality is its permanent condition, not its intelligizing or its lower-order activities alone.”

³²⁶ *Metaphysics*, Δ 1014a26.

primary immanent component, formally indivisible into another form)³²⁷. Despite being defined as “immanent” (ἐνυπάρχω), thus in a sense being correlated with the things dependent upon it, in other parts of Aristotelian discussion it is somewhat correlated with ἀρχή³²⁸: Ὅτι μὲν οὖν τὰ πρῶτα ἀρχὰς καὶ στοιχεῖα καλῶς ἔχει λέγειν, ἔστω συνομολογούμενον (Let us now be in agreement that it is right to call the primordial beings ‘principles’ and ‘elements’).

Such inconsistency of use in the part of Aristotle is reminiscent of Plato’s own use of the word. If the modern philological tools ascribe to Empedocles the primacy in its use to physical realities, the ancient commentators attributed it to Plato³²⁹:

Πλάτων τά τε τῶν Πυθαγορείων καὶ τῶν Ἐλεατικῶν ἐπὶ τὸ σαφέστερον προαγαγὼν τά τε ὑπὲρ τὴν φύσιν ἐξύμνησεν ἀξίως κἀν τοῖς φυσικοῖς καὶ γενητοῖς τὰς στοιχειώδεις ἀρχὰς τῶν ἄλλων διέκρινε καὶ στοιχεῖα πρῶτος αὐτὸς ὠνόμασε τὰς τοιαύτας ἀρχὰς.

Clarifying greatly the doctrines of the Pythagoreans and Eleatics, Plato composed worthy ‘hymns’ about the pre-manifested. He discerned the elementary principles in what is manifested and natural, and he was the first to call those principles ‘elements’. (Transl. Acevedo, slightly altered)

The usage of Plato, however, was not consistent³³⁰:

Unfortunately, the Platonic corpus does not really warrant such a clear distinction. In fact, when comparing the rather motley use of στοιχεῖα across the Platonic corpus against the wealth of pre-Socratic metaphysical speculation, it seems more appropriate not to insist too much on any sort of a programmatic intention on the part of Plato [...]

³²⁷ (Transl. Crowley, 2005).

³²⁸ *De gen. et corr.*, 329a5.

³²⁹ Eudemus of Rhodes, *Fragmenta*, 2nd ed., ed. F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles* 8 (Basel: Schwabe, 1969), fr. 31.

³³⁰ (*Ibid.* 2018, p. 31).

From Plato and Aristotle to Iamblichus and the world of Late Antiquity the usage of the word and its relation to the process of constant creation might have shifted, but a meaning that might have been retained by Iamblichus is the Empedoclean double meaning of transcendence and materiality that is attached to the elements of the soul. As argued by Kingsley³³¹ and Lebedev³³², Empedocles was strongly related with both Orphism and Pythagoreanism, thus making the transmission to Iamblichus or at least his personal inspiration or recontextualization of that discussion more likely, considering his Pythagorean tendencies³³³.

Shaw starts his exposition of Iamblichean theurgy with a narrative about embodiment in the Platonic tradition and the discussions between dualist and monist interpretations of the relation between soul and matter encapsulated by optimistic and pessimistic views of embodiment in the Platonic tradition³³⁴. In a certain sense, that is a transposing of modern concerns for the ancient world, with the word “*dualismus*” having been coined by Thomas Hyde in 1700³³⁵ and multiple interpretations of the supposedly dualism or anti-dualism of Plato and subsequent Platonists have unfolded since the 18th century³³⁶. Shaw is following a path already opened by Dodds³³⁷ and A.J. Festugière³³⁸ in their discussions of “optimistic” and “pessimistic” responses to the problem of matter, soul and their relation to embodiment. Iamblichus’ position is firmly inserted into the ‘optimistic’ camp and his defense of theurgy would be linked to his positive view of embodiment related with his particular interpretation of the *Timaeus* and the creation of different degrees of souls. Dillon and Finamore note that another feature of the

³³¹ Cf. (1995, p. 371-375).

³³² Cf. (2015, p. 550-585).

³³³ Iamblichus regarded Pythagoras as the model for the Neoplatonic sage and might have even considered him above Plato. Cf. (Giangiulio, p. 18-30).

³³⁴ (2014 [1995], p. 23-30).

³³⁵ Cf. (Couliano, 1989 [1987], p. 25).

³³⁶ For the concept of dualism and its historiographical discussion Cf. (Couliano, 1989 [1987], p. 25-53).

³³⁷ Dodds summarizes the Iamblichean view in historical terms in the following passage: “Such reflections inevitably raised the question, “What are we here for?” [...] It was only under the Empire that both philosophers and other men began to treat it as a major problem. They provided a wide variety of answers, which Festugière has classified, starting from the doxography given by Iamblichus in his essay *On the Soul*. He divides them into two main groups, optimistic and pessimistic. For those who held fast to the old faith in the divinity of the cosmos the *Timaeus* offered an easy answer: without humanity the perfection of the world would be incomplete. In other terms, we are here, as a second-century Platonist put it, ‘for the revelation of divine life’ —human existence is part of the self-realization of God. Others, starting from the Platonic saying that ‘all life cares for the lifeless everywhere’, saw man as God’s administrator and earthly existence as a form of service (*leitourgia*).

³³⁸ *Rev.* II. p. 1364-1387.

Iamblichean psychology is the fundamental entanglement between embodiment and salvation, between soteriology and incarnation³³⁹.

Iamblichus seems to equate the processional demiurgy (= constant creation = πρόοδος) linked to the differentiation of the souls as something both material and immaterial – thus making the soul “dual” in nature – with the principles/elements of the universe. The souls descend according to their passing through the different places in the cosmic order and have their “lots” (διακληρώσεων) according to such structure. As discussed above, this is an idea that has an echo in the narrative structure of the *Philosophical History*, especially in the description of Isidore’s feats and his embodiment in the Encosmic realm as imbued of a holy mission. The word στοιχεῖον do appear in the text³⁴⁰, but in a context of discussion of the 3 fundamental principles of an investigation (ἱστορία) that contemplates reality: ἔρως, φιλοπονία and ἀνχίνουα. That is a somewhat complicated passage of Athanassiadi’s text in the philological sense, she synthesizes two different passages from the Suda³⁴¹ and one from Photius³⁴² in order to recreate a readable version of the text. That passage might be related to the Chaldean-Hermetic lore grounding the discussion on cosmic ages, so it will be discussed in a later chapter³⁴³.

More related to the Damascian presentation of Isidore’s great soul in the *Philosophical History* is the description of the τὰ κρείττονα γένη as a special kind of souls. In the presentation of Isidore’s embodiment and his mission, Damascius presents a related term and discussion³⁴⁴: “πόθεν, ὃ ἐταῖρε, δῆλον”, εἶποι τις ἄν, “ὅτι ὁ σὸς φιλόσοφος ἀπὸ τοῦδε τοῦ ἔθνους ὄρμητο τῶν ψυχῶν;” (“Someone might ask: how can you prove, my friend, that your philosopher comes from this caste of souls?”) The purpose of Damascius in this passage and in what follows is the presentation of Isidore as a soul imbued of a mission, a staggering type of soul, a soul that came to the world in order to enlighten it and

³³⁹ “The implications of this theory are far-reaching. If what it is to be a human soul necessarily involves two aspects, higher and lower, then the human soul must live two lives. It must engage in intellectual acts as well as in acts in Nature. Therefore, every human soul must descend into a body, or part of its essence would be unfulfilled, which is impossible. Further, in order to be fully human, the soul must ascend again, either after death or in this life through theurgy. In this way, theurgy takes on exceptional importance in Iamblichus’ philosophy. It is not some adventitious magical adjunct that can be jettisoned from human life. Theurgy is a fully natural part of the human condition, inherent in Nature, existing for those wise enough to utilize it so that they may raise their souls to the highest aspect and fulfill their role as true mediatory entities.” (2002, p. 16.)

³⁴⁰(*PH*, 33A, B, C). Additionally, it also appears many times in other works of Damascius, like the *De Princ.* or the *Commentary on the Parmenides*.

³⁴¹ The entries for στοιχεῖα and ἔρως. Cf. (S IV, 446, 6) and (II, 418, 8).

³⁴² Φ 31.

³⁴³ For now, it is important to note, following Shaw, the role of Eros in the recreation of the creative acts of the Demiurge by the Iamblichean theurgist. Cf. (2014, p. 135-143).

³⁴⁴ (*PH*, 6A).

transfigure material existence into a more blissful experience, the spiritualization of the body. Isidore is presented as a philosopher that subscribed to the theory of the vehicle of the soul³⁴⁵:

ἔφασκε δ' οὖν παρ' ἐκείνου καὶ ἐκεῖνο ἀκηκοέναι ὁ Ἰσίδωρος, ὡς ἔχει τι ἢ ψυχὴ ἀγροειδὲς ὄχημα λεγόμενον, ἀστροειδὲς τι καὶ αἰδίων. καὶ τοῦτο μέντοι τῷ ἀστροειδεῖ σῶματι τῷδε ἀποκέκλειται ἐνίοις μὲν εἴσω τῆς κεφαλῆς, ἐνίοις δὲ εἴσω τοῦ δεξιοῦ ὤμου.

Isidore affirmed to have heard from him that the soul possesses a luminous vehicle, astral and eternal. And that this vehicle is united with the astral body which in some men lies inside the head, in others in the right shoulder.

The vehicle of the soul (ὄχημα) is astral and has the properties of the stars and the elements (στοιχεῖον)³⁴⁶ from which they are made as in the description of the souls' creation by Iamblichus. As noted by Dillon and Finamore³⁴⁷: “the concepts of the descent of the soul and the different classes of human soul are closely bound together.”

I suppose that the ἐκεῖνος from which Isidore heard about the vehicle of the soul might have been Proclus³⁴⁸, Syrianus or even Salustius. Athanassiadi includes that fragment in a section called “*Unclassified Fragments*”, alongside a later fragment from the *Suda* that exposes a very similar doctrine about the consubstantiation of the immaculate body (ἄσπιλος σῶμα) and the soul: τὸ ὁμόστολον ψυχῆς ἄσπιλον σῶμα³⁴⁹. Based on the fact that Athanassiadi defends that Damascius somehow devaluated theurgy in comparison

³⁴⁵ (*Ibid.* 153A).

³⁴⁶ Cf. the fr. 63 of É. des Places: (οἱ) τῶν στοιχείων αἰθέρες... The quotation of that Chaldean fragment is made by Damascius in his commentary on the *Phaedo* [it is actually a teaching class taken by one of his students] in which he is discussing Socrates' description of the heavenly spheres. Damascius argues that the elements and souls are purer and more beautiful there and that the luminous vehicles are necessarily purer in those regions: εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, πάντως που καὶ τὰ ἀγροειδῆ ὄχηματα καθαρὰ καὶ αἰ ψυχαὶ καλλίους. The expression here is exactly the same as the one found in the *Philosophical History*: ἀγροειδὲς ὄχημα. L.G. Westerink argues that what Damascius is saying is that the ethereal aspect is the purest form of any element. Cf. (1977, p. 358). The fragment 98 states: Ἄνδρὸς δὴ ἱεροῦ δέμας αἰθέρες οἰκοδόμησαν (the ethers have strengthened the body of a sacred man). The ὄχημα also appears in other works of Damascius, like the *De Princ.* (I. 157.13; I. 255.3; I. 264.17 and the *In Parm.* (7.9; 8.2; 8.4; 42.10; 255.17).

³⁴⁷ (2002, p. 16).

³⁴⁸ Proclus exposed a theory of the double vehicle of the soul (*In Tim.* III 236.31 ff. and *Elem. Theol.* § 207–210), one mortal and other immortal. In his particular view of transmigration, he argues that human souls cannot degrade and inhabit the souls of animals or plants, while Damascius, probably in a more orthodox Iamblichean fashion, maintains that they indeed can be transformed into the souls of other “lesser” beings. (PH, 4A)

³⁴⁹ PH, 153B.

to philosophy³⁵⁰, the placement of such Suda's fragments inside a coherent whole in her reconstruction would cause problems for a narrative in which theurgy is supposedly responsible for the decline of the Platonic school of Athens under Hegias. I would argue that those two fragments should be placed in the section concerning Isidore's embodiment and miraculous powers³⁵¹.

Regardless of that, it is clear that the Iamblichean perspective of embodiment, destiny and final destination of the soul is enclosed in the narrative of the *Philosophical History*. It is a Cosmo-Historical narrative of embodiment and the subsequent release from matter or the transfiguration of material reality itself by the spiritual transcendence of the Platonic sage, since the vehicle of the soul is inscribed in the very own material body (καὶ τοῦτο μέντοι τῷ ἀστροειδεῖ σώματι τῷδε ἀποκέκλειται ἐνίοις μὲν εἴσω τῆς κεφαλῆς, ἐνίοις δὲ εἴσω τοῦ δεξιοῦ ὤμου). In other works of Damascius, notably the *Commentary on the Parmenides*, the problem might be placed in a slightly different way, but the fundamental premise of the ontological nature of the soul being altered by embodiment is never questioned³⁵²:

In several passages, Damascius explains (consistent with many Platonists) that all of the qualities of the body are dependent on (enmattered) forms, whether those qualities are bestowed by a universal or cosmic soul (as in the case of the four elements) or by the individual soul, or by the demiurge, who first prepares the substrate to receive the traces of the forms. So, there can be no kind of body without soul and body gets all of its qualities from the soul or maybe we should say, a soul. But in that case, it would seem that embodiment, that is, the fact that an individual soul is embodied, would not change or affect the nature of the soul. After all, soul brings to the body all that body has on offer. The direction of causation is unilateral, from the immaterial to the material. And yet (and here Damascius enters into explicit controversy with his predecessors Plotinus and Proclus) Damascius reluctantly speculates that the soul 'changes essentially' owing to embodiment, owing, that is, to its relationship to the body [...] the soul's very engagement with the forms that it, after all,

³⁵⁰ Cf. the fragments 88A and 150 and the discussion by Krulak (2017, p. 478-480).

³⁵¹ Athanassiadi's 5-38.

³⁵² Cf. (Ahbel-Rappe, 2018, p. 152-153).

projects from itself on embodiment changes the nature of the soul, according to Damascius.

In my opinion, Ahbel-Rappe puts too much faith on the originality of Damascius as “one of the first philosophers of consciousness”³⁵³ in her text on the Parmenides commentary, in many aspects he seems to be continuing the Iamblichean tradition, but that problem is far beyond my concern here, that is only how the idea might be reflected in the *Philosophical History*. What really matters is that Damascius’ narrative about the descent of the soul and its embodiment seems to be overall coherent with the Iamblichean theory.

Even if the narrative on embodiment might not have been constructed as mytho-historical elsewhere, in the *Philosophical History* it obviously can be defined in that way, considering the narrative structure of the work that, as seen in the Introduction, is a blend of history, biography, mythography and even the so-called ancient prose fiction or novel. Returning to the text and its place in the historical development of the Mediterranean world, the messenger of the gods Isidore, a soul incarnated into the world with the purpose of guiding those who followed him into the light of God³⁵⁴, is a sage that did not extend his light into our future. The historical testimony of his ecstatic experience, as that of most “pagan holy men” of Late Antique society, waned with the expansion of Christianity and became part of the debris of historical experience. The pagan holy man has been reduced to a charlatan, a miracle-monger³⁵⁵, a counterfeiter, a witch-doctor³⁵⁶. His Christian counterpart acquired the respectability of the mystical furor and the veneration of many historical generations, while Isidore, Heraiscus, Syrianus and even the more famous and appreciated Proclus became mere footnotes to history, faced by historians and classical

³⁵³ Cf. (2018, p. 154).

³⁵⁴ Cf. *PH*, 12A, B and 14.

³⁵⁵ In a now very famous text, René Girard analyzed the biography of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus in light of his mimetic theory of culture and religion. In the description of Girard, Apollonius is pictured as a charlatan and guru with no authentic divine or religious experience, but as a mere social manipulator that could understand the basic tenets of human desire and then turn it into social control and influence. The pagan hermit or holy man in such a narrative is a very intelligent and conscious pettifogger. Cf. (2001 [1999], p. 49-62)

³⁵⁶ “The holy men of Greco-Roman paganism will never inspire the reverence or the fascinated horror that the ascetics and monks of early Christianity have commanded ever since they first impinged on the common mind in the time of Antony and Athanasios. Writing for a Christian audience Francis Bacon could dismiss the semi-mythical Epimenides and Numa, and notorious exhibitionists like Empedokles and Apollonios, as self-evident imposters; while in our own less devout times the abundance of the hagiographical literature ensures that the Christian saint will preoccupy scholars for the indefinite future, if only as the unwitting patron of a mass of historical and sociological data that is only just beginning to be analyzed. Yet this is poor excuse for neglecting the pagan holy man, who came in the later Roman empire to play a conspicuous part in his own religious tradition, and also affords instructive points of comparison with his Christian competitors.” Cf. (Fowden, 1989, p. 33)

scholars as deluded men with the same spiritual value as that of “unworthy” shamans and tribesmen of the most remote “primitive cultures”.

If Isidore was to be almost forgotten by history, his soul did not arrive in the Encosmic realm without a reason. Again, the Iamblichean theory of the soul can enlighten how and why such a soul exists. The golden chain of holy philosophers had to incarnate in this world by an act of necessity. As Dillon-Finamore attest³⁵⁷:

In discussing the soul’s descent (sections 26-27), Iamblichus argues (following Plato’s *Timaeus*) that there is a certain necessity to the descent and the order through which the souls are brought to generation. The Demiurge sends all souls into the cosmos, and all souls follow a leader-god (one of the planets or stars) with its entourage of angels, daemons, and heroes. Within this descent there are clearly different sorts of human souls. Some are purified and, although sometimes existing in bodies, remain a cut above other mortals, able to re-connect with the supra-celestial Intellect and engage in pure intellection.

So, in base of that conclusion, there is a reason for the descent of all souls. Some descend upon the world in order to purge offenses committed in previous lives, while others, like the souls of Pythagoras and Plato, are pure souls that “descend freely in order to make the world a better place”³⁵⁸. The translators and commentators of the *De Anima* note a striking similarity between the Iamblichean theory of the soul and the Buddhist theory of the *bodhisattva*, a supremely enlightened being that stay in the temporal realm of the *Samsāra* in order to illuminate all sentient beings through his/her attainment of *bodhicitta*³⁵⁹.

³⁵⁷ (2002, p. 16).

³⁵⁸ (*Ibid.* p. 17) “Their divine thoughts help us lesser mortals re-ascend and better our own lives. (2) Souls that require punishment are forced to descend and live a life designed to pay the penalty for past sins. (3) In between the two extremes, there is the soul which has made some progress in its past lives but has not yet achieved the status of pure soul. It descends in a partially free manner since it must still pay for its previous offences but it also is somewhat willing to make the descent since it will thereby improve its lot and work its way further upward toward the rank of pure soul.”

³⁵⁹ Dillon and Finamore are sceptic about any Buddhist influence or contact in the part of Iamblichus: “Since Iamblichus was hardly acquainted with Buddhism, this is presumably a coincidence, but an interesting one. A difference is important as well. The bodhisattvas choose to help their fellow creatures; the highest human souls in the Iamblichean universe must descend and help. The similarity with the philosopher-rulers in Plato’s Republic is clear. Like them, perhaps, the pure souls see no conflict between the desire to intelligize and the need to descend and help others, but the descent is necessary nonetheless (Rep. 540a-c)” (2002, p. 17).

Doctrines similar to the *bodhisattva* theory can also be found in Hindu writings corresponding to the Greco-Roman late antique period³⁶⁰ and the speculations of possible intercourses between Neoplatonism and Indian religious and philosophical schools offer much food for thought, but any profound development of the theme is, again, beyond the present concern³⁶¹. What is important is to show that the soul of “the great Isidore”³⁶² was one of such pure souls. When discussing his master amazing prophetic powers, Damascius says³⁶³: καὶ τάχα ἂν ἦδε ἡ πάθη ἀπροαίρετος ἂν εἴη, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο συμβαίνοι ἂν ἴσως καὶ ταῖς ἀκηράτοις. “That state happened naturally to Isidore, without deliberation (ἀπροαίρετος) as a necessary outcome of his undefiled and pure (ἀκήρατος) soul.”

The key word here is ἀκήρατος, a technical term also used by Iamblichus in his discussion of the state of the pure souls before they enter into bodies³⁶⁴:

Δεῖ δέ που καὶ τοὺς βίους τῶν ψυχῶν κατανοεῖν πρὶν ἐλθεῖν εἰς σῶμα, ὡς ἄρα καὶ οὗτοι πολλὴν ἔχουσιν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς διάστασιν· ἀπὸ δὲ διαφόρων τρόπων ζωῆς διάφορον ποιοῦνται ἑαυτῶν καὶ τὴν πρώτην σύνοδον. Οἱ τε γὰρ νεοτελεῖς καὶ πολυθεάμονες τῶν ὄντων, οἱ τε συνοπαδοὶ καὶ συγγενεῖς τῶν θεῶν, οἱ τε παντελεῖς καὶ ὀλόκληρα τὰ εἶδη τῆς ψυχῆς περιέχοντες, πάντες ἀπαθεῖς καὶ ἀκήρατοι ἐμφύονται πρώτως εἰς τὰ σώματα· οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν³⁶⁵ ἄδην

³⁶⁰ The Yogasūtra of Patañjali, already commented, is the most obvious parallel. That particular textual tradition absorbed many Buddhist influences, so the similarities might also point in that direction.

³⁶¹ Cf. (Gregorios, 2002, p. 15-25); (Ciapalo, 2002, p. 71-83); (Staal, 1961, p. 22-24) and the volume organized by R. Baine Harris: *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought* (1981). Beginning already in the 19th century, before J. Bidez published *Eos: Platon et L'Orient* (1945), the speculation on the Oriental influence over Plato and the Neoplatonists led the German Indologist R. Garbe (1896) to assume that the doctrines of the Gnostics and Plotinus had origins in the philosophical school of Sāṃkhya. Garbe devotes a whole chapter of his book on Sāṃkhya-Yoga to discuss the dependence of late antique Greek systems on “samkyam” concepts and in p. 4. affirms that: Die Abhängigkeit des Neuplatonismus von unserem Systeme ist so stark, dass sich die Anschauungen der bedeutendsten Vertreter jener Schule zum Teil vollständig mit Sāṃkhya-Lehren decken. Hierher rechne ich u. a. die Sätze Plotin's, dass die Seele von Leiden und Alterationen frei sei, dass sie von allem derartigen nicht berührt werde, sondern dass das Leiden der Welt der Materie angehöre; desgleichen die Forderung, dass der Mensch der Sinnenwelt entsagen und durch Contemplation der Wahrheit zustreben solle. Of course, his view on Plotinus and the problem of the soul is radically different from the Iamblichean theory of the vehicle of the soul and the “bodhisattva” theory present in Buddhism and somehow resonating in the Yogasūtra, but some kind of link between the Greco-Roman οἰκουμένη and India certainly existed and recent research has even argued about the constant presence of Buddhists and Brahmins in Alexandria and Syria with even local practitioners being hypothesized Cf. (Buono, 2016, p. 69-70).

³⁶² *PH*, 9C.

³⁶³ *Ibid.* 9D.

³⁶⁴ *De Anim.* 30.11-21. *Stob.* 1. 49. 40. 34-45.

³⁶⁵ The nature of the souls is also reflective of the successive ages of history as will be shown in the second chapter. Everything is a reflex of all things in the sympathetic world of the *Philosophical History*. The time of Damascius is described in the fragment 18 as being dominated by desire (ἐπιθυμία) and in that period the

ἀναπεπλησμένοι καὶ ἄλλων παθῶν μεστοὶ μετὰ παθῶν συνέρχονται πρώτως τοῖς σώμασι.

One must also consider the lives of souls before they entered into body, since these lives have great individual variation. From different manners of life souls experience a different first encounter with the body. For, those who are “newly-initiated,” who have seen much of reality and are companions and kinsmen of the gods, and who are fully perfected and encompass the parts of their soul complete are all first implanted free of passions and pure [ἀκήρατοι] into body. As to those, on the other hand, who are sated with desires and full of passions, it is with passions that they first encounter bodies.

Philological considerations aside of the word’s meaning in Greek lyric poetry, Herodotus or Plato³⁶⁶, the theory of the pure souls (ἀκήρατοι) in the historical setting seems to be related with the Neoplatonic usage of the Hesiodic image of the Golden Chain (χρυσῆ σειρά) and the ideological justification of the Neoplatonist *diadoché* as sacred amidst a world dominated by Titanic chaos and ἐπιθυμία³⁶⁷. In a passage quoted and discussed by Fowden³⁶⁸, the Neoplatonist Hierocles of Alexandria started a genealogy for the “holy race” (ἱερὰ γενεὰ)³⁶⁹ in Ammonius Saccas, the mysterious master of Plotinus.

The development of a holy genealogy for the sacred race might be seen as a rhetorical strategy in order to socially justify the position of the Pythagoreanized Neoplatonic θεῖος ἀνὴρ and his production of discourses based on his experiences of holiness. Indeed, the development of the Neoplatonic biographical and narrative tradition is strongly influenced by the Pythagorean narratives on the life of Pythagoras³⁷⁰ and other Pythagorean sages, like the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* of Philostratus³⁷¹. While the Neoplatonists themselves surprisingly made very few allusions to Apollonius, the model of

dominance over things of politics and social is dominated by individuals in which ἐπιθυμία is the rulling principle of their embodiment, like Pamprepus and the Christian emperors.

³⁶⁶ The word appears in the *Phaedr.* (247d) and the *Laws* (735c), but the meaning is not necessarily related to the theory of the unpolluted souls and their embodiment.

³⁶⁷ Cf. (Fowden, 1982, p. 34-38).

³⁶⁸ Hierocles apud. Photius, *Bibl.* 214, esp. 172a, 173a.

³⁶⁹ In *PH*, 73, Damascius says that the “holy race” lived apart [from the corrupt society], leading a blissful life pleasing to the gods and devoted to philosophy and the worship of divine beings: ἡ δὲ ἱερὰ γενεὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν διέζη βίον θεοφιλή καὶ εὐδαίμονα, τὸν τε φιλοσοφοῦντα καὶ τὸν τὰ θεῖα θεραπεύοντα.

³⁷⁰ Both Iamblichus and Porphyry wrote about the Pythagorean life and the latter also wrote a *History of Philosophers*. Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 39).

³⁷¹ Cf. (Fowden, 1982, p. 36-38).

the Pythagorean sage incarnated in the world in order to help humanity in its liberation became a literary *topos*³⁷². In the time period in which Damascius was writing the *Philosophical History*, when paganism was already disassembled in terms of sacred space and sacred geography, the pagan holy man was already a marginal figure, someone in which their followers deposited hope for guidance and leadership in the darkest times of the Typhonian order. The Egyptian *bodhisattva* Isidore³⁷³ can predict the future³⁷⁴, advise people in need³⁷⁵, communicate with the souls of the dead³⁷⁶, expose the most mystical doctrines even for the learned³⁷⁷ and even convert someone from the limited perspective of the Peripatetics to the Divine Meadow of the Immense Ocean of Platonic Concepts.

The conversion of Dorus, the Arabian Peripatetic, is a demonstration of Isidore's natural disposition towards truth and mystical illumination³⁷⁸:

Δῶρος, ὁ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀραβίας· ὡς φησι Δαμάσκιος εἰς τὴν φιλόσοφον ἱστορίαν δεινότατον εἶναι ζητητὴν τῆς ἀληθείας. τοῦτον Ἰσίδωρος ὁ φιλόσοφος ἤσθάνετο μὲν τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐπὶ ταῖς Ἀριστοτέλους ὑποθέσεσιν ἐνδεδεμένον, ἅτε ἐκ παίδων ἐν αὐταῖς τεθραμμένον πορρωτέρω τῆς ἡλικίας, καὶ διὰ τὴν ἀήθειαν τῆς Πλάτωνος μεγαλοπρεποῦς ἐπιστήμης οὐ δυνάμενον ἀναπτῆναι πρὸς τὰ ὑψηλὰ καὶ λαμπρὰ τῶν νοημάτων. οὕτω δὲ ἔχοντα καταμαθὼν ἀνεκαλέσατό τε κατὰ βραχὺ καὶ ἀνεπέτασεν αὐτοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν εἰς τὸ μέγα πέλαγος τῆς ἀληθείας, ὥστε ἀποσκευασάμενον τὴν τὰ μικρὰ συλλογιζομένην ἀκρίβειαν περιπατητικὴν εἰς τὴν διὰ Προμηθέως τινὸς ἅμα φανότατον πυρὶ

³⁷² Peter T. Struck (2004, p. 194) notes that in the Roman Imperial period the approximation between the Pythagorean philosopher – the model for the Neoplatonists – with his symbolic discourses and the sorcerer or magician is a growing trend: “Pythagorean symbols in the Roman period begin to be regarded, to some extent, as efficacious speech. They have the capacity not merely to communicate ideas but also to get things done. Their early function as identity tokens, already a kind of efficaciousness, here expands into broader regions and picks up affiliations with ritual and even magical power. In these contexts, then, the Pythagorean “symbol” acquires capacities similar to the symbol of the mystery religions and takes on an increasingly performative power. Its function outgrows the boundaries of semiotics and encroaches on the territory normally reserved for the priest and the magician.”

³⁷³ The theophoric nature of the name (“gift of Isis”) should not be ignored, especially considering the heavy influence that the cults of the Egyptian gods and the mysteries of Isis and Osiris had in the Neoplatonic milieu in which Isidore was born. Based on Damascius comments in 35B, it seems that Isidore was not an ethnic Egyptian considering that Heraiscus and Asclepiades, Egyptians themselves, consulted with him “even in questions of Egyptian philosophy”. The myths of Osiris and Isis are interpreted as paradigmatic examples of cosmogonical narrative by Damascius in the *PH*, 3.

³⁷⁴ *PH*, 9A, B, C, D, E, F.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 24B.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 11

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 35B

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 134A.

καταπεμφθεῖσαν διαλεκτικὴν, αὐτοψίαν τε καθαρώτατον οὖσαν νοῦ καὶ φρονήσεως, ἀναδραμεῖν τε καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ εἰσοικίσαι τὰς τοῦ βίου φιλοσόφους ἐλπίδας.

Dorus, from Arabia. *Damascius says in his Philosophical History* that he was a marvelous investigator of the truth. The philosopher Isidore perceived since the beginning that he was enchained by the hypotheses of Aristotle inasmuch as these were the basis of his development and growth since childhood. Given that he was unaccustomed with Plato's marvelous wisdom, he was incapable as he progressed in years to take flight towards sublime and luminous states of mind. Being aware of this, [Isidore] gradually called him back and opened his soul to the immense ocean of Truth, so that Dorus freed himself from the meticulous syllogisms of the Peripatetics, concentrated on proving tiny points, towards the art of dialectics which was sent down by some Prometheus at the same time as a shining fire to be the purest revelation of wisdom and mind, and there he based the hope of his life in regards to philosophy.

The holy man is also a guide into the “immense ocean of Truth” (τὸ μέγα πέλαγος τῆς ἀληθείας)³⁷⁹ in itself a metaphor for mystical experience across many religious and literary traditions³⁸⁰ and the process of becoming acquainted with Truth depends on an experience that goes beyond the Aristotelian ἀκρίβεια³⁸¹, it is self-transformation dependent on mystical vision, supernatural experience (αὐτοψία). According to the *LSJ* entry, αὐτοψία can have the meaning both of “seeing with one's own eyes” and “supernatural

³⁷⁹ Cf. *PH*, 22: αὐτὴν δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐν ταῖς ἱεραῖς εὐχαῖς πρὸς ὅλον τὸ θεῖον πέλαγος ἔλεγε. This fragment will be discussed later, but the image of the ocean as a counterpart for the state of the soul that has surpassed the limitations of the body is important to note by now.

³⁸⁰ In the Hindu tradition, the stories of the seekers Nārada and Mārkaṇḍeya involve the overcoming of their terrestrial and localized existences and the penetration into “the waters of non-existence”, the final and supreme mystery of Māyā. Being the element of life preservation, circulating in nature in the form of rain, sap, blood and milk, it is the substance endowed with the power of transformation. In the symbolic plane, penetrating into the waters or the vast oceans of existence means to be initiated into the supreme mysteries of life. Cf. (Zimmer, 2002 [1946], p. 31-48.)

³⁸¹ Isidore is shown in another passage (*PH*, 106B) to also be endowed with ἀκρίβεια. Preciseness and meticulousness is still in the terrestrial realm, where the Aristotelian knowledge exceeds: “Those who directed poetic and rhetorical schools also looked for the company of the philosopher, for despite his lack of specialization in their subjects he gave them through his philosophical precision [ἀκρίβεια] a sense of care for their own childish disciplines. (ἐπεὶ καὶ ὅσοι ῥητορικῶν προΐσταντο διατριβῶν ἢ ποιητικῶν, ἡσπάζοντο τὴν τοῦ φιλοσόφου συγχὴν ὁμιλίαν. εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἀνάγωγος ἦν τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἀλλὰ τῆ γε ἄλλη φιλοσόφῳ ἀκρίβεια προσετίθει τι καὶ ἐκείνοισ ἐπιμελέστερον εἰς τὰ σφέτερα αὐτῶν τεχνύδρια)

manifestation, vision” and can also mean the magical action that provoke a supernatural vision in the PGM³⁸². In the sense used by Damascius, who witnessed the events in first person, it can have both meanings since it narrates concomitantly the conversion of Dorus from Aristotelian technicism to the Platonic way of life and Damascius’ own conversion from rhetoric to philosophy as he journeyed with Isidore from Alexandria to Athens in a sacred peregrination through the holy shrines of the Middle East³⁸³.

In the Neoplatonic lexicon, αὐτοψία appears in some other passages as reflective of mystical experience or theurgic operation³⁸⁴ and in its etymological history one can find both medical, literary and philosophical meanings since the 3rd century BCE³⁸⁵. In a time in which the legitimacy of the pagan mystical traditions was practically lost³⁸⁶ by the proto-secularizing and appropriative efforts of Christian apologists, monks and politicians, someone like Isidore, in his secretive³⁸⁷ journey with his disciples Dorus and Damascius, seemed to progressively resemble the magician described by Betz in the introduction to his edition and translation of the PGM³⁸⁸:

This type of wandering craftsman seems keen to adopt and adapt every religious tradition that appeared useful to him [...] this type of magician no longer understood the old languages, although he used remnants of them in transcription. He recited and used what must at one time have been metrically composed hymns; [...] In the hands of

³⁸² 1.950, *P.Mag. Leid.W.16.38*. It also appears in PGM XIII, 734: προσλήμψη δὲ, ὃ τέκνον, ἐπὶ τῆς αὐτοψίας... (you should drink, o son, for the practice of direct vision (αὐτοψία)...))

³⁸³ It is hard to say exactly what happened when Isidore converted Dorus, what kind of images and experiences the three men (Isidore, Dorus and Damascius) had at that moment, but based on descriptions of other events in the *Philosophical History* and Neoplatonic literature it might have been exhilarating for Dorus. Isidore might have had his body involved in mystical light or manifested supernatural powers like levitation, the invocation of Plato’s soul or conjuration of metaphysical beings into the material plane. All of these phenomena are attested in Neoplatonic literature, like Iamblichus incredible powers in Eunapius or the narratives about the miracles of the two Juliani.

³⁸⁴ E.g. Proclus, *in Alc.* p. 92C; Iamblichus *De. Myst.* 2.4, 7.3.

³⁸⁵ Cf. Foster, J. The "autopsy" enigma: etymology, related terms and unambiguous alternatives. In: *Forensic Sci Med Pathol.* 2023

³⁸⁶ As noted in the introduction, Isidore was considered a magician, a sorcerer, by a Christian writer like Zacharias of Mytilene and a particularly problematic one. Cf. *VS*, [22-23]: “Thus he insulted the companions of Horapollon: Asclepiodotus, Heraiskos, Ammonios and Isidore — who eventually became known as an overt magician and troublemaker — and the other pagans with what had taken place in Menouthis: all the excesses and the fornication of the priestess of Isis, and how she was offering this to [23] anyone who wanted, just like a prostitute who is available to everyone.” Transl. Ambjörn.

³⁸⁷ Cf. *PH*, 9A; 30, A, B, C, D. Secrecy is also a common feature of the Pythagorean philosopher since the Archaic Greece. Cf. (Burkert, 1972, p. 178-179). The actions of Isidore are in a great part molded on Pythagoras, that could even be considered a superior to Plato among some Neoplatonists like Iamblichus. Cf. (Struck, 2004, p. 194). In 26A and B, Damascius attests the Pythagorean background of Isidore’s actions.

³⁸⁸ (1992, p. xlvi-xlvii).

magicians of this type, the gods from the various cults gradually merged, and as their natures became blurred, they often changed into completely different deities.

Betz is describing a reality more fitting to the 3rd and 4th centuries in which the demarcation between the philosopher and the *magus* was more explicit, but as the expansion of Christianity became unstoppable the confusion between pagan religious thinkers and the wandering magicians and craftsmen of the syncretistic Greco-Egyptian culture became unavoidable.

As a matter of fact, Isidore was a wandering holy man eager to travel abroad (προθυμότατος εἰς ἀποδημίαν). His psychology reflects the Pythagorean literary *topos* of the man that wants to absorb inside himself the marvels of the world through a spiritual journey³⁸⁹:

προθυμότατος εἰς ἀποδημίαν οὐ τὴν μάταιον καὶ
 τρυφῶσαν, εἰς ἀνθρώπινα οἰκοδομήματα καὶ
 μεγέθη καὶ κάλλη πόλεων διαχαίνουσαν· ἀλλ' εἴ
 πού τι θαυμαστὸν ἀκήκοεν ἢ ἱεροπρεπές, ἀφανές
 ἢ φανόν, αὐτόπτης ἠβούλετο γενέσθαι τοῦ
 θαύματος.

He was eager for long journeys, not of the empty and luxurious type and also not of the type that yawn at of the greatness and beauty of man-made buildings and cities. But if he ever heard about marvelous or sacred places, manifest or unmanifest, he desired to witness [αὐτόπτης] the wonder into himself.

Another word of the family of αὐτοψία takes place here: αὐτόπτης. As noted above, words of that ‘family’ are prominent through the magical papyri³⁹⁰ and are part of common magical lexicon and also of prose fictional narratives³⁹¹ influenced by magical practices³⁹².

³⁸⁹ *PH*, 21.

³⁹⁰ Another example from the PGM VII 321: Αὐτοπτος· λαβὼν ἀγγεῖον χαλκοῦν <καὶ> βαλὼν εἰς αὐτὸ ὕδωρ ὄμβριμον ἐπίθουε λίβανον ἀρσενικόν.

³⁹¹ The narrative of Damascius is considered by Photius (cod. 130) in terms of literary style and beauty of expression alongside the likes of Lucian, Lucius of Patras, Iamblichus the Novelist, Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus. He also juxtaposes some passages of Damascius’ *mirabilia* with Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius* in the cod. 241.

³⁹² Cf. (Ruiz-Montero, 2007, p. 53). For the general theory that the prose fictional narratives (aka “ancient novels”) have origins in magical, aretalogical and ritualistic contexts Cf. (Merkelbach, 2001, p. 266-304 and

Isidore wanted to experience in himself the unmanifest and manifest wonders of the magical cosmos of the Neoplatonists (ἀλλ' εἴ ποῦ τι θαυμαστὸν ἀκήκοεν ἢ ἱεροπρεπές, ἀφανές ἢ φανόν, αὐτόπτης ἠβούλετο γενέσθαι τοῦ θαύματος). His soul had a special attunement to such phenomena considering his extraordinary embodiment conditions.

Appearing also in the fragments 9E (ἐγρηγορότι μὲν τῷ Ἰσιδώρῳ οὐ παρῆν ἡ ἄρρητος αὐτοψία³⁹³) and 9F (ὅτι διττὸν ἔλεγεν ἐκ τούτου τὸν τρόπον τῶν θείων αὐτοψιῶν³⁹⁴), αὐτοψία is related with ἐποπτεία³⁹⁵ in the *Commentary on the Phaedo*³⁹⁶:

Ὅτι ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς ἠγοῦντο μὲν αἱ πάνδημοι καθάρσεις, εἶτα ἐπὶ ταύταις ἀπορρητότεραι, μετὰ δὲ ταύτας συστάσεις παρελαμβάνοντο καὶ ἐπὶ ταύταις μῆσεις, ἐν τέλει δὲ ἐποπτεῖαι. ἀναλογοῦσι τοίνυν αἱ μὲν ἠθικαὶ τε καὶ πολιτικαὶ ἀρεταὶ τοῖς ἐμφανέσι καθαρμοῖς, αἱ δὲ καθαρτικαὶ, ὅσαι ἀποσκευάζονται πάντα τὰ ἐκτός, τοῖς ἀπορρητοτέροις, αἱ δὲ περὶ τὰ διανοητὰ θεωρητικὰ ἐνέργειαι ταῖς συστάσεσιν, αἱ δὲ τούτων συναιρέσεις εἰς τὸ ἀμέριστον ταῖς μῆσεσιν, αἱ δὲ ἀπλαῖ τῶν ἀπλῶν εἰδῶν αὐτοψαῖα ταῖς ἐποπτεῖαις.

In the mysteries the first stage used to be general purifying ceremonies, followed by more secret ones, after which conjunction took place, then initiation, and finally vision. Analogous to these stages are the several degrees of virtues, the ethical and social virtues corresponding to the public purifying rites, the purificatory virtues, in which all the extraneous is discarded, to the more secret purifications, speculative activity on the reflective level to conjunction, integration of its results to form an indivisible whole to initiation, simple intuition of simple forms to vision. (Transl. L.G. Westerink)

The lexicon of that passage contains several important words for Damascius' philosophy, like καθαρμός, σύστασις and συναιρέσις, but the main link of that passage with my discussion is the Pythagorean portrayal – following Plato – of the philosopher as the

335-451). Merkelbach developed the theory first exposed by Kérenyi (1931) about the ritual origins of the so-called fictional narratives in the Greco-Roman world.

³⁹³ “When awakened, Isidore’s ineffable vision disappeared.”

³⁹⁴ “He talked therefore of the dual nature of the miraculous visions.”

³⁹⁵ The final grade of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, ἐποπτεία is alluded here in the context of Socrates’ discussion of the philosopher as someone initiated in the mysteries. Cf. *Phaed.* 69c3-d2.

³⁹⁶ I.167.

initiate, someone that can directly see (ἀποψία) the final truth of the mysteries (ἐποπτεία). In the world of Damascius, however, the mysteries of Eleusis were already prohibited and the sanctuary had been destroyed by the Germans and “the men in black robes” (i.e. the Christian monks)³⁹⁷ and the association with mystery religions and other pagan initiatory practices might have been punishable with death and frequently associated with sorcery and magic. Isidore and Damascius might have seemed arcane figures for his contemporaries³⁹⁸. Thus, even philosophical mysticism could be seen as form of magic³⁹⁹.

The association between the Pythagorean sage and occult, “shamanic” or mystical practices is not an innovation of Late Antiquity⁴⁰⁰ but the universal soteriological aim of the embodied soul arrived in the material realm for the liberation of humanity – or more precisely of those who want to follow him/her in his journey – is a typical late antique trend. That said, what separated someone like the “*bodhisattva*” Isidore from the magician in the period of the High Empire and pagan hegemony was his soteriological emphasis⁴⁰¹. With the dominance of Christianity and the radical devaluation of pagan myths, sacred geography and metaphysical validity, the pagan holy man was increasingly pushed to the boundaries of society, associated with magicians and sorcerers, and became almost a late antique Parsifal, a romantic longing for a time in which the order of the gods was manifested in this world, the Golden Age, the perfection that once permeated all society and was now restrict to his private journeys and rites with disciples and friends.

³⁹⁷ The story of the last hierophants can be found in Eunapius’ *PS* alongside the closing of the mysteries by the emperor Theodosius in 392. Eunapius was initiated into the mysteries by the last legitimate hierophant, at a period in which the mysteries were already in decline.

³⁹⁸ Cf. (Chuvin, 1990, p. 6): “For pagans, what was different was the necessity of adapting to a completely unparalleled situation. No longer were their religion and their rituals those of the state. This was a situation to inspire nostalgia and attempts at winning back their lost public privileges, and also to hasten the spread, beginning in the third century, of beliefs and practices of a private nature, under the influence of philosophy (Platonic and Pythagorean), former initiation cults (official ones like the Eleusinian mysteries or less formal ones like Orphism), and “Chaldean” or “Egyptian” magic.”

³⁹⁹ As I pretend to discuss in the last chapter, that might be one of the reasons for the general absence of “theurgy” in the philosophical writings of Damascius, instead of any return to a ‘Plotinian’ atheurgic mysticism. In the Eunapius’ narration about Antoninus we are told that the Canobic mystic avoided talking about theurgy, probably as a measure to avoid open persecution by Christian authorities. Cf.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. (Burkert, 1972, p. 127-137 and p. 357-363).

⁴⁰¹ Sarah Iles Johnston (2018, p. 695) discusses how the theurgists of the Platonic tradition radically separated themselves from magicians: “While theurgists practiced rituals that we (or other ancient people) might identify as “magic”—that is, roughly evoking the features listed above—the theurgists themselves rejected that label [...] the theurgists claimed that, in contrast to *magoi*, they worked with the cooperation of the gods rather than by coercing them, and that they worked for the higher purpose, ultimately, of purifying their souls, rather than towards cotidian purposes such as the *magoi* did (e.g., the incitement of sexual passion or the acquisition of wealth).” Also (p. 703): “Indeed, the theurgists insisted that what set their rituals apart from ‘magic’ was the fact that those rituals were rooted in philosophy and the understanding of the cosmos that this philosophy gave them. The theurgists claimed to be putting into effect metaphysical principles that had been woven into the universe at the beginning of time. *In doing so, the theurgists claimed to be not only pursuing their private goals, but also participating in the on-going, demiurgic (re)creation of the cosmos.*”

The late Neoplatonic longing for the Golden Age, its actualization through mystical rites and the developments of holy genealogies (“the Golden Chain”) for the followers of the religions of the gods might fit somehow into Athanassiadi’s scheme of the growing trend of *monodoxy* in late antique society: the search for the only correct opinion about truth and religion amongst a myriad of false and deviant opinions⁴⁰². But as Athanassiadi herself recognizes in a previous work⁴⁰³, the psychological pressure exerted by Christianity into the psyche of the pagans might have been responsible for such a phenomenon among the pagan Platonists. What it seems to me, and I want to explore it further in the last chapter, is that the pagan mind was somehow “lost” into the abyss of metaphysical dislocations and ontological mutations unleashed by the official Christianized establishment. As noted by P. Chuvin, “the pagans’ stubborn refusal to change religion led them, not always knowingly, to change their religion.”⁴⁰⁴The “monodoxy” of the pagan genealogies and anti-heretical interpretations of Plato, the Chaldean Oracles and sacred literature in general might have been a way to counteract Christianity and to cope with the changing times⁴⁰⁵ in a desperate need to establish at least some ordering in a fragmented world.

⁴⁰² Cf. (2016, p. 14): “Ayant atteint vers le ne siècle de notre ère un zénith de permissivité intellectuelle et spirituelle - on dirait un état extrême de polydoxie -, l’univers hellénistique s’embarquait déjà sur un mouvement inverse, une lente marche à rebours vers la pensée unique - la monodoxie -, néologisme qui a spontanément surgi devant moi alors que je venais de terminer un livre qui tente d’analyser la notion d’hérésie chez les platoniciens tardifs. Fruit d’un cycle de conférences à la Section des sciences religieuses del ’École pratique des Hautes Études, ce petit livre, inspiré par une maxime d’Eudore d’Alexandrie, qui revendiquait pour Platon une pensée unique, est en effet une enquête sur l’intolérance dans un milieu spécifique et restreint: de Numénius à Damascius, chacun des maîtres du platonisme avait sa propre manière de lire les écrits du fondateur de la secte, position qui aboutissait inéluctablement la certitude que toute autre lecture de Platon dans le présent et le passé sentait l’hérésie.”

⁴⁰³ Cf. (1993, p. 11): “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.”

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. (1990, p. 10).

⁴⁰⁵ In *Empire to Commonwealth* (1993, p. 5), Fowden defines the consequences of the Christian monotheism and its intertwining with the Roman state as the foundation of the political theology that came to dominate the late antique and medieval world in the conjunction between monotheism and the idea of empire: “When, by the fifth century, the Roman Empire appears to have become irreversibly Christian, it is tempting to suppose that a “transformation” of antiquity has been brought about. But the Christianization of the Roman Empire was not merely a “transformation” or “transition” within a limited segment of time. It was part of a wider and longer process by which the idea of empire, and in particular monarchy, was conjoined with belief in the One God—monotheism. Sasanian Iran was likewise struggling with the relationship between religion, in this case Mazdaism, and empire; and although that particular nexus of problems never came anywhere near being resolved, the religion Iran eventually adopted, Islam, was very much part of that late antique dynamic whose first phase had been Christianization.”

In this section, I tried to give a brief outline of the very complex Iamblichean doctrines of the embodiment, their relation with a cosmic structure and its presence as the ideological justification for Isidore's mission in the *Philosophical History*. The brief discussion of the literary *topos* of the pagan holy man in a historical background led me to the conclusion that the activity of mystics like Isidore in the world of the 5th century had a tendency to appropriate the Iamblichean doctrine of classes of souls and special conditions of embodiment to a context in which the social legitimacy of pagan religious elites was dwindling and the ecstatic or trance induced holy man was approaching the liminal figure of the sorcerer in terms of social perception and perhaps even (unconscious) self-perception through the somewhat frequent use in the *Philosophical History* of lexicon associated with the PGM. In the next chapter, I will look closely to a "case study" between the narrative of Damascius and that of a contemporary Christian hagiographer. As noted by Chuvin, the place of the learned pagan in the post-Christian Roman society was that of a practitioner of the "occult sciences"⁴⁰⁶. That fact in itself has huge consequences for the idea of "mysticism" as a discourse of liminality.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. (1990, p. 10-11): "Scattered throughout the Empire, pagan communities survived locally throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, in ways that often escape us, with a dynamism and intellectual vitality that were greater in the East than in the West. Adherents were excluded from political, administrative, and military power but not from civil office or teaching, and they provided good Christian society with practitioners of "occult" sciences."

4. The Story of Asclepiodotus and the Christian “proto-secularization” of pagan myths

The proto-secularizing efforts of Christianity and its metaphysical dislocation of pagan myths and narratives can be seen in the *Life of Severus* in the story of Paralius and the barren wife of Asclepiodotus. The story of Asclepiodotus is also told by Damascius, even if in a much more fragmentary state, so it constitutes a good parallel of opposite Christian and pagan narratives. But before analyzing that story as the main remark of this chapter, I will briefly return one more time to the “*bodhisattva* theory” to illustrate a historical point. In the second century, in the time of the two Juliani, the Middle Platonic⁴⁰⁷ *topos* of the qualitative spiritual difference between the sage or initiate and the masses of men was established in its core, as the Chaldean Oracle fragments attests (e.g. οὐ γὰρ ὑφ' εἰμαρτὴν ἀγέλην πίπτουσι θεουργοί⁴⁰⁸). The Chaldean bipartite anthropology⁴⁰⁹ is foundational for the separation of the classes of souls and by the time of Damascius such a bipartite anthropological perspective was joined with the theory of the classes of souls.

Olympiodorus, a younger contemporary of Damascius, commenting upon the *Phaedo*'s 72b1-3 reports an explanation of Chaldean fr. 138 in this way⁴¹⁰:

ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδὲ τὰς τῶν θεουργῶν ψυχὰς βούλεται μένειν αἰεὶ ἐν τῷ νοητῷ, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατιέναι εἰς γένεσιν· περὶ ὧν φησιν τὸ λόγιον ἄγγελικῶ ἐνὶ χώρῳ [fr. 138].

But he (sc. Plato) holds that the souls of the theurgists do not remain forever in the intelligible order, but that they, too, descend into generation, concerning whom the oracle says: "in the angelic order."

⁴⁰⁷ It would be better, in terms of this work, to use the (clashing) expressions of “underworld of Platonism” (Dillon) and “universal Platonic world” (Athanassiadi) instead of Middle Platonism because it is not a strict investigation about “philosophy” as it is understood in manuals of the history of philosophy, rather a study in the history of spirituality, a phenomenon in which philosophy is participant but not the sole focus. Much of the ideas and doctrines that were present in the Greco-Roman world from c. 150 to 650 that overlapped with philosophy usually are not studied in courses on the history of philosophy. Using the expressions of Dillon or Athanassiadi allows one to integrate the Chaldean Oracles, the Gnostics, Hermetism and other groups into the whole.

⁴⁰⁸ Fr. 153 (É. des Places). “For the theurgists do not fall into the herd that is subject to destiny”.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. (Stang, 2011, p. 3.)

⁴¹⁰ Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.*, 149 [64, 2-5 N.) W.

Plato, as far as is known, never used the word theurgy or ever referred to theurgists. This is a particular late antique interpretation of certain cosmological and anthropological developments that were taking place since the times of Apollonius of Tyana, as noted by Fowden⁴¹¹. The conjunction between the theory of the unpolluted (ἀκήρατος) soul and the eschatological doctrine about “saviors” might have been a particular pagan way of dealing with the expansion of Christianity and its prominence since the 4th century. Olympiodorus⁴¹² is reflecting the same Iamblichean pattern⁴¹³ that has been described in the *Philosophical History* and seems to be permeating the mindset of the Platonic philosophers and other elite pagans of the period. The necessity of certain guiding souls that can understand correctly the nature of things due to their particular conditions of embodiment is of fundamental importance for a community that saw its prestige shift from the center to the periphery of society in the 2 centuries from Constantine to Justinian⁴¹⁴.

Indeed, as shown both by the *Philosophical History* and the *Life of Severus*, the conflicts between the two sects – that of the pagans and the Christians – was not mainly political-theological, but involves deeper issues of way of life and ontology. The story of Paralius is paradigmatic for the shifting perspectives among the two groups⁴¹⁵ and to demonstrate both the decay in prestige of the pagan holy man, with his description as a fraudulent magician, and Christianity’s proto-secularizing efforts in its evaluations of the myths and traditions of the pagans. Isidore, an unpolluted soul and a sage imbued of cosmic mission in the chronicle of Damascius, is described as a magician in Zachariah’s work⁴¹⁶.

⁴¹¹ (1982, p. 36-37.)

⁴¹² Cf. (Stang, 2015, p. 3-5)

⁴¹³ As Shaw has commented (2014, p. 3-5), some perception of “decline” or at least deviation of pagan practices was already widespread by the time of Iamblichus, but in his time, it was not felt as being caused by Christianity. Arguably, not even Damascius thought something like that, the Christians are just the symptom rather than the disease.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. (Chuvin, 1990, p. 11.)

⁴¹⁵ Both were, of course, far from being unified groups. Any dichotomy between the pagan and the Christian might take into consideration the significant differences inside both communities. As discussed in the section above, Damascius e.g. abhorred the pagan Pamprepus while Christians had enough internal fights in order to “purify” the community of believers either from orthopraxical or politico-theological reasons. That said, Damascius does not make positive comments towards any Christian figure in any extant part of the *Philosophical History*. Every time that the Christians are mentioned they are either mentioned through the adjective ἀλλόφρων (foreigner) or as representatives of the “forces of generation” (γένεσις), the forces inherent to the sublunar world and that in the mythical cyclical scheme of Damascius predominate in his times. In short, *Damascius never praises the Christians in any single line.*

⁴¹⁶ Cf. VS, 22.

In the extant Syriac edition of the original (now lost) Greek text of the *Life of Severus*, we are told that the only practitioners of “true philosophy” are those following the teachings of Christ⁴¹⁷:

For it seems, from what you are saying, that although he is a Christian in form and appearance, he rather takes pains to honor the pagans, his mouth wide open to praise those with whose help he is abusing not only those whose virtue is recognized, and who have already been serving God as priests for a long time, but the whole philosophy that they have revealed [...] So if you care about the truth—and you do care about it—speak about his childhood—for the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom they are resting, the priests and those who practised philosophy, true philosophy—indicating also from what city he was, from what people and from what family, if you know these things about the man; and particularly everything about how he conducted himself and how he, from his very childhood, was thinking about God.

The legitimacy of philosophy is dependent on the revelation of the true mystery of Jesus Christ in his Incarnation on the historical world⁴¹⁸. This is, of course, an idea that is an

⁴¹⁷ VS, 8-9.

⁴¹⁸ Not all Christian theologians, in antiquity or in modern times, subscribe to such idea. In the ancient world, the controversies regarding Docetism (the idea that Jesus only appeared to be human and was fully divine) were condemned by the council of Nicaea in 325 and deemed heretical by all the main Christian churches. In modern times, someone like Henry Corbin defended an abandonment of the doctrine of Incarnation in name of a pluralistic Abrahamic theology bordering a polytheistic Mazdean angelology. In the words of Tom Cheetham (2009): “One of the most important themes in Corbin's work is his critique of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. His particular brand of heresy is a form of docetism, from the Greek *dokeo*, “to seem or appear” - the idea is that Christ only seemed to be human, but was really wholly divine. The theological details are complex and difficult, but suffice it to say here that Corbin's concern is to bridge the gulf between the transcendent and the immanent in such a way as to open the individual soul to transcendence while guarding against the “entrapment” of God in material and social history. And too, a doctrine of the unique and literal incarnation of God at one particular time in history makes of Christianity the one true religion - which for Corbin is a denial of the truth, coherence and continuity of the Abrahamic tradition. He does not deny the transcendence of God, but that God is the Hidden God-beyond-God, the God of negative theology, whom we can never know. What we can know, in limited but multiple ways, are the plural “gods” of the angelic hierarchies. Corbin's Christology is an “angel Christology” in which the figure of Christ is multiplied, appearing uniquely to each individual, and Corbin's intent is to open up dogmatic monotheism by envisioning a kind of “polytheism” that prevents monotheism from collapsing in upon itself in a fatal idolatry.”

echo of many previous Christian philosophers and apologists⁴¹⁹ and can also be found in the already discussed *Theosophia Tubingensis* and in the Sibylline Oracles⁴²⁰. Despite significant theological difference between Christian sects like Monophysites and Chalcedonians, many inside both groups tend to agree that the λόγος of Jesus Christ is a confirmation and overcoming of previous pagan prophetic and philosophical truths. The idea that philosophical and oracular pagan knowledge predicted the coming of Christ and the instauration of the Christian faith is a typical late antique phenomenon. The doctrines of the pagan holy men, like Isidore or Proclus, are in the eyes of the Christians fraudulent sorcery instituted by the devil in order to deviate souls from their salvation. The only embodiment of any soul that is ontologically superior to all others is the embodiment of Jesus Christ as incarnated God.

Now this has consequences for the whole appreciation of pagan knowledge and way of life by Christians. From a historical point of view, the experience of Christianity was being constructed at that time as a hegemonic order, an epistemological field that needed to neutralize and deconstruct the pagan mythological and theological edifice as witchcraft and sorcery. Severus is presented by Zachariah as someone special, a man acquainted to become one of the guardians of the City of God⁴²¹:

The illustrious Severus was of Pisidian origin. His city was Sozopolis, which befell him after the first [city], from which we all [11] fell because of the transgression of Adam, and toward which the divine apostle is calling us anew, saying: “We have no lasting city here, but we seek the one that will come, the one whose Artificer and Maker is God.

Contrary to Isidore’s, Severus’ soul was not endowed with a special ontological status, he was a man among many and was his embracing of the Christian faith that allowed him to have special perceptions on the nature of things. Another point that is in striking opposition to the *Philosophical History* here is the affirmation that the true Temple is yet to come in the form of the New Jerusalem in the future, in the fulfillment of the *eschaton* at the end of

⁴¹⁹ E.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* I. 15. 66-73 or I.21. 134 and even 6.4.35-8. Also, Origen, *c. Cels.* 1.12 or 4.39.

⁴²⁰ Cf. (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 18-23).

⁴²¹ *VS*, 10-11.

times (“We have no lasting city here, but we seek the one that will come, the one whose Artificer and Maker is God”).

The relationship between a doctrine of embodiment, time, cosmology and the nature of history’s unfoldment is radically different between the texts⁴²². In the sense of the Foucaultian *épistème* we are dealing with radical – opposite even – perceptions of the conditions of knowledge and ontological possibilities of conceiving the world. The concept in Foucault means the historical a priori in which all the possibilities of a given culture can unfold⁴²³, the passage between the different types of *épistème* is not extensively discussed and between its development in *Les Mots et les Choses (The Order of Things)* and *L’archéologie du savoir (The Archeology of Knowledge)* there is a complexification of the conceptual discussion and his historical conceptualization of “ages” is kind of clumsy⁴²⁴.

But the point here is not so much in discussing Foucault and post-structuralist theories of history, rather in emphasizing the discontinuity between two ontological orders of history: the pagan Neoplatonic and the Christian. Such “epistemic shift” can also be discussed through the Eliadean dichotomy between linear and cyclical cosmologies and Jonathan Z. Smith’s theorizations of “locative” – somewhat correspondent to Eliade’s archetypal repetition – and “utopian” worldviews. The mystical discourse is a form in which individuals at the sunset of a historical-religious culture deal with its epistemic crisis, a litany for the dead, a gaze into the abyss. For now, what is important is to note is the fundamental contrast between the overall outlook of Damascius and that of the world surrounding him represent for the hegemony of the Christian *épistème*.

⁴²² The contrast between Isidore’s abilities of prophecy with that passage (VS, 13) is striking (emphasis is mine): “My friend Menas, astonishing everyone in his love of God, predicted what would happen in a prophecy as the outcome showed: “He will be a brilliant bishop, like the holy John who was entrusted with the rudder of the holy church of Constantinople.” *And so this was revealed—once again by means of a God-loving soul—about Severus, while he was still young, by God, who is the only one who has foreknowledge of the future.*”

⁴²³ Cf. (The Order of Things, 1994 [1966], p xxi-xxiii.)

⁴²⁴ In many ways, the historical conceptualization of Foucault is indebted far more to Oswald Spengler than to the usual sources that are ascribed to his thought in Marxism, Psychoanalysis and even structuralist anthropology. The notion of the radical discontinuity between historical cultures in an ontological sense with its corollary that the world of the ancient Greco-Roman culture was not an ancestor of the West but rather a radically different historical “civilization” and also a kind of “poetic” forging of historical eras is a product of Spengler’s thought that is often neglected in the theory of history and the humanities. The archeological concept of *épistème* is a prolongation of the Spenglerian morphogenesis, “archetypal exemplars” and historical intuitions. Cf. (Richardson, 1995, p. 109.) As noted by some critics, there is little discussion in Foucault’s works on how the passage from one *épistème* to another is unfolded, I would say that religion plays a major role in such change and that a history of the unfolding of the archetypal exemplars (Spengler) or *épistèmes* (Foucault) is largely the history of religion.

Arriving in Alexandria to study rhetoric in the circles of Horapollo⁴²⁵, Damascius probably met the same circle described by Zachariah in the Paralius section⁴²⁶:

Now Paralius, who had been raised a pagan by his other brothers in his country⁴²⁷, came to Alexandria with the intention to study the art of grammar [...] He came to Horapollo, the grammarian, a man who was a specialist in his art and a splendid teacher, but also a pagan, bewildered by demons and magic. Hence Paralius became even more pagan; he was even induced to make sacrifices to the idols together with his master.

Horapollo's school in Alexandria was a repository of pagan cultural artifacts in the Egyptian context of the 5th century and in a subsequent persecution, Horapollo himself, nicknamed as *Psychapollo* (soul destroyer) by the Christians⁴²⁸, has been tortured and accepted Christianity due to his own personal interests of survival. Damascius comments about Horapollo's torture in the persecution of 489 when the Christian authorities were searching for Isidore and Heraiscus⁴²⁹ and subsequently about his conversion to Christianity due to "his insatiable desire for gain"⁴³⁰. Details aside, the most important figure for the argument of the present chapter is not Horapollo, but Asclepiodotus. Like Horapollo, the Alexandrian Asclepiodotus was a polymath and an influential pagan philosopher with financial resources and well established in the elite of Aphrodisias, where he married the daughter of his counterpart also named Asclepiodotus (the elder)⁴³¹.

⁴²⁵ *PH*, 120.

⁴²⁶ *VS*, 15.

⁴²⁷ Paralius was a young pagan student from Aprozias that upon arrival in Alexandria to study soon enough developed a beef with Asclepiodotus the younger. The story of his conversion to Christianity and revelation of the frauds of the pagan philosophers (Asclepiodotus, Isidore, Heraiscus, Asclepiades etc.) occupies a large part of the work.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.* 32.

⁴²⁹ *PH*, 117B: ζητῶν δὲ ὁ Νικομήδης τὸν Ἄρποκρᾶν ἦν καὶ μὴ εὕρισκων αὐτόν. ὁ δὲ Ἰσίδωρος ὁ φιλόσοφος τοῦτο μαθὼν πέμπει <...> διὰ γραμμάτων δηλούντων τοὺς ἐπιόντας. ἐάλω δὲ ὁ γραμματηφόρος καὶ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν πέμψαντα· καὶ τὸν Ὠραπόλλωνα καὶ τὸν Ἡραῖσκον αἰροῦσι καὶ νεύροις ἀνακρεμάσαντες ἀπὸ τῆς χειρὸς ἐκάτερον ἀπήτουν τὸν Ἄρποκρᾶν καὶ Ἰσίδωρον. "Nicomedes was looking for Harpocras and he could not find him. And Isidore the philosopher sent a letter to Harpocras indicating his persecutors as he heard this. The messenger was captured and revealed the identity of the man who had sent him. Then they arrested Horapollo and Heraiscus and, suspending them by their tied hands, demanded information about Isidore and Harpocras." The subsequent fragment (117C) continues the story: κατατείνας ἐτ' ἐμπρίσαντες καὶ κατατεινομένω ταῖς στρέβλαις ὑπὲρ τοῦ κατειπεῖν τοὺς συνεγνωκότας. οἱ δὲ ἐμπρίσαντες τοὺς ὀδόντας τοῦ εἶξαι τῷ τυράννῳ γεγόνασι κρείττους

⁴³⁰ *PH*, 120.

⁴³¹ *VS* 17, and (L. Robert, *Hellenica* IV (1948), p. 115-126) and (C. Roueché, *Aphrodisias in late antiquity*, 85-93. Cf. Appendix II, p. 348-9.)

In the *Philosophical History*, Asclepiodotus is presented as a sharp-minded and erudite (πολυμαθής) representative of Hellenism, a man with many abilities and endless scientific and artistic curiosity:

οὗτος ἐκ παίδων εὐθὺς ὠμολογεῖτο ὀξύτατος καὶ πολυμαθέστατος εἶναι τῶν ἡλικιωτῶν, ὥστε καὶ πολυπραγμονῶν οὐδὲν ἐπαύετο περὶ ἐκάστου τῶν παραπιπτόντων, ὧν ἢ τε {ή} φύσις ἀπεργάζεται θαυμασίων καὶ τέχνη ἐκάστη παρέχεται δημιουργημάτων.

He was considered since childhood to be the smartest and most erudite of all his contemporaries, as he never stopped being busy with whatever came across his path, whether it was a wonder of nature or some craft made with human art.

In the world of Late Platonism, those qualities are not necessarily an encomium by the part of Damascius, since many Platonists had a disdain for πολυμαθία⁴³² and in some other fragments the futile and learned Asclepiodotus is compared negatively to Isidore and the mystic Sarapio, men who only cared about “two or three books”⁴³³. The divinely possessed wandering man was far higher in the spiritual ladder than the “humanist” erudite with all his vanities and technicalities, as I already commented in the ‘conversion’ of Dorus perpetrated by Isidore⁴³⁴. Be that as it may, Asclepiodotus was nonetheless a respected member of the pagan community and, despite his inferiority to Isidore or

⁴³² E.g. In the *Vita Procli* (38), Marinus says that Proclus desired to burn all books other than the *Timaeus* of Plato and the Chaldean Oracles. Commenting upon that passage, Fowden comments the following: “Proklos once observed that ‘If I had the power, I would allow of all the ancient books only the (Chaldaean) Oracles and the *Timaeus* to circulate, but all the other books I would conceal from the present generation, because those who read them carelessly or without attention can only be harmed’. These words are close in spirit to Iamblichos, whose distinctive contribution to the evolution of Neoplatonism was the attempt to mould together into a coherent whole the philosophy of Plotinos and Porphyry and the theurgical doctrines of the *Oracula Chaldaica*. Theurgy taught how, through sacramental actions and the use of ‘the ineffable words by which a mortal charm the heart of the immortals’, the initiate might purify his soul and be raised up to union with the gods. The resulting state of divine possession (ἐνθουσιασμός), the culmination of the theurgic process, was among the most distinctive characteristics of the pagan holy man. Carried away by divine madness, and filled with supernatural power (δύναμις), he was able not merely to bring about the separation of his soul from his body (ἐκστασις), but to make a positive advance into the divine realm (ἀναγωγή καὶ μετὰστασις).” Cf. (1982, p. 37.)

⁴³³ *PH*, 35A and 111.

⁴³⁴ Eunapius (PS, 6.9.2) also make pejorative comparisons between scholarly erudites and “god-filled” theurgists when he comments that the teachings of Aedesius of Pergamon, a disciple of Iamblichus, were mere “precise learning” (ἐν λόγοις ἀκρίβεια) in comparison with the mystically infused ἐνθουσιασμός of the theurgist Sosipatra.

Sarapio⁴³⁵, an initiate of the Neoplatonist community and someone that had spiritual capabilities still far above any common pagan, let alone the despised Christians due to his abilities as an iatrosophist or physician⁴³⁶, alchemist⁴³⁷, mathematician⁴³⁸ and musician⁴³⁹. In the narrative of Damascius, that is far more complicated than the one of Zachariah due to its extreme fragmentary state⁴⁴⁰, the story of the barren wife is briefly alluded.

The only information that we can gather about Damiane's – Asclepiodotus' wife and heir of Asclepiodotus the elder – miraculous conception in the *Philosophical History* comes from very short passages in the fragments 95B, C and D. The story of the birth of the blessed son of Asclepiodotus cannot be linked to another story, one about a divine tragedy in the temple of Isis, without recurring to Zachariah's account of the revelation of a supposed fraud of the pagan philosophers by the enatonian monk Stephen in the *Life of Severus*. After arriving in Alexandria, Paralius searched for his brother Athanasius, then living as a monk alongside Stephen in the *Enaton*.⁴⁴¹

Eventually overcome by nature, he was longing to see, at last, his brother Athanasius, and when he came to the monastery of Salomon, he fell an easy prey to the holy couple, Stephen and Athanasius, who, being faced with his numerous pagan arguments and problems, easily solved them through the power of the divine spirit. For

⁴³⁵ Asclepiodotus is somewhat negatively compared to Isidore and Marinus in the fragment 103B, where it is said that both Isidore and Marinus were "true philosophers" and in contrast to the flamboyant Asclepiodotus could not use marriage as a mean of social alpinism.

⁴³⁶ *PH*, 85D.

⁴³⁷ *PH*, 80.

⁴³⁸ 85A.

⁴³⁹ 85B, C.

⁴⁴⁰ P. Chuvin (1990, p. 111) observes that immediate identification between some of the events in the work of Zachariah and that of Damascius are complicated to sustain, but the story of the barren wife seems to be referenced in both works, the same for the Christian profanation (from the pagan point of view) or the revelation of the pagan charlatanism (Christian point of view) in the temple of Isis. Chuvin also notes that the points of comparison between both works can be difficult when accounting for a general history of the persecution against pagans in Alexandria in the second half of the 5th century: "The group of intellectuals mentioned by Zacharias – specifically Horapollo, Asclepiodotus, Heraiscus, Ammonius, and Isidorus – reappears in the *Life of Isidorus* by Damascius. It is tempting to assume that the scuffles with the police mentioned in the fragments of the work that have been preserved are related to the same period. Tempting, but not certain, since according to those fragments, the police investigated a group around Ammonius, not Horapollo, and some of the figures are different. On the pagan side, the professor of Greek, Harpocras, and on the Christian side, the police officer, Nicomedes, are not mentioned in the *Life of Severus*. Furthermore, in this account, Horapollo and his uncle Heraiscus were arrested and whipped, but did not reveal the whereabouts of Harpocras and Ammonius. The two episodes cannot be fused, and circumstances in the one related by Damascius are more difficult for us to grasp than in the other, because of the fragmentation of Damascius' work. Ammonius, who appears in Damascius as the prime target of the authorities, is accused by the philosopher of having reached an agreement with the bishop in order to continue teaching."

⁴⁴¹ *VS*, 15-16.

Stephen was very learned and well qualified in the divine doctrines as well as in general knowledge; [16] and being familiar with many writings of the Doctors of the Church that stand up against the pagans, he received God's grace to refute them [the pagans] completely when discussing with them. In his zealous fear of God, he was like the great Elia. Refuting the pagans' sophistic arguments against the Christians he argued against their absurdities, and the disgraceful consecrations of pagan gods, and the false oracles of polytheism with their obscure and distorted answers, their ignorance of the future and other errors of these demons. And he [Stephen] persuaded him [Paralius] to forward doubts like these to the companions of Horapollon, Heraiskos, Asclepiodotus, Ammonius, Isidore and the other philosophers who were with them, and make a fair judgment of what was being said from both sides. After several days of such discussions, Paralius found paganism weak and without foundation.

Stephen, the Christian monk, acts throughout the story as someone that has a more pragmatic and "rational" explanation of the stories that the pagans claim to be miraculous. The contrast between the truth teller Stephen and the pagan charlatans is fundamental to Zachariah's narrative.

"Refuting the pagans' sophistic arguments against the Christians [...] and the false oracles of polytheism with their obscure and distorted answers, their ignorance of the future and other errors of these demons", Stephen is the late antique equivalent of the modern skeptic, showing reservations to all the miracles and supernatural events of the pagans. Stephen stands in contrast to Isidore, Heraiscus, Asclepiades and Asclepiodotus⁴⁴². Soon after describing the arrival of Paralius, Zachariah introduces Asclepiodotus⁴⁴³:

Asclepiodotus the Alexandrian, by exercising sorcery and magic, and making [17] invocations of demons, had taken the opportunity to become admired by the pagans through philosophy. He urged his namesake—who at this time was glorified with the honours and dignities given to

⁴⁴² As noted by Ambjörn: "Paralius acts as a mediator between the pagan philosophers and Stephen. Here, it is Stephen who plays the part of the rational thinker, arguing on the basis of physiological facts, whereas the pagans are depicted as irrational miracle-seekers." Cf. (2008, p. 14, n. 10).

⁴⁴³ VS, 16-17.

him by the emperor, and was a prominent member of the senate of Aphrodisias—to give him [the Alexandrian] his daughter as wife. But when he had spent a long time in Caria with this woman, and wished to become a father, his wish was not fulfilled, since God brought punishment upon him — the lack of children and the barrenness of his wife — as a result of his committing evil acts of magic.

The marriage of the Alexandrian Asclepiodotus with Damiane, the daughter of the Aphrodisian Asclepiodotus, was barren due to the impiety and sorcery practiced by the Alexandrian man. As noted above, Damascius described Asclepiodotus as a practitioner of many disciplines that in our modern standards could be classified as “occult”, like alchemy and he was also a specialist in herbs, stones and other substances. Some of those practices could be related to the rites of theurgy or hieratic arts and also to affiliate private practical disciplines, like the ones of the famous Mithras Liturgy⁴⁴⁴. Since Zachariah’s Greek original has been lost, it is not possible to speculate about which words he might have used in reference to Asclepiodotus’ practices, and I cannot say much about the Syriac text because I do not have knowledge that language.

For the axiological neutral text of Damascius⁴⁴⁵, most of those evil acts of magic practiced by Asclepiodotus were simply part of the typical *paideia* of the learned pagan Neoplatonist⁴⁴⁶, but the extent to which the rites of Asclepiodotus overlapped with what is called in the *Philosophical History* as *ἱερατική* is hard to discuss. According to Damascius, the polymath Asclepiodotus was highly deficient in “higher Orphic and Chaldean knowledge”⁴⁴⁷:

ἦν δὲ ὁ Ἀσκληπιόδοτος οὐχ ὀλόκληρος τὴν εὐφυΐαν, ὡς τοῖς πλείστοις ἔδοξε τῶν ἀνθρώπων,

⁴⁴⁴ Hanegraaff (2022) discusses the phases of the PGM IV. 475-829 ritual and their relation with psychoactive substances in pages 36-42. For Hanegraaff, the rituals of the Mithras Liturgy have overlap with the ecstatic practices of the Chaldean Oracles and Georg Luck also considers that the rituals of theurgy and other affiliated pagan practices of the Neoplatonists involved the use of substances that in the modern world we would call “drugs”:

⁴⁴⁵ Neutral regarding the pagan sciences and types of knowledge, not neutral towards the events, of course.

⁴⁴⁶ As noted above, Asclepiodotus had abilities in music, geometry, alchemy and medicine, all of those practices have “occult” (in a modern post-Christian sense) or mystical resonances among the Neoplatonists. In his commentaries on the *Phaedo* and the *Parmenides*, Damascius discusses the mystical properties of geometric forms and rituals related with mathematics and alchemy.

⁴⁴⁷ *PH*, 85A.

ἀλλ' ἀπορεῖν μὲν ὀξύτατος, συνεῖναι δὲ οὐ λίαν ἀγχίνους οὐδὲ αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ ὅμοιος, ἄλλως τε καὶ τὰ θεϊότερα τῶν πραγμάτων, ὅσα ἀφανῆ καὶ νοητὰ καὶ τῆς Πλάτωνος ἐξαίρετα διανοίας. πρὸς δὲ τὴν Ὀρφικὴν τε καὶ Χαλδαϊκὴν {τὴν} ὑψηλοτέραν σοφίαν, <τὴν> καὶ τὸν κοινὸν φιλοσοφίας νοῦν ὑπεραίρουσαν, ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐλείπετο. πρὸς δὲ φυσιολογίαν τῶν καθ' ἑαυτὸν πάντων ἦν ἐρρωμενέστατος· ὡσαύτως καὶ ἐν τοῖς μαθήμασιν, ἀφ' ὧν καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἄλλα τὸ μέγα τῆς φύσεως ἀπηνέγκατο κλέος. ἐν τοῖς περὶ ἡθῶν δὲ καὶ ἀρετῶν ἀεὶ τι καινουργεῖν ἐπεχείρει, καὶ πρὸς τὰ κάτω καὶ τὰ φαινόμενα συστέλλειν τὴν θεωρίαν, οὐδὲν μὲν (ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν) τῶν ἀρχαίων νοημάτων ἀποικονομούμενος, πάντα δὲ συνωθῶν καὶ κατάγων εἰς τήνδε τὴν φύσιν τὴν περικόσμιον.

Asclepiodotus' disposition was not perfect, as many people thought. He was very sharp in raising questions, but not very synthetic in his understanding. His intelligence was not synthetic, especially in terms of divine matters and the invisible and intelligible essence of Plato's sublime thought. On the higher Orphic and Chaldean knowledge [σοφία], that transcends the purpose of common philosophy, he was even more deficient. In the natural sciences he was, however, more learned than all. He was also great in mathematics and earned a reputation of glory in that field. In the field of ethics, he always attempted to innovate and to limit his research to the visible and manifested world without getting rid of any of the doctrines of the Ancients [τῶν ἀρχαίων νοημάτων], but packing everything together and bringing it down to the level of the pericosmos.

Now this passage is of extreme importance not only for the development of Paralius' story but also to open an excursus on the levels of possibility of ascent among the pagan initiates⁴⁴⁸. Despite all of his talents and knowledge, Asclepiodotus had a lower

⁴⁴⁸ O'Meara discusses, in his chart on the scale of virtues in the *Philosophical History*, how only some few philosophers were really endowed with "theurgic virtue", the highest of them all. Cf. (2004, p. 86): "It is difficult to find, in the fragments remaining from Damascius' Life of Isidore, clear examples of individuals reaching the highest level in the scale of virtues, 'theurgic' virtue. We should assume that this was at least as rare as was success in reaching 'theoretical' virtue. Perhaps we can also assume that Damascius' hero, Isidore, and his equal, Sarapio, went this far. Perhaps another instance is that of the priest Heraiscus, who had uneven natural talents (76D [F182]), ethical and political virtue (76C [F173]), but was also particularly close to the gods, so much so that (76E [EI07]): "They say that even Proclus recognized Heraiscus as being superior to

understanding than someone like Isidore. The last sentence, where Damascius says that he synthesized or compressed (συνωθέω) everything in the pericosmic level, shows not only a difference between the supposed rituals and invocations practiced by Asclepiodotus and the true traditions of the Chaldean Oracles⁴⁴⁹, but also the differences of appreciation between the Christian and Neoplatonic exegetes.

What seemed like evil magic for the Christian observer was merely part of the sciences involved with traditional pagan learning and in the highest form of pagan initiatory practices Asclepiodotus was highly deficient.⁴⁵⁰ That is not to say that Asclepiodotus could not produce miracles, because he likely could, but there has to be some difference between the miracles that he was able to perform and the higher theurgic or mystical state of existence⁴⁵¹:

ἐνέβησαν μὲν εἰς τὸ ρεῖθρον τοῦ Μαιάνδρου
διανήξασθαι ποταμοῦ αὐτός τε καὶ ὁ
Ἀσκληπιόδοτος ὁ πάλαι γεγωνὸς παιδαγωγὸς
αὐτοῦ· ὁ δὲ σφᾶς ἐν μέσαις ταῖς δίναις ἀπολαβόν,
ὁ Μαιάνδρος, ὑποβρυχίους ἐποίει, ἕως ὁ
Ἀσκληπιόδοτος ἐπὶ μικρὸν ἀναδύς, ὅσον
θεάσασθαι τὸν ἥλιον, “ἀποθνήσκομεν” ἔφη καὶ τι
προσθεῖναι καὶ ἀπόρρητον ἠδυνήθη. τότε δὲ
ἐξαίφνης, ἀπ’ οὐδεμιᾶς φανεραῖς προμηθείας, ἐπὶ
τῆς ὄχθης ἔκειντο τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἡμιθνήτες· εἶτα
ἀνακτησάμενοι τὰς ψυχὰς ἀνεχώρησαν ἐξ αὐτῶν
τῶν γε τοῦ ἄδου ρευμάτων. οὕτως ἔνθεον
ἐκτήσατο δύναμιν ὁ Ἀσκληπιόδοτος, καὶ ταῦτα
μετὰ τοῦ σώματος ἔτι ὄν.

Going into direction of the river Maeander, he⁴⁵²
and his older teacher Asclepiodotus tried to swim

himself, for Heraiscus knew all that Proclus knew, whereas the reverse was not the case.” This was very high praise indeed from Proclus, a philosopher who, according to Marinus, had reached the summit of the scale of virtues. It is possible that the lost parts of Damascius' work might have mentioned other examples of such perfection, but it is likely that these would have been small in number as compared to the many instances of people exemplifying 'natural', 'ethical' and 'political' virtues.”

⁴⁴⁹ It might not mean that Asclepiodotus was not a practitioner of Chaldean theurgy, just that he was incompetent or did not went very high in the scale of asceticism. It is known that theurgy involved long periods of silence (*Or. Ch.* 132), abstinence from food, sleep and the practice of praying for long periods of time. Asclepiodotus, a rather flamboyant person, probably did not had the discipline to follow the rituals to the most elevated spheres.

⁴⁵⁰ Chuvin notes (1990, p. 104): “This universal initiate, schooled in Orphic as well as Chaldaean doctrines, teaches us a great deal about the beliefs and rituals of late paganism. His conduct as a "man of god" was quite unusual, however, and his influence was limited to a very narrow circle.”

⁴⁵¹ *PH*, 81.

⁴⁵² It is not clear in the fragment who are the persons involved, they might be Isidore and the younger Asclepiodotus (that was still older than Isidore) or the two Asclepiodoti, with the younger one being the responsible to perform the miraculous salvation from death.

in the river. But the Maeander seized them and submerged them in its flows, until Asclepiodotus came up to the surface for a small moment, just long enough to look with marvel to the sun [θεάσασθαι] and scream “We are dying”, being able also to impose a secret word [ἀπόρητος⁴⁵³] on the sun. Then, out of a sudden, without any apparent assistance, they were lying on the bank of the river half-dead. Soon enough their souls returned to them from the streams of the Hades. This was the divine [ἔνθεος] power [δύναμις] possessed by Asclepiodotus, even when still existing as an earthly body.

Assuming that the passage refers to Asclepiodotus the younger, it seems that he was also a theurgist beyond being a “theoretical” philosopher, so the level of his deficiency as seen by Damascius was not bound to any consideration on the so-called dichotomy between “philosophers and hieratics”, but possible due to his overemphasis in an alchemical or material [pericosmic] explanation for the uses of ἱερατική itself⁴⁵⁴, rather than in in futile discussions over rational philosophy against ritualized “irrational” practices.

As seen by the text of Zachariah, the barrenness of Damiane was due to Asclepiodotus’ impious invocations of demons. Zachariah proceeds in the story⁴⁵⁵:

Since his father-in-law was grieving his daughter’s lack of children, this philosopher made up a divination — or rather, was deceived by the demon, the one that represented Isis, who promised him the seed of children if he brought his wife to her temple which, since long ago, was

⁴⁵³ Athanassiadi translates ἀπόρητος as “secret spell” given the context in which Asclepiodotus seems to be forcing the sun through manipulation of nature and that might sound like magic for our contemporary sensibilities. However, such marvelous feats are common in Neoplatonic literature, like when Proclus saved Athens from a drought bringing rain through his manipulation of Chaldean rituals (VP, 28). Asclepiodotus’ uttering of an esoteric word probably activated a σύμβολα/συνθήματα and through his theurgic ability he was able to manipulate the correspondences in the universe and save himself and his companion. That is another indication of why the worldview of pagans and Christians was strikingly different: the pagans believed that the fundamental laws of correspondence in the pericosmic level were attached to their religious beliefs, while Christians usually regarded such laws as abominations and manipulation of demons. This is, again, another idea that penetrated the Neoplatonic philosophy through the Chaldean Oracles and Iamblichus’ interpretations. Cf. (Fowden, 1993, p. 116-128); (Struck, 2004, p. 211-212); (Shaw, 2014, p. 162-169.)

⁴⁵⁴ Based on the description of Damascius here, it seems that Zachariah and the Christians were also not too far from the truth in their description of Asclepiodotus as a “magician”, both his alchemical practices and theurgic invocations seem to be bounded for with concerns from the practical life, rather than as anagogic elevations of the soul back to the primeval Source. In the last chapter, Asclepiodotus will appear again in the discussion about the fragment 87.

⁴⁵⁵ VS, 17-19.

in Menouthis, a town 14 miles from Alexandria, close to the one called Canopus. And so he persuaded his father-in-law to let him take his wife and bring her to this place. Having promised to return to him with his wife and the child she was going to get, Asclepiodotus, having deceived his namesake [the father-in law], went to Alexandria. [18] Though he spent some time in Menouthis, and offered many sacrifices to the demons, this proved of little use to him, since the barrenness persisted even there, at her [Isis'] site. Then, when he thought he saw, in a dream, that Isis was sleeping with him, those who interpreted dreams there and served the demon that represented Isis, told him that he should mate with her statue, and, afterwards, be together with his wife. This way he would get a son. When this 'philosopher' had been persuaded to [commit] such an error—which the priest, who had given the advice in the first place, eventually admitted — he had intercourse with the rock that had the shape of Isis, and afterwards with his wife. But she remained barren. Finally, the priest advised him to go, alone with his wife, to the town Astu and stay there for some time, and adopt the child that had recently been born by the priestess, [who was] a member of his family. For this, he [the priest] foolishly claimed, was what the gods and the Fates wanted him to do. Having been persuaded to follow this advice, he went with his wife — unescorted — to the child's mother, and, after giving her money, took her child. Then, after a while, he returned to Alexandria, boasting about the barren woman having given birth after such a long time. And those who were seized with pagan madness made a great fuss about this swindle, [19] as if it were true, and praised Isis, and Menouthis, her town — where some benefactor has covered the temple of Isis with sand, so that not even a trace of it can be spotted.

As the text of Zachariah makes clear, Asclepiodotus was clearly a charlatan from the Christian point of view. This contrasts heavily with the text of Damascius, where

Asclepiodotus is described almost as what would be called “natural philosopher” in subsequent centuries⁴⁵⁶.

Not only Asclepiodotus was a charlatan, but the whole ensemble of already “covered” pagan religious, scientific⁴⁵⁷ and ritual activities was based on wrongdoing and the priests and priestesses of Isis were implied in the cult of evil demons and religious fraud. There is nothing that can be saved in those practices. The allusion of Asclepiodotus fornication with the statue of Isis can be a possible reference to theurgy, as is known that the practice involved the animation of statues⁴⁵⁸. The problem at hand here concerns both the history of religion and the history of science⁴⁵⁹ and can be seen as a paradigmatic shift in the literary and epistemic history in the passage from the ancient world to the Byzantine period. The story of the barren wife also reached our own world very briefly from the remaining fragments of the *Philosophical History* and is surprising, at least to my limited knowledge, that no historian, philologist or epistemologist up to that point has analyzed comparatively both narratives.

⁴⁵⁶ Up until the 18th century the practitioners of the modern natural sciences in Europe were called natural philosophers and many of them were strongly interested in alchemy, occultism, the doctrine of correspondences and other types of knowledge that started to be “rejected” at the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the 19th century. The case of the physicist Isaac Newton, the creator of classical mechanics and calculus, is emblematic. Newton was called by John Maynard Keynes as “the last of the magicians”. For a discussion of the presence of occult and esoteric types of knowledge in the scientific milieu of modernity, see (Josephson-Storm, 2017, p. 41-62) and for the “rejection” of esotericism among the moderns, see (Hanegraaff, 2013, p. 45-68). The perspectives of Josephson-Storm and Hanegraaff are more complementary than it seems at first glance, with the former emphasizing how the supposedly absence of esoteric and religious elements in the founders of modern thought has been a historiographical construct while the latter discusses how a certain historiography constructed a history of modern rationality in opposition to the esoteric elements of the Renaissance that were still somewhat in vogue up until the 18th century.

⁴⁵⁷ Again, I must stress that my approach is not an attempt to find who was “right” or wrong in the debate over theological and epistemic matters between pagans and Christians. The task here, as should be stressed again and again, is of the confrontation of two epistemic and imagetical universes and how the experience of the “defeated” side was felt like a collapse and led to the sensibilities of mysticism and mystical union. My argument is historical, but from a phenomenological or psychological point of view mysticism can be defined as the “escape from history”.

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. (Iles-Johnston, 2018, p. 713-716); (Uždavinys, 2014, p. 143-203.)

⁴⁵⁹ The “Foucaultian” perspective adopted here is not dissimilar to the intuitions of Paul Feyerabend, Leo Frobenius or Oswald Spengler, i.e. the idea that scientific truth – in the sense of the coordinate body of discourses of what is true about reality or the theory of knowledge – depends of many historical and anthropological matters, rather than being abstract truths floating in an intangible realm beyond history. Different epistemic formations imprint different possibilities of possibility of knowledge. Paul Feyerabend (1975) argued that in the debate between the Catholics and the emerging scientific method in the 17th century it is not possible to define an objective and neutral method of ascribing who was wrong or right. As it turns out, in my perspective, among the myriad of possibilities of knowledge entailed by the infinitely possible cultural systems, mystical experience might be the closest thing to an unmediated experience of Truth and transcendence of subject-object distinction, mysticism might be the mark 0 of history, or rather the beyond history, the point in which the historical experience collapses as Union. I believe that such a reading of Damascius’ *aporesis* is possible if mysticism is understood as a category of experience attached to the historical unfolding of man.

In the fragments 9C and D, that seem to be variations of the same Damascius' passage in Photius⁴⁶⁰, we are told that Damiane did get pregnant due to divine interference: "And taking with him his wife that was about to give birth" (ἐπίτεκα οὔσαν τὴν γαμετὴν συνεπῆγεν) and "being compassionate for the first hopes of marriage, the god gave a sign [σύμβολον] of the birth that was to happen and the husband saw that the wife was pregnant" (κατελεήσας τοῦ γάμου τὰς πρώτας ἐλπίδας ὁ θεὸς ἐδίδου σύμβολον τῆς ἐσομένης γονῆς· καὶ τὴν γαμετὴν λοιπὸν ἑώρα ἐπίτεκα οὔσαν ὁ ἀνὴρ). For Damascius, the wife of Asclepiodotus really gave birth due to miraculous divine activity and the use of the word σύμβολον here is not a coincidence, since in the Neoplatonic world the σύμβολον is related to the ἀπόρητος. In the Chaldean Oracles, the fire-like paternal Intellect diffused σύμβολα and συνθήματα⁴⁶¹ through the created cosmos and according to the Neoplatonists those symbols or tokens could be used in mysterious or esoteric ways (ἀπόρητος)⁴⁶² to instigate miraculous events in the pericosmic world through the knowledge of the science of correspondences.

This is a worldview that entails in itself a blend of poetics, philosophy and science. One can even wonder if the literary *topos* of the arcane mage with a long beard, a laboratory and books full of manipulation of mystic symbols is not based on images of the Neoplatonists and other ideologically affiliated groups in Late Antiquity⁴⁶³. In the text of our author, the practices of Asclepiodotus are well inside a limit of anthropological possibilities of his given culture, even though he is kind of deficient in the higher practices. For the Christian Zachariah, however, all of this epistemic and mythical cultural baggage of the pagans is prone to error and falsity, with the pagan "magic" being at the same time demonic and false, ineffective.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Φ 137 and Φ 269 of Zintzen's VI edition.

⁴⁶¹ The two words are usually used with interchangeable meanings in most Neoplatonic philosophers. Cf. Proclus, *In. Crat.* 20.31–21.2. The fundamental idea is that the transcendent Father of the Universe sowed or sprinkled [ἔσπειρεν] hidden or secret symbols [ἄφραστα σύμβολα] all over the universe [κατὰ κόσμον].

⁴⁶² That is one of the most common words in the lexicon of Damascius, with words of the same family appearing over 100 times in his works in reference both to the mystery and transcendence of the Ineffable principle and to esoteric aspects of the religious cult. For the former use, see *De. Princ.* I. 17. 27 (οὐδὲ πᾶς θεὸς ἀπόρητος πρότερον ἢ ἔν) and for the latter, in the *Philosophical History* itself the word appears in the fragment 87C, where we are told about known and unknown (mysterious) aspects of divine practice [θρησκευία]: τῆς περὶ τὰ θεῖα διατριβούσης θρησκευίας, ὅση τε ῥητὴ καὶ ὅση ἀπόρητος.

⁴⁶³ As seen in the first chapter, the connections between the intellectual worlds of Neoplatonic late Greek spirituality and post-Medieval Western thought passed through the streams of the Islamic or Islamicate world. Many ideas of mathematics, magic, alchemy and natural philosophy also passed from the Greeks to the world of Islam and to the so-called West through the influence of late pagan philosophers like Damascius and Simplicius, men that were possibly responsible for preserving such traditions at Harran.

The monk Stephen acts as a rationalizer of pagan miraculous narratives and, according to Zachariah, unmasks the charlatanism of Asclepiodotus⁴⁶⁴:

Believing that this false story [i.e. Damiane's conception] was true, Paralius announced what had happened to his brother [Athanasius] and his companions as something great, saying that it was more powerful than any rational argument. He boasted about it as if it were a manifest pagan miracle. When the divine Stephen heard this nonsense, he said to Paralius: "If the barren woman has given birth, dear friend, she also produces milk, and they should make sure about this through a woman who is trustworthy and decent, and known to be of an Alexandrian family. She can observe the sign of the milk and confirm the miracle, so that no one will think that the daughter of a prominent person in Caria, and the wife of a philosopher, has been outraged [by the observer]." Since this seemed to be a good idea, Paralius forwarded the suggestion (*protasis*) of the monks to the pagan philosophers. They, however, fearing that the fraud would be refuted, said to Paralius: "You are attempting the impossible! How can you expect any honest person to consent [20] to any such thing? [...]"

Indeed, after hearing the explanation of Stephen, Paralius went to Menouthis, where there was a secret temple of Isis, and he had a revelation of the goddess, or the demon that appeared disguised as Isis, telling him to pay attention to another student of Horapollo's school and that the student was an evil magician.

As the story unfolds, Paralius start to doubt the explanations of the pagan oracle after his questions about who was the magician remained unanswered, accepted the words of the enatonian monks, prepared a conundrum for the pagan philosophers⁴⁶⁵ and started to pray in the Christian way⁴⁶⁶:

⁴⁶⁴ VS, 18-20.

⁴⁶⁵ "Thus he insulted the companions of Horapollon: Asclepiodotus, Heraiskos, Ammonios and Isidore — who eventually became known as an overt magician and troublemaker — and the other pagans with what had taken place in Menouthis: all the excesses and the fornication of the priestess of Isis, and how she was offering this to [23] anyone who wanted, just like a prostitute who is available to everyone."

⁴⁶⁶ VS, 21-22.

And from now on he prayed in the manner they had advised him: “Creator of all [etc.],” adding what the great [22] Stephen used to say: “Show me your truth, and do not ever again let me be deceived by the demon, this lover of warfare who arms people against each other and provokes them into quarrel, nor by the rest of the evil demons that resemble him.” For they had advised him to pray to the “Creator of all,” since they immediately wanted to draw him away from invocation of pagan gods and demons — of Kronos, I say, and Zeus and Isis and names like these — and, little by little, discipline him to the true doctrines, and to knowing no other creator of all but our lord Jesus Christ, through whom the father made the world, the archai and the dominions. As it is written: “For everything was through him, the divine speaker says, and without him was nothing.”

A notable thing in this passage is the emphasis on the “Creator of all”. More than just an apposition between the Christian God and the pagan idols, the passage stresses the importance for Christians of the doctrine of Creation, in opposition of the pagan idea of the eternity of the world⁴⁶⁷.

In the note 465 above, there is a reference to events happened at Menouthis, where there was a temple of Isis. This event is important because it haunts the *Philosophical History* as a specter and represents a trauma for pagans and a victory for Christians. Damascius talks about such event as a destruction of the esoteric side of philosophy (τὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἀπόρρητα)⁴⁶⁸: “By this time, the mysteries of philosophy were turned into objects of comedy and great laughter by some of those people whose ears are shattered and perception destroyed” (ἤδη γὰρ ἐνίοις τῶν τὰ ὅλα κατεαγόντων καὶ ἅμα διεφθαρμένων τὰς διανοίας εἰς κωμωδίαν ἐτρέπη καὶ γέλωτα πολὺν τὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἀπόρρητα). The event described here is the destruction of a secret temple of Isis at Menouthis and the public humiliation of the statues of the gods, in that place the remaining pagans deposited their hopes and religious expectations. It is important to note in the passage the intrinsic relation

⁴⁶⁷ John Philoponus, a Christian philosopher and theologian, wrote treatises against Proclus and Aristotle refuting the pagan idea of the eternity of the world. Zachariah himself wrote a dialogue called “Ammonius” in which the arguments of Ammonius Hermiae, the teacher of Philoponus, Zachariah and Damascius, are analyzed and refuted: “On the whole, the authors of these treatises criticized the idea of co-eternity of the world to God, which was characteristic of the Neoplatonic philosophy.” Cf. (Varlamova, 2017, p. 385). Damascius scorned Ammonius for his compromise with Christianity

⁴⁶⁸ *PH*, 58A.

between philosophy and pagan cult. The destruction is also alluded in in the fragments 53A, B, C and D and is extensively narrated by Zachariah.

The 4 fragments selected by Athanassiadi as part of her main fragment 53 are obviously related and also appear as a sequence in Photius and Zintzen⁴⁶⁹. They are significant passages in terms of my argument in this text – i.e. that the “epistemic” cosmological world of the pagans was shattered in the conflict with the Christian “ontological” views. In 53A, Damascius talks about the astrological cycle of Sothis and its relation with the myths of Isis and Orion:

τὴν Σῶθιν Αἰγύπτιοι τὴν Ἴσιν εἶναι θεολογοῦσιν⁴⁷⁰, οἱ δὲ Ἕλληνες εἰς τὸν Σείριον ἀνάγουσι τοῦτο τὸ ἄστρον, καὶ ὡς κύνα τὸν Σείριον, ὀπαδὸν τοῦ Ὠρίωνος ὄντα κυνηγετοῦντος, οὕτω διαζωγραφοῦσι, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐντετυπωμένον τῷ οὐρανῷ δεικνύουσι.

The Egyptians “theologize” [θεολογοῦσιν] on Isis as Sothis, while the Greeks attribute this star to Sirius, thus the dog of Orion, who accompanies him in his hunting, or rather they show him carved in the sky in this form.

It is not my purpose to enter into the details on the between ancient myth and astrology here⁴⁷¹, but the opening of the section with the correspondence between a cosmological-mythological fact is symptomatic to the fact that, for the pagans, a whole universe was collapsing⁴⁷².

⁴⁶⁹ Φ 70, Φ 71, Φ72, Φ 73.

⁴⁷⁰ The verb θεολογέω according to the LSJ, means a discourse on the gods and cosmology, what is fitting an appropriate for the section.

⁴⁷¹ For an interpretation of the myths of Isis and the mythical Dog and their relation with astrology, see the discussion of (Merkelbach, 2001, p. 102-111). Sothis is “the brightest star of the constellation Canis Maior, which appears next to Orion” (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 151, n. 125). The myth of Isis-Sothis is related to the cycles of the Nile and the inundation of the river in the heliac rise of the star after its occultation for seventy days. The inundation of the Nile marks the rebirth of Osiris and the recreation of cosmogony. Thus, the myth is related to fundamental aspects of Egyptian symbolism and is appropriated by Damascius to represent his Chaldean influenced cosmic theology in the Proemium of the *Philosophical History*.

⁴⁷² The correspondence between the Egyptian and Greek myth in astrological terms also need to be emphasized. According to the Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jan Assmann, all the “polytheistic” theologies had a common semantics of understanding in which the different cults and gods could be accommodated and translated. In opposition, monotheism emerges as a “in the first place as a negative or counterreligion, defining what god is not and how god should not be worshiped. Revolutionary monotheism is based on the distinction between true and false, between one true god and the rest of forbidden, false, or nonexistent gods. The introduction of this distinction into the realm of religion constitutes a radical break. Polytheistic or “primary” religions generally are not concerned with questions of what to believe, but how to

The situation becomes clearer when looking at the subsequent passages⁴⁷³:

τινὲς δὲ ἔλαθον τὸ ἱέρωμα κατάξαντες καὶ
διαφθείραντες, καὶ ἀπορούμενοι τελεστικῆς
βοηθείας οἱ ἐπιχώριοι ἀνθρωπίνῃ σπουδῇ καὶ
τέχνῃ τὸν λιμένα μόλις ἑαυτοῖς περισώζουσιν οἱ
Αἰγύπτιοι.

Some people stealthily destroyed and shattered the sacred object [the statue], and abandoned of initiatic assistance the local Egyptian population succeeded only with difficulty in preserving a refuge using human effort and skill.

The abandonment of the initiatory rites (τελεστικῆς⁴⁷⁴) is a tragic event, we are witnessing a *Götterdämmerung*. The passage from 53D finishes the cycle: “as they dug emerged and was disclosed the pediment of a very ancient temple” (ὀρυττόντων δὲ ἀνακύπτει καὶ ἐκφαίνεται παλαιάτου νεὸ ἀέτωμα). The story is also told in Zachariah, after Paralius supposedly discovered the fraud of Asclepiodotus and the priest of Isis. According to Zachariah, after discovering the fraud and confronting the pagans, Paralius was beaten by them⁴⁷⁵.

Then, they contacted Peter Mongus, the Bishop of Alexandria, described by Damascius as a “reckless and worthless man” (ἀνὴρ ἰταμὸς ὦν καὶ περιπόνηρος)⁴⁷⁶, and prepared a revenge against the pagans, contacting the prefect of Alexandria and accusing the pagans of practicing magic and sacrifices⁴⁷⁷:

As soon as the great Stephen was informed about this, he called us to him, to Enaton, the monastery of Salomon, and asked Paralius if he could show the pagan idols that were hidden in Menouthis. He said that he would show them, and hand over

act. Not the truth of the beliefs but the correctness of the ritual performances and recitations is what matters: orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. No primary religion is concerned with the danger of worshipping “false” gods; their concern is, rather, not to neglect any gods requiring worship.” Cf. (2004, p. 28).

⁴⁷³ 53B. That passage of the text is corrupt and looking at the note of Athanassiadi (1999a, p. 151, n.126) might be enlightening.

⁴⁷⁴ In terms of the philosophy of Damascius, the initiatory rites may be engulfed by the larger semantic field of ἱερατικὴ, in which the rites of all pagan cults are subsumed under Chaldean theurgy as a kind of “first theology”. Cf. 4A: Τὴν δὲ ἱερατικὴν, ἣ ἐστὶ θεῶν θεραπεία.

⁴⁷⁵ VS, 23-25.

⁴⁷⁶ PH, 113I: ὁ δὲ τῶν κρατούντων τῆς πολιτείας ἡγεμὼν τὴν δόξαν ἐπισκοπεῖν εἰληχῶς, ὄνομα Πέτρος, ἀνὴρ ἰταμὸς ὦν καὶ περιπόνηρος.

⁴⁷⁷ VS, 27.

the altar, and confirm the sacrifices that they had dared to make.

With the help of the monks called *Tabennesiotes*, Paralius and the other Christians reached the temple of Isis at Menouthis and started to destroy everything⁴⁷⁸, putting apart statues, demolishing the walls and probably sacking the offerings. It is a scene not much different from the contemporary acts, transmitted all over the world, of the so-called Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and from an *anthropological* standpoint can be seen as a justified act by the Christians, a reinforcing of Christian necessity for orthodoxy in contrast to pagan emphasis in orthopraxy. The conflict of visions is related to the Christian emphasis on the Incarnation⁴⁷⁹ and transfiguration of history, thus leading to a focus in paradigmatic acts manifested through historical-temporal actions and Redemption as the main cosmo-historical horizon, while the pagans believed in the transcendence of history by the symbols and many degrees of cosmic ascent beyond the realm of historical existence in innumerable cycles. The pagan “terror of history” was somehow substituted by the Christian historiolatry⁴⁸⁰.

The events at Menouthis, unleashed by the rivalry or envy of Paralius towards Asclepiodotus, were probably felt like a trauma by the Alexandrian pagans and

⁴⁷⁸ VS, 28-30: “When the Tabennesiote entered, and saw the many idols, and spotted the altar [29] that was awash with blood, he called out, in Egyptian: “One God!” as to eradicate the error of polytheism. First, he reached for the idol of Kronos, which was weltering in blood, and then all the other demonic idols, and a collection of all various kinds of them—for at that time even dogs, cats, apes, lizards and reptiles were, since old, worshipped by the Egyptians. And he got hold of the insolent dragon, the graven image of which was of wood, and it seems to me that they who worshipped it, or itself, since it wanted to be honoured in that way, saw it as a symbol of the rebellion of the first formed creatures, since it [the rebellion] was by means of wood [the tree], on its [the snake’s] advice. [...] Those that had already, due to the long time that had passed, become partly destroyed, we burned in Menouthis, while the pagans [30] who lived in the said village were expecting, due to the demonic power that possessed them, that it would be impossible for anyone who approached them with contempt to escape, and not perish immediately.”

⁴⁷⁹ VS, 30: “But we wanted to show them that all the power of the pagan gods and demons has actually been dissolved and lost after Christ, the word of God, had come and become human—he who voluntarily carried the cross for our sake in order to abolish all contrary power. For he said: “I have seen Satan fall like lightning from the sky and I have given you the authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all enemy power.” [Luke 10:18–19]. Since we wanted to show them this, we set some of the [idols] on fire, whereas we described others in writing: those that were of brass, or skilfully made with particular artfulness, or of marble, of all forms, and also the brass altar and the wooden dragon. We sent the description to the city, to Peter, the bishop of our Lord Jesus Christ, asking him to tell us what to do.”

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Mircea Eliade (1991, p. 141-148) has discussed the internal tensions inside Christianity between the more literalist and “proto-historicist” Christian fathers and those that wanted to incorporate many aspects of pagan traditional views of cycles and the periodic regeneration of history. It can be said that this tension inside Christianity was latent for many centuries and was always manifested historically in the form of the persecutions against heretics and even mystics. Meister Eckhart, for example, was initially condemned as heretic due to his suspicious writings. The theological tensions inside Christianity are a fabulous subject, but unfortunately I do not have the space or time to develop it here. What could be interesting to point is that if any of the theories regarding the Damascian authorship of Ps. Dionysus are true, it means that the main body of Christian mysticism is indeed indebted to a pagan philosopher.

Neoplatonists. The temple of Isis was among the last functioning pagan shrines in the region and its destruction might have precipitated a sense of mourn, distaste and melancholia, the elimination of the hieratic side of philosophy (τὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἀπόρρητα). Not to say of actual risk of torture and physical elimination. At this particular point in time, only the refuge in the remains of the Golden Age, of Cronian life, the inner temple that could not be violated, was a possible experience of the divine among the pagans. It was necessary to be absorbed, to contemplate the passage of time inside oneself and to rest assured that the cycles of history would bring back and resurrect the ancient and austere marbles that once ruled life and the sweetness of divine existence.

The destruction of the Isiac temple at Menouthis marks the focal point from which my narrative will continue: the elimination of an important pagan shrine, a dislocation of the sacred space. In the scattered fragments of Damascius – as ruined as the pagan temples that disappeared as rocks and marbles within the deserts of Egypt – the events assume a clear conscience of the metaphysical, symbolic and historical meanings of the destruction and the comparison with Zachariah of Mytilene, a Christian contemporary of Damascius, shows the inevitable outcome. The Christians are the constantly *bête noire* of the Philosophical History, the antithesis through which the spiritual unity of the later centuries would unfold. It is clear that most of the initiatory sciences through which philosophical and intellectual pagans entered in contact with a certain way of life were threatened to be extinct in the historical plane, with only the infinity of consciousness and philosophical ascesis – through journeys of body and soul – available as possible paths for the pagan spiritual practitioners. The ἀπόρρητα that was shattered now must be sought in nature and the inner self.

II. Cosmology, Prophecy and the *Religio Mentis*

5. Hermetic Egyptian *Topoi* and the Center of the Cosmos

Evidently, by the channel of the Pythagorean tradition, some seeds and certain roots of Egyptian wisdom reached Hellas where they grew into the magnificent tree of Platonism.

C. Evangeliou, *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia and Africa*, p. 119.

In light of what was seen in the last chapter with the story of Asclepiodotus/Paralius and the destruction of the last temple of Isis at Menouthis, the pagan holy man and its entourage of followers suffered a fatal blow in their expectations, dreams and hopes in the passage from the 5th century to the 6th century. If in the world of the 4th century the pressure of Christianity was felt like doom⁴⁸¹, between 515 and 525 the situation might have appeared more like if cosmic necessity was about to overcome everything⁴⁸². Damascius points to it himself in a passage about the destruction of a statue in a sanctuary of Apollo⁴⁸³: “But this statue too was destroyed by the Necessity that overcomes all that is ancient” (ἀλλὰ δὴ καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἄγαλμα καθεῖλεν ἢ πάντα τὰ ἀρχαῖα καθελοῦσα ἀνάγκη). The use of the verb καθαιρέω creates no doubt about the profound sense of loss involved in seeing the death of a world. We know that statues were mutilated⁴⁸⁴, temples torn apart⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸¹ Athanassiadi says that among the main differences between the narratives of Eunapius and Damascius is “the sense of doom” that permeates the first and that Damascius was far more practical and realist, being often humorous and overtly critical. Cf. (1993, p. 3). However, as different as personalities and writing styles are, the fact is that in the world of Damascius any pagan hope of restoration was long gone and that is a fact that certainly influenced his own perspective.

⁴⁸² Cf. (Chuvin, 1990, p. 132): “Justinian, who shared power from the time his uncle Justin I ascended the throne in 518, governed alone after his uncle's death on August 1, 527. As of that year, even before his personal reign began, Justinian tightened the laws against heretics, Manichaeans, Samaritans, pagans, and the like. Stakes were set up to burn Manichaeans, and the law passed against them that year contained a statement of general intolerance: “With regard to heretics, and also Hellenes who try to introduce polytheism, as well as Jews and Samaritans, we have resolved not only to restore the regulations of existing laws and to reinforce them with this present law, but also to enforce other measures which will provide those who share our shining faith with greater security, order, and honor.”

⁴⁸³ *PH*, 82B.

⁴⁸⁴ In her edition of the *Philosophical History*, Athanassiadi annexed plates of statues found in Damascius' possible home in Athens and one can see clearly the phenomenon at hand: the statue of Athena (Plate III) has been deliberately beheaded, a votive relief with the Cave of Pan with Hermes presenting the newly born Dionysus to the Nymphs (Plate V) is shown with all the faces of gods being deliberately disfigured. I included the statue of Athena and the votive relief as appendixes I and II.

⁴⁸⁵ In Constantinople e.g. by the time of Justinian there were no more pagan temples and open worship has been eradicated since the time of Theodosius I: “Open worship had ceased in the reign of Theodosius I. By the reign of Justinian cultic paganism in the capital necessarily would have gone underground, and we do not

and a way of life disappeared into the shadows of anonymity. Athanassiadi interprets ἀνάγκη in the text both as a reference for cosmic necessity and for the actions of the Christians⁴⁸⁶. That they were linked in the thought of Damascius there can be no doubt.

Damascius starts the *Philosophical History*, if we take for granted Asmus, Zintzen and Athanassiadi's renderings of the fragments, with observations about the preeminence of Egypt among all the peoples and the nature and origin of philosophy, with an explanation about the cosmogonic function of the hieratic arts (ἱερατική) among the Egyptians. He presents observations on ritual, philosophy, theurgy and fundamental anthropology, with plenty of Hermetic and Chaldean resonances⁴⁸⁷. The Syrian philosopher begins with the claim of the antiquity of the Egyptians and with the cosmogonical nature of the Egyptian priestly rites as the upholder elements of sacred order. The metaphysical centrality of Egypt with its traditional rituals of cosmic significance is a literary *topos* common to the Hermetic treatises, being present, as will be seen, in the *Korē Kosmou* and the *Asclepius*. In the first chapter of *The Egyptian Hermes*, Fowden contends with the historiographical interpretations of the eschatological myths in the *Hermetica*, claiming them not as pagan prophecies foretelling the demise of paganism in the 4th century, but as Egyptocentric reactions against the Hellenocentric Greco-Roman culture⁴⁸⁸.

Fowden's hypothesis is that the prophecies are literary laments on the demise of Egypt as a traditional society, with its gods, priests, pharaohs and initiation rites. Taking into consideration passages like the criticism against the Greeks in *C.H. XVI*⁴⁸⁹, Fowden's

know what form their rites took. There remains, furthermore, no physical evidence of pagan cult, temples, or priesthoods at Constantinople in the sixth century. Procopius reveals that "Hellenes" performed their rites in secret." (Cf. Maas, 1992, p. 62.) In the countryside or in the provinces, as discussed before, paganism remained alive, but it is no exaggeration to point again and again that it was a liminal religious trend in the time of Damascius.

⁴⁸⁶ Cf. (1999a, p. 207, n. 208).

⁴⁸⁷ *PH*, 1-4.

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. (1993, p. 38): "In the form in which it has come down to us, the *Asclepius* is a compilation of materials from various sources, loosely linked together [...] Paragraphs 24-7 (= N.H.C. vi.8.70-5) contain a more or less self-sufficient narrative foretelling the demise of Egypt and its gods, which modern scholarship has analyzed as a compound of apocalyptic *topoi* and allusions to the persecution of paganism by victorious fourth-century Christianity. That it is indeed related to other literary prophecies, especially Egyptian ones such as *the Oracle of the Potter*, there can be no dispute; but its allusions to legal penalties for pagan worship, and even for those who devote themselves to *religio mentis*, are certainly not, as has been alleged, fourth century insertions in response to the anti-pagan laws of the Christian emperors, since the eschatological prophecy in book vii of Lactantius's *Divinae Institutiones*, composed during the first decade of the fourth century, is not only based on the Perfect Discourse, but actually makes use of both the passages in question. In fact, Hermes's prophecy cannot be shown to contain any necessary reference to Christianity."

⁴⁸⁹ "Therefore, all is possible for you, o King, you are capable of everything. Preserve this discourse untranslated, in order that such mysteries may be kept from the Greeks, and that their insolent, insipid and meretricious manner of speech may not reduce to impotence the dignity and strength [of our language], and the cogent force of the words. For all the Greeks have...is empty speech, good for showing off; and the

arguments do make some sense, but it must be remembered that even a Hellenophone non-Egyptian philosopher like the Arab Iamblichus⁴⁹⁰ criticized the Hellenes for being superficial and cultivators of the latest trends⁴⁹¹. As noted by Domaradzki, from his “Egyptophile perspective, Iamblichus castigates the Greeks for their variability and insatiable taste for novelty, which he contrasts sharply with the stability and faithfulness of the Egyptians”⁴⁹². At the hands of a Neoplatonist like Damascius, endowed with the typical Neoplatonic cultural imperialism⁴⁹³, the Hermetic literary *topoi* have mingled with other sources of Greek and Oriental thought. Moreover, the world of the sixth century in ideological, religious and political matters was radically different from the one that existed at the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the Hermetic treatises were supposedly written⁴⁹⁴.

philosophy of the Greeks is just noisy talk. For our part, we use not words, but sounds full of energy.” (ὄσον οὖν δυνατόν ἐστί σοι, βασιλεῦ, πάντα δὲ δύνασαι, τὸν λόγον διατήρησον ἀνερμήνευτον, ἵνα μήτε εἰς Ἑλληνας ἔλθῃ τοιαῦτα μυστήρια, μήτε ἢ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὑπερήφανος φράσις καὶ ἐκκελυμένη καὶ ὡσπερ κεκαλλωπισμένη ἐξίτηλον ποιήσῃ τὸ σεμνὸν καὶ στιβαρὸν, καὶ τὴν ἐνεργητικὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων φράσιν. Ἑλληνες γάρ, ὦ βασιλεῦ, λόγους ἔχουσι κενοὺς ἀποδείξεων ἐνεργητικῶν, καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν Ἑλλήνων φιλοσοφία, λόγων ψόφος. ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ λόγοις χρῶμεθα. ἀλλὰ φωναῖς μεσταῖς τῶν ἔργων.)

⁴⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it has to be asserted that Iamblichus was as much “Hermetist” as “Neoplatonist” if we take into consideration Wouter Hanegraaff’s ideas on the author of the *De Mysteriis*.

⁴⁹¹ Cf. In a context of criticism against the translation of Egyptian names to the Greek language that resembles C.H. XVI, 1-2, Iamblichus resonates the Hermetic condemnation against the Greeks: “it is understandable why Iamblichus vehemently repudiates [in the *De Mysteriis*] (7.5.257.8–11) the idea of rendering any foreign names into Greek: when “translated” (μεθερμηνευόμενα) these sacred names lose not only their original “meaning” (διάνοια) but also their original “power” (δύναμις). Thus, Hellenization of barbarian discourse is wrong because its power is inextricably connected to its form. Towards the end of the book, Iamblichus similarly stresses (259.6–7) that also prayers lose their power, as they are modified through the “inventiveness” (καινοτομία) and “lawlessness” (παρανομία) of the Hellenes. As his salvific project builds on the idea that certain cultures have a privileged access to the divine, Abamon harshly condemns those philosophers who (like Plutarch or Porphyry) think that names, prayers, symbols, and rites are conventional and therefore essentially interchangeable from culture to culture. Accordingly, he concludes with the diagnosis (259.7–13) that the Greeks have lost contact with the gods through the flaws of their national character: the Hellenes “by nature” (φύσει) are “innovative” (νεωτεροποιοί), which is why they remold everything “in accordance with [their] unresting linguistic ingenuity” (κατὰ τὴν ἄστατον εὐρεσιλογίαν), whereas the barbarians are “constant” (μόνιμοι) in their customs and remain “steadfastly” (βεβαίως) with the same words, which is why they are “dear” (προσφιλεῖς) to the gods.” Cf. (Domaradzki, 2021, p. 386–387.)

⁴⁹² (*Ibid.* p. 387.)

⁴⁹³ The Neoplatonists had the habit of appropriating philosophical and religious concepts of other sects and ascribing them to Pythagoras, Plato or the Chaldean Oracles. Cf. (Athassiadi, 1999a, p. 137, n. 107). Such philosophical syncretism is the reflection of their self-perception as repositories of the Hellenic *paideia*. In the biography of Proclus by Marinus it is said that Proclus claimed that the philosopher “should be the hierophant of the whole world in common” (*VP*, 19). The position of metaphysical high-priest gives to the Neoplatonic philosopher the highest position as hermeneut of rites, myths and cultic practices. The vast majority of men would only have access to half-truths and symbolically mediated mythological constructs while the Neoplatonist can work as the meta-interpreter of cultures, traditions and rites with his superior intuition. In the *PH*, 35B we are told that Isidore was consulted by Heraiscus and Asclepiades “even in questions of Egyptian philosophy” and that he was the one that could lead both of them, who were his elders and practitioners of the “Egyptian” tradition (likely Hermetism), to the light of truth of their own concepts.

⁴⁹⁴ The exact date of the Hermetic treatises is disputed in the scholarship and since mine is not a work on Hermetism I prefer to abstain of any polemics, but some clarification needs to be done. The texts were usually divided in technical and philosophical Hermetica by Festugière and other 20th century scholars, but

As will be unfolded in this chapter, the so called Proemium is of fundamental importance to understand the cosmological structure in which the *dramatis personae* of the *Philosophical History* move in and it is reflective of syncretism with the Hermetic literary *topoi* that Damascius probably absorbed in the course of his studies in Alexandria through his contact with Isidore, Horapollo, Heraiscus, Asclepiades, Asclepiodotus and perhaps even with Indian Brahmans through Severus. As with anything in this field of research, all the conclusions must be deemed provisional at the very best. The cyclical doctrine of the 3 (or 4) ages exposed in Athanassiadi's fragment 18 must be interpreted in the light of the cosmology of the section organized as the "Proemium" by Athanassiadi.

The fragments analyzed together – the fragment 18 will be the subject of the next chapter – point to a typically pagan cyclical cosmic narrative and Damascius' particular development of it might be illustrative of his assimilation and reinterpretation both of late antique and traditional Hellenic literary allusions. The presence of disciplines leading to the state of θεοκρασία (φιλοσοφία and ιερατική) as a way of dealing with the cyclical passage of time can be described as the presence of trance induced forms of ecstasies and enstasis to cope with the changing epistemic systems in a Foucaultian sense⁴⁹⁵. Through his acts of self-deification, the pagan holy man can reach the outer reaches of space and time and transcend history.

The antiquity and ritual knowledge of the Egyptians is a *topos* of the Hellenic culture that is present since the Archaic and Classical periods, with its concrete manifestation in authors like Herodotus⁴⁹⁶ and Plato⁴⁹⁷ but in the text of Damascius that

since the works of Fowden in the 80s and 90s of 20th century and especially many works of 21st century scholarship the division has been questioned and the "classic" position that the texts derived their doctrines wholly from Greek philosophy has been questioned, as will be shown below. Cf. (Hanegraaff, 2022, p. 18): "From the 1970s, the pro-Greek/anti-Egyptian ideology was gradually weakened and finally abandoned, due partly to the discovery of new Hermetic manuscripts in Coptic and other ancient languages and partly to a slow decline of philhellenic bias in the study of ancient religions more generally."

⁴⁹⁵ In an essay about Foucault and the "black sun of language", Michel de Certeau makes an interesting connection between the foucaultian notion of the conditions of possibility of knowledge and what he calls "La Mystique", the sense of absurdity felt by some individuals at the collapse of religious and mythical structures, a sense that is felt like a need to affirm the lost oneness with Being beyond all socially accepted truths. Cf. (2000 [1986], p. 171.185). I believe that a phenomenological link between de Certeau's Christian mystics and the late pagan holy men can be made through a shared experience of dissolution and decay. Moreover, the Western mystic intuition itself, as seen in the section mysticism, might be attributed to the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, and if behind his mask there was not the person of Damascius, we know for sure that he was heavily influenced by the Neoplatonism of the Athenian school.

⁴⁹⁶ E.g. *Histories* II. 50: "Moreover the naming of almost all the gods has come to Hellas from Egypt."

⁴⁹⁷ "*Socrates*: The story is that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there dwelt one of the old gods of the country, the god to whom the bird called Ibis is sacred, his own name being Theuth. He it was that invented number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus... To him came Theuth, and revealed his arts,

topos is fundamentally linked with a pattern of Hermetic influences that were foundational among the post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists rather than only with Platonic or traditional Hellenic cultural *topoi*. In the world of Late Antiquity, many cultural patterns of Greek language and culture have been reshaped to fit the new cosmopolitical order inaugurated by the world of kingdoms and empires since the Hellenistic period⁴⁹⁸ and most of the representatives of Greek *paideia* were Hellenized Orientals⁴⁹⁹ – like the Neoplatonists – that probably were not solely native Greek speakers or were at least bilingual⁵⁰⁰.

In the beginning of the *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus makes clear allusions to the teachings of Hermes and “Egyptian philosophy” as the foundations of Platonic and Pythagorean philosophies⁵⁰¹:

Θεὸς ὁ τῶν λόγων ἡγεμών, Ἑρμῆς, πάλαι δέδοκται καλῶς ἅπασιν τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν εἶναι κοινός· ὁ δὲ τῆς περὶ θεῶν ἀληθινῆς ἐπιστήμης προεσθηκῶς εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ αὐτὸς ἐν ὅλοις· ὃ δὴ καὶ οἱ ἡμέτεροι πρόγονοι τὰ αὐτῶν τῆς σοφίας εὐρήματα ἀνετίθεσαν, Ἑρμοῦ πάντα τὰ οἰκεῖα συγγράμματα ἐπονομάζοντες. Εἰ δὲ τοῦδε τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡμεῖς τὸ ἐπιβάλλον καὶ δυνατὸν ἑαυτοῖς μέρος μετέχομεν, σὺ τε καλῶς ποιεῖς ἃ εἰς γνῶσιν τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν, ὡς φιλοῦσι, περὶ θεολογίας προτείνων ἐρωτήματα, ἐγὼ τε εἰκότως τὴν πρὸς Ἄνεβῶ τὸν ἐμὸν μαθητὴν πεμφθεῖσαν ἐπιστολὴν ἑμαυτῷ γεγράφθαι νομίσας ἀποκρινοῦμαι σοὶ αὐτὰ τάληθῆ ὑπὲρ ὧν πυνθάνη. Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν εἶη πρέπον Πυθαγόραν μὲν καὶ Πλάτωνα καὶ Δημόκριτον καὶ Εὐδοξον καὶ πολλοὺς ἄλλους τῶν παλαιῶν Ἑλλήνων τετυχηκέναι διδασχῆς τῆς προσηκούσης ὑπὸ τῶν καθ' ἑαυτοὺς γιγνομένων ἱερογραμμάτων, σὲ δ' ἐφ' ἡμῶν ὄντα καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἐκείνοις ἔχοντα γνώμην διαμαρτεῖν τῆς

saying that they ought to be passed on to the Egyptians in general... "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories ... "The king answered and said, "O man full of arts, if men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks." *Phaed.* 274c- 275a, with omissions.

⁴⁹⁸ Cf. (Chanotis, 2018, p. 344-385); (Bowersock, 1990, p.15-28).

⁴⁹⁹ It would be interesting to discuss how the “Oriental” background of the Neoplatonists led them to have a more positive perspective of the barbarian religions and philosophies in contrast with a Delphic Hellenic priest like Plutarch. Domaradzki in the article quoted above makes an interesting comparison between Plutarch and Iamblichus as purveyors of opposite interpretations of the validity of Egyptian symbols and rituals by Hellenic philosophers.

⁵⁰⁰ Porphyry’s allusion to the difficulty that Plotinus had with some Greek phrasal constructions is very telling of the type of cultural interaction that was being developed since the 1st century in Roman Egypt and other Roman provinces in the Middle East and North Africa.

⁵⁰¹ *De. Myst.* 1.1.1.

ὑπὸ τῶν νῦν ζώντων καὶ καλουμένων κοινῶν διδασκάλων ὑφηγήσεως.

Hermes, the god who presides over language, has long been considered, quite rightly, to be the common patron of all priests; he who presides over true knowledge about the gods is one and the same always and everywhere. It is to him that our ancestors in particular dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes. And if we, for our part, receive from this god our due share of favour, such as we are capable of receiving, you, for your part, do well in laying before the priests questions about theology, such as they love to deal with, and which pertain to their expertise; and, at the same time, assuming that the letter sent to my student Anebo may be addressed equally well to me, it is reasonable for me to grant you a true reply to your enquiries. For it would not be right for Pythagoras and Plato and Democritus and Eudoxus and many other of the Hellenes of old to have been granted suitable instruction by the sacred scribes of their time, but for you, in our time, who have the same purpose as they, to fail of guidance at the hands of those who are accounted public teachers now. (Transl. Dillon, Clarke, Hershbell, slightly altered).

Iamblichus' text – the beginning of his response to Porphyry in matters of theurgy – represents a typical late antique blend of the traditional Hellenic lore about Egyptian primary wisdom⁵⁰², the centrality of Hermetic influences and Egyptian mysticism among the spiritual currents of the time. Such “Egyptianizing” tendency has often been described by 19th and early 20th century scholars as being indicative of a literary allusion, an embellishment without any real Egyptian or Oriental strata in the body of Greek thought⁵⁰³.

⁵⁰² E.g. Plato *Tim.* 22b and *Crit.* 108d.

⁵⁰³ Scholars like E.R. Dodds (1961) and Gilbert Murray (1925) criticized Iamblichus as a transposer of “Oriental” superstitions and magic to the supposedly rational edifice of Greek thought. Others, like Festugière, claimed that even among the philosophical *Hermetica* nothing really Egyptian could be discerned and that the ontological and cosmological patterns of Hermetism were totally of Greek provenance. Festugière, in principle, admits that such influences are possible in the preface for the 3rd edition of *Rev.* but maintains throughout that they cannot be discerned textually, considering his limited methodology of identifying influences solely through philological and internalist analysis. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library with many Coptic versions of Greek papyri and obvious signs of native Egyptian influence

As Fowden comments in the introduction of the already classic “*The Egyptian Hermes*”, denying the substantial influence of native Egyptian culture over Hermetism and – as a side note – the Oriental influence over theurgic and mystical Neoplatonic practices is only possible if we confine ourselves to the internalist approach of classical philology and focus more on questions of lexicon than social or intellectual history⁵⁰⁴. The basic agreement of Fowden with Bull⁵⁰⁵, Edmonds⁵⁰⁶, Gurgel Pereira⁵⁰⁷ and Hanegraaff⁵⁰⁸, of an actual Egyptian base for Hermetism and its connection with theurgy and Neoplatonism, is fundamentally enlightening to the interpretation of the first fragments of the *Philosophical History*. The days of Walter Scott have long gone and his comments about the lack of Hermetic influences and allusions on the pagan Neoplatonists also do not hold water against the test of time⁵⁰⁹.

In the opening lines of the *Philosophical History*, Damascius affirms that the Egyptians are “the oldest and more venerable” race of men known:

Αἰγύπτιοι τοίνυν ὅτι μὲν παλαιάτατοι ἀνθρώπων
εἰσίν, ὧν ἀκοῆ γινώσκομεν, ὀλίγου τι πάντων,
οὐδεὶς οὕτως ἐστὶν ὀψιμαθῆς ὅς οὐχὶ πολλῶν
ἀκήκοε λεγόντων τε καὶ γραφόντων.

over the “pagan gnosis” weakens considerably his claims. According to Fowden, the Greeks that established themselves in Egypt soon adopted many Egyptian religious customs and evidence of Greco-Roman gods in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, especially outside Alexandria, was scarce. Cf. (1993a, p. 19-20).

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. (1993a, p. xiii-xxv and 13-56). Additionally, the claims of some 20th century scholars that the doctrines of Hermetism, the Chaldean Oracles and the Neoplatonists expose a purely “Hellenic” strain of thought exhibit a certain anthropological *naïveté*. As recently as 1999 one can find authors like C. Van Liefferinge trying to derive all the doctrines of the Chaldean Oracles from a purely “Hellenic” field of thought. Even if someone was taking for granted that Numenius, both Julians, the authors of the Hermetic treatises and all Neoplatonists were simply Greeks from the Balkan peninsula transplanted to Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Levant, what is extremely unlikely and contradicted by many available sources, it would be very naive to think that they were not influenced even to a minor degree by the religious and cultural environment around them.

⁵⁰⁵ (2018, p. 33-36.)

⁵⁰⁶ (2019, p. 321-322.)

⁵⁰⁷ ‘The Hermetic Λόγος: Reading the Corpus Hermeticum as a Reflection of Graeco-Egyptian Mentality’ (PhD diss., Philosophisch-Historischen Fakultät der Universität Basel, 2010).

⁵⁰⁸ (2022, p. 23-31).

⁵⁰⁹ Walter Scott translated the *Corpus Hermeticum* to English in the early 20th century. In his edition of the texts, he includes the *testimonia* and many theoretical interpretations. In one of his commentaries, he states that the communication between the authors of the Hermetic texts and the Neoplatonic schools was scarce and that “the pagan Neoplatonists paid little attention to the Hermetica.” Cf. (1982, p. 95). According to Scott, the Neoplatonists knew that Hermes Trismegistus was not the author of the Hermetica and preferred to accept as revealed literature the Chaldean Oracles and the Orphic material (p. 96). The fact that nothing seems to stand above the Chaldean Oracles for the Neoplatonists that came after Porphyry is true, but many recent scholars have been reevaluating the intercourse between the Neoplatonic authors and the Hermetic texts. In her notes to the *Philosophical History*, Athanassiadi detects many passages with Hermetic literary style, parallels and undertones.

That the Egyptians are indeed the oldest and more venerable⁵¹⁰ race of men that we have heard, no one is ignorant enough to not have apprehended from many different sayings and writings.

In fact, it seems that Damascius is making a point about the origins of the sacred arts and techniques – including philosophy – and a description of the “Golden Age” of humanity in which Egyptian sacred priests doing sacred rites established a link between the cosmic regions and thus created an ontological subsistence to the whole civilization. The sacred spiritual economy of the ancient Egyptian theocratic state, idealized as being fundamental to the “good fortunes” of all the people through the appropriate mythical rituals, is established as the source for the heavenly mandate in this world and a description of a world oriented to the sacred. In my opinion, his words here have a double meaning: 1) They are an appropriation of the Hermetic *topoi* on the centrality of Egypt as found in the Asclepius and the *Korē Kosmou* reconfigured by a 6th century Neoplatonic scholar; 2) The passage might be shown to contain an attack on Christianity due to presence of the word ὀψιμαθής.

Let me begin with the attack on Christianity. The adjective ὀψιμαθής is used to mean that someone is “late in learning” or “learns later”⁵¹¹. Athanassiadi affirms that ὀψιμαθής can be used to denote those that are culturally *nouveau riche* and translates the word as “ignorant”⁵¹². The Neoplatonists typically thought that Christians were late learners and corruptors of the ancient *paideia*, a dispute that formally goes back at least since the polemics of the Emperor Julian with the Christian professors of rhetoric and philosophy⁵¹³. By affirming that no one can be ὀψιμαθής about the antiquity of the Egyptians, Damascius is positioning Egyptian myth at the center of the historical process and refuting Christian claims about the Creation of the world and reaffirming the pagan cultural identity, as Christians often claimed that Moses predated the sages of Egypt and Chaldea.

⁵¹⁰ I believe that *παλαιάτατοι* in that context might mean something like “ancient and venerable” rather than just old, considering Damascius’ multiple allusions to the profundity and knowledge of the Egyptians throughout the extant fragments of the *PH* (e.g. 35B or 72B and 72C). A similar use of the word can be found in other examples of Greek literature according to the LSJ entry.

⁵¹¹ The word is used by Plato in the Republic 409b, but the context does not seem to be associated with Damascius’ usage.

⁵¹² Cf. (1999a, p. 75, n. 1.)

⁵¹³ Julian, as the last pagan ruler of the Roman Empire (361-363), forbade Christians (“Galileans”) of teaching rhetoric and philosophy, claiming that they should conform to “their own Mark, Matthew and Luke”. Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1992 [1981], p. 9-11) and (Smith, 1995, p. 190.)

Thus, the antiquity of the Egyptians is related to the fact of them being the first to establish initiation rites and ritualistic activities, in rituals that are of cosmogonical nature, recreations of the constant and infinite demiurgy of the cosmos⁵¹⁴:

διὰ μηχανῆς τινος ἀπόρου καὶ ἀνθρωπίνης ἐλπίδος ἔξω καθεστηκυίας ἐν ἀπορρήτοις τὰ ἀπόρρητα διαμηχανωμένους ὑπὲρ τε σφῶν αὐτῶν τῆς οὐρανίας ἐλπίδος καὶ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἄλλων Αἰγυπτίων τῆς ὅλης εὐθημοσύνης.

[The Egyptian priests] execute esoteric mysteries in hidden places in ways that are unfathomable and free from the hope of any reward in this life, in search of their own salvation and the well-being of all the Egyptians.

The esoteric and ineffable rites (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις τὰ ἀπόρρητα) of the Egyptian priests are directed to the general well-being and good order of all Egyptians (ὑπὲρ τῶν ἄλλων Αἰγυπτίων τῆς ὅλης εὐθημοσύνης), the order, in a metaphysical sense, of Egypt and the cosmos as a whole. The word εὐθημοσύνης is used by Plotinus in the sense of denoting “good order”⁵¹⁵ and is also present in Hesiod as an apposition to κακοθημοσύνη, disorder. In *Op.* 471-472 it is used in the sense of “organization and disorganization”⁵¹⁶. In Damascius, that might have picked that word both from Hesiodic and Plotinian lexicon, the reference might be to the Hermetic perspective of Egypt as the center of the cosmos, the place of a cosmic organization enacted by the cosmogonic ritual of the Egyptian priests.

As can be seen from the Latin Asclepius, the image of Egypt as a terrestrial image of heaven is a fundamental Hermetic theme⁵¹⁷:

Au ignoras, o Asclepi, quod Aegyptus imago sit caeli aut, quod est uerius, translatio aut descensio omnium, quae gubernantur atque exercentur in caelo? et si dicendum est uerius, terra nostra mundi totius est templum.

And do you ignore, o Asclepius, that Egypt is the copy of heaven or, better said, the place that projects here [below] all the operations that

⁵¹⁴ *PH*, 2B.

⁵¹⁵ *Enn.* IV. 4. 5. 18.

⁵¹⁶ εὐθημοσύνη γὰρ ἀρίστη/θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποις, κακοθημοσύνη δὲ κακίστη.

⁵¹⁷ *Asc.* 24. 14-20.

govern and implement the celestial forces? If this is true, our land is the temple of the whole world.

That passage inaugurates the “prophecy” of Hermes Trismegistus to his disciples about the decadence of Egypt and the fall of its sacred order. The theme resonates in the *Philosophical History* and will be also discussed in the last chapter. But before reaching that point, another Hermetic correspondence of that theme can be found in the *Korē Kosmou*⁵¹⁸:

Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐν τῷ μέσῳ τῆς γῆς κεῖται ἡ τῶν προγόνων ἡμῶν ἱερωτάτη χώρα, τὸ δὲ μέσον τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου σώματος μόνης τῆς καρδίας ἐστὶ σηκός, τῆς δὲ ψυχῆς ὀρμητήριόν ἐστὶ καρδία, παρὰ ταύτην τὴν αἰτίαν, ὧ τέκνον, <οἱ> ἐνταῦθα ἄνθρωποι τὰ μὲν ἄλλα ἔχουσιν οὐχ ἧττον ὅσα καὶ πάντες, ἐξαίρετον δὲ τῶν πάντων νοεροὶ εἰσι καὶ σώφρονες, ὡς ἂν ἐπὶ καρδίας γενόμενοι καὶ τραφέντες.

Since the most sacred land of our ancestors lies in the center of the earth, and the center of the human body is the precinct of the single heart, and the heart is the headquarters of the soul⁵¹⁹, for this reason, my child, people in this region possess these other fine qualities no less than all other people. In distinction to all others, however, they have a superior intelligence and moderation as those born and raised in the region of the world’s heart⁵²⁰. (Transl. Litwa)

⁵¹⁸ *SH*, XXIV. 14.

⁵¹⁹ The *Korē Kosmou* also presents an extensive discussion on the nature of the soul (*SH*. XXIV) that is related to the Iamblichean doctrines discussed in chapter 3. Since many aspects of the theories of Iamblichus apparently did not come from Plato, one might wonder if any Egyptian source might be possible considering the fact that the *Korē Kosmou* is the “most Egyptian” of all Hermetic extant texts. Cf. (Podemann Sørensen, 2012, p. 1).

⁵²⁰ Cf. (Hanegraaff, 2022, p. 54): “Thus Egypt, the temple of the soul, is located at the heart of the world. It is the home of divine instruction, the jewel of creation from which all good things flow. This “heartland” is of vital importance in the most literal sense, for the world (not just the earth, but the cosmos as a whole) is itself the body of a great living and breathing Being, a “second god” that can be apprehended by the senses and has been created or born from the ultimate divine Source. The divinely appointed task of human beings is to take good care of the world and all living things; and since the Egyptians among all other human beings find themselves living in the most sacred space on earth, they have a special responsibility to act and behave with priestly devotion as servants of divinity.”

This is a central mytheme of the Egyptian religion, the idea of Egypt as the center of the whole world⁵²¹. In both Hermetic treatises and also in Iamblichus *De Mysteriis*, the mytheme of Egypt as the center of the cosmos is related with the initiatory rites and practices of mysteries. An earlier passage of the *Korē Kosmou*, says that Egypt is the center of the cosmos, the pupil of the eye of the world⁵²².

Aside from Hermetic and Neoplatonic writings, the preeminence of Egypt is also present in stories about Orpheus being initiated in Egypt, just like Plato and Pythagoras. Orphism and stories about Orpheus figure prominently in the Neoplatonic writings. It could even be said that Orphism has for Damascius an authority even equal to that of Plato and closer to the Chaldean Oracles⁵²³. That Orpheus was also initiated in Egypt was not coincidence, as Diodorus of Sicily attests⁵²⁴:

Ὀρφέα μὲν γὰρ τῶν μυστικῶν τελετῶν τὰ πλεῖστα καὶ τὰ περὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πλάνην ὀργιαζόμενα καὶ τὴν τῶν ἐν ἄδου μυθοποιίαν ἀπενέγκασθαι. τὴν μὲν γὰρ Ὀσίριδος τελετὴν τῇ Διονύσου τὴν αὐτὴν εἶναι, τὴν δὲ τῆς Ἴσιδος τῇ τῆς Δήμητρος ὁμοιοτάτην ὑπάρχειν, τῶν ὀνομάτων μόνων ἐνηλλαγμένων· τὰς δὲ τῶν ἀσεβῶν ἐν ἄδου τιμωρίας καὶ τοὺς τῶν εὐσεβῶν λειμῶνας καὶ τὰς παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς εἰδωλοποιίας ἀναπεπλασμένας παρεισαγαγεῖν μιμησάμενον τὰ γινόμενα περὶ τὰς ταφὰς τὰς κατ' Αἴγυπτον.

Orpheus brought from Egypt the majority of initiations into mysteries and the rites celebrated in honor of his peregrinations and the myths about the Hades. The initiatic rite of Osiris is in fact identical to that of Dionysus and the one of Isis is indeed in all similar to that of Demeter: only the names are changed. It was Orpheus who

⁵²¹ A very detailed discussion can be found in (Assmann, 2001, p. 17-52.) Also interesting, (Fowden, 1993b, p. 46-47.)

⁵²² SH. XXIV, 13.

⁵²³ Cf. PH, 85B. Also, it is not coincidental that in the *De Princ.* the closing section is devoted to the theologies and theogonies of Greeks and Barbarians. After exhausting the possibilities of metaphysics and language in an exhilarating discussion, Damascius turns himself to theology and mysticism as antidotes to the opacity of language. In the same text, he affirms that information about Egyptian matters was given to him by Heraiscus and Asclepiades, both of whom are heavily involved with Egyptian religion and probably linked with Hermetism. One can only wonder why Egyptian cosmogony, that is only one more in the kaleidoscope of mythologies in the *De Princ.* assumes such position of centrality in the *Philosophical History*. In my opinion, the appropriation by Damascius of the Hermetic apocalyptic *topoi* constitutes the most viable explanation.

⁵²⁴ I. 96. 4-5.

introduced the punishments of the wicked into Hades, the meadows of the devoted, and the production of images in the presence of the many, imitating the funerary rites of the Egyptians.

Some of the themes presented here by Diodorus⁵²⁵ can be found in the Proemium of the *Philosophical History*, although in a typical Iamblichean Neoplatonic exegetic framework: the centrality of Egypt as the purveyor of initiation rites (τῶν μυστικῶν τελετῶν) and the equivalence between the myths of Dionysus and Osiris. The myth of Dionysus Zagreus is fundamental for the Orphic mythology of Damascius and Olympiodorus commentaries on the *Phaedo* of Plato⁵²⁶ and Damascius reproduces an Egyptianized version of the myth in the same section of the *Philosophical History*⁵²⁷.

That Damascius is not solely making descriptive historical observations seems obvious by the passage placed by Athanassiadi just before the presentation of the cosmogonical rites of the Egyptian priests⁵²⁸:

εἴσω δὲ ἢ τοιαύτη σοφία κρυπτομένη ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τῆς μυθολόγου ταύτης ἀληθείας, οὕτως ἡρέμα παραγυμνοῦται κατὰ βραχὺ τῷ δυναμένῳ πρὸς θεὸν ἀνακλῖναι τὴν ἱερὰν ἀγλὴν τῆς ψυχῆς.

Wisdom of this kind, hidden in the temple of truth that is expressed by the mythologist, it is in this way quietly and slowly revealed to the man who can lift to the divine the sacred light of his soul.

This is a sketch of the Neoplatonic theory of myth. Athanassiadi, in her notes to the passage, shows it to be a reminiscence of Plato's allegory of the cave "conveyed through a verbatim quotation from *Resp.* 540a."⁵²⁹ The section 540a of the *Republic* follows the passage where Socrates instructs Glaucon about the education of the ideal citizens for 15 years until they reach the age of 50, only those capable of surviving the tests would have

⁵²⁵ Also, see I. 23.2, 6-7.

⁵²⁶ Following the thesis of A. Diès (1927) of the "transposition of the mysteries", A. Bernabé (2011) argues that Plato himself was a transposer of Orphic mysteries to philosophy. The details of his thesis cannot be discussed here appropriately, but in his conclusions he claims that Plato takes from Orphism mainly the doctrine of immortality of the soul and the possibility of divinization. R. G. Edmonds (2009) in his discussion of Olympiodorus' reception and retelling of the Dionysian Orphic myth emphasizes the "creative" aspects of individual interpreters instead of a supposedly monolithic "Orphic myth" that has passed down unchanged through the ages up until the times of Olympiodorus. Cf. (p. 4-7).

⁵²⁷ 3A, B and C, all to be discussed later.

⁵²⁸ 2A.

⁵²⁹ (1999A, p. 75, n. 2.)

been required to “turn upwards the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all” (καὶ ἀναγκαστέον ἀνακλίναντας τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀγῆν εἰς αὐτὸ ἀποβλέψαι τὸ πᾶσι φῶς παρέχον)⁵³⁰. The language of Damascius is almost a paraphrase of Plato: πρὸς θεὸν ἀνακλῖναι τὴν ἱερὰν ἀγῆν τῆς ψυχῆς, but I suspect that his paraphrase conveys something else.

The metaphor of the light is already present at the beginning of the Republic⁵³¹ in the exposition of the Allegory of the Cave. It seems to me that Damascius is appropriating the language of Plato in order to place the Neoplatonic holy man and mystic as the privileged interpreter of myth, especially the Hermetic cosmological myth of Egypt’s centrality. The reason why only the pagan (Neoplatonic) holy man can know those facts and not someone that is ὀψιμαθῆς is due to the special conditions of his enlightened soul: his soul is endowed with sacred light (ἱερά ἀγῆ), or rather it can perceive the sacred light of God better than other men due to his special soul, wrapped in a luminous vehicle (ἀγνοειδὲς ὄχημα)⁵³². It must be remembered that the *Philosophical History* was written for Damascius’ students, the remaining flowers of the pagan Neoplatonic elite. The elitism of his theory of myth (ἡ τοιαύτη σοφία κρυπτομένη ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τῆς μυθολόγου) and general interpretation of history attached to it is reflective of a demarcation between the Neoplatonists and the “herd” of ignorant men, both Christian and the remaining pagan sects outside the sphere of the Neoplatonic *paideia*.⁵³³

The Neoplatonic mythologist can also understand the mystery of Egypt’s cosmic centrality due to his mystical experiences. Plotinus often used the image of the inner

⁵³⁰ The book VII of the Republic is where one could find the famous analogy between the Sun and the Good and the famous Allegory of the Cave. Despite not being part of the Neoplatonic canon established by Iamblichus, the Republic was read by the Neoplatonists, as both Proclus and Damascius can testify. Cf. (Baltzly; Finamore; Miles, 2018, p. 2-6.) The Republic was not part of the usual reading list of the Neoplatonists, a list that usually followed Iamblichus scheme starting from the Alcibiades I and ending in the Parmenides. However, as it is obvious by the allusion here and in other parts of the *Philosophical History* (e.g. fragments 18 and 46D), Damascius appreciated and read the Republic. Proclus wrote a commentary, and it seems that this work of Plato, that in modern times is his most known, only gained some traction in the Neoplatonic schools in the late 4th century and in the 5th century. In Olympiodorus commentary on the Gorgias, the Republic and the Laws are the most extensively referred. Cf. (*Ibid.* p. 8-9).

⁵³¹ 514a-516a.

⁵³² Cf. 153A and the discussion above.

⁵³³ In the fragment 89A, Damascius presents a philosopher called Dominus, “from Laodicea and Larissa in Syria”, a pupil of Syrianus that studied philosophy alongside Proclus. Dominus was competent (ἱκανός) in mathematics, but shallow in other philosophical subjects. Daring to write his own interpretations of Plato, he is accused by Damascius in the *Philosophical History* of distorting the words of Plato. His distortion was so strong that Proclus had to write a “purificatory” (καθαρτικός) treatise against him. Athanassiadi (2006, p. 150), notes that since the times of Iamblichus the interpretation of philosophy and mythology at the hands of the Neoplatonists had such a conformation that the possession of knowledge as divine revelation becomes: “la pierre de touche de la nouvelle religiosité.”

temple as a metaphor for his experiences⁵³⁴ and in other passages of the Philosophical History the image of the ἄδυτος/ἄδυτον⁵³⁵ is employed to denote sacred or miraculous experiences⁵³⁶. The cosmogonic rituals of the Egyptian priests are thus faced with a typical Neoplatonic understanding of myth and traditional ritual. It is a “locative” perspective that is largely derived from Plato’s *Laws* and the *Timaeus*. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, such locative perspective of a fundamentally good cosmic order is based on patterns developed by priestly castes of Babylonian and other Mesopotamian religions⁵³⁷ and seems to be the model for religion and the repetition of archetypes in the religious theory of Mircea Eliade⁵³⁸. However, such order, that once was manifested even in the historical world (“Encosmic”), in the Golden Age of Cronus, can now be accessed only through special means. But I will return to that point later.

The location of the Egyptians as the “oldest people” on the world is an attempt to metaphysically locate the first populations to begin esoteric rites (ἀπόρρητα), religious cults and to live in geometrically conceived cities, to delineate a “sacred space”. That is the meaning of being “the oldest race of men of which we have heard” (αἰγύπτιοι τοῖνον ὅτι μὲν παλαιάτατοι ἀνθρώπων εἰσίν), it is both a metaphysical and a historical description⁵³⁹. The attribution of the greatest antiquity to the Egyptians might also be related with the Neoplatonic holy man mystical authority over the teachings that define the place of Egypt and the initiation rites in the center of the cosmos. The Neoplatonist can, in this manner, posit himself as the specialist in cosmogony, the one that can interpret through his intuition (συναίρεσις) and sacred light the meaning of rites, cults and the conformation

⁵³⁴ “there was no movement in him and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent – but there was not even any reason or thought, and he himself was not there, if one must say this; but he was as if carried away or possessed by a god, in a quiet solitude and a state of calm... He had no thought of beauties, but had already run up beyond beauty and gone beyond the choir of virtues, like a man who enters into the sanctuary (*adyton*) and leaves behind the statues in the outer shrine; ...And when one falls from the vision, he wakes again the virtue in himself... and he will again be lightened... This is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world” (*Enn.VI. 9. 11*). Transl. A.H. Armstrong.

⁵³⁵ The ἄδυτος (“not to be entered”) is the innermost sanctuary of the Greek temple and its dominion is considered to be exclusive of the gods. To enter that place metaphysically means that someone is reaching a god-like state.

⁵³⁶ E.g. 34C.

⁵³⁷ (1978, p. 13).

⁵³⁸ (*Ibid.*)

⁵³⁹ “The Greek world at large, and after it the Roman, was firmly persuaded that the Egyptians had been the first people to organize formal religious cult. Men of these less ancient nations were prepared to admire quite uncritically the temples and rituals of the Egyptians and even to accept the idea that the land of Egypt was intrinsically holy. The priesthood, which retained not a little of the vast social and political power it had wielded under the Pharaohs, enjoyed a reputation among men of Greek and Latin culture usually accorded only to the sages of nations safely and romantically remote from the well-trodden highways of the Mediterranean world, such as the Brahmins and Gymnosophists of India”. Fowden, *Egypt*, p. 14-15.

of the historical process. Damascius, being a former student of Horapollo⁵⁴⁰ and acquaintance of Heraiscus and Asclepiades, probably had access to the variegated texts of the Hermetic tradition, but did not consider them revealed literature in the same level as the Chaldean Oracles and the Orphic writings. He merely appropriates the Hermetic *topoi* to his own needs.

Considering all of this, he then proceeds to another level of interpretation: the actual position of the myths Osiris and Isis and their interpretation through the triadic revelation of the Chaldean Oracles. Later on, his vessel arrives at the ports of the relation between φιλοσοφία and ιερατική, to finally arrive at the mighty ocean of θεοκρασία. That is a subject for the next chapter, where the fragments 3 A, B, C and 4A, B and C will be related to the fr. 18, in order to prepare the terrain for the particular “heterotopical” mystical discussion of the last chapter.

The present chapter acts as a prelude to the next and opens the influences of Hermetism and the mobilization by Damascius of a series of pagan sources in order to construct a metaphysical *bricolage* of mythological patterns and *topoi* of the endangered pagan religions. The position of Egypt as the center of metaphysical order and of the esoteric rituals of the Egyptian priests as the “center of the cosmos” might have been a rhetorical construction in order to write a cosmo-historical text in opposition to Christianity. The centrality of Egypt as the first repository of the mystical traditions is the model of the mythical Golden Age, an age that existed before the divided state of the 5th and 6th centuries.

⁵⁴⁰ Horapollo says that, “Only the land of Egypt, *since it is in the middle of the earth*, just as the so-called pupil is in the eye, causes the rise of the Nile in summer” (Hieroglyphics 1.21). Quoted by (Litwa, 2018, p. 101). The pedagogical formation of Damascius in Egypt likely had a strong effect on him and according to some sources the cults of the Egyptian gods were present in the Roman province of Syria

6. The Collapse of the Great Year Myth and Hieratic Art

Oh how lonely settles the evening-wind. /Dying away a man's head droops in the dark of the olive tree. /How shattering is the decline of a family. /This is the hour when the seer's eyes are filled/With gold as he beholds the stars.

Georg Trakl, *Helian*

The discussion of the previous chapter gives rise to the inquiry into the Age of Darkness and the pagan perception of the perpetual night that enveloped their wandering existences through the shores of the Mediterranean and decayed tombs of the fallen kings of old, cedar forests with cloudy mists, snow-caped mountains, merciless deserts, mighty rivers and all the superb Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Anatolian and Greek landscapes. Once full of gods and temples of the ancestors, now the houses of the gods were turned to simple bricks and rocks, nothing more than human artifice corrupted by the irresistible Fate that rules life in the sublunar world⁵⁴¹. That Damascius saw his epoch as the one of setting sun there is no discussion. It does not matter how much some modern historians pretend that Late Antiquity is just an age of innocent transformations, that pagan sources exaggerate the amount of brutality, that Christianity is the rightful inheritor of Hellenism, that Edward Gibbon was just an Enlightenment thinker obsessed with combating the Church, that barbarian invasions were just a matter of people changing identities⁵⁴² and so on. All of those “enemies of decadence” seem to forget that transformation entails destruction, historical change is the herald of annihilation. It is in the shadow of the black sun of decay that new languages are born.

⁵⁴¹ Cf. *Or. Ch.* 102: “Do not gaze at Nature, her name is Fate” (Μὴ φύσιν ἐμβλέψῃς· εἰμαρμένον οὖνομα τῆσδε) and 103: “Do not join excessively [the] Fate” (μηδὲ συναυξήσῃς θειμαρμένον).

⁵⁴² That particular claim, made by historians like Patrick Geary and Walter Goffart, and still taken seriously in academic circles, is particularly mistaken. The fact that identity is a cultural construct and some Germanic peoples adopted Roman culture do not allow us to deny that at a certain point in time different peoples with different cultural traditions and identities clashed in the aftermath of the Western Roman Empire. Based on recent archaeogenetic research, there was strong populational substitution in places like Italy, Central Europe, the West Balkans and Greece due to the Germanic *Völkerwanderung* and the expansions of Bulgars, Slavs, Huns, Magyars etc. Cf. Antonio et al. 2019 and the fresh doctoral dissertation of C. Cannariato (2024) on the population of Pompeii: *Pompei, capsula del tempo dell'Impero Romano: analisi paleogenomica dei resti umani rinvenuti nell'antica città*. However, I am not making the contrary naïve claim that identity derives from biology or genetic ancestry, just pointing that massive population substitution seems to have happened in many territories of the Roman Empire. According to medieval historian Peter Heather, the idea that the “barbarian” peoples from the North were just absorbed peacefully into Roman society “smells more of wishful thinking than likely reality.” Cf. (2018, p. 80.)

Coming back to the text of the *Philosophical History*, the myth of Osiris and Dionysus imposes itself as an extension of the discussion of the hidden mysteries of mythological interpretation in 2A and B. The myth is particularly fit to be linked again to another passage in the *Korē Kosmou*⁵⁴³:

At a certain point in Isis' mythological account of the present deplorable condition, the earth, polluted by crimes and dead bodies, implores God for a holy emanation from himself that might somehow make things right. In response to the prayers of not only earth, but all the elements, certain measures are taken by God, but Horus interrupts his mother's narrative and asks: "Mother, how did earth succeed in obtaining an emanation from God?"

The instruction of Isis to Horus in this fragmentary Hermetic treatise preserved by Stobaeus⁵⁴⁴ contains observations on the nature of soul and embodiment, a statement on the decay of the present times and an interpretation of the myth of Osiris. The extensive allusion to the *Korē Kosmou* (S.H. XXIII-XXVII) in Athanassiadi's notes to the *Philosophical History* awakened my interest for its relations with the text of Damascius, even though an extensive development of them is impossible to be accomplished in this work.

The presentation of the myth of Osiris and Isis by Damascius in the text is a rendition of the triadic cosmological structure of the Chaldean Oracles and is an important counterpart for discussing both the fragment 18 and the passages about the *ἱερατικὴ-φιλοσοφία* following the myth in the Proemium. The discussion of anthropological and symbolic expressions of the mythological pattern here will be minimal, just the basic for reinforcing the overall argument. The myth of Osiris and Isis is such an infinite subject that someone could write one-thousand pages on it and still not exhaust the possible meanings⁵⁴⁵ and appearances of those deities in Egyptian and Greco-Roman sources. Important to note, as well, is the presence of Isis in the *Korē Kosmou* and in the

⁵⁴³ Cf. (Podemann Sørensen, 2012, p. 1-2).

⁵⁴⁴ Stobaeus I. 49. 44, vol. i, p. 385 (Wachsmuth).

⁵⁴⁵ Cf. (Merkelbach, 2001, p. 3-40 and p. 71-87); (Borgeaud, 2000, p. 39-42.)

hypothetical Chaldean Oracle that Damascius is quoting in the fragment 3B. Isis is considered to be a disciple of Hermes in much of Hellenistic and late antique literature⁵⁴⁶.

Following the definition of myth and the centrality of the Egyptians as a sacred people, Damascius says⁵⁴⁷:

Οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι ἐσέβοντο θεῶν μάλιστα Ὅσιριν τε καὶ Ἴσιν, τὸν μὲν ἅπαντα δημιουργεῖν νομίζοντες εἶδεσί τε καὶ ἀριθμοῖς τὴν ὕλην διακοσμοῦντα, τὴν δὲ κατάρδουσάν τε καὶ παιίνουσαν τὴν τούτου δημιουργίαν ἀενάου ζωῆς ὀχετοῖς ἀμετρήτοις.

Among the gods, the Egyptians worshipped mainly Osiris and Isis. He was the creator of all things, arranging matter by form and number, she nurtures and sprinkle his incessant demiurgy⁵⁴⁸ through the ilimited channels of infinite life”.

At a first glance, the text mobilizes a lexicon from many strands of philosophy and religion that converged in Neoplatonism. First, obviously, Plato and Pythagoreanism (δημιουργέω/δημιουργία, ἀριθμός⁵⁴⁹), the Orphic Poems (ἀέναιος⁵⁵⁰) and the Chaldean Oracles (ζωή,

⁵⁴⁶ See the references collected by Litwa (2018, p. 100) in his translation of the *Kore Kosmou*. Litwa also establishes some links between the mythological persona of Isis and the theme of the preceding chapter saying that “The line of Hermetic teaching thus travels from Hermes to Isis to Horus. Horus, physical son of Isis and Osiris, is apparently considered to be Egypt’s second king (after Osiris). Diodorus of Sicily (a first-century BCE historian) also represents Isis as the teacher of her son Horus. After resurrecting Horus with the elixir of immortality, Isis teaches him both medicine and prophecy. In alchemical literature, moreover, Isis reveals to Horus the secrets of metals. To the Greeks of the Hellenistic and Roman periods (roughly from 300 BCE to 300 CE), Isis was depicted as a culture heroine. She taught human beings how to grow food, make medicines, and in general how to live a civilized life. The view of Isis as a civilizer (along with her husband Osiris) is beautifully expressed at the end of this excerpt (§§ 65–68) [i.e. the *Kore Kosmou*]. This material may derive from popular hymns that laud the virtues of the gods (called “aretologies”).”

⁵⁴⁷ PH, 3A. I suppressed the Photian conjunction ὅτι and the verb φημί from the text and maintained only the text that is supposed to be from Damascius.

⁵⁴⁸ The word “incessant” do not appear in the text, but the concept of “demiurgy” entails a constant creation rather than a *creatio ex nihilo* like in the Christian tradition.

⁵⁴⁹ Cf. (Acevedo, 2018, p. 70): “Pythagoras says that the cosmos is a created thing in the realm of thought but not in that of time (κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν οὐ κατὰ χρόνον).”⁸⁰ Aristotle dismisses offhand this Pythagorean doctrine as absurd, but it appears in later literature as Pythagorean, and it agrees with the cosmology of Timaeus, and with the important doxographical statement that Pythagoras coined the term ‘cosmos’, ἐκ τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ τάξεως, ‘because of the order in it.’⁸¹ The association of Pythagoras with the henceforth allied concepts of ‘universal orderly beauty’ (κόσμος) and ‘sequential order’ (τάξις), established from early on a sort of conceptual amalgam that would be perpetuated through the Middle Ages. The intemporal and conceptual character of this creation, this universe and this order is to be related to the immaterial aspect of letter and number in their intrinsic duality. Discussing Philolaus’ theories, Burkert observes: ‘the Greek word ἀριθμός is not completely equivalent to the modern concept of “number”. Αριθμός is always a whole

ὄχρητός). If the section on the antiquity of the Egyptians was establishing the Neoplatonic philosopher as the privileged esoteric interpreter of myths, this section might be the establishment of the Neoplatonic Chaldean influenced cosmological theories as the exegesis of the myth of Isis. In the *Korē Kosmou* there are analogous passages⁵⁵¹, so the question of the text direct influence over Damascius might be pointed, but there is also the possibility that Damascius had access to other sources, no longer extant, that also influenced the author of the Hermetic treatise. The last hypothesis seems likely considering that Damascius studied with Horapollo from his teenage years up until his late twenties or early thirties⁵⁵² and that the Neoplatonists appropriated the Hermetic writings for their own purposes⁵⁵³.

The purpose here seems to be the insertion of the Egyptian myth into the metaphysical scheme of the Chaldean Oracles, a scheme that is similar to the one in the image presented in the chapter 3. Since the original text of the Oracles is not extant, all we have are the interpretations of the different Neoplatonic writers⁵⁵⁴. In order for disclosing the relation between the myth, philosophy and hieratic art it is an important step because it is, like many other post-Iamblichean Neoplatonic attempts, to locate a widespread and tradition myth inside the theological framework of Neoplatonism and to give to the Neoplatonic sage the “meta-theory” regarding a tradition that was in danger of extinction. That is how the subsequent passage unfolds with reference to Typhon (Seth) as the mythological figure that is responsible both for the sorrows of the Egyptians due to his dismemberment of Osiris and as a counterpart for the dark age in which Damascius was living.

Indeed, in the fragment 3B Damascius talks about the dismemberment of Osiris-Dionysus:

number, and tied up with the actual process of counting. Thus it is closely connected with things, and in fact is itself a thing, or at least an ordering of things. Ἀριθμὸς means a numerically arranged system, or its parts.’

⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁵¹ Cf. SH. XXIII, 62. Cf. Litwa p. 101.

⁵⁵² Damascius was probably somewhere between 27-33 at the time of the events described in his journey with Isidore from Alexandria to Athens, when he abandoned the profession of rhetorician and became a disciple of philosophers like Isidore, Marinus and Zenodotus. Based on the description of the events in the book, the *Philosophical History* was probably written 30-35 years later, when he was already the diadoch of the Platonic school in Athens and before the edict of Justinian in 529.

⁵⁵³ The differences in social origin between the authors of the Hermetic treatises and the Neoplatonists were very likely marked. Fowden (1993a, p. 5) argues that Hermetism gave expression to a wider current of Platonic or Platonizing counterculture that was literate – thus already a small minority – but not necessarily instructed in the formal schools of philosophy, while the pagan holy men of the Neoplatonic schools came from a very restrict elite, both in intellectual and socio-economic stands. C. Bull also makes a

⁵⁵⁴ Cf. (Athassiadi, 1999b, p. 158); (Majercik, 2001, p. 265).

τοῦτον οἱ μὲν λέγουσιν εἶναι τὸν Διόνυσον, οἱ δὲ ἄλλον· ὃν ὑπὸ Τυφῶνος δαίμονος ἐσπαράχθαι, καὶ μέγα πένθος γενέσθαι τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις, καὶ τοῦ σπαραγμοῦ μνήμην ποιεῖσθαι ἐπὶ πάντα τὸν χρόνον.

Some say that Osiris is Dionysus, others that he is another [god]. He was cut in pieces by the demon Typhon, what brought much sorrow for the Egyptians. His dismemberment is remembered and ritualized forever.

The σπαραγμός of Osiris is obviously related with Damascius' interpretation of the myth of Dionysus in the *Commentary on the Phaedo*⁵⁵⁵. But I would like to focus here on the allusion to Typhon, one of the most common recurrences all over the *Philosophical History* in regards to the state of decay and moral dissolution of the Roman Empire⁵⁵⁶. The Typhonian state is metaphysical, it might be present at any time of history as a counterpart of matter, but in the fragment 18 it is said that some inherent metaphysical states in the triads manifest themselves as predominant historical forces in certain periods, following a cosmic and cyclical cosmological theory. The remembrance (μνήμη) of Osiris is related to the establishment of the esoteric rituals necessary for the ascension of the soul and the dispersal of the body of Osiris is the mythical representation of the fragmented “enmattered” state of existence⁵⁵⁷.

⁵⁵⁵ The figures of Dionysus and the Titans have a history in terms of Neoplatonic interpretation as part of the relation between the One and the Many, Unity and Multiplicity. In the world of generation, Dionysus unify the Titanic in himself. While he is below the higher triad that is dominated by Zeus, Dionysus is responsible for the “demiurgic” activities while the Titans are the ones who “fragment” the constant creations of Dionysus. The Titanic state is the state in which human beings cannot ascend beyond the fragmented conditions of embodiment and material constraints. The discussion is about a section of Plato's *Phaedo* (62b) regarding the “custody” in which human beings are attached in the body: ἔν τινι φρουρᾷ ἐσμεν (we are in a certain type of custody). Damascius says: "Using these principles, we shall easily prove that “the custody” is not the Good, as some say, nor pleasure, as Numenius would have it, nor the Demiurge, as Paterius says, but rather, as Xenocrates has it, that it is Titanic and culminates in Dionysus." (Ὅτι τούτοις χρώμενοι τοῖς κανόσι ῥαδίως διελέγξομεν, ὡς οὔτε τὰγαθόν ἐστιν ἡ φρουρά, ὡς τινες, οὔτε ἡ ἡδονή, ὡς Νουμήνιος, οὔτε ὁ δημιουργός, ὡς Πατέριος, ἀλλ', ὡς Ξενοκράτης, Τιτανική ἐστιν καὶ εἰς Διόνυσον ἀποκορυφοῦται). *In. Phaed.* 1.2. According to Edmonds (2009, p. 8), Damascius usually uses ἀποκορυφοῦται in reference to the process of returning to a unitary state out of a multiple or division, like in the *In. Parm.* 94.26 and 95.9.

⁵⁵⁶ E.g. the allusions to Pamprepius in the fragment 112.

⁵⁵⁷ The activity of matter as being monstrous and titanic is present in the treatise *De Iside et Osiride* (373A-C) of Plutarch: “they have a legend that the soul of Osiris is everlasting and imperishable, but that his body Typhon oftentimes dismembers and causes to disappear, and that Isis wanders hither and yon in her search for it, and fi ts it together again; for that which really is and is perceptible and good is superior to destruction and change. The images from it with which the sensible and corporeal is impressed, and the relations, forms, and likeness which this takes upon itself, like impressions of seals in wax, are not permanently lasting, but disorder and disturbance overtakes them, being driven hither from the upper reaches, and fi ghting against

Let me now hurry, following some hints by P. Hoffmann (2017), to the presentation of the structure of Damascius' interpretation of the relation between the sacred origin, associated with Egypt and its establishment of mystical and hieratic rites, and the process of time, procession or decadence in the historical ages. The French classicist presents an interpretation of the philosophy of history in Damascius as being related to the Hesiodic ages of the world and to some influences of Plato's cosmological reflections⁵⁵⁸. The text of Damascius is synthesized by Athanassiadi in her fragment 18 based on 3 sources: two comments by Photius of varying lengths⁵⁵⁹ – chosen by the Byzantine patriarch on the basis of their “beautiful of expression” (καλλιέπεια) – and a reconstructed text based on indications by the Suda. The three texts are not identical, even if their meaning is more or less similar. As I am dealing mostly with Athanassiadi's condensed edition, the other texts are provided in an appendix in the Greek original and in my own English translation, adapted from Hoffmann.⁵⁶⁰

Athanassiadi places the synthesized fragment into the section about Isidore's actions and miraculous powers (fragments 1-38). The contrast of the different types of “modes of existence” or πολιτεία⁵⁶¹ and their interpenetration in the totality of history, side by side with the correspondence between soul – history – cosmos is possibly a way of dealing with a possibility of transcendence even in the monstrous Typhonian age. As shall be seen, it also entails a particular interpretation of the relation between history and matter:

Horus, whom Isis brings forth, beholden of all, as the image of the perceptible world. Therefore it is said that he is brought to trial by Typhon on the charge of illegitimacy, as not being pure nor uncontaminated like his father, reason unalloyed and unaffected of itself, but contaminated in his substance because of the corporeal element. He prevails, however, and wins the case when Hermes, that is to say Reason, testifies and points out that Nature, by undergoing changes of form with reference to the perceptible, duly brings about the creation of the world.” Transl. Del Lucchese.

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. p. 749-753.

⁵⁵⁹ A “brief” (VI fr. 22) and a long one (VI fr. 238).

⁵⁶⁰ It could be argued philologically that I am dealing with Athanassiadi's Damascius rather than with Damascius himself, but then it would also need to be argued *that any reading of the Philosophical History* is a reading of Photius and the Suda and not of Damascius. Moreover, that same problem could be extended to a large number of ancient texts considering the problems of transmission, manuscript tradition and copy. And that is just the tip of the iceberg, considering that there are also psychological and anthropological gaps between the world of Late Antiquity and our own. Anyway, the task of interpretation, the risk of reading texts, involves formulating a narrative that might be probable based in internal coherence and correspondence to the material.

⁵⁶¹ In the Greek Patristic lexicon of Lampe (p.1113), it is said that πολιτεία can mean a community or society, like the modes of living of Jewish people or the Christian way of life and conduct. It can also be used in reference to ascetic practices or an act of religious behavior (p. 1114). It seems probable that Damascius is using the word in a manner that is similar to the modern concept of “culture” or cultural formation. A more or less coherent Neoplatonic historical anthropology can be derived from that passage in fragment 18.

Ὅτι τριῶν δὲ ὄντων μερῶν ἢ εἰδῶν τῆς ψυχῆς, ἢ ὅπως ἂν τις ἐθέλοι καλεῖν τριττὴν ἔφασκε γίνεσθαι πολιτείαν, ἔχουσιν μὲν ἐκάστην τὰς τρεῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ κρατοῦντι ἐνὶ τὸ πᾶν μορφουμένην καὶ ὀνομαζομένην τῷ ἐπικρατοῦντι. Καὶ τὴν μὲν προΐεναι μάλιστα κατὰ λόγον, ἣν ἂν τις οἶμαι τὸν ἐπὶ Κρόνου βίον ἐπονομάσειεν ἢ τὴν χρυσοῦν γενεάν ἢ τὸ θεῶν ἀγχίσπορον γένος, οἷα ἐν σχήματι μύθου σεμνύνουσιν ἐν τῷ τρίποδι τῆς Μούσης καθήμενοι ποιηταί· τὴν δὲ κατὰ θυμόν, διανισταμένην ἐπὶ πολέμους καὶ μάχας καὶ ὡς ἐπιπᾶν φάσαι, τὴν περὶ πρωτείων καὶ δόξης ἀγωνιζομένην, οἷαν γενεσθαί τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς ἱστορίας ἐκάστοτε θρυλουμένην ἀκούομεν· τὴν δὲ κατ' ἐπιθυμίαν, πανταχῇ διαρρέουσιν καὶ ὑπὸ τρυφῆς ἀκολάστου διεφθαρμένην, ταπεινὰ καὶ γυναικεῖα φρονοῦσαν, δειλία σύνοικον καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ὑνῖα καλινδουμένην, φιλοχρήμονα, μικροπρεπη, δουλεῦειν ἀσφαλῶς ἐτέλουθσαν, οὐδὲν τίμιον οὐδέ ἐλεύθερον διαπραττομένην, ἀνδραποδώδη καὶ ἀσθενη, γαστρὶ καὶ αἰδοίος ἀεὶ τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν μετροῦσαν οὐδέ θυμῷ γενναίωι χρωμένον· οἷον σῶμα παρειμένον ἐν μαι χῶραι κείμενον ἐκνευρισμένον, οὐδέ κινεῖσθαι ἔτι δυνάμενον· καὶ πολλῶι χαμαιπετεστέραν ἐπεδείκνυτο τὴν ζωὴν τῶν νῦν ἐν τῇ γενέσει πολιτευομένων ἀνθρώπων.

He used to say that, just as the soul has three parts or types (or whatever one chooses to call them), so too there are three different ways of life, each of which contains all three elements while receiving its overall shape from the dominant one, which also gives it its name. Reason is the main influence on the first of these, which could be called the Cronian life, the Golden Race or the generation akin to the gods, celebrated in the guise of myth by poets seated on the tripod of the Muse. Emotion influences the second, which engages in wars and battles and generally fights for the first prizes and for glory, and which we continually hear talked about by history. Appetite rules the third, which is totally dissipated, corrupted by unbridled wantonness, dominated by base and womanish thoughts, associated with cowardice, wallowing in swinishness of every kind, avaricious and petty, desiring the security of a slave, achieving nothing noble or free, servile and weak, measuring happiness solely in

accordance with the belly and the pudenda, totally without nobility of spirit; like a body dumped in a corner, lying enervated and incapable of movement. And he showed the life of the men who are now in the service of generation to be much baser even than this. (Transl. Athanassiadi, altered).

Hoffmann associates the description of Damascius “three forms of living” (πολιτεία) with the Platonic correspondence between the microcosm of the soul (ψυχή) and the larger cosmic processes.

The structure of the human soul corresponds to the structure of reality in the Damascian Neoplatonic philosophy of history. The passage can be seen as a synthesis of the tripartite division of the soul in Plato’s Republic and Hesiod’s theory of the Ages of the World.⁵⁶²

Ce texte philologiquement instable, en raison de sa transmission multiple, expose clairement ce que l’on pourrait appeler une « philosophie néoplatonicienne de l’Histoire », ou une théorie des « Âges de l’Humanité », selon une consécution chronologique et un schéma de dégradation qui font se succéder : un temps – mythique – de la Raison (λόγος), correspondant à l’âge d’or d’Hésiode ; un temps – héroïque et proprement historique – du principe Irascible (θυμός) et des activités guerrières, qui est, en termes platoniciens, le temps du courage (ἀνδρεία) et de la recherche des honneurs (φιλοτιμία) et qui correspond à l’histoire de la Grèce ancienne et de la Rome païenne jusqu’au IV^e siècle ; et enfin un temps présent (νῦν) dominé par le principe Concupiscible, et où s’exprime toute la détestation de Damascius pour le régime politique byzantine et la société corrompue qui l’entoure.

This philological unstable text, due to its multiple transmission, exposes clearly something that one may call a “Neoplatonic philosophy of history” or one theory of the “Ages of Mankind” according to a chronological sequence and a scheme of degradation which make one succeed another: a – mythical – time of Reason (λόγος),

⁵⁶² Cf. 2017, p. 742.

corresponding to the golden age of Hesiod; a time – heroic and properly historical – of the Irascible principle (θυμός) and warlike activities, which is, in Platonic terms, the time of courage (ἀνδρεία) and the search for honors (φιλοτιμία) and which corresponds to the history of ancient Greece and pagan Rome until the 4th century; and finally a present time (νῦν) dominated by the Concupiscible principle, and where all of Damascius' detestation for the Byzantine political regime and the corrupt society that surrounds it is expressed.

Hoffmann's view seems plausible and correlates with the argument developed here, but I would like to present a slightly modified version of his account.

The comparative forms used at the end both of Athanassiadi's synthesized passage, present in Photius and Suda accounts, and the comparative form used in the fragment 4C (πολυπλοκωτέρων) also in relation to Typhon and the present time (νῦν) might pose a problem for the tripartite anthropology-cosmology in terms of a fourth element outside the triad: a fourth principle that would be correspondent to matter and the demonic elements of its manifestation as a historical age. Because, as it is clear by the passage, all the elements of the cosmos have a counterpart in history. In the fragment 4C, after describing the state of θεοκρασία attained by the true mystic, Damascius talks about the divisions and sufferings entailed by the state of embodiment and the really Typhonian nature of that process:

καὶ τοῦτ' ἂν εἶη θεοκρασία, μᾶλλον δὲ ἔνωσις παντελής, ἐπάνοδος τῶν ἡμετέρων ψυχῶν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἐπιστρεφομένων καὶ συναθροισμένων ἀπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ μερισμοῦ, καὶ τί γὰρ οὐ λέγω σπαραγμοῦ διαρρήδην, ὃν ἐνταῦθα ῥυεῖσαι καὶ σῶμα γήϊνον λαβοῦσαι διεσπάσθησαν αὐταὶ ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν, καὶ πολλαχῆ διωκίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν Τυφονείων τῶ ὄντι καὶ ἄλλως γηγενῶν παθημάτων, ὄντων γε οὐ κατὰ τὸν Τυφῶνα μόνον, ἀλλ' ἔτι οἶμαι καὶ τούτου πολυπλοκωτέρων.

That would be the absorption into the divine, or rather the total union, the ascension of our souls to God as they return and are unified after the

multiple divisions. It can be said that after being fragmented and having taken earthly bodies, they were torn apart from themselves and are scattered through many sufferings not only Typhonian, but also with other terrestrial sufferings, I believe, *even more tortuous* (πολυπλοκωτέρων).

The more tortuous sufferings of the soul that Damascius discuss here might be related with the comparatives used in the fragments composing Athanassiadi's 18: καὶ πολλῶ χαμαιπετεστέραν ἐπεδείκνυτο τὴν ζωὴν τῶν νῦν ἐν τῇ γενέσει πολιτευομένων ἀνθρώπων.

Athanassiadi translates the passage as “And he showed the life of the men who are now in the service of generation *to be much baser even than this*” while Hoffmann translates the passage to the French as “*et c'est sous des couleurs plus viles encore que [Damascius] représentait la vie des hommes qui maintenant mènent leur existence dans le monde de la generation.*” Athanassiadi thinks that the passage is a reference to Isidore, he is the subject that shows the life in his own times as even lower than the lowest point of existence, while Hoffmann's more conservative philological reading thinks that the Suda's excerpter is referring to Damascius. As far as I know, the use of the comparative in these two related passages (frs. 4C and 18) has not been explored yet. As the LSJ entry shows, χαμαιπετής (lit. “falling to the ground”) is a word attested in Pindar, Aeschylus, Euripides and Plato and has a general meaning of something low, groveling and even sensuous, being also used to refer to the roots of the trees in bizarre forms. In the same manner, πολύπλοκος means something tangled, complex, tortuous. Both forms can be connected to an enrooted, entangled material existence lost amid the complexities of the world of generation (γένεσις).

It would be easy to explain why Damascius used such words in reference to the mythological figure of Typhon in terms of Neoplatonic metaphysics and the scheme from simplicity to complexity that arises from the One to matter in his metaphysical scheme. The use of the comparatives, however, is not obvious and a questioning regarding the number of historical ages – 3 or 4 – might arise from that fact and I will return to that point soon. Nevertheless, Hoffmann's reading attests that Damascius developed a “philosophy of history” equivalent to a Platonized conformation of Hesiod's theory of the ages of mankind. Hesiod perhaps is the first Greek source alluding to a cyclical cosmology and, in fact, most ancient philosophers and cultures, not only in the Mediterranean, had a cyclical

conception of time. As noted by Thomas McEvilley, “the circular view of time is part of the shape of ancient thought and one of the major differences between ancient and modern attitudes.”⁵⁶³ That cyclicity of time can be defined as the “Great Year Myth”, a concept forged by the historian of mathematics and astronomy Otto Neugebauer⁵⁶⁴.

Among historians of religion, Mircea Eliade thought that the cyclical shapes of time and the linear historical understanding inaugurated by Jewish and Christian thought marked the strongest difference between Christian and pagan religious sensibilities, with the Christian understanding of time being a proto-secular or proto-modern way of dealing with time and, consequently, with religion. This has also been observed by the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer in the decade of 1940s, in one of his essays presented at the Eranos meetings⁵⁶⁵, not to say of *Hamlet's Mill*, the massive book written by philosopher Giorgio Santillana and anthropologist Hertha von Dechend on the relation between ancient mythologies, cosmic cycles and astronomical theories⁵⁶⁶. The cyclicity of historical time and a cosmology based on the repetition of archetypes (“Eternal Return”⁵⁶⁷) might be defined as being part of the cosmological axis of pagan religions. As discussed above, in the chapter about Asclepiodotus’ story, the observations of Damascius regarding the destruction of the temple of Isis at Menouthis is punctuated with astronomical observations and a sense of mourn, like a lament for the passing of a “world-image”.

Hoffman’s location of a Damascian philosophy of history in those fragments as being related to the Platonic tripartite psychology exposed in the *Republic* and the Hesiodic account of the Ages of Mankind in the *Works and Days* is indeed ingenuous⁵⁶⁸, even though there are also other influences in the thought of Damascius and his presentation of

⁵⁶³ (2002, p. 69.)

⁵⁶⁴ *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy*. 3 vols. Springer, 1975, p. 618.

⁵⁶⁵ Zimmer also makes an allusion to the essay of the Augustinian priest Erich Frank (1942, p. 9-10), in which Frank locates the writings of Augustine and other Christian fathers as the roots of the modern idea of linear time. Cf. 1946, p. 22-23).

⁵⁶⁶ Cf. (1977, p. 43-56).

⁵⁶⁷ It must be stressed nonetheless that the dichotomic perspective of Eliade fails to acknowledge conflicts between similar types of cultural formation (“archaic”) inside his system with his antithesis between archaic – modern man, an antithesis that is probably fruit of his traditionalist leanings and the dichotomy between traditional and modern established by René Guénon and his followers. Cf. (Bordas, 2008, p. 41-48). I believe that the Foucaultian concept of *épistème* might be richer for my particular approach of detecting how “mysticism” in the text of Damascius is a response to the collapse of a “world-image”.

⁵⁶⁸ “Damascius croise deux références fondamentales : les Travaux d’Hésiode – commentés par Proclus – et la République de Platon, qui, sans appartenir expressément au « canon de Jamblique » qui régissait l’enseignement néoplatonicien, était évidemment lue et commentée à Athènes comme à Alexandrie : le commentaire de Proclus, là encore, en est une preuve éclatante et l’on sait que Damascius – restaurateur de l’ensemble du cursus philosophique néoplatonicien dans l’école d’Athènes – a peut-être lui-même consacré des cours à la République.” 2017, p. 749.

Isidore's discourse on the historical ages: Hermetism, the Chaldean Oracles and their anthropological and cosmological reflections. The possible Hermetic influences and resonances permeate the text in its opening Egyptianism and in allusion to many mystical doctrines of the Egyptians, like in the affirmation of the Egyptians as the first people to discover the hieratic arts, thus discovering the fundamental elements of correspondence in the universe⁵⁶⁹. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Damascius seems to have absorbed many Hermetic *topoi* through his contacts in Alexandria⁵⁷⁰ and Athanassiadi locates many resonances between his text and the Stobaeus *Hermetica* XXIII-XXVII known as *Korē Kosmou*⁵⁷¹. In the *Korē Kosmou* there is a discussion of the geography of different peoples and its relation with the descent of the soul⁵⁷². As much as Plato and Hesiod are present in Damascius, the level of his syncretism seems to go beyond those two sources.

So, it is necessary to understand what is specific to the cyclic view of Damascius and how it relates to the hieratic arts in terms of spiritual technologies auxiliary in the ascension of the soul. Or even, if it is possible to be articulated, in which way the theurgic or hieratic art can make the divine principles beyond the realm of time actualized in the embodied soul. Returning to Hoffmann, his specific claim is that the tripartite division of the ages in Damascius is a mingling of the Hesiodic 5 ages⁵⁷³ in the *Works and Days* with the Platonic tripartite division of the soul as λόγος, θυμός and ἐπιθυμία⁵⁷⁴. The Hesiodic cosmology of the ages⁵⁷⁵ is in itself a probable Archaic Greek reconfiguration of certain traditional patterns of Mesopotamian origin and similar schematical patterns, probably through an early Egyptian or Sumerian diffusion, can also be found in India. The cyclical cosmology is related with certain astrological and astronomical observations and patterns⁵⁷⁶ and with the doctrines of the immortality of the soul⁵⁷⁷, what makes the

⁵⁶⁹ *PH*, 4A.

⁵⁷⁰ Also, considering the scarcity of biographic information about most ancient and medieval individuals, nothing can indicate that Damascius might not have journeyed deeper into Egypt and had established contacts beyond the extremely Hellenic *milieu* of Alexandria.

⁵⁷¹ Thus, in many of her footnotes she points to the similarities between the *Philosophical History* and Hermetic texts, pointing that Hermetic influences or at least common sources between Damascius and the Hermetists permeate the *Philosophical History*.

⁵⁷² *SH*, XXIV.

⁵⁷³ Cf. 106-201.

⁵⁷⁴ p. 744, n. 23.

⁵⁷⁵ Hesiod divides the ages of mankind into five stages: a perfect Golden Age of Cronus, a Silver Age, a Bronze Age, a Heroic Age and an Iron Age. The total perfection decreases from age to age, with the exception being the Heroic Age inserted between the Bronze and Iron Ages. The Heroic Age seems to be a probable interpolation in the Greek poetic tradition of a mythical motif of Near Eastern origin. Cf. (McEvelley, 2002, p. 72).

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 76-78.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 103-112.

Damascian claim about the nature of the hieratic arts in the Proemium related not only to Proclus' definition of *ἱερατική* as a science of correspondences but also to the overall cosmic scheme presented in the fragment 18 and also to the tripartite divisions in the fragment 33A and the allusions to the Sothic cycle in the fragments 53A and 74F, as seen in the fourth chapter.

For Hoffmann, the doctrine of the equivalence between *ψυχή* and *πολιτεία* is developed among the Neoplatonists mainly by Proclus, in his commentary to Plato's *Republic*⁵⁷⁸ and Damascius' text is probably answering to questions first developed by Proclus in his inquiry to Plato's geographic discussion of the different types of principles related to the peoples that inhabit the variegated landscapes known by the classical Greeks. In the Platonic discussion⁵⁷⁹, the Greek world is centered in the middle and corresponds to the principle of reason and love of wisdom (*τὸ φιλομαθές*), to the Irascible principle correspond the Thracians, Scythians and other northern peoples (*τὸ θυμοειδές*) and the Concupiscible principle, based on the love of money (*τὸ φιλοχρήματον*) is correlated with the southern peoples of the Phoenicians and Egyptians.

The novelty of the *Philosophical History* according to such view would be the transposition of that scheme from geography to history⁵⁸⁰, in a movement that is seen by Hoffmann as an incorporation of Hesiod. The geographical schemes of the Platonic lexicon would be transposed for an interpretation of the historical process. And for Damascius, history must be understood as a very specific manifestation of the cosmic procession, as have been discussed in chapter 2. It has a beginning and an end and will repeat itself forever and ever. Also, since all the 3 ages contain all the others (*ἔχουσιν μὲν ἑκάστην τὰς τρεῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ κρατοῦντι ἐνὶ τὸ πᾶν μορφουμένην καὶ ὀνομαζομένην τῷ ἐπικρατοῦντι*), there are specific ways to access the Golden Age of Cronus even in the Typhonian age.

⁵⁷⁸ “La doctrine de Damascius situe la *πολιτεία* chrétienne au dernier niveau d'un processus de dégradation qui évoque les livres VIII et IX de la République et la description platonicienne de la corruption des *πολιτεῖαι*, et qui est fondée sur l'idée d'une homologie de structure entre l'âme humaine et les régimes politiques déterminés par un certain état de l'ἦθος des citoyens: cette analogie parcourt la République, et Damascius, après Proclus réinterprète ici la théorie de Platon (notamment en Rép. IV et VIII-IX) selon laquelle il y a une correspondance entre la *ψυχή* et la *πόλις*, la Cité idéale étant une projection universelle de l'âme juste – dans le cadre d'une doctrine de la tripartition de l'âme, et des quatre vertus que sont la *σοφία*, l'*ἀνδρεία*, la *σωφροσύνη* et la *δικαιοσύνη*. On a montré ailleurs que l'anthropologie platonicienne de la République est le cadre conceptuel à travers lequel un Proclus appréhende le phénomène du christianisme, et l'état dégradé de l'âme chrétienne – ignorante, passionnelle et injuste.” 2017, p. 750.

⁵⁷⁹ *Rep.* 435E 1-436A 3.

⁵⁸⁰ “Alors que Proclus reproduit assez fidèlement la géographie platonicienne de République IV, une nouveauté marquante s'observe dans le texte de la Vie d'Isidore: la tripartition de l'âme ne fonde plus une géographie, mais une histoire, qui porte incontestablement une marque hésiodique.” *Ibid.* p. 751.

However, the interrelatedness of the cosmic, mythical and astronomical/astrological symbolism that Damascius takes supposedly from Hesiod is part of a mythological pattern that has encompassed much of the ancient world, including not only the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome but also the Near East, North Africa, India, Southeast Asia etc. That is part of the apparatus of the Great Year Myth and its presence has been noted by historians of religions in many disparate cultural formations⁵⁸¹. The allusion to the Hesiodic χρυσῆ γενεά (“Golden Race”) does not make the poem of Hesiod the only or even the main source for Damascius. Considering the fragment 18 alone – or his triple sources in Photius and the Suda – can lead to an overstatement of the Hesiodic influence on the basis of linguistic “internalism”. It is not because Damascius wrote in Greek and that the first occurrence of the expression “Golden Race” can be found in Hesiod⁵⁸² that such theme resonated exclusively from that source. It seems to me that Damascius was appropriating different sources in Greek literature to fit his own philosophical and theological agendas.

Moreover, as noted by Radcliffe Edmonds⁵⁸³:

In the Greek mythic tradition, the interpretation of the myth cannot be kept separate from the way the narrative is recounted, since the author retelling a traditional tale always adapts the details of the story to fit the ideas he is trying to convey and the audience to which he is recounting the tale. In this process of *bricolage* (to borrow the term from Levi-Strauss), the author strives to render his version authoritative for his audience by engaging with previous versions of the tale, especially the best known or most authoritative renditions.

The Greek literary and philosophical tradition is a system constantly actualized with personal interpretations in a system of *bricolage*. It is clear by the exposition of the

⁵⁸¹ E.g. Mircea Eliade described the doctrine of the cosmic cycles as a natural development of the periodicity of nature and the repetition of sacred archetypes in mythical rituals all over the world. His theory is phenomenological and universalist, but even more historically inclined researchers like Scarpi and McEvelley have written about such phenomenon. Indeed, it seems that McEvelley’s discussion of the Great Year myth in his colossal *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002, p. 67-82) is highly indebted to some interpretations by Eliade (alongside de Santillana and Von Dechend’s *Hamlet’s Mill*), even if the Romanian scholar is not quoted in a single line.

⁵⁸² Χρύσειον μὲν πρότιστα γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων/ἀθάνατοι ποίησαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες./οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ Κρόνου ἦσαν, ὅτ' οὐρανῷ ἐμβασίλευεν· *Opera et dies*, 109-111.

⁵⁸³ Cf. (2009. p.2).

Proemium, that the fragments of the cosmic ages are related with the Egyptianist and hieratic elements delineated in the opening statement of Egypt's prominence and discovery of the hieratic arts (Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ ταῦτά εἰσιν οἱ πρῶτοι φιλοσοφοῦντες).

As Garth Fowden has commented, the mytheme of the Golden Age had ample circulation in Egypt during the 3rd and 4th centuries⁵⁸⁴. Moreover, beyond the very likely Egyptian influences it could also be related with Chaldean thought, especially with the Isis-Osiris myth described by Damascius in the terms of the Chaldean Oracles in the *PH*, 3A quoted above. According to Athanassiadi, in that passage Damascius is likely quoting a Chaldean Oracle, reconstructed by her as follows⁵⁸⁵: Ἴσὶν τε ἀνάου ζοῆς ὀχετοῖς ἀμετρήτοις⁵⁸⁶. Apart from supposedly discovering a “new” Oracle, not listed in the edition of É. des Places⁵⁸⁷, Athanassiadi's interpretation also correlates the passage with the triadic structure of the Chaldean doctrines⁵⁸⁸ and such interpretation sheds light in the passages quoted by Photius and the Suda that are synthesized in her fragment 18.

The tripartite nature of the cosmic process is reflected in the myth of Osiris-Dionysus described in *PH* 3, a possible correspondence with the Chaldean triadic interpretation (Father – Power – Intellect) – in which Osiris and Isis are interpreted as being the first and second principles of the triad by the Neoplatonists⁵⁸⁹ – of the processes engendered in the totality of existence that is also present in Iamblichus discussion of the Egyptian theology in book VIII of the *De. Myst.*, a chapter that is, again, associated with Hermetic influences⁵⁹⁰. So the 3 ages of human history in the temporal sphere can be accurately said to correspond to the 3 principles of the main triad in the cosmic sphere: The Unknown Father, Dynamis or Hecate and Intellect⁵⁹¹. Osiris in his infinite demiurgy is the Egyptian equivalent to the Chaldean Father while Isis corresponds to the role of Hecate or

⁵⁸⁴ Cf. (1987, p. 35 and 38-44). I disagree with Fowden's emphasis on Egyptian traditionalism as the only (?) or main motivator of such types of discourse in the centuries III and IV, rather than in a general “pagan” sensibility being overrun by the tides of Christianity. That is certainly the case for texts like the *Oracle of the Potter*, but not the sole or even main explanation for the prophecies of the Latin Asclepius, a text that shares much imagery with the prophecies of Olympus and Antoninus.

⁵⁸⁵ “As this phrase includes two characteristically Chaldaean terms (ζοή, ὀχετός) and constitutes an almost complete hexameter line, I suggest that Damascius may here be quoting a Chaldaean oracle”. Cf. (1999a, p. 77).

⁵⁸⁶ “Continuing everlastingly the infinite streams of Isis infinite life.”

⁵⁸⁷ Des Places, É. *Oracles chaldaïques*. Les Belles Lettres, 2010 (1971).

⁵⁸⁸ “For the Neoplatonic identity of these two deities as first and second principles of the intellectual triad in the Iamblichan system...” Cf. 1999a, p. 77, n.1.

⁵⁸⁹ Cf. (Majercik, 2001, p. 266-267).

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Clark, D. *Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in De Mysteriis*. In: International Journal of the Platonic Tradition 2. 164-205, 2008.

⁵⁹¹ (Majercik, 1989, p. 4).

Power (δύναμις). The Isiac principle, considered as the dynamic action that engenders the ineffable silence beyond reality⁵⁹², appears in the Damascian lexicon with obvious Hermetic allusions as ζοή, the infinite life, a term that is as equally Hermetic as Chaldean⁵⁹³.

The Hesiodic influence is certainly there, but it is far from being the single influence upon the presentation of the cosmic ages in the *Philosophical History*. It is appropriated, in a mix of many other sources, alongside Hermetic allusions filtered through Chaldean theology. Besides being a follower of Iamblican Platonism, Damascius was also a native of the West Semitic regions and had a relatively informed knowledge of the Semitic traditions of the Phoenicians⁵⁹⁴ and the Babylonians⁵⁹⁵, as his knowledge of the *Enuma Elish* can well attest. His predilection for the *Chaldean Oracles* and for their Platonized Oriental thought probably cannot be ascribed solely to his Iamblican Platonism. The synthesis of Hermetic, Chaldean and traditional Hellenic (both Hesiodic and Platonic) currents is a better explanation for the Golden Age in the *Philosophical History*. That synthesis is fruit of a religious and philosophical syncretism typical of the Neoplatonists, especially of the later Neoplatonists, men who lived in a world in which preserving and synthesizing the doctrines of the evanescent religions was seen almost as a mystical task.

In the systems of Hermetism and the Chaldean Oracles, the Father or Source – the unmanifested – manifests itself through Nature/Kosmos (Hermetism) or Dynamis/Hecate (Chaldean Oracles), precisely the vessel of Isis sprinkling the infinite life for the mystical Osirian creation in the silence of his death and rebirth. In such a view, nothing really perishes, nothing can die⁵⁹⁶. The interpenetration of one historical age into another in different proportions is a sign that the historical temporal order is only a material transmutation of the infinite activities of Isis and the practices of philosophy and the hieratic arts can allow the soul to transcend any temporal limitation (τὴν δὲ ἱερατικὴν [...] ψυχῶν περὶ ἀθανασίας). The cyclical cosmological ideas of the *Philosophical History*

⁵⁹² That silence perhaps could be understood as the motif behind Osiris death and resurrection, a process that mirrors the cycles of life. The mystery behind the cycles is exactly the mystical death of the Creative Principle. Cf. (Assmann, 1983, p.345-377).

⁵⁹³ E.g. *C.H.*1.

⁵⁹⁴ *De. Princ.* III, 125.3.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.* III, 125.1.

⁵⁹⁶ Cf. *C.H.* VIII. Ὅτι οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων ἀπόλλυται, ἀλλὰ τὰς μεταβολὰς ἀπωλείας καὶ θανάτους πλανώμενοι λέγουσιν.

synthesize Hermetic, traditional Hellenic (Hesiod, Plato) and Chaldean doctrines, considering that Chaldean influences permeate the bulk of Damascius thought⁵⁹⁷.

There is also another possibility, more speculative but not without some substance, that the ages are actually four rather than three. It can also fit inside the triadic structure of Platonism, the Chaldean Oracles and Hermetism correlating at the same time with Hesiod and other traditional accounts of the Great Year myth. As Hoffman argued, Damascius triadic description is based on the same sources of the Proclean description of Being-Life-Thought in the proposition 103 of the *Elements of Theology*⁵⁹⁸ and that triad might revert to the thought of Numenius⁵⁹⁹, a thinker that is very likely related to the dawn of the poetic-oracular traditions that reached us as the remaining fragments of the Chaldean Oracles⁶⁰⁰. In the Chaldean system, as in Hermetism, the triad of Source-Life-World only includes matter as shaped by the demiurgic powers of God through the activity of ζοή/Hecate/Isis. Primal matter, the irrational structure of matter, exists as a formless entity before demiurgic activity.

The nature of such matter, as related to the interpretations of the *Timaeus* of Plato, even sparked a debate between Cherniss and Festugière over the moment in which matter comes into existence⁶⁰¹. In the *C.H.VIII*, there are two types of matter, one enveloped as a circle by the Creator – let us call it cosmic matter – and another type that is pre-existent, eternal, that exists forever⁶⁰²:

ὁ δὲ κόσμος ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς † αἰδίου † καὶ ἀθάνατος γέγονε, καὶ ὅσον ἦν τῆς ὕλης ἀποκείμενον τῷ ἑατοῦ ... τὸ πᾶν ὁ πατήρ σωματοποιήσας καὶ ὀγκώσας ἐποίησε σφαιροειδές, τοῦτο αὐτῷ τὸ ποιὸν περιθείς, οὕσαν καὶ αὐτὴν ἀθάνατον, καὶ ἔχουσαν αἰδίου τὴν ὑλότητα.

⁵⁹⁷ “Combès (PP II, 215 n. 3) advances the plausible hypothesis that many elements of Iamblichus’ Chaldaean Theology were integrated by Damascius in his treatise *On the First Principles*. Indeed he describes the entire first volume as ‘une justification critique de la doctrine selon laquelle l’inéffable est transcendant, à l’un et l’un transcendant à la triade qui suit’, which on his evidence was Iamblichus’ interpretation, not accepted by Proclus, and not apparent from the *De Mysteriis*. As regards Damascius’ posterity, even his own pupil and companion Simplicius admits that he finds him too difficult, indeed incomprehensible (CAG ix, 625, 2 and 775, 32).” (Athanasias, 1999b, p. 164, n. 68.)

⁵⁹⁸ (2017, p. 754.)

⁵⁹⁹ (*Ibid.*)

⁶⁰⁰ “some sort of bridge must have linked the two systems; but I find it hard to be quite sure which way the traffic ran. It could even have been a two-way traffic, since (. . .) Numenius and Julianus may well have been contemporaries”. Dodds, 1961, p. 271.

⁶⁰¹ *Rev.* vol. III, Int.

⁶⁰² *CH.* VIII, 2.9-3.5.

The cosmos came into being immortal from the Eternal Father, and he took the matter that he desired into a body and gave it substance and created it into a spherical form. This quality [the circularity] the Father imposed on the matter, but matter is in itself eternal and its materiality lasts forever.

Some lines below, Hermes says that “when matter was without body, my son, it was without order”⁶⁰³. So, beyond the ordered triad of the world still exists the disordered and chaotic matter lurking as one of the principles that exist in the cosmos. That fact for itself creates difficulties for the abstraction of some unified Hermetic system and alongside other passages came to be regarded as part of possible gnostic or dualistic introgressions inside the Platonic inspired monism of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Chaldean Oracles also seen to have some passages that could be interpreted in such way, like the fragment 88 in which “evil matter” (κακῆς ὕλης) is alluded: [ἡ φύσις] πείθει πιστεύειν εἶναι τοὺς δαίμονας ἀγνοῦς, καὶ τὰ κακῆς ὕλης βλαστήματα χρηστὰ καὶ ἐσθλά..⁶⁰⁴ As seen in the introductory section on mysticism, Hanegraaff, following Fowden⁶⁰⁵, argues that such philosophical inconsistencies are indeed a reflex of degrees of initiation related to an experiential and spiritual aspect of the Hermetic writings⁶⁰⁶, but could also be expanded for the “universal Platonic world” as a whole.

What I would like to emphasize in such cosmological comments on unshaped matter as a fundamental principle is related to the comparative form of χαμαιπετές discussed above that is present in the Suda fragment that Athanassiadi synthesizes in her fragment 18. As discussed, the relevant passage is translated by Athanassiadi: “*And he showed the life of the men who are now in the service of generation to be much baser even than this*⁶⁰⁷.” The reference is to a supposed teaching of Isidore in which the lives of the men living in Damascius times are *even baser* than the men of the age of Concupiscence. That

⁶⁰³ ὅτε γὰρ ἦν ἀσώματος ἡ ὕλη, ὃ τέκνον, ἄτακτος ἦν. *Ibid.* 3.10-11.

⁶⁰⁴ " [Nature] persuades us to believe that the demons are pure, and that the offspring of evil matter are good and useful." Transl. Majercik.

⁶⁰⁵ Cf. (1993a, p. 95-104).

⁶⁰⁶ “If Hermetic spirituality was a type of privatized, experience-oriented religion, this has consequences for conventional ways of categorizing the materials. By and large, most of the texts that used to be called “philosophical” remain relevant, but their theoretical discussions about the exact nature of God, humanity, and the cosmos must be considered from the perspective of their function in a wider spiritual framework: they do not stand on themselves, as contributions to philosophical debate, but are meant to provide background information that spiritual practitioners need while navigating their journey of healing and salvation”. 2022, p. 21.

⁶⁰⁷ καὶ πολλῶι χαμαιπετεστέραν ἐπεδείκνυτο τὴν ζοὴν τῶν νῦν ἐν τῇ γενέσει πολιτευομένων ἀνθρώπων.

might be a rhetorical trope, of course, but could also indicate that beyond the 3 ages reflecting the triadic structure of Chaldean and Hermetic thought, there is an age even darker, more insubstantial and derived from the nature of primordial unshaped matter, a reversion to the prelapsarian chaos before the constant demiurgic activity and its reflection over the channels of generation. In the system of the Chaldean Oracles, it is not clear where is the position of matter in relation to the triad and I believe that the way of life that is even more decayed (χαμαιπετεστέραν) than the Typhonian described by Damascius might be a reference to the Christian doctrines of the Creation and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as counterparts for material existence.

In the Chaldean fragment 134, it is said that:

Μηδ' ἐπὶ μισοφαῖ κόσμον σπεύδειν λάβρον ὕλης,
 ἔνθα φόνοσ στάσιές τε καὶ ἀργαλέων φύσις
 ἀτμῶν ἀχμηραὶ τε νόσοι καὶ σήψιες ἔργα τε
 ῥευστά· ταῦτα χρεὼ φεύγειν τὸν ἐρᾶν μέλλοντα
 πατρός νοῦ.

"Do not hasten to the light-hating world, boisterous of matter, where there is murder, discord, foul odors, squalid illnesses, corruptions, and fluctuating works. He who intends to love the Intellect of the Father must flee these things."
 (Transl. Majercik)

Now, the reference to Christianity as the negative counterpart of reality is obvious all over the *Philosophical History*, as has been discussed already. The association of Christian individuals and leaders (Peter Mongus, Cyril of Alexandria, Christian mobs etc.⁶⁰⁸) with monstrosity, corruption and decay is evident. Pamprepicus, as low as he can be, is nothing more than an instrument of the insatiable necessity that opposes the Good: ὄργανον ὁ Παμπρέπιος ἐπιτήδειον τῆς πρὸς τὸ κάλλιον ἀντιπνεύσεως ἀνάγκης ἦν⁶⁰⁹. But the Christians might be a worse threat, an evil even beyond Typhon, the historical and communitarian representation of matter unordered matter.

That is not to say that “evil” here has a metaphysical meaning in the sense of being a hypostasized metaphysical reality, like the Christian Satan, but is merely the enclosing of

⁶⁰⁸ E.g. the fragments 42, where Olympus is praised, 43, where the death of Hypatia at the hands of the Christians is narrated and 113I where Peter Mongus is called an evil man.

⁶⁰⁹ 113D.

reality into the realm of sense-perception, an abandonment of Unity. “Mental sleep” is the only Neoplatonic hell⁶¹⁰. I believe that here we stand at the root of Damascius’ scorn of the Christian religion, as both Father Jean Trouillard⁶¹¹ and Athanassiadi commented⁶¹²: a girdling membrane (ὑπεζωκός⁶¹³) that separates the material world from the spheres above⁶¹⁴. The problem of matter is thus important to understand both the Proemium and the narrative of the “Great Year” in fragment 18. Damascius is both an aporetic philosopher and an austere theologian of Unity, a monist philosopher⁶¹⁵. The tension between the puzzles of *aporesis* and the monist worldview lie at the heart of the matter. I cannot engage that problem here, but I can outline what seems to me the problem of Christianity and the refuge in the mystical based on my reading of the *Philosophical History* enriched with some passages of the Chaldean Oracles.

This problem has drastic consequences for the way Damascius presents hieratic arts and mysticism in his descriptions of persons like Isidore, Sarapio or Heraiscus. The structure of the Neoplatonic virtues among the *dramatis personae* of the *PH* detected by O’Meara has a cosmic significance since it involves how the respective souls reflect the doomed times in which their souls have been embodied. Indeed, everything that exists can be manifest at some point of the cosmic scale, that is why the 3 or 4 ages contain in minor proportions elements of the others. Even in the darkest times of mankind the transfiguration of the individual soul towards the divine is still possible. But there has to be an ordered way to overcome division (matter) and the ὑπεζωκός. The demonic side of matter described in the Oracle 134 can be overcome by initiation⁶¹⁶:

Οὐ γὰρ χρῆ κείνους σε βλέπειν πρὶν σῶμα
τελεσθῆς· ὄντες γὰρ χθόνιοι χαλεποὶ κύνες εἰσὶν
ἀναιδεῖς.

For you must not gaze at them until you have
your body initiated. Being terrestrial, these ill-
tempered dogs are shameless. (Transl. Majercik)

⁶¹⁰ Cf. (Trouillard, 1981, p. 13).

⁶¹¹ (*Ibid.*)

⁶¹² (1999b, p. 173).

⁶¹³ Cf. *Or. Ch.* 6.

⁶¹⁴ *In. Parm.* 131.

⁶¹⁵ Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999b, p. 173-174).

⁶¹⁶ *Or. Ch.* 135.

In the next chapter I will discuss how Damascius undergone an initiation into philosophy in the Hierapolitan cave of Apollo and how this was a preparatory task in comparison with the truly entastic experience of Isidore.

What this Chaldean fragment seems to imply is that to go beyond the terrestrial chains of material division it is necessary to have the body “initiated” (σῶμα τελεσθῆς). This is an Oracle quoted by Proclus in his *Commentary to the Alcibiades*⁶¹⁷ and after this first quote, he continues the discussion saying: “they enchant souls, forever turning them away from the rites” (τὰς ψυχὰς θέλγοντες ἀεὶ τελετῶν ἀπάγουσιν). That such verses could be understood by the late Neoplatonists, in their tendency to posit themselves as arch-theologians of a syncretic paganism⁶¹⁸ and true initiates, as a reference to the state of affairs in the Roman Empire is not unlikely. To rise above the material divided state is necessary to undergo an initiation (τελετή) and that might explain why the time of the present (νῦν) in the *Philosophical History* is even lower than the Typhonian age. The rites of initiation have been forbidden, the first preparatory links to the sacred are now secret or strictly personal. That is possibly the reason why Damascius inserts the relation between φιλοσοφία and ἱερατική inside the Egyptian Proemium.

In that context, it seems that φιλοσοφία is not inserted appositionally in relation to ἱερατική, but in a sense of interdependence⁶¹⁹:

ἱερατικὴ καὶ φιλοσοφία οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἄρχονται ἀρχῶν, ἀλλ’ ἡ μὲν φιλοσοφία ἀπὸ τῆς μίας τῶν πάντων αἰτίας, εἰς τὴν ὑποστάθμην τῶν ὄντων καθήκουσα διὰ μέσων τῶν ὄλων γενῶν, θείων τε καὶ τῶν μετὰ θεοῦς κρειττόνων καὶ ἐν τρίτῳ, φασί, βῆ ματι φαινομένων.

Hieratic art and philosophy do not originate from the same celestial sources. From the first cause of all things comes philosophy, directing itself

⁶¹⁷ *In Alc.*, 17-18 [40, 1-5 Cr.).

⁶¹⁸ As discussed in the Introduction, the syncretic notion of “paganism” is largely the creation of the same intellectuals that were trying to preserve the immensely endangered traditions of pre-Christian religion throughout the Mediterranean. One might wonder what could have happened if their theological project was taken as a model for the political elites instead of the Chalcedonian Christian theological and political model. It is likely that Islam would never exist, Christianity might have become a fringe group in the Roman Empire and if the Roman state survived until modern times, it is possible that the modern notion of “Europe” as culturally separate from the “Middle East and North Africa” would not arise as well. But that is just a personal exercise of imaginative alternate history, it is really hard to predict what could have happened.

⁶¹⁹ *PH*, 4A.

towards the understanding of being by all intermediate orders: the most excellent, the Divine, that which comes after the divine and what they call third, the world of the appearances.

The philosophy described here is at the same time the dialectical and preparatory stage for the training of the mind⁶²⁰ and the descriptions of the world of the appearances and the pagan theology of the *philosophia perennis*, described at the end of the *De. Princ.*, that is universal and manifests itself in the writings of the sacred peoples and sages of the world. It is a complementary and essential goal to the hieratic practitioner.⁶²¹ It seems to be confirmed as well by the fragments 34C and 34D in which Isidore is described as having a preference for Aristotelian philosophy in comparison with the poetical and rhetorical arts, but at the same time finding Aristotle's body of writings lacking in divine knowledge due to its attachment to the discursive rather than the intuitive qualities of the mind. Thus, philosophy also has degrees of initiation and a philosophy that lacks a divine theosophy cannot reach the union of the divine, as Aristotle and Chrysippus never reached the summit⁶²². The same could be said of Hierocles, that disregarded hieratic art and was immensely deficient in the divine faculties⁶²³.

Thus, philosophy and *ιερατική* are intertwined since the beginning. In truth, *ιερατική* is the exegesis of myth and philosophy and their assimilation to consciousness in order to ascend beyond the cathartic state, the first phase of virtuosity that can lead the soul beyond the embodied state⁶²⁴. Damascius might have had a more “poetic” or interiorized understanding of the sacred arts and philosophy, if we take the opinions of Krulak and

⁶²⁰ Like the philosophy of the peripatetics embraced by Dorus before his conversion by Isidore. Cf. 134

⁶²¹ “The verb used in the *Life of Isidore* to describe this descent, *καθήκειν*, was commonly employed by Late Platonists to mean the expansion of divine powers into the material world and, frequently, the sympathetic relationship between the divine and material expressions of these powers. Proclus hinted at the theurgic expression of this process when he spoke of the special character of the encosmic, planetary gods, such as Helios, reaching down “even as far as grass and stone—and there is grass and stone dependent on the power of the sun, whether you care to call them ‘heliotrope’ or by any other name. It is much the same in the case of the other gods” (Krulak, 2017, p. 463).

⁶²² Cf. 34D.

⁶²³ Damascius also talks about “a theosophy that comes from the gods” (*ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἤκουσαν θεοσοφίαν*). *PH*, 46D. In the words of A.-J. Festugière: “the last followers of philosophy, disciples of Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, taught a theosophy by which, through exercises of asceticism and initiation rites, the divinity was made present on earth or elevated to it in the heavenly regions”.

⁶²⁴ “Progression in the scale of virtues (from civic to cathartic to theoretic virtues) is likened to progression through the grades of the mysteries (In Phd. 1.167), and just as these mysteries aim, Damascius says, to bring the souls of participants back to their origin, so too the philosopher's progression in the virtues achieves this same end (In Phd. 1.168). Ritual and philosophical activity both aim at the same goal and resemble each other” (Cf. Miles, 2018, p. 58).

Athanassiadi as foundation⁶²⁵, actually even might have privileged φιλοσοφία. However, in the archeological remains of his possible house at Athens and in the ruins of the diadochia, an immense amount of statuary has been found and the hieratic or theurgic art involved the animation of statues as receptacles of the gods. Therefore, I think it is hard to sustain that Damascius was not a theurgist at least at some level of his philosophical and religious practices.

Moreover, his identification of the Egyptian philosophy – presumably the oldest and “original” one – with the hieratic arts, the worship of the gods and the doctrines of immortality of the soul introduced to the Greeks by the Pythagoreans is worthy of note⁶²⁶:

τὴν δὲ ἱερατικὴν, ἣ ἐστὶ θεῶν θεραπεία, ἐντεῦθεν ποθεν ἀπὸ τῶν περικοσμίων αἰτιῶν ἄρχεσθαι καὶ περὶ ταῦτα πραγματεύεσθαι, ψυχῶν περὶ ἀθανασίας, ὅτι κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ Αἰγυπτίοις φιλοσοφεῖται, τῶν τε ἐν ᾧδου μυρίων λήξεων παντοίων πρὸς ἀρετὴν καὶ κακίαν ἀφορισμένων, ἔτι τῶν περὶ τὸν βίον μυρίων μεταβολῶν, ὡς ἄλλοτε ἐν ἄλλοις σώμασιν ἢ γένεσιν ζῶων καὶ φυτῶν διατριβουσῶν. Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ ταῦτά εἰσιν οἱ πρῶτοι φιλοσοφῶντες· ἀπὸ γὰρ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων ἕκαστα τούτων οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι ἐξήνεγκαν εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας.

Hieratic art, which is the worship of the gods, is where, from the third and mundane sphere, the currents of the ascension of the soul derive. With pericosmic roots, this is its corollary: the immortality of the soul – about which the Egyptians philosophized – and the determination in Hades of endless destinies according to virtues and vices, and also the infinite transformations of life forms, as in at different times souls transform into the bodies of humans, animals and plants. And about all these things, nothing is restricted to the philosophers on each side; so that it is easy to adjust the theorizations of the Egyptians to those

⁶²⁵ (2017, p. 1); (1999b, p. 166): “Primarily a poet, with a superb feel for the language which he moulds round his considerable needs, Damascius is an exceptionally ambitious thinker. At the same time he is poignantly aware of the limitations of both human understanding and expression, but quite unwilling to restrict himself to the orbit of his given abilities. A lucid and tenacious fighter in the metaphysical field—as in real life—he appears in our eyes as an intellectual acrobat who is forced to create new terms in response to his emotional and metaphysical leaps. This is indeed what happens when he attempts to grasp and describe the sternly apophatic region of the Beyond.”

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.* 4A, 5-17.

of the Greeks. The Egyptians were, therefore, the first to philosophize on these things. And it was from the Egyptians that the Pythagoreans brought such things to the Greeks.

Indeed, the narrative of the *Philosophical History* seems to follow a pattern macrocosm – microcosm and many of the individuals discussed in the work will be presented as emanations or representatives of specific ages of the cosmic order (“Cronian”, “Typhonian” etc.). The worship of the gods, i.e. ιερατική, was first introduced as a formal science under the tenets established by the Egyptian sacred philosophers and that doctrine was the correspondence between different layers of the cosmos. To ascend beyond the material realm of division the hieratic arts are necessary: ἐντεῦθεν ποθεν ἀπὸ τῶν περικοσμίων αἰτιῶν ἄρχεσθαι καὶ περὶ ταῦτα πραγματεύεσθαι.

Proclus, in his short treatise περὶ τῆς καθ’ Ἑλληνας ιερατικῆς τέχνης (*On the Sacred Art of the Hellenes*), attests that the theurgic art is essentially the knowledge of correspondences and analogies of the universe⁶²⁷:

Ὡσπερ οἱ ἐρωτικοὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν αἰσθήσει καλῶν ὀδοῦ προΐοντες ἐπ’ αὐτὴν καταντῶσι τὴν μίαν τῶν καλῶν πάντων καὶ νοητῶν ἀρχήν, οὕτως καὶ οἱ ιερατικοὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐν τοῖς φαινομένοις ἅπασι συμπαθείας πρὸς τε ἄλληλα καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἀφανεῖς δυνάμεις, πάντα ἐν πᾶσι κατανοήσαντες, τὴν ἐπιστήμην τὴν ιερατικὴν συνεστήσαντο, θαυμάσαντες τῷ βλέπειν ἐν τε τοῖς πρώτοις τὰ ἔσχατα καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἐσχάτοις τὰ πρώτιστα, ἐν οὐρανῷ μὲν τὰ χθόνια κατ’ αἰτίαν καὶ οὐρανίως, ἐν τε γῆ τὰ οὐράνια γῆνως. Ἡ πόθεν ἡλιοτρόπια μὲν ἡλίῳ, σεληνοτρόπια δὲ σελήνῃ συγκινεῖται συμπεριπολοῦντα ἐς δύναμιν τοῖς τοῦ κόσμου φωστήρσιν; Εὐχεται γὰρ πάντα κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν καὶ ὑμνεῖ τοὺς ἡγεμόνας τῶν σειρῶν ὄλων ἢ νοερῶς ἢ λογικῶς ἢ φυσικῶς ἢ αἰσθητῶς· ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἡλιοτρόπιον ᾧ ἔστιν εὐλύτον, τούτῳ κινεῖται καί, εἰ δὴ τις αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὴν

⁶²⁷ 148.1-18. The text is known in modern bibliography as *De Sacrificio et Magia* and was a huge influence upon Renaissance Platonism and magic. Cf. (Copenhaver, 1988, p. 77-84.) I prefer to translate the title as *On the Sacred Arts (or Science) of the Hellenes* rather than just as “On the Priestly Art” as Copenhaver did. The allusion to the “Hellenes” on the title is emblematic and the term, in the times of Proclus and Damascius, meant the collective body of “pagan” practices, rituals and philosophical disciplines, rather than just an ethnic identification of Greek speaking peoples. The Hellenic pagan association is fundamental to understand its meaning.

περιστροφὴν ἀκούειν τὸν ἀέρα πλήσσοντος οἴος τε ἦν, ὕμνον ἄν τινα διὰ τοῦ ἤχου τούτου συνήσθετο τῷ Βασιλεῖ προσάγοντος, ὃν δύναται φυτὸν ὑμνεῖν.

Just as lovers systematically leave behind what is fair to sensation and attain the one true source of all that is fair and intelligible, in the same way priests — observing how all things are in all from the sympathy that all visible things have for one another and for the invisible powers — have also framed their hieratic knowledge. For they were amazed to see the last in the first and the very first in the last; in heaven they saw earthly things acting causally and in a heavenly manner, in the earth heavenly things in an earthly manner. Why do heliotropes move together with the sun, selenotropes with the moon, moving around to the extent of their ability with the luminaries of the cosmos? All things pray according to their own order and sing hymns, either intellectually or rationally or naturally or sensibly, to heads of entire chains. And since the heliotrope is also moved toward that to which it readily opens, if anyone hears it striking the air as it moves about, he perceives in the sound that it offers to the king the kind of hymn that a plant can sing. (Transl. Copenhaver, 1988).

The universal correspondence (συμπαθεία) of man and cosmos is not something restricted to spiritual reality and nature, but a fundamental rule of everything. The significance of the “Egyptian” Proemium has often been underestimated when considering the esoteric nature of the work. It looks like Damascius had an initiatory structure in mind when composing the work based on such principles, it is not merely a sparse chronicle of individual lives and events, but a sacred history of the late pagan community, taking the fundamental structure of the cosmos and the ways to anagogic transcendence as guiding principles. The “hieratic knowledge” (τὴν ἐπιστήμην τὴν ἱερατικὴν) is an essential way along the ascensional path and the lack of a hieratic art among the Christians and its prohibition by the Christian Emperors is what led to the tragedies and misfortunes of the times.

The mystical ascents, divinatory powers and theurgic acts described in the extant fragments are inserted in that structure and should be understood as being revelatory of different aspects of reality and degrees of initiation. It is not possible to ascend without an initiation that might be strictly “pagan” from the anthropological and metaphysical point

of view. As discussed by O’Meara, very few individuals in the *PH* seem to have attained the highest virtues of the Platonic scale⁶²⁸, a fact that must be interpreted as reflecting the decadence of the times. Thus, the criticism that Damascius exhibit towards his contemporaries is not a silly attempt of setting himself as superior, as Photius claimed⁶²⁹, but an analysis showing that men and women could overcome the intrinsic barbarity of life in decadent times. Theopathy and sympathy, as the text of Proclus demonstrate, are still part of the fundamental rules of the universe and God can be reached by degrees of ascent through hieratic practices and philosophy. The Neoplatonic *paideia* comprising hieratic arts and philosophy is a way through which souls that become embodied as humans can reach the sacred Cronian time or even the Beyond. Despite the sense of tragedy and trauma instigated by the historical destruction of the pagan cultural symbols, the Divine Grace was a part of the emanated self-created cosmos⁶³⁰.

With the destruction of the temples and shrines, the gods and divine Beyond continued to exist and could be reached by the mystically inclined wandering philosopher. Mysticism is the state of hope to transcend the bitterness of the times. The collapse of the Great Year Myth – actualized as the recreation of cosmogony by the orthopraxy of intellectual pagans – as a social force with the institution of Christian based conceptions of time, divinity and orthodoxy, has led to an Age governed by matter, an age in which ascension was a question of individual practice. The intellectual pagans had to become secretive wandering sages, often associated with magicians and charlatans by the Christian epistemic formation⁶³¹. They were somehow like travelers from a very distant country in

⁶²⁸ In O’Meara’s chart, only 3 or 4 persons might have attained the highest virtue, the theurgic one. Among them one can find the Egyptian mystics Sarapio and Heraiscus, Isidore and perhaps Syrianus. Cf. (2006, p. 90). Curiously enough, Proclus apparently was not considered to have reached the highest state by Damascius, despite his position of being almost a saint for the Athenian Neoplatonists.

⁶²⁹ “[Damascius] sets himself up as judge, not leaving a single one of those on whom he has lavished praise without some deficiency...thus pulling down and throwing to the ground each one of those whom he has extolled and glorified, he imperceptibly establishes his own authority in every way above everybody else. This is why he continually matches praise of Isidore with criticism”. *Bib.* 181.26-37. Transl. Athanassiadi.

⁶³⁰ Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999b, p. 172-173): “And it is within this logic of extendable unity between Man and the Beyond that we should contemplate the function of the maintainers [...] In their unending emanational capacity, the iynges, the maintainers, and the teletarchs are understood by Damascius to be the totally benign powers present in all worlds—the empyrian, the aetherial, the material (Parm. 59, 87). Whether as rays of the visible sun (that is as material maintainers (fr. 80)) or as metaphysical paradigms (that is as intelligible iynges), they personify grace at all levels of existence. For grace, which is implicit in the act of emanation, is a universal force for the Platonist, pre-eternally present in the world, working for salvation independently of any individual action or even existence. It is everybody’s inalienable possession, which cannot be lost or snatched away, though it may lie unused by the individual who has fallen asleep.”

⁶³¹ Cf. (Bazou, 1994, p. 217): “Dans l’Orient de la fin du Ve siècle, quand se multipliaient les pèlerinages chrétiens, circulaient d’autres pèlerins plus discrets, derniers philosophes néoplatoniciens, païens chassés d’Alexandrie, en sursis à Athènes. Se maintenant à l’écart des villes et des grands sanctuaires désormais

their own times. In the next and final chapter, the meaning of Damascius' initiatory journeys through the remaining sacred shrines of the Middle East and Anatolia and the experiences of Sarapio and Isidore will be positioned as regards the experience of θεοκρασία.

This is the longest chapter of the text and I think that some preliminary conclusions can be reached before submerging into the next phase: First, the cyclical cosmology of Damascius is presented as a particular version – a bricolage – of the Great Year Myth. In that cosmology there are possibilities of 3 or 4 historical ages, depending on the interpretation made of the position of matter and the comparatives used by Damascius, and those ages can interpenetrate the others in different degrees. The theory of cosmic cycles is also related with theory behind the justification for the need and existence of the hieratic arts (ἱερατική) as preparatory for the ascension of the soul. The Christians are doomed as a group due to their rejection and ignorance of this sacred art.

7. La Mystique

* The fall of the Serapeum and the prelude of mysticism

At a certain point of the 4th century, when it was becoming clear that Christianity was not merely a trend and was definitely entrenched in imperial bureaucracy itself, the followers of the religions of the gods started to understand that their way of life was going to be extinguished, that the whole cosmic order was going to change. Even in the 3rd century, while Iamblichus was still living, the hints of such catastrophic events were felt by the Hellenes as a prelude⁶³². At the point in which Julian died fighting the Persians and could not point any “Hellenic” successor to the government of Rome, the crisis was installed and the “restoration” started to become more and more unlikely. As seen in the first and second chapters, Damascius did not believe in a *de facto* pagan restoration in his immediate historical times, but only in a spatial access to the fundamental principles of reality. The prediction of the fall of the divine order and the transformation of the religions of the gods into cults of the dead, however, is the sign of a sensibility that was present in the Mediterranean at least since the Ptolemaic times and is a reshaping by Hellenic or Hellenized pagans of certain Egyptian sensibilities.

As noted in the examples of resonances of the *Korē Kosmou* and the Asclepius in the *Philosophical History*, the power of Egyptian Ptolemaic prophecies about the fall of the sacred order established by the mystical rites of Egypt was interiorized by the most spiritually inclined pagans in Alexandria. The *Oracle of the Potter*, for example, is a marked apocalyptic prediction of the destruction of Alexandria due to the impiety of the Greeks. Such concerns of markedly Egyptianism were probably common ground in Egypt since the 3rd century BCE⁶³³ and were adapted and readapted to conform to new times and cultural crises. The Oracle says⁶³⁴:

And the belt-wearers [the Greeks] will destroy themselves, for they are followers of Typhon. Then Agathos Daimon will abandon the city that is being built [Alexandria] and will emigrate to

⁶³² Cf. (Athanasiasiadi, 1993, p. 4-6 and Fowden, 1982, p. 37-40).

⁶³³ Cf. (Fowden, 1993a, p. 21-22).

⁶³⁴ *Apud* (Fowden, 1993a, *ibid.*).

God-bearing Memphis. And it will be deserted, the city of foreigners that will be built among us. These things will come to pass when all evils have come to an end, when the foreigners who are in Egypt disappear as leaves from a tree in autumn. And the city of the belt-wearers will be deserted... on account of the impieties they have committed. And the Egyptian statues which were carried thither will be restored to Egypt, and the city by the sea will be transformed into a drying-place for fishermen, for Agathos Daimon and Mephis [= Knephis] will have departed to Memphis; so that passers-by will say: 'This was [once] the all-nurturing [city], that was inhabited by all races of men.'

This is a narrative of destruction and resurrection, of the reestablishment of the cosmic order after the age of the "belt-wearers" (the Greeks and Romans) have passed. In Late Antiquity or early Byzantine age, such Hellenistic prophecies were recontextualized by pagans like Damascius in their strife against the expansion of Christianity.

The centrality of the Alexandrian Serapeum and its destruction in 391/392 led by the Christian Bishop Theophilus then became fundamental for pagan eschatology and historical narratives. Built by Pharaoh Ptolemy III Euergetes (c. 280-222 BCE), the temple of the god Serapis was central as a library and a place of learning by the 2nd century and continued to be a holy place for pagans in the 3rd and 4th centuries. It was also place of a "truly mystical union" of gods – considering that Serapis was born of the Egyptians Osiris and Apis – such as the union of Osiris and Adonis in a statue of Aion identified by the impressive powers of Herakles⁶³⁵. The place was also endowed with significance by Christians and its destruction was marked as the apex of a sacred narrative as attested by the *Chronographia Golenischevensis*, the so-called *Alexandrian World Chronicle*⁶³⁶. The triumphant figure of Theophilus over the Serapeum, as presented by the chronicle, stands as a testimony for the Christian victory over the pagan gods.

Damascius begins the section identified by Athanassiadi as a "history and prosopography"⁶³⁷ of the late Platonic community exactly with events related to the destruction of the Serapeum. First, he talks about the brothers Euprepus and Epiphanius, Christians that abandoned Christianity in favor of the "ancient way of life" (ἀρχαιοπρεπής

⁶³⁵ Cf. *PH*, 76E.

⁶³⁶ Garstad, B. "Barbarian interest in the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*". In: *Early Medieval Europe*, 19 (1): 3–42.

⁶³⁷ (1999a, p. 72).

πολιτεία)⁶³⁸ and then proceeds to describe the great deeds of Olympus, the man who prophesized about the destruction of the temple and led a pagan group in its defense against Christian attackers. Olympus is famous for having said that pagans should not mourn the rocks as the “real temple is within”.⁶³⁹ Before looking at the words Damascius dedicated to Euprepus, Epiphanius and Olympus it is necessary to talk about another man, a very mysterious one, that arrived in Alexandria from Asia Minor and installed himself in the Serapeum. That man attended by the name of Antoninus and his impressive story reached our world through the testimony of Eunapius.

One of the three sons of the blessed Eustathius and the holy Sosipatra, it was predicted by his mother that Antoninus, like his siblings, would never accomplish human happiness in the course of his life, only the divine one.⁶⁴⁰

ἀλλ' ἄκουε μὲν σύ, Εὐστάθιε, συμμαρτυρούντων
δὲ οἱ παρόντες. παῖδας μὲν ὑπὸ σοὶ τέξομαι τρεῖς,
πάντες δὲ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον δοκοῦν ἀγαθὸν οὐδὲν
ἀτυχήσουσι, πρὸς τὸ θεῖον δὲ [οὐδὲ] εἶς.

But now thou listenth to me, Eustathius, and let those who are here bear me witness: I shall bear you three children, and all of them will fail to win what is considered to be human happiness, but of the happiness that the gods bestow, not one of them will fall therein. (Transl. W.C. Wright, slightly altered)

Educated in Pergamon by the mystic and philosopher Aedesius after his father passed away, Antoninus was in a direct line of apprenticeship from Iamblichus⁶⁴¹. His master was one of the disciples of the royal Syrian Platonist⁶⁴² and had access to mystical visions himself. After living as a hermit among rocks, trees and goats for some years, Aedesius established a school of philosophy in Pergamon and was also the teacher of Maximus of

⁶³⁸ *PH*, 41.

⁶³⁹ “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.” Athanassiadi, 1993, p. 14.

⁶⁴⁰ Cf. Eunapius, *PS*, 6.8.3.4.

⁶⁴¹ “Antoninus had come from good philosophical stock. His mother had been quite thoroughly educated and his father was an associate of Aedesius, one of the inner-circle students of Iamblichus himself.” Cf. Watts, E. *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. University of California Press, 2006, p. 188.

⁶⁴² Iamblichus was descendent of a lineage of “priestly kings” from Syria. Cf. Shaw, 2014 [1995].

Ephesus – the famous theurgist so scorned by some modern scholars – and of the emperor Julian.⁶⁴³

Sosipatra herself was initiated into the mysteries of philosophy by two demigods or *daimones* at the age of 5; after caring for her during 5 years in her father’s state they disappeared for the Western Oceans and the Hesperides⁶⁴⁴. She had incredible powers of divination and was even considered to be omniscient⁶⁴⁵. Of her three children with Eustathius, Eunapius considered only Antoninus’ deeds worthy of being registered⁶⁴⁶. Antoninus established a school of philosophy in Canopus, near the Delta of the Nile. His story, as related by Eunapius, is important for establishing a pagan ancestor of Olympus and of the Hermetic *religio mentis* of interiorized ritual⁶⁴⁷. In being the only “worthy” son of Sosipatra, he strived to fulfill his mother’s prophecy⁶⁴⁸:

καὶ τῶν μὲν δύο τὰ ὀνόματα οὐδὲν δέομαι γράφειν, Ἄντωνῖνος δὲ ἦν ἄξιος τῶν πατέρων, ὅς γε τὸ Κανωβικὸν τοῦ Νείλου καταλαβὼν στόμα, καὶ τοῖς ἐκεῖ τελουμένοις προσθεὶς ὅλον ἑαυτόν, τὴν τε ἀπὸ τῆς μητρὸς πρόρρησιν ἐξεβιάζετο. καὶ ἡ νεότης τῶν ὑγιαίνοντων τὰς ψυχὰς καὶ φιλοσοφίας ἐπιθυμούντων ἐφοίτων πρὸς αὐτόν, καὶ τὸ ἱερὸν νεανίσκων ἱερέων μεστὸν ἦν. αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν ἔτι ἄνθρωπος εἶναι δοκῶν καὶ ἀνθρώποις ὁμιλῶν, πᾶσι τοῖς ὁμιληταῖς προῦ λέγειν, ὡς μετ' ἐκεῖνον οὐκ ἔτι τὸ ἱερὸν ἔσοιτο, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ μεγάλα καὶ ἅγια τοῦ Σεράπιδος ἱερά πρὸς τὸ σκοτοειδὲς καὶ ἄμορφον χωρήσει καὶ μεταβληθήσεται, καὶ τὸ μῦθῳδες καὶ ἀειδὲς σκότος τυραννήσει τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς κάλλιστα. ὁ δὲ χρόνος ἀπήλεγεζεν ἅπαντα, καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα γε εἰς χρησιμοῦ συνετελέσθη βίαν.

⁶⁴³ *PS*. 6.1-6.3.

⁶⁴⁴ *PS*. 6.6.7.1-6.7.1.1

⁶⁴⁵ *PS*. 6.8.3.3.

⁶⁴⁶ Commenting on the story about the theurgist Sosipatra and a man that tried to gain her love through magical means, G. Luck remarks: “The story is fascinating, because it tells us something about the intellectual elite of paganism at the time of the Emperor Julian. Magic was everywhere, but it could be defeated, and —most important of all — theurgy worked. It looks like the pagan elite's last stand in the battle against the Christians. To prove that they were on the right side, the pagans not only claimed to have inherited the best of Hellenic culture — Platonism and rhetoric — but also direct contact with the ancient gods at any time they desired. Add to this the beauty and charm of Sosipatra and her psychic gifts, and you have an irresistible argument that paganism is better. The Emperor Julian, by returning to it, accepted this kind of thinking and endorsed it.” Cf. (1989, p. 191.)

⁶⁴⁷ Cf. Note 169 above.

⁶⁴⁸ *PS*, 6.9.15.2-6.9.17.5.

The names of two of them I do not need to record. But Antoninus was worthy of his parents, for he settled at the Canobic mouth of the Nile and devoted himself wholly to the religious rites of that place, and strove with all his powers to fulfill his mother's prophecy. To him resorted all the youth whose souls were sane and sound, and who hungered for philosophy, and the temple was filled with young men acting as priests. Though he himself still appeared to be human and he associated with human beings, he foretold to all his followers that after his death the temple would cease to be, and even the great and holy temples of Serapis would pass into formless darkness and be transformed, and that a fabulous and unseemly gloom would sway over the fairest things on earth. To all these prophecies time bore witness, and in the end his prediction gained the force of an oracle. (Transl. W.C. Wright)

The words of Eunapius resonate like a litany for the last days of paganism in Alexandria. Even the “great and holy temples of Serapis” would pass into an amorphous and obscure state (ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ μεγάλα καὶ ἅγια τοῦ Σεράπιδος ἱερὰ πρὸς τὸ σκοτοειδὲς⁶⁴⁹ καὶ ἄμορφον χωρήσει καὶ μεταβληθήσεται).

The pagan temples were usually constructed in places of fundamental importance for cosmogonic rituals and were spiritual, philosophical and political centers of power. When Christianity operated the devaluation of the sacred geography of Egypt, Greece, Italy and the Near East, the temple as an *axis mundi* was condemned to become a mere pile of rocks. The divinities, of course, would not cease to exist, either literally or as a concept, but they should be sought in other places. For pre-modern cultures, the construction of temples and cities was not aleatory, but based on both technical knowledge of engineering and “mythical” sciences of celestial archetypes. The temple was “pre-existent” in heaven before becoming materially “actualized” by the techniques of engineers, blacksmiths and woodworkers. In many cultures of the ancient Near East and India, the celestial archetype

⁶⁴⁹ In Damascius, the metaphors of darkness and the abyss are frequent when addressing the nature of the Ineffable: “Skotos theology is used to complement the message conveyed in passages as the one above. Expressions such as *skotos*, *skoteinoteta*, are used in order to signify the impression we get of the world that lies beyond the intelligible. More particularly the word *skotos* is used to signify the One and often, in the terminology of the Egyptian priests the Pythagorean One; this is the equivalent of the Ineffable in Damascius. The ‘one principle of everything’, ‘the principle that is beyond the All’, ‘the inexpressible principle’, and ‘the ineffable principle’ are some of the expressions that alternate with *skotos*. Cf. (Kalogiratou, 2014, p. 38.)

of city and temple existed previously in the heavenly spheres⁶⁵⁰. That ontological preexistence of the sacred space is what allowed it to be interiorized by the mystical private acts of later pagan philosophers.

Based on the description of Eunapius, Antoninus practiced some form of hieraticized philosophy that was similar to the contemplations of Isidore and Damascius. His oracles predicted that his generation was the last before the Dark Ages, a theme that, as we have seen, resonated strongly in the *Philosophical History* and might be a “platonization” of Hermetic and Egyptian *topoi*. According to Eunapius, the family of Antoninus and Sosipatra despised money and was willing to take the risk to confront any political order in the quest for true philosophy, like Socrates did when he confronted the Athenian authorities. That is also a theme present in Damascius and in some passages he comments about people that converted to Christianity due to a desire to achieve social position or financial advantages⁶⁵¹. Isidore is also praised for avoiding the presence of the “impure” Christians at all costs⁶⁵²:

τοὺς δὲ παντάπασιν ἀπεωθεῖτο ὡς ἐναγεῖς ὄντας καὶ ἀνιάτους, οὐδὲν τε αὐτὸν ἐδυσώπει προσδέχεσθαι σφῶν τὴν ὁμίλιαν, οὐ πλοῦτος ἐξαισίος, οὐ περιφάνεια πολιτείας, οὐ δυναστεία ἄμαχος, οὐ κακοθήεια τυραννική τις.

And he completely rejected them as if they were cursed and incurable and nothing could be made in order for him to accept them favorably as companions, neither money nor political celebrity nor unlimited power and not even tyrannical malignity.

He also said that Isidore refused to dinner or participate in the feasts of the rich or receive gifts from them⁶⁵³. According to the LSJ, word ἐναγής that is used to refer to Christians have the general meaning of “cursed”, “impure”, “sacrilegious” and “abominable”. Being enemies of the arts associated with ἱερατική – a conundrum of spiritual disciplines that are necessary for the purification of the lower parts of the soul – the Christians can never ascend beyond the world of generation, beyond the material constraints of reality and

⁶⁵⁰ Cf. (Eliade, 1991, p. 6-12).

⁶⁵¹ The most obvious examples are Horapollo and Ammonius. Cf. 113 and 118.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.* 20A.

⁶⁵³ *PH*, 20B.

are thus necessarily associated with the Titanic mythological symbol or even with pure matter.

The narrative of Eunapius about Antoninus evokes a similar sensibility more than 100 years before Damascius wrote the *Philosophical History*⁶⁵⁴:

οἷτινες, ἅμα φραζάμενοι κατὰ <τῶν ἱερῶν> λιθ<ίν>ων καὶ λιθοξο<άν>ων, ἐπὶ θυμὸν ταῦτα βαλλόμενοι, πολέμου δὲ μήτε ἀκοὴν <μήτε παρακοὴν> ὑφιστάμενοι, τῷ τε Σεραπίῳ κατελυμήναντο καὶ τοῖς ἀναθήμασιν ἐπολέμησαν, ἀνανταγώνιστον καὶ ἅμαχον νίκην νικήσαντες. τοῖς γοῦν ἀνδριᾶσι καὶ ἀναθήμασι ἐς τοσόνδε γενναίως ἐμαχέσαντο, ὥστε οὐ μόνον ἐνίκων αὐτά, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔκλεπτον, καὶ τάξις ἦν αὐτοῖς πολεμικὴ τὸ ὑφελόμενον λαθεῖν. τοῦ δὲ Σεραπίου μόνον τὸ ἔδαφος οὐχ ὑφείλοντο διὰ βάρους τῶν λίθων, οὐ γὰρ ἦσαν εὐμετακίνητοι· συγγέαντες δὲ ἅπαντα καὶ ταράξαντες, οἱ πολεμικώτατοι καὶ γενναῖοι, καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀναιμάκτους μὲν, οὐκ ἀφιλοχρημάτους δὲ προτείναντες, τοὺς τε θεοὺς ἔφασαν νενικηκέναι, καὶ τὴν ἱεροσυλίαν καὶ τὴν ἀσέβειαν εἰς ἔπαινον σφῶν αὐτῶν κατελογίζοντο.

Εἶτα ἐπεισῆγον τοῖς ἱεροῖς τόποις τοὺς καλουμένους μοναχοὺς, ἀνθρώπους μὲν κατὰ τὸ εἶδος, ὁ δὲ βίος αὐτοῖς συώδης, καὶ ἐς τὸ ἐμφανὲς ἔπασχόν τε καὶ ἐποίουν μυρία κακὰ καὶ ἄφραστα. ἀλλ' ὅμως τοῦτο μὲν εὐσεβὲς ἐδόκει, τὸ καταφρονεῖν τοῦ θείου· τυραννικὴν γὰρ εἶχεν ἐξουσίαν τότε πᾶς ἄνθρωπος μέλαιναν φορῶν ἐσθῆτα, καὶ δημοσίᾳ βουλόμενος ἀσχημονεῖν· εἰς τοσόνδε ἀρετῆς ἤλασε τὸ ἀνθρώπινον. ἀλλὰ περὶ τούτων μὲν καὶ ἐν τοῖς καθολικοῖς τῆς ἱστορίας συγγράμμασιν εἴρηται. τοὺς δὲ μοναχοὺς τούτους καὶ εἰς τὸν Κάνωβον καθίδρυσαν, ἀντὶ τῶν νοητῶν θεῶν εἰς ἀνδραπόδων θεραπείας, καὶ οὐδὲ χρηστῶν, καταδήσαντες τὸ ἀνθρώπινον. ὅστῃα γὰρ καὶ κεφαλὰς τῶν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ἀμαρτήμασιν ἐαλωκότων συναλίζοντες, οὓς τὸ πολιτικὸν ἐκόλαζε δικαστήριον, θεοὺς τε ἀπεδείκνυσαν, καὶ προσεκαλινδοῦντο τοῖς ὀστοῖς καὶ κρείττους ὑπελάμβανον εἶναι μολυνόμενοι πρὸς τοῖς τάφοις. μάρτυρες γοῦν ἐκαλοῦντο καὶ διάκονοί τινες καὶ πρέσβεις τῶν αἰτήσεων παρὰ

⁶⁵⁴ *PS*, 6.11.3.1- 6.11.11.1

τῶν θεῶν, ἀνδράποδα δεδουλευκότα κακῶς, καὶ μάστιξι καταδεδαπανημένα, καὶ τὰς τῆς μοχθηρίας ὠτειλὰς ἐν τοῖς εἰδώλοις φέροντα· ἀλλ' ὅμως ἡ γῆ φέρει τούτους τοὺς θεούς. τοῦτο γοῦν εἰς μεγάλην πρόνοιαν καὶ <εὐστοχίαν> Ἀντωνίνου συνετέλεσεν, ὅτι πρὸς ἅπαντας ἔφασκεν τὰ ἱερὰ τάφους γενήσεσθαι.

For these men, girding themselves in their wrath against our sacred places as though against stones and stone-masons, made a raid on the temples, and though they could not allege even a rumour of war to justify them, they demolished the temple of Serapis and made war against the temple offerings, whereby they won a victory without meeting a foe or fighting a battle. In this fashion they fought so strenuously against the statues and votive offerings that they not only conquered but stole them as well, and their only military tactics were to ensure that the thief, should escape detection. Only the floor of the temple of Serapis they did not take, simply because of the weight of the stones which were not easy to move from their place. Then these warlike and honourable men, after they had thrown everything into confusion and disorder and had thrust out hands, unstained indeed by blood but not pure from greed, boasted that they had overcome the gods, and reckoned their sacrilege and impiety a thing to glory in.

Next, into the sacred places they imported monks, as they called them, who were men in appearance but led the lives of swine, and openly did and allowed countless unspeakable crimes. But this they accounted piety, to show contempt for things divine. For in those days every man who wore a black robe and consented to behave in unseemly fashion in public, possessed the power of a tyrant, to such a pitch of virtue had the human race advanced ! All this however I have described in my Universal History. They settled these monks at Canopus also, and thus they fettered the human race to the worship of slaves, and those not even honest slaves, instead of the true gods. For they collected the bones and skulls of criminals who had been put to death for numerous crimes, men whom the law courts of the city had condemned to punishment, made them out to be gods, haunted their sepulchres,¹ and thought that they became better by defiling themselves at their

graves. "Martyrs" the dead men were called, and "ministers" of a sort, and "ambassadors" from the gods to carry men's prayers,—these slaves in vilest servitude, who had been consumed by stripes and carried on their phantom forms the scars of their villainy. However these are the gods that earth produces! This, then, greatly increased the reputation of Antoninus also for foresight, in that he had foretold to all that the temples would become tombs. (Transl. W.C. Wright)

The prophecy of Antoninus that the “temples would become tombs” (τὰ ἱερὰ τάφους γενήσεσθαι) is one of the most impressive signs of the contrast between the pagans and the Christians. I quoted the whole passage of Eunapius because in my opinion it is one of the strongest narratives on the demise of paganism that reached our days⁶⁵⁵. The idea of the transformation into a “tomb” as the cult of the gods was substituted by the cult of the Christian martyrs is part of the perception among some pagans that the Christians were necromancers that worshipped the dead.

The passage of Eunapius also resonates some themes of Damascius, like the association in the fragment 18 between the current way of life and the swines and slaves. The text of Eunapius can also remove any doubt about the radical and vertiginous demobilization and destruction of the pagan shrines. As a matter of fact, the destruction of the Serapeum is also figured in the *Philosophical History* as a pivotal moment, a temporal mark and Damascius starts his narrative where Eunapius ends⁶⁵⁶: “Olympus, brother of Generosa. He came from Cilicia to Alexandria in order to worship Serapis” (Ὀλυμπος, ἀδελφὸς Γενερώσης· ὃς ἦκεν ἀπὸ τῆς Κιλικίας εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ἐπὶ τὴν θεραπείαν τοῦ Σαράπιδος.) Olympus travelled from Anatolia to Egypt to be one of the defenders of the Serapeum against the Christian attack of 391-391⁶⁵⁷, soon after Antoninus had passed away. Contrary to Neoplatonic pagan sources, the Christian sources affirm that pagans

⁶⁵⁵ Cf. (Watts, 2015, p. 2): “The destruction of the Serapeum was a momentous event, second perhaps only to the Gothic sack of Rome in 410 for the amount of attention it received from contemporary sources. In the same way that the sack of Rome shocked an empire unaccustomed to questioning its military superiority, the disappearance of Serapis’s temple in Alexandria highlighted the vulnerability of large centers of traditional religion that had once seemed a permanent fixture of Roman life.”

⁶⁵⁶ PH, 42A.

⁶⁵⁷ Cf. (Athanasiasiadi, 1993, p. 10): “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.”

were capturing Christians and keeping them inside the Serapeum, forcing them to make sacrifices and worship the pagan gods⁶⁵⁸.

After making multiple compliments about Olympus' physical appearance⁶⁵⁹, behavior⁶⁶⁰ and diet⁶⁶¹ – and it should be remembered that Damascius never met Olympus, he died even before Damascius was born, so it is a purely oral memory⁶⁶² – Damascius touches on the subject of religion:

ταῦτά τοι τοῖς Ἀλεξανδρεῦσι κατέστη
 ἱεροδιδάσκαλος, ἤδη κατασυρομένης ὑπὸ τοῦ
 χειμάρρου τῆς πολιτείας. ὁ δὲ συναγείρων
 ἑκάστοτε τοὺς παρατυγχάνοντας ἐδίδασκε τὴν
 περὶ τὸ θεῖον ἀγιστεύουσαν θέμιν, τὰ ἀρχαῖα
 νόμιμα καὶ τὴν τούτοις ἐφεπομένην εὐδαιμονίαν,
 ὅση τε καὶ οἷα θεόθεν ἀπήντα τοῖς ἀκριβῶς ταῦτα
 διαφυλάττουσιν.

Thus, he became a sacred teacher [ἱεροδιδάσκαλος] for the Alexandrians, at a time in which their way of life [πολιτεία] was swept away by the torrent⁶⁶³. He used to gather the people around him and teach them about the right way of performing the sacred rites [ἀγιστεύουσαν], the ancient traditions and the happiness that comes from them, that great and wonderful happiness sent by the gods to those who faithfully observe them.

By this passage and the quotation of Eunapius, it is possible to see the significance of the Serapeum and of the sacred temples for the pagan worldview and way of life (πολιτεία).

⁶⁵⁸ Cf. (Watts, 2016, p. 1): “Under the leadership of the philosopher Olympus and other teachers, like the grammarians Helladius and Ammonius, the pagans launched multiple attacks on the city’s Christians. Their actions belied the stereotype of intellectual restraint. According to Christian sources, the people captured by these men and their students were “forced to sacrifice at burning altars.”

⁶⁵⁹ PH, 42C.

⁶⁶⁰ 42E.

⁶⁶¹ 42D.

⁶⁶² Cf. (Watts, 2015, p. 215): “Pagan authors similarly idealized the actions of figures who resisted Christian attacks on the Serapeum. Olympus, a Cilician philosopher who had come to Alexandria in order to worship Serapis, led the defense. He guided the defenders through regular worship and superintended a final ceremony through which Serapis abandoned his temple. Rufinus attacked him as “a philosopher in name and garb only” and the “leader of a criminal and impudent band.” Pagan sources, however, celebrated him as a “man who was not human but entirely godlike.”

⁶⁶³ Since χεῖμαρρος means flow, melted snow and torrent (as a substantive), the lexical choice shows the association between Christianity and γένεσις and also a sense of “dissolution” provoked by a strong force, like a river invading a snowy place and turning the snow into water.

Olympus was a pagan holy man who wandered from Asia Minor to Egypt in order to defend the pagan way of life.

Just like in the literary theory of Erich Auerbach the analysis of key-literary works can act as catalyzers of a worldview and changing representations of reality⁶⁶⁴, or Carlo Ginzburg and his general theses on the history of culture in the 16th century constructed through the microscopic analysis of a simple Friulian miller or his general thesis on Eurasian shamanism constructed through the analysis of the *Benandanti* of Northeast Italy⁶⁶⁵, the *Philosophical History* can serve as a micro-historical and literary source to the shifting historical ontologies of paganism and Christianity and, more than that, a chronicle of the confrontation between historical and mystical experiences among the last pagans. It is one of the last overtly pagan narrative works that survived – even if in a fragmentary state – from the 6th century. After the text of Damascius it is increasingly difficult to see the Hellenes and their experience (*Erlebnis*) in the historical landscape. It could be argued that the *Philosophical History* counts among the few “representations of reality” from a pagan point of view in the Christianized Byzantine Empire of Justinian.

Coming back to Olympus, after seeing that resistance was pointless, he performed a rite through which Serapis abandoned the Serapeum⁶⁶⁶: “Thus taking courage, he urged them to perform throughout the day the ordained hierurgy to the god according to the old custom” (ταῦτά τοι καὶ θαρρῶν αὐτὸς κατὰ τι ἔθος ἀρχαῖον ἐκέλευσε δι' ἡμέρας τὴν ἱερουργίαν τὴν τεταγμένην δρᾶσαι τῷ θεῷ). The word used here for the “ritual” is ἱερουργία a term that is used by Plato to describe the rites of sacred marriage in the *Laws*⁶⁶⁷. The use here might indicate that the sacred rite is now between the souls and the god since the temples collapsed. Athanassiadi interprets the passage in that sense⁶⁶⁸:

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. 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

⁶⁶⁴ Cf. (2002 [1946], p. 3-22).

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. (1996, p. 187-198).

⁶⁶⁶ *PH*, 42G.

⁶⁶⁷ 775a.

⁶⁶⁸ Cf. (1993, p. 14).

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.

The focus here is in the absorption of external rituals by the practice of mentalizations, asceticism, long days of contemplation and inner and outer journeys⁶⁶⁹. It can be said that the *religio mentis*⁶⁷⁰ of the Hermetists is the mystical discipline of the disenfranchised pagan. History pushed the pagans to the limits of absorption inside the multiple layers of the divine.

Olympus prophesized that Serapis would flee from the temple: “Olympus was so filled with the god that he prophesized to his companions that Serapis would flee from the temple: and this came to pass” (οὕτω δὲ ἦν ὁ Ὀλυμπος πλήρης τοῦ θεοῦ, ὥστε καὶ προεῖπε τοῖς ἐταίροις, ὅτι Σάραπις ἀφίησι τὸν νεῶν· ὃ καὶ γέγονεν). In the end, pagans should not mourn the destruction of the temple and the *ἱερὰ πρὸς τὸ σκοτοειδὲς καὶ ἄμορφον χωρήσει καὶ μεταβληθήσεται* as predicted by Antoninus. The god would not cease to exist because the pagan gods existed as emanations from the One for all eternity. The inner temple cannot die, the loss is only apparent because the nostalgia for Unity is the first step to salvation⁶⁷¹. The innermost temple is also the abandonment of ego and the divided state, entailing an enstatic absorption into the Divine (θεοκρασία).

Damascius recognizes this in 4C, after beginning with the Egyptian antiquity, describing the anagogic function of hieratic arts and their relation with philosophy and how the Pythagoreans brought the “Egyptian philosophy” to the Greeks:

καὶ τοῦτ' ἂν εἶη θεοκρασία, μᾶλλον δὲ ἔνωσις παντελής, ἐπάνοδος τῶν ἡμετέρων ψυχῶν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἐπιστρεφομένων καὶ συναθροισμένων ἀπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ μερισμοῦ, καὶ τί γὰρ οὐ λέγω σπαραγμοῦ διαρρήδην, ὃν ἐνταῦθα ρυεῖσαι καὶ

⁶⁶⁹ Some of those elements seemed to be also practiced by theurgists since the times of Marcus Aurelius, as the evidence from the Chaldean Oracles indicate in the practice of silence: σῆγ' ἔχε, μύστα (Keep silent, initiate). Fr. 132.

⁶⁷⁰ Cf. *Asc.* 25.

⁶⁷¹ Cf. (Athanasiasiadi, 1999b, p. 168): “Does the all-encompassing ‘vision’ which follows the emptying of the mind reach as far as the chaotic darkness of the Beyond? What does it include? Is it a progressive experience from the divided to the One, as in Plotinus or Proclus, or is it a sudden, unconscious and ineffable gift, as in Numenius? The impossibility of answering these questions is reflected in Damascius’ refusal to endow us with clear-cut certainties at any level of his description of the Oracles’ theology. Confines are continuously blurred and the triptych Abyss—Meta-being—One is as undivided as the next—if the expression ‘next’ means anything in this context—stage of the intelligible ennead.”

σῶμα γήϊνον λαβοῦσαι διεσπᾶσθησαν αὐταὶ ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν, καὶ πολλαχῆ διωκίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν Τυφονείων τῷ ὄντι καὶ ἄλλως γηγενῶν παθημάτων, ὄντων γε οὐ κατὰ τὸν Τυφῶνα μόνον, ἀλλ' ἔτι οἶμαι καὶ τούτου πολυπλοκωτέρων.

And that would be the absorption in the Divine [θεοκρασία], with no doubt the total union, the ascension of our souls to God as they return and unify themselves after multiple divisions. It can even be said that after fragmenting themselves and taking earthly bodies, they disintegrate from inside and are scattered through many ways not only Typhonian⁶⁷², but also for other terrestrial afflictions, I believe, even more tortuous.

As it turns out, it seems that Damascius perhaps (?) knew that he was not someone that would reach that state. He experimented altered states of mind, as will be seen below, but his endless destruction of Neoplatonic metaphysics in the *De. Princ.*⁶⁷³ might hint to his impossibility of reaching Union. His apophatic theology and metaphysics based on the incognoscibility of the Beyond ends not with extreme scepticism, but with mythology, as Ahbel-Rappe reminds us⁶⁷⁴. Just like the temples were collapsing in the historical plane, so was Greek metaphysics in the theoretical works of Damascius, his work is truly a Poetics of the Twilight. However, in Isidore and Sarapio he saw the undivided state that goes even beyond the Golden Age of Cronus and it is with a very limited approximation to that place – if something like that can even be conceived – that I will conclude.

⁶⁷² As noted before, the reason why the Christians could not go beyond the extremely fragmented state of existence was due to their lack of a hieratic art, since the hieratic disciplines have unmatched efficacy in the pericosmic realm, as noted by Krulak (2017, p. 476): “ἱερατική’s purgative aptitude, unmatched in the pericosmic realm, meant that its potency in this ontological layer exceeded that of philosophy. Damascius acknowledged this, stating that the connection (συναφή) made through philosophy was not “as exact (ἀκριβής) as the ineffable union (ἀπόρητος ἔνωσις)” associated with the rites (*In Phd.* I 168), an assertion consonant with his portrayal of ἱερατική as a paradigm for philosophy.”

⁶⁷³ Unfortunately that process cannot be demonstrated here, but both Athanassiadi (1999b) and Ahbel-Rappe (1998) summarize well his arguments. See as well: C-W, LVI-LXXII.

⁶⁷⁴ Cf. (1998, p. 362): “Despite his Sceptical affiliations, Damascius ends his *Doubts and Solutions* with a theological testimony to the truth of his unorthodoxy, his metaphysics of the Ineffable (C-W, III. 161). In order to justify his own name for the first principle, “the Ineffable,” Damascius cites a version of the Orphic Theogony attributed to a mysterious personage named either Hieronymous or Hellanikos. This version gives a prominent place to several deities missing in the more commonly cited version, the Sacred Discourse in 24 Rhapsodies, or Rhapsodic Theogony. But because these versions omit the deities, they transmit by their very silence the fact that the Orphic principle is, as Damascius understands it, the Ineffable. [...] Damascius not only authorizes his own metaphysical innovations by alluding to a primordial tradition, but he also verifies his understanding of metaphysical discourse as presenting a lack of adequate signifiers. This abyssal semiotics is his most authoritative statement. It marks the end of his history of Neoplatonic metaphysics with an almost breathtaking theology of silence.”

*** The Inner Temple and the Outside of History: An Exercise in Heterotopia**

“The flames sawed in the wind and the embers paled and deepened and paled and deepened like the bloodbeat of some living thing eviscerate upon the ground before them and they watched the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves inasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origins and are exiles. For each fire is all fires, the first fire and the last ever to be.” — “Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West”, Cormac McCarthy

“Thy chastity is but a more subtle form of corruption, and thy contempt of this world is but the impotence of thy hatred against it.” — “The Temptation of St. Antony”, Gustave Flaubert

Sometimes it is necessary to understand the limitations of hermeneutical strategies and rhetorical devices that accumulate debris of many layers for centuries and make some terms to acquire a fossilized meaning. That is the case for philosophy. As A.Uždavinys reminds us⁶⁷⁵:

we should turn our attention to the hidden kernel of what is called philosophy, be it a chariot for traveling into another world; a mighty method, ‘stolen from the gods’ and subsequently corrupted, turned upside down; a crafty stratagem; or a means of achieving and experiencing indivisible objects—that is, of living ‘another life’ where the self is assimilated to Dionysus, the god both of tragedy and of comedy. Accordingly, we intend to describe the chief goals (*skopoi*) of this method — a method that constitutes only one particular form of mediation between the transcendent divine wisdom and our human existence, one of the various ways based on certain archetypal patterns, and our intellectual powers as shaped according to these patterns, as well as on our historically determined visions and metaphysical hopes of dealing with reality.

⁶⁷⁵ (2014, p. 7.)

In his view, ancient philosophy is not an enterprise that dissociates itself from the supposedly immense ignorance of myth and inherited mythological traditions, it is not a language game and neither a literary genre. It is also not the search for anything called “Being” in a historical tradition prefigured in order to glorify some specific ethnic/national group or cultural tradition that is its supposed “inheritor”. Philosophy, for a Neoplatonist like Uždavinys, is the sum of Hellenic spiritual exercises developed to “make the inward journey to the place of truth”⁶⁷⁶ and “to become like God” as much as possible⁶⁷⁷. The philosophical activity of Damascius and other late antique Platonists is no different and is not dissimilar to what may be called “mysticism” in modern times. The dialectical and argumentative strategies are only the prelude to the absorption in God or the Divine (θεοκρασία)⁶⁷⁸, as discussed in the previous sections.

For someone like Uždavinys – and I bet Damascius would agree – philosophy is a tradition that has been handed by the gods, it exists everywhere and can be accessed through the inner workings of the spiritual complex made of mind and body. Krulak says that Damascius “hieraticized” philosophy, absorbing into his philosophical contemplation the mystical hieratic rites that were now forbidden by the Christian Emperors⁶⁷⁹. Philosophy is an integrative gnosis that involves dialectics, visualizations, metaphorical approximations to the Absolute and a fundamental lived experience that cannot be directly translated to discursive language. Even a supposed literary and biographical text like the *Philosophical History* have its ineffable aspect. As G. Miles points out, philosophical biographies and literary narratives constitute a philosophical activity in the same manner as formal treatises⁶⁸⁰. The supposed heavy criticism of Damascius against many of his

⁶⁷⁶ (*Ibid.* p 39.)

⁶⁷⁷ (*Ibid.* p. 67)

⁶⁷⁸ *PH*, 4C.

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. (2017, p. 474): “Nevertheless, it is also evident that by assigning a grade of initiation to each virtue, Damascius intended his audience to view philosophy as an initiatory process in the same vein as the defunct mysteries. In large degree, the power of ascent once found in ritual was still attainable in a time and place where such praxes were forbidden. As is seen in the case of Proclus, the language of the mysteries was often interwoven with allusions to theurgic praxes, but this is not the case in Damascius’ statement. Here is an instance in which the broader range of *ιερατική*, referring to a full complement of priestly and ritual activities, rather than the narrower association with theurgic practice, might be found. Nevertheless, this passage shows Damascius navigating a fine line in which philosophy was both primary, in that it was the principal means of ascent, and secondary, in that the mysteries were an idealized method of attaining likeness to god.”

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. (2018, p. 57): “A general supposition of my approach is that philosophical biography is in a meaningful sense a type of philosophical writing; if we can take philosophy in this period to be much more than a set of doctrines, a way of living and thinking (as Pierre Hadot influentially argued),⁸ the biographical texts become not merely sources of data to recount in the introduction to books on ancient philosophy before moving on to the ‘hard stuff’, but works that are essential to the overall philosophical programme of late antique Platonism, exploring in narrative terms the possibilities of integration (and disintegration) of human beings, and especially of philosophers.”

contemporaries might be seen as a reflection, transposed to the interpretation of society, of human virtues and vices, of his extremely rigorous philosophical aporetic method.

Because to say that something has mystical or transcendental aims is not the same as saying that it is a hodge podge of arbitrary opinions, falsity and “schizoid” mental states, as it was often implied by some early 20th century scholars in their unsuspecting and uncritical commitment to some reductionist ideologies of the European Enlightenment and its historicist corollary. Athanassiadi has commented on the reasons for the lack of “ideological descendants” of Damascius philosophical writings⁶⁸¹:

It is easy to see straight away why Damascius remained without a posterity. Much more than any accident of history, it was his own attitude towards the human mind and its possibilities which must be held responsible for his lack of spiritual descendants. For Damascius is a ferocious detractor of any classificatory attempt in the realm of metaphysics—a jester with a philosopher’s mask.

The peculiar sensibility of Damascius indeed shows signs of an almost skeptical spiritual tendency⁶⁸². The affirmation and posterior negation, as logically invalid or insufficient, of any positive hypothesis regarding the Source of everything is something that left the reader with a sensation akin to mazziness, a sense of awe. This heavy aporetic method may be seen as a spiritual exercise in the search for the nameless truth and experience of being. As noted by Combès, the aporetic method of Damascius is not as much a skepticism revived, in the style of Sextus Empiricus, but a consequence of his negative theology⁶⁸³.

That method has a limited recurrence in the *Philosophical History*, as I pointed above, in the many evaluations of distinct schools and forms of living. Before passing to a discrimination of the “mystic” in the text as a series of pagan turned occult interiorized liminal experiences, it is necessary to point out some relevant aspects of Damascius metaphysical reflections in a very brief *excursus*. It is fundamental to point, though, that we have no way of knowing the exact date of composition of the metaphysical systems exposed in the *De. Princ.* and the *Commentary to the Parmenides*, in a way that their

⁶⁸¹ (1999b, p. 165.)

⁶⁸² Ahbel-Rappe discusses the possible scepticism of Damascius in an article: *Scepticism in the Sixth Century? Damascius’ Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, volume 36, Number 3, July 1998, p. 337-363.

⁶⁸³ (1986, p. xxv and xxi).

relationship of continuity with the *Philosophical History* can be at most an educated guess. All three works were probably composed after Damascius became diadoch in the early 6th century and before Justinian's edict of 529, but the exact dates are impossible to be affirmed.

The impulse behind the philosophizing in the *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* is the desire to achieve a synthesis, a final answer regarding the Unknown or Beyond. The first principles referred to in the title are the Ineffable, the One and the Noetic Triad. Time after time, hypothesis after hypothesis, Damascius finds himself in metaphysical torment, a desperation through the περιτροπή⁶⁸⁴ of all theoretical and linguistic formulations⁶⁸⁵. A problem such as this one could easily lend itself to many dissertations, books and metaphysical reflections and it is not my aim here to solve it, the purpose of invoking Damascius theoretical treatise is to show that it has resonances with certain practices described in the *Philosophical History* and for the understanding that Damascius has of the cyclical historical procession and its relation with mystical states of consciousness.

Searching for a response, Damascius journeyed internally, in the subjects dealing with the soul to the point of metaphysical exhaustion and externally, in his peregrination from Alexandria to Athens, his spiritual conversion to a tradition of sacredness that was waning from history but had the doors of eternity to explore. Athanassiadi comments on the particular spiritual disposition of Damascius and his contradictory character⁶⁸⁶:

Damascius is a ferocious detractor of any classificatory attempt in the realm of metaphysics—a jester with a philosopher's mask. With great care and meticulousness, he constructs superb intellectual edifices, which he then proceeds to contemplate from several angles by cleverly turning them inside out and upside down. In doing this he displays his own thoroughness,

⁶⁸⁴ A word that has its roots in Plato's *Theaetetus* (171b), the περιτροπή is, according to Ahbel-Rappe, fundamental to the lexicon of the ancient Sceptics, like Sextus Empiricus and Aenesidemus. Cf. (1998, p. 345-348). "This word has a history in the annals of skepticism. Although it can be literally translated as 'reversal', its sense in the context of dialectic refers to arguments that are overturned from within, that is by premises internal to the argument. Sextus Empiricus, for example, refers to a whole class of such turned-about arguments, or arguments whose very assertion undermines the position at issue." p. 343.

⁶⁸⁵ "The One is completely unknowable and inexpressible. Why then look for something else beyond the inexpressible? It is maybe the case that Plato, made us ascend ineffably towards the Ineffable, by the mediation of the One. It is of the Ineffable that we always talk of as being beyond the One. Just like he made us turn to the One by the suppression of the One itself and of other things." *De Princ.* I.9.8-14. Transl. Kalogiratou, 2014.

⁶⁸⁶ 1999b, p. 165.

subtlety and ingenuity, while at the same time exposing the extreme relativity of these structures, with which our divided intelligence is forever condemned to play as a result of the dislocated state to which the Titanic War has reduced it.

The Titanic War alluded in her text is a reference to a passage in the *De Princ.* in which Damascius comments on our human divided and ‘Titanic’ state incapable of reaching real intuitive synthesis (συναίρεσις), chained as we are by a limited condition of existence⁶⁸⁷.

It is not clear if Damascius experienced the state that he calls θεοκρασία or at least testified Isidore reaching that state. In the *PH*, Isidore enters into some mystical and prophetic states himself and – more importantly – in the journey from Alexandria to Athens under the guidance of Isidore, Damascius experiences a union with Apollo through which he could dream of himself as being the Phrygian god Attis⁶⁸⁸:

ὅτι “ἐν Ἱεραπόλει τῆς Φρυγίας ἱερὸν ἦν Ἀπόλλωνος, ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν ναὸν καταβάσιον ὑπέκειτο θανασίμους ἀναπνοὰς παρεχόμενον. τοῦτον τὸν βόθρον οὐδ’ ἄνωθὲν ἐστὶν ἀκίνδυνον οὐδὲ τοῖς πτηνοῖς τῶν ζώων διελθεῖν, ἀλλ’ ὅσα κατ’ αὐτὸν γίνεται, ἀπόλλυται. τοῖς δὲ τετελεσμένοις, φησί, δυνατὸν ἦν κατιόντας καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὸν μυχὸν ἀβλαβῶς διάγειν”. λέγει δ’ ὁ συγγραφεὺς ὡς αὐτὸς τε καὶ Δῶρος ὁ φιλόσοφος, ὑπὸ προθυμίας ἐκνικηθέντες, κατέβησαν τε καὶ ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ἀνέβησαν. λέγει δ’ ὁ συγγραφεὺς ὅτι “τότε τῇ Ἱεραπόλει ἐγκαθευδήσας ἐδόκουν ὄναρ ὁ Ἄττης γενέσθαι, καὶ μοι ἐπιτελεῖσθαι παρὰ τῆς μητρὸς τῶν θεῶν τὴν τῶν Ἰλαρίων καλουμένων ἑορτὴν ὅπερ ἐδήλου τὴν ἐξ ἄδου γεγονῦσαν ἡμῶν σωτηρίαν.

⁶⁸⁷ His rage and sense of suffering while searching for the resolution of all the apories of Platonic philosophy is vivid, poetic and brutal: “And yet, if, when we attempt to sound and explore in all its senses the intelligible depths, we fall short of that truth and deviate as we do towards what is low and divided, through being dragged and pulled down towards them by the compulsion of our miserable nothingness, we should nevertheless resign ourselves to this deviation and this fall. For it is not possible in our present state to grasp these things otherwise and we must be content if we can touch them from afar as it were, with great difficulty, very faintly, or indeed if we can gain the trace of a hint which will suddenly flash before our eyes, even though the spark comes from the self, rising out of the soul; a small gleam, not really bright, yet still an indication by analogy of that huge all-shining light. As regards this discourse too, this is the thing for which it should be praised: that it despises itself and confesses itself blinded by that united, intelligible light and unable to stare at it.” Cf. (*De Princ. III*, 141). Transl. Athanassiadi.

⁶⁸⁸ *PH*, 87.

Wherefore, “At Hierapolis, in Phrygia, there was a sacred place of Apollo and in the underground depths of the temple there was a passage that produced deadly vapors. Through this hole not even flying creatures could pass unharmed since everything that came within its limits died. The initiate, however, could descend into its lower depths and remain there unscathed. The writer says that he and the philosopher Dorus, both bridled by desire, descended and ascended without suffering any harm. The author also says: “going to sleep at Hierapolis I had a dream in which I became Attis⁶⁸⁹ and, with the command of the Mother of the Gods I celebrated the festival of the so-called Hilaria⁶⁹⁰, which meant my salvation from the Hades.

We can only guess what experiences might have been instigated by such religious experience, but as Kalogiratou notes, the tendency of speaking metaphorically in the more elaborate metaphysical treatises of Damascius might have religious experiences and other altered mental states as its base and foundation⁶⁹¹. In terms of historical experience, the articulation of a mythological tradition that was certainly perceived as being purged from the land into an interiorized state of inner aporetic absurdity is perhaps a hint for the apophatic theology of Damascius. The question is not so much of doctrine, but of longing and feeling that the ontological edifice that sustained pagan religion and philosophy was collapsing. The metaphysical solution of escape to an Ineffable even beyond the One, holds a clue to the One’s disappearance, as has been noted by Michel de Certeau in the discussion of his Christian mystics of the early modern period that longed for the Christian “historical-anthropological” One of the High Middle Ages⁶⁹².

⁶⁸⁹ Attis was a young Phrygian shepherd that was in love with the Nymph Sagaritis. The Goddess Cybele fell in love with his youthful beauty and while she appeared to him in her transcendent power, Attis castrated himself amidst despair and delirium. The Goddess then transformed him into a pine tree. The cult of the god has appeared in Greece around the 4th century BCE and reached Rome at the end of the second Punic War. Cf. (Lancelotti, p. 17-30).

⁶⁹⁰ The “so-called” allusion is Photius’ ironic commentary.

⁶⁹¹ Cf. (2014, p. 35): “It is true that the Diadochus often supplements his theoretical endeavours with mythological figures (particularly from the Orphic tradition and the Chaldean Oracles, as well as from other sources) or visual imagery. This interpretive method, whether allegorical or symbolic, is common to Platonic and Christian mystical writers, as well as to philosophical theologians of the East, such as Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thinkers. In Damascius’ view, non-philosophical myths, symbols, and figures are employed as objects of reflection because it is impossible to say anything adequate about the nature of the Ineffable, or of God.”

⁶⁹² Cf. (1992 [1982], p. 2).

But let us take a look into the quote in a more detailed manner. The cults, rites and overall historical and anthropological sensibilities that furnished the basic symbols and psychic structures for the more abstract conceptualizations and speculations of Damascius were in steadfast downturn, the pagan tradition was certainly on the “razor’s edge”⁶⁹³. What is that *κατάβασις* that Damascius experienced alongside Dorus after their conversion by Isidore? Does it have any consequence for his mystical experience and does it correspond to the state of *θεοκρασία*? To the last question, the answer is most likely negative and the argument must be elaborated after the examination of the mythical pattern. The first thing that we take notice is the existence of a supposedly functioning sanctuary to Apollo well inside Anatolia almost in the dawn of the 6th century⁶⁹⁴. That fact in itself should not surprise us, since as other sources remark⁶⁹⁵ paganism was alive and well in isolated pockets of the countryside at least until the Justinian policies of no-tolerance⁶⁹⁶.

Damascius maybe participated in a secret or at least coveted ceremony for the *Magna Mater* (Cybele) or approached the sacred cave in the ruined and abandoned temple of Apollo⁶⁹⁷ in a journey of spiritual exploration with Dorus, after both men were initiated into the mysteries of philosophy by Isidore⁶⁹⁸. The *Ἰλάρια* is a Greek lexical adoption of the

⁶⁹³ Cf. (Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 22).

⁶⁹⁴ Considering that the meeting between Damascius and Dorus happened in the journey from Alexandria to Athens when Isidore was fleeing from the persecution in Alexandria, the probable date for the events narrated in fr. 87 is somewhere near 489-490. The sanctuary could be easily a ruin as well, what would make the story even more representative of the argument being developed here: amidst the ruins of a previous sanctuary of Apollo, the two men, recently enlightened by Isidore, nostalgically recreate the experiences of a thousand-year-old cult that had vanished. Imagining both of them having life-changing experiences at the ruined temple leads one to wonder what profound feeling of loss and nostalgia have sparked such experiences.

⁶⁹⁵ Cf. the discussion in Bowersock (1990, p. 1-15).

⁶⁹⁶ As previously discussed, Chuvin argued that paganism still remained in Roman society as a “countercultural” tolerated force until at least 529, since then the records of pagan activities start to become more and more rare. With the Islamic reorganization of the polis system in the Middle East after 642, all the signs of the ancient Hellenic paganism start to vanish. Cf. (1990, p. 11).

⁶⁹⁷ According to Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIII, 6.18), the shrine of Apollo in Hierapolis visited by Damascius in the end of the 5th century has been at least partially ruined since a long time before his own times in the 4th century: “When this city was stormed by the generals of Verus Caesar (as I have related before), the statue of Apollo Comaeus was torn from its place and taken to Rome, where the priests of the gods set it up in the temple of the Palatine Apollo. And it is said that, after this same statue had been carried off and the city burned, the soldiers in ransacking the temple found a narrow crevice; this they widened in the hope of finding something valuable; but from a kind of shrine, closed by the occult arts of the Chaldaeans, the germ of that pestilence burst forth, which after generating the virulence of incurable diseases, in the time of the same Verus and of Marcus Antoninus polluted everything with contagion and death, from the frontiers of Persia all the way to the Rhine and to Gaul.”

⁶⁹⁸ The events described in that section are placed by Athanassiadi in the section relating the prosopography of Alexandria in the 470s, but since Dorus is present and Damascius only came to meet him and Asclepiodotus in the so-called “journey of conversion” from Alexandria to Athens around 489, as seen in the events related in the fragment 134, I suppose that the story chronologically should be placed after the events related in such fragment.

Latin term for the equinox festival of Cybele and the rites performed in the cave⁶⁹⁹ – if there was any ritual at all⁷⁰⁰ – definitely belong to the religious experience of cave incubation, a tradition that has its roots even before the times of Homer⁷⁰¹ and was represented in Ancient Greece by the religious seer called by E.R. Dodds as “*iatromantis*”⁷⁰², he was a physician (ιατρός) and a seer (μάντις)⁷⁰³ and many of the famous sages of the Hellenic world, like Abaris, Epimenides, Empedocles and Pythagoras were said to be healer magicians, shamanic figures that engaged in incubation rituals⁷⁰⁴. Now, the mythology of the underground cave and the incubatory rituals that it entails have roots in Iron Age Anatolia⁷⁰⁵ and the general problematic, understood either as a *topos* or a religious pattern, is positioned by Ioan P. Couliano as part of the general problematic of the “*Himmelsreise der Seele*”, a term coined by Wilhelm Bousset in 1965⁷⁰⁶.

Be that as it may, the question still stands: what is the relation of the experience described in the fragment 87 and *ἱερατική*? Is it an experience of *θεοκρασία*? For the first question, only some hints can be found. As already discussed in the introduction, *ἱερατική* is a well-established term of Greek religious and ritual practices. It also has been said that the term is used by Proclus and other Neoplatonists to refer to what is called “theurgy” in the sense of the series of rituals associated with the Chaldean Oracles. In that sense, by the time of Damascius it might have really meant an unificatory approach for the extant pagan

⁶⁹⁹ Cf. (Couliano, 1991, p. 126): “The ancient goddesses of the matrifocal civilization of old Europe were conquered, but not finished. In western Anatolia and in ancient Greece, the goddess survived as Kubaba (or Kybebe, Cybele) as Hekate, and as Artemis. These great goddesses were connected with the moon, the dead, dogs, and ecstasy.”

⁷⁰⁰ It could have been a “ritual of the imagination” or some form of *religio mentis*, but as the subsequent passage in the text do show, the ingestion of the substance was certainly real. It is hard to know if it was a “theurgic” experience, but it does seem to confirm the suspicions of authors like Luck (1989) and Hanegraaff (2022) that even the philosophical pagans from the Neoplatonic *milieu* used mind-altering substances in ritualistic activities.

⁷⁰¹ Cf. (Couliano, 1991, p. 115-118.)

⁷⁰² “We owe to Eric R. Dodds (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, 1951) the word “Iatromantes,” and to F. M. Cornford (*Principium Sapientiae*, 1952) the idea that Greek philosophy was an outcome of earlier shamanic speculations on the soul. Dodds was acquainted with Meuli's 1935 article, which he thoroughly critiqued. Incidentally, he did not seem to notice that his own theory was a perfect copy of Meuli's: he explained Greek shamanism partly by Scythian influence and partly as a native Greek Medicine Men development of ancient ideas concerning certain divine men (*theioi andres*).” Cf. (Couliano, *ibid.* p. 136-137.)

⁷⁰³ Cf. (Couliano, 1983, p. 24-30.)

⁷⁰⁴ The connection between the Goddess and Apollo can be found in (Kingsley, 1995). Apollo also had possession rites and “under the name of Apollo of Hyperborea, he also possessed a very special category of seers, the *Iatromantes* (from the Greek words *iatros* [healer] and *mantis* [prophet]), said to be *phoibolamptoi* or *phoiboleptoi* (possessed by Phoebus-Apollo). These were native Greek shamans.” The location of the rites of Cybele under a temple of Apollo in Phrygia is not a coincidence.

⁷⁰⁵ Cf. (Lancelotti, p. 42-43).

⁷⁰⁶ Cf. (Die *Himmelsreise der Seele*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965.) Couliano criticizes Bousset's formula as inappropriate to describe the variegated facets of the religious phenomenon, but uses the term anyway.

practices unified by Chaldean and Neoplatonic syncretic metaphysical interpretations⁷⁰⁷. Regarding the question if the experience entails θεοκρασία, or rather, the total union (ἔνωσις παντελής), it seems that it is not the case, it is not the final state and only a travel into more intermediary levels of the Neoplatonic cosmos. It might have meant Damascius' personal salvation from metaphysical death (τὴν ἐξ ἄδου γεγонуῖαν ἡμῶν σωτηρίαν), his initiation into philosophy, but not the final union with the Ineffable.

Why is it so? The reason for my suspicions can be found in the unfolding of the story:

διηγησάμην δὲ τῷ Ἀσκληπιόδοτῳ, ἐπανελθὼν ἐς Ἀφροδισιάδα, τὴν τοῦ ὄνειρου ὄψιν. ὁ δὲ ἐθαύμασέ τε τὸ συμβεβηκός, καὶ διηγήσατο οὐκ “ὄναρ ἀντὶ ὄνειρατος”, ἀλλὰ θαῦμα μείζον ἀντὶ ἐλάττονος. νεώτερος γὰρ ἔλεγεν εἰς τὸ χωρίον ἐλθεῖν τοῦτο, καὶ ἀποπειραθῆναι αὐτοῦ τῆς φύσεως. δις οὖν καὶ τρις ἐπιπύξας τὸ ἱμάτιον περὶ τὰς ῥίνας, ἵνα κἂν ἀναπνέῃ πολλάκις, μὴ τὸν διεφθαρμένον καὶ λυμαντικὸν ἀέρα ἀναπνῆ, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀπαθῆ καὶ σωτήριον, ὃν ἔξωθεν εἰσήγαγε περιλαβὼν ἐν τῷ ἱματίῳ, οὕτω πράξας εἰσήει τε ἐν τῇ καταδύσει, τῇ ἐκροῇ τῶν θερμῶν ὑδάτων ἐπακολουθῶν, ἐπὶ πλείστον τοῦ ἀβάτου μυχοῦ, οὐ μὴν εἰς τέλος ἀφίκετο τῆς καταβάσεως· ἡ γὰρ εἴσοδος ἀπερρώγει πρὸς βάθος ἤδη πολὺ τῶν ὑδάτων, καὶ ἀνθρώπῳ γε οὐ διαβατὸν ἦν, ἀλλ' ὁ καταβάτης ἐνθουσιῶν ἐφέρετο μέχρι τοῦ πέρατος.” ὁ μέντοι Ἀσκληπιόδοτος ἐκεῖθεν ἀνήλθε σοφία τῇ αὐτοῦ κακῶν ἀπαθῆς. ἀλλὰ καὶ πνοὴν παραπλησίαν ὕστερον τῇ θανάσιμῳ ἐκ διαφορῶν εἰδῶν κατασκευασάμενος ἐμηχανήσατο.

I narrated my dream to Asclepiodotus on my return to Aphrodisias; he marveled at what happened and related to me not "a dream for a dream", but a greater miracle for a smaller one. He said that in his youth he had come to this place to test its nature. Wrapping his garment round his nostrils two or three times, so that, even

⁷⁰⁷ Cf. (Krulak, 2017, p. 481): “He had inherited a philosophical tradition deeply affected by Platonism’s hieratic turn and, as a result, argued for a Bacchic blend of his own in which philosophy emulated effectively, if not perfectly, hieratic catharsis. In this way, Damascius’ philosophy incorporated the ethos and efficacy attached to hieratic ritual, thereby neutralizing any need for such practices. This hieraticized philosophy, sent from the “one cause of all things,” ensured that the soul was purified and thereby prepared for its ascent to transcendent realms.” However, Krulak’s conclusion seems to contradict Damascius’ narrative of his own initiation into philosophy in the fragment 87.

if he had to breathe frequently, he would inhale not the bad and harmful air but the sound and salubrious air which he had brought in from the outside within his garment, he penetrated the underground path following the outflow of the hot waters almost as far as its impassable extremities, even though he did not reach the limit of the descent; for the path broke off where the waters became very deep and impassable to man. Yet the *kataibates*⁷⁰⁸ reached the end in a state of inspiration. And indeed, thanks to his wisdom, Asclepiodotus came up from there free from harm and sometime later he managed to produce a vapor similar to the deadly one by using various ingredients. (Transl. Athanassiadi, altered)

The experience of initiation entailed by Damascius after the aspiration of the θανάσιμος ἀναπνοή could be reproduced by the alchemist Asclepiodotus in his hieratic experiences⁷⁰⁹. Moreover, as we have seen before in the chapter about the story of Paralius, Asclepiodotus was considered deficient in higher states of existence by Damascius. It could be argued, however, that the states of mind of both individuals were different as they had such experiences, as Damascius and Dorus entered the cave unprotected and thrilled by the exultation of philosophical conversion, while Asclepiodotus entered prepared to decipher the mysteries of the ritual site⁷¹⁰. In the case of Damascius, the experience might have had a higher initiatory meaning. As it turns out, the ritual experience is indeed related with the experiences of ascension and descent of the soul, but considering that Asclepiodotus could encapsulate the mysterious vapors in his alchemical laboratory and could have access to the experience as some type of initiate, it is probably only a very initial stage.

The meaning of τὴν ἐξ Ἄιδου γεγонуῖαν ἡμῶν σωτηρίαν has been discussed by Mihai⁷¹¹ and the author concludes, in accordance with my suspicions, that the experience of Damascius at Hierapolis might have been his entrance into philosophy. Mihai does not talk about the story of Asclepiodotus in his arguments, but rather argues that Attis had a

⁷⁰⁸ This is one of the epithets of Hermes as the guide of the souls to the underworld (cf. Athanassiadi, 1999a, p. 221, n. 233) and its presence confirms that the practice described is one of incubation and κατάβασις.

⁷⁰⁹ It must be remembered that Zosimus of Panopolis regarded his alchemical activities as ἱερα τέχνη and that the practices of the hieratic arts among the Neoplatonists share the general worldview and many spiritual technologies with the alchemical arts of the Roman Egypt. Cf. (Grimes, 2018, p. 130-135.)

⁷¹⁰ Additionally, Asclepiodotus was already a senior philosopher, while Damascius was still being initiated at this time.

⁷¹¹ “*Le descensus ad inferos du néoplatonicien Damascius à Hiéropolis*”. In: Cahiers des études anciennes. LIII, 2016.

central position in the Neoplatonic efforts of mythological exegesis, being associated with Helios-Apollo⁷¹² as the god responsible for elevation and conversion of a limited terrestrial state to another state of higher ascension in the Neoplatonic triadic cosmos⁷¹³.

I think it is safe to assume that what is at hand here is not a mystical experience of final union or absorption into the divine, but a preparatory experience that could be shared with many different levels of initiates, that for their part might have had different experiences, expectations and visions. The *récit* conforms to the pattern described by Couliano⁷¹⁴ about the cults of the ancient Anatolian Goddess and their relation with the experiences of the ascension of the soul through the descent to the primal “womb” of the Goddess. The image of the womb is present in the Chaldean Oracles⁷¹⁵:

Τοῦδε γὰρ ἐκθρόσκουσιν ἀμείλικτοί τε κεραυνοὶ
καὶ πρηστηροδόχοι κόλποι παμφεγγέος ἀγῆς
πατρογενοῦς Ἑκάτης καὶ ὑπεζωκὸς πυρὸς ἄνθος
ἠδὲ κραταιὸν πνεῦμα πόλων πυρίων ἐπέκεινα.

For Implacable Thunders leap from him and the lightning receiving womb of the shining light of Hecate, who is generated from the Father. From him leap the girdling flower of fire and the powerful breath (situated) beyond the fiery poles. (Transl. Majercik, altered)

⁷¹² Julian, Discourse IV, 140b-c; Proclus, Hymn I, 24-26 Vogt.

⁷¹³ “Nous croyons donc que le songe est un indice de conversion à la philosophie, car dans le système néoplatonicien, le dieu Hélios-Apollon, assimilé à Attis dans le néoplatonisme tardif²⁷, était le dieu élévateur et convertissant. Ainsi, la « libération de l’Hadès » ne se réfère pas à une quelconque promesse de résurrection, mais bien à une conversion, dans le cadre d’un rite de purification, et non pas nécessairement d’initiation. Ce songe-message reçoit donc de la part de Damascius deux interprétations : l’une, disons concrète ou littérale, affirme qu’il ne mourra pas dans la grotte par asphyxie²⁸ ; l’autre, allégorique, qu’à travers la purification philosophique Damascius sera affranchi de l’Hadès. En d’autres mots, la mort étant la séparation de l’âme d’avec le corps (Phédon 67d 4-5), la purification de l’âme s’obtient par l’exercice de la philosophie, ce qui assure un meilleur sort dans l’Au-delà.” (2016, p. 19).

⁷¹⁴ A much more recent writer on the subject, the historian Yulia Ustinova, has concluded that the experience of the caves and cave initiation – like the cave of Trophonius – was central to the cults and ecstatic experiences of the Greek world. She explored the underground initiations of philosophers and mystics in Archaic Greece and compared the altered states of consciousness attained by these Greek mystics with shamanic initiations. She also points to similarities between Empedocles, Parmenides and Plotinus, despite an 800-year gap between the first two and the latter. Cf. (2009, p. 177-215.)

⁷¹⁵ Fr. 35. The fragment is quoted in Damascius’ *De Princ.* II, 133, 1-6, where it is said: “Indeed, the First Once Transcendent communicates the hebdomad to the gods themselves; but to others, it is communicated by him through participation.”

The womb or vagina of the Goddess (κόλπος⁷¹⁶) is impregnated by the shining light [thunderbolts?] (παμφεγγέος) of the Paternal Intellect. The poem has both mythological and philosophical undertones in the Neoplatonic interpretation of Proclus⁷¹⁷ and the fact that Hecate appears as receptacle of the Father signs that Damascius experience of becoming the consort god of the Great Goddess (Attis) reaches the level of union with Psyche or World Soul⁷¹⁸ in the emanationist Neoplatonic cosmos. So, in short, the experience reaches a degree of profundity that is elevated beyond the Encosmic realm but not of the union with the Ineffable. In terms of the triadic emanationist cosmos, it is restricted to the first triad.

The system of Damascius could be described – in a simplified form – more or less like this:

Ineffable

*

One

*

One-All

All-One

One-Being (Unified)

*

All

*

Father

Dynamis

Intellect

⁷¹⁶ According to the LSJ, the word κόλπος can mean both womb and vagina, and considering the possible sexual undertones of the Chaldean rituals it is not out of place that this is symbol for the interaction between God (male) and psyche (female), with the thunderbolts being the Intellect in the scheme of the 3 hypostases.

⁷¹⁷ Cf. Proclus, *In Crat.*, 58, 19-22.

⁷¹⁸ Cf. (Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013, p. 22): “A peculiar aspect of the Oracles' metaphysics is the important role assigned to Hecate, who seems to function as a mediator between different entities or realms, most conspicuous in her role as the World Soul, the mediator between the intelligible realms and the material cosmos; she also seems to be the principal divine speaker of the Oracles.”

This can be delineated based on a certain reading of the *De. Princ.*⁷¹⁹ Indeed, as a historian of Greek ecstatic and mystical “out of body” experiences⁷²⁰, Couliano does not know exactly what to do with Neoplatonism⁷²¹:

The greatest philosopher of late antiquity, Plotinus (200-270 C.E.), would certainly share the intensity of mystical concerns with this experiential background of Greek mysticism based on near-death and out-of-body experiences. Plotinus's type of mysticism has, however, been defined as a "subjectification" and "interiorization" of objective otherworldly journeys like those described by Plutarch one and a half centuries earlier.

Plotinus's philosophy is Platonism; yet the solutions now given to many problems left unsolved by Plato are Aristotelian. With the middle Platonists (Philo of Alexandria, Plutarch, Numenius of Apamea, Celsus, and others), Plotinus shares the idea that there are a number of intermediaries between the intelligible and the sensible world. His system has the following hypostases, which emanate downward and are gradual stages, not separate or solid entities:

- I. The One (*monos*), the Absolute, the transcendent, which has no perfect equivalent in Plato, but was prefigured by other Platonic philosophers such as Plutarch himself, and derives from the pressure to explain multiplicity from unity;
2. The intellect (*nous*), which is the equivalent of the Platonic world of Ideas or intelligible patterns of all things, and is a first step from unity to multiplicity;
3. The world soul, which contains *in potentia* the whole universe and represents a further downward movement of unity toward multiplicity;

⁷¹⁹ Cf. (Kalogiratou, 2014, p. 38).

⁷²⁰ He goes from Homer and the so-called “shamans” and visionaries of the Archaic period to Plato and Plutarch without much difficulty (p. 119-153), but an unsolved questioning hover around when facing Plotinus and the nature of his mystical experiences inside such interpretative framework.

⁷²¹ (1991, p. 152-153.)

4- Individual souls

Plotinian mysticism is the recovery from the alienation felt by the embodied human being in the world. Nostalgia for unity with the supreme unity, the One, is deeply imprinted in the rational soul, which strives to leave the burden of the physical body and flee toward the One (*Phuge monou pros monon*). Ecstasy is the supreme goal of Plotinian mysticism, and it is described in terms that recall the "oceanic feeling" of Hindu mysticism. It is a state of mind in which the knower is identified with the known. All duality being absent, no vision or drama unfolds, unlike most of the apocalypses examined so far. The goal of Platonic mysticism is higher than a visit to the heavenly Hades: it is a visit to the essence of all essences, which is beyond the universe and cannot be described.

The Neoplatonic mystical ascent has degrees of intensity and can be characterized by an ascension through ladders of reality, or rather by *an absorption inside oneself of the different ladders of the ascent*. The religious experience of Damascius at the temple of Apollo in Phrygia and what unfolds from it is a preparatory task for the ascension of the soul⁷²² and in the scheme of Couliano in *Psychanodia* would fit into what is called "otherworldly revelatory journeys"⁷²³.

Considering this, the questioning must be directed to the proper historical setting of the problem, what can these experiences and changing states of mind tell about the historical conceptualizations of the world of the *Philosophical History* at large and all the events described in our inquiry until that point. Returning to Couliano, it is notable that he labels his chapter on the intricacies of Neoplatonic, Gnostic and Hermetic systems as "Interplanetary Tours on a Platonic space shuttle"⁷²⁴. The question addressed here leads me back to the idea of the "underworld of Platonism" developed by Dillon⁷²⁵ and discussed briefly in the introduction. What may have been the historical and literary reasons behind the doctrines of the ascension of the soul and progression through the

⁷²² Cf. (Mihai, 2016, p. 5): "Attis apparaît donc à Damascius après son descensus comme symbole de sa conversion d'abord pour sa fonction purificatrice et ensuite du fait de son assimilation avec le dieu Hélios-Apollon. Ce songe évoque, grâce à la philosophie et à l'enseignement d'Isidore, la réintégration de Damascius dans le cercle des philosophes."

⁷²³ (1991, p. 5.)

⁷²⁴ (*Ibid.* p. 188.)

⁷²⁵ (1992, p. 392-396.)

heavenly spheres that are articulated in the text of Damascius? As noted above, the scheme of Damascius is ascensional and, as argued by V. Napoli⁷²⁶, the miraculous tales and events described in the *Philosophical History* have an anagogical meaning.

In light of the idea developed in this text, the anagogic function of the philosophical and hieratic arts and the different mystical states attained by these disciplines – either ecstatic or “absorptionist”⁷²⁷ – seems to be a response of the pagans to the anxieties and the feeling of cosmic abandonment of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when the mystical doctrines of the Chaldean Oracles have been compiled and Plotinus exercised his philosophical activity in Rome. Later pagans felt the need of unifying or synthesizing these different strands of mysticism in order to counteracting the influence of Christianity, as noted above in the comments of G. Luck about the story of Sosipatra and Daemons.

Couliano also indicates this in his presentation of the Platonic “space shuttle” in the work of Macrobius⁷²⁸:

A nostalgic Roman aristocrat, he was close to Symmachus and those who desperately tried to revive pagan religion in a Roman Empire that was rapidly moving toward religious totalitarianism; in fact, all pagan cults, public and private, were forbidden between 381 and 392⁷²⁹. Macrobius was, however, certainly not the inventor of what we are calling here the "Platonic space shuttle. [...] In order to understand the background of this bizarre and important doctrine, which shaped ideas about the interplanetary journeys of the soul down to the seventeenth century, we need to move back in time a few centuries, to a period ranging from the first decades of the second century to the late

⁷²⁶ Cf. (2018, p. 126): “Nella Vita del filosofo Isidoro il meraviglioso, nella misura in cui è individuato in una varietà di elementi inquadrabili nella tradizione filosofico-religiosa del neoplatonismo²¹, si configura come una cifra della manifestazione del divino e di quanto vi è connesso, volta a stimolare e promuovere l’ascesa dell’anima e l’assimilazione a dio. Ritengo che si possa affermare che, nella prospettiva neoplatonica, in cui la filosofia ha nell’assimilazione a dio il fine ultimo dell’intero suo percorso, l’istanza della peculiare potenza anagogica del meraviglioso visto nel suo specifico profilo sacrale e divino sia pienamente integrabile, su un comune sfondo speculativo, con la topica concezione platonica e aristotelica della meraviglia come cominciamento (archē) del filosofare. In questa prospettiva, che schiude un preciso orizzonte di senso e di valore dei fenomeni qui presi in esame, le diverse manifestazioni del meraviglioso sono fattori capaci di veicolare un forte messaggio ideologico e di rinsaldare l’identità pagana. Il meraviglioso, così configurato, è visto come pienamente compatibile con la speculazione filosofica. In tale ottica si possono passare in rassegna alcuni contenuti della suddetta opera damasciana, che costituiscono anche delle significative testimonianze dell’immaginario pagano tardoantico.”

⁷²⁷ i.e. the duality between ecstasy and enstasis.

⁷²⁸ (1991, p. 188-189).

⁷²⁹ These dates do correlate with the destruction of the Serapeum.

fourth century. The most outstanding philosophers of the second century-Basilides the Christian Gnostic, Numenius, Celsus, and the two Julians (Julian the Chaldaean and his son, Julian the Theurgist, authors of the Chaldaean Oracles) - -were obsessed by a question that has now lost much of its appeal: How does the soul descend from its heavenly realm to be incarnated in the body, and by what means does it return to its origin?

As seen in the chapter 3, the Iamblichean doctrine of the soul and the liminality of the pagan holy man are intertwined in the text of Damascius. The literary genre and rhetorical construction of the *Philosophical History* as a type of transcendental prosopography of later paganism is clearly an instructional and anagogic tool to elevate the soul of the ideal reader⁷³⁰ – someone that had access to the teachings and esoteric doctrines of Damascius – to a contemplation of the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the myriad ways of ascending the cosmic ladder and, in terms of modern theories of literary fiction, the infinite possibilities of life and modes of living beyond the encapsulating limitation of the new Christian *épistème*.

In this way, the “sacred race” (ἱερὰ γενεὰ) must stand apart from the corrupt society of its entourage and keep alive the sacred flame, as we are told in the fragments 73 A and B. They acquire a new light under the guise of Damascius’ conversion in the cave: “The sacred race lived a life apart, happy and blessed by the gods, a life dedicated to philosophy and the worship of the gods”⁷³¹ (ἡ δὲ ἱερὰ γενεὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν διέζη βίον θεοφιλή καὶ εὐδαίμονα, τὸν τε φιλοσοφοῦντα καὶ τὸν τὰ θεῖα θεραπεύοντα). The religious cauldron of late paganism synthesized in the Neoplatonic philosophy was a necessary step for the anagogic philosophical disciplines, the hieratic art (ἱερατική) and the worship (θεραπεία) of the traditional gods through the Neoplatonic cultural hermeneutics was of central importance: “they kindled pure fire in the altars”⁷³² (ἀνέκαιον ὀσίῳ πυρὶ τοὺς βωμούς). The fire of the altar is also a metaphoric allusion to the primordial fire that is recurrent in the mystical poems of the Chaldean Oracles.

I will go back to the Oracles soon enough, but as much as the experiences of the gods and their sacral ordinance in a *locus* are an important introductory part of the

⁷³⁰ Hoffmann argued that the purpose of the *Philosophical History* was to be a deliberate program to reorganize the school of Athens after the death of Proclus and justify the reforms and leadership of Damascius. Cf. (1994, p. 555).

⁷³¹ *PH*, 73A.

⁷³² *PH*, 73B.

disciplines necessary for the ascent, the mystic is the traveler, the wanderer, the man who wants to see for himself (θεωρεῖν) the miraculous. Just like the mystic Sarapio, Isidore was a wanderer, a “true eccentric”⁷³³ that felt embarrassed with official titles like the diadochy⁷³⁴, he was someone that rejoiced in mysterious ways. It is in the fragments describing the experiences of Isidore that the secret temple of the mystic in the *Philosophical History* must be sought, it is in his wanderings and miraculous teachings that θεοκρασία can be reached at least as a spiritual guess for the jeopardized reader.

As Michel de Certeau has remarked⁷³⁵:

Est mystique celui ou celle qui ne peut s’arrêter de marcher et qui, avec la certitude de ce qui lui manque, sait de chaque lieu et de chaque objet que ce n’est pas ça, qu’on ne peut résider ici ni se contenter de cela. Le désir crée un excès. Il excède, passe et perd les lieux. Il fait aller plus loin, ailleurs. Il n’habite nulle part. Il est habité, dit encore Hadewijch, par

“un noble je ne sais quoi ni ceci, ni cela, qui nous conduit, nous introduit et nous absorbe en notre Origine”.

Mystical [*mystique*] is the one who cannot stop walking and who, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows from every place and every object that it is not this, that one cannot reside here nor be content with that. Desire creates an excess. It exceeds, passes, and loses the places. It makes one go further, elsewhere. It inhabits nowhere. It is inhabited, says Hadewijch again, by

“a noble I know not what nor this, nor that, which leads us, introduces us, and absorbs us into our Origin.”

In the historiography of “la mystique” [the mystic] developed by de Certeau⁷³⁶, the mystic as a literary genre is also directly implied in the experience itself, as it turns out to be a

⁷³³ Cf. (Athassiadi, 1999a, p. 33).

⁷³⁴ Cf. 98C.

⁷³⁵ (1982, p. 411).

⁷³⁶ It is not a coincidence, I believe, that the mystics about which Michel de Certeau wrote were direct inheritors of Neoplatonism inside the Christian tradition, like Nicholas of Cusa, he even alludes to Plotinus some few times in *La Fable Mystique* (p.69; p. 158; p. 235; p. 236).

fleeting or ephemeral relation between editor and edited, the compiler of the mystic science and the mystic that is the purveyor of the experiences. Additionally, his focus on the mystic discourse as nostalgia amidst the dissolution of patterns with a focus in experience can be equally applied to Late Antiquity as for the 16th and 17th centuries at the dawn of European modernity. Paradoxically, the anguish of the Christian mystics in the dissolution of the cultural “One” of the High Middle Ages⁷³⁷, can be compared to the wanderings and sense of nostalgia of the pagan holy man or Neoplatonic saint witnessing the last days of his world⁷³⁸.

In the text of Damascius, however, the mystic pact is far more tenuous. The transmission is triple rather than bifocal: the wanderings of Isidore, the paradoxical prosopography and the experience of the marvelous of many individual lives are not transmitted through a pact between author – the textual translator of all the events and experiences – and subjects, but is complicated by the presence of two mediators: Photius and the anonymous compiler of the Suda. From the historical point of view, the mystical experience in the text of Damascius is an echo travelling in time, a radical otherness that is a like a distant cry in the empty sky. The text of the *Philosophical History* and its focus on the miraculous and paradoxical, punctuated by a huge recurrence to digressions, carries in itself the *historical experience* of mysticism, but mediated through the dust of archives, copyists and the sadness of a lost world, the world without future of paganism.

⁷³⁷ The word “One” here should not be understood as the metaphysical One of the Neoplatonists though, but as the “cultural kernel” or *épistème* of a given epoch. The Russian medievalist A. Gurevich (1985, p. 2-23) used the concept of “world picture” in order to describe the cultural kernel of an epoch, its particular sensibility towards the world, nature, space, time, the divine and socio-economic relations. If joined with the observations of Michel de Certeau, it can certainly lead to a rich understanding of mysticism as a historical experience: “The German historian Leopold von Ranke used to say: ‘Every historical epoch has its own immediate relationship with God’ - an idealist way of putting a profound and undeniable truth: every epoch is interesting and important for its own sake, in and for itself, regardless of its relations with the subsequent course of history. In fact, we do not study the past for teleological reasons only, to discern, that is how the present has arisen from it. Study of different periods of history, including those remote from us, and, perhaps, unconnected in any clear or direct way with our own, enables us to see both the unity and the diversity of mankind. Once our eyes are opened to the recurrent strains in history, when we keep on coming across the same human needs and the same human responses, we gain a deeper understanding of human society and the laws that govern it. Contact with human existence in all its variety in other historical periods, in other civilisations, in other cultural environments, helps us to comprehend our own particular originality, our own place in the historical process. Thus, we have to take account of the individual as well as of the general, of common factors as well as of diversity” (p. 3.)

⁷³⁸ Cf. (Sheldrake, 2001, p. 39-40): “This paradigmatic period of mysticism proliferated in the context of what de Certeau refers to as ‘a loss’. The various movements and writings were born (to use de Certeau’s words) ‘with the setting sun’. This ‘sunset’ was the gradual demise of a previously dominant Christian religious worldview. De Certeau asserted that the ‘dark nights’ expressed in various mystical texts refer not merely to interior, subjective states of spiritual loss and absence but also to the ‘global situation’ of religious faith in western culture.”

The eccentric philosopher and wandering sage Isidore of Alexandria, the master and greatest personal influence over Damascius, is more than a Neoplatonic scholastic. As much as he learned philosophy with Proclus alongside Marinus and Zenodotus⁷³⁹, he also had another master, a far more mysterious one, someone so mysterious that the writings of Damascius transmitted by the Byzantine commentators and copyists are our only source about him: the mystic Sarapio, a true representative of the Golden Age of Cronus. The source for the life of Sarapio in Athanassiadi's edition is again another synthesis of fragments: S IV, 323, 28 and Φ 167⁷⁴⁰:

τοῦτον ἐποιήσατο φίλον ὁ Ἰσίδωρος, τὸν <ὑπερ>βαλόντα πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἐπὶ εὐσεβείᾳ τε καὶ ὅλῃ βίου φιλοσοφίᾳ, πλὴν αὐτοῦ τοῦ Ἰσιδώρου. τοσοῦτον δὲ τῷ ἀνδρὶ περιῆν ἀληθοῦς τρόπου τε καὶ λόγου, τοῦ τε ἐν παροιμίᾳ λέγεσθαι εἰωθότος, ἔργῳ δὲ βεβαιωθέντος ὑπ' ἐκείνου, τοῦ “λάθε βιώσας”, ὥστε οὐδένα τῶν τότε ζώντων ἀνθρώπων οὔτε τῶν νεωτέρων οὔτε τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐλπίζομεν ἂν εἰδέναι οἷον λέγω· οὐδὲ ἔγνω τις ἄλλος, οἷος ἦν ὁ Σαραπίων ἐκεῖνος, οὐδὲ ἂν ἔγωγε νῦν ἠπιστάμην, εἰ μὴ μοι αὐτὸς ὁ φιλόσοφος ὑπέδειξε τῷ λόγῳ τὸν Σαραπίωνα. οὐ γὰρ ἔργῳ ποτὲ ἔφη πείσεσθαι αὐτὸν ἐντυχεῖν ἑτέρῳ ἀνδρὶ· ἄλλως τε καὶ ὅτε ἐγήρα, μηκέτι καταβαίνειν θαμὰ ἀπὸ τῆς σφετέρας οἰκίας, οἰκεῖν δὲ μόνον ἐν οἰκίσκῳ μικρῷ, τῷ ὄντι μονάδα βίον ἀναδεδεγμένον, πρὸς μόνον τὰ ἀναγκαιότατα χρώμενον τῶν γειτόνων ἐνίοις. εὐκτικὸν μὲν οὖν εἶναι τὸν Σαραπίωνα διαφερόντως ἔλεγε καὶ ἐν ἰδιώτου σχήματι πανταχοῦ περιφοιτᾶν τῶν ἱερῶν χωρίων, ὅπου ἦγεν ὁ τῆς ἐορτῆς νόμος, τὰ πολλὰ δὲ ἐπ' οἴκου διημερεύοντα ζῆν, οὐ τίνα ἀνθρωπίνην ζωὴν, ἀλλ' ἀτεχνῶς εἰπεῖν θεῖαν, εὐχὰς τε ἀεὶ καὶ ἀρετὰς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἢ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον φθεγγόμενον, μᾶλλον δὲ σιγῇ διανοούμενον. ζητητικὸς δὲ ὢν τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ φύσει θεωρητικὸς οὐ περὶ τὰ τεχνικώτερα τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἤξιον διατρίβειν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀδροτέροις καὶ ἐνθουσιαστικωτέροις νοήμασιν ἐνεφύετο. διὸ μόνον σχεδὸν τὸν Ὀρφέα ἐκέκτητο καὶ ἀνεγίνωσκεν, ἐρωτῶν ἐφ' ἐκάστοις ἀεὶ τοῖς παραπίπτουσι ζητήμασι τὸν Ἰσίδωρον, ἄκραν ὡς εἰπεῖν ἐπιστήμην ἐν θεολογίᾳ προβεβλημένον.

⁷³⁹ Cf. 59A, B, C, D.

⁷⁴⁰ This is the fragment 111 of Athanassiadi's edition.

ὅς οὕτω μὲν κατεφρόνει χρημάτων, ὥστε κεκτηῖσθαι μηδοτιοῦν ἢ μόνα δύο ἢ τρία βιβλία, ὧν ἦν καὶ ἡ Ὀρφέως ποιήσις· οὕτω δὲ ἡδονῶν τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα, ὥστε ἐξ ἀρχῆς εὐθὺς τὰ ἀναγκαῖα {καὶ} μόνα προσφέρειν τῷ σώματι, ἀφροδισίων δὲ ἄχραντον εἶναι διὰ βίου παντός. οὕτω δὲ ἡμέλει τιμῆς τῆς παρὰ ἀνθρώπων, ὥστε οὐδὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει. οὐδ' ἂν ἐγνώσθη μετὰ ταῦτα, εἰ μὴ θεῶν τις ἠβουλήθη παράδειγμα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις χαρίσασθαι τοῦ Κρονίου βίου, ἵνα μὴ δοκῆ μῦθος εἶναι ὁ λόγος, μὴ ἔχων ἐπιμαρτυροῦσαν τὴν ἱστορίαν. ὁ μὲν γὰρ Χείρων λεγόμενος ἐν μεθορίῳ μᾶλλον εἰστήκει τῆς Κρόνου καὶ Διὸς ἀρχῆς, ὅθεν διφυής. Σαραπίων δὲ οὗτος ὑπὸ τοῦ φιλοσόφου γνωσθεὶς ἀναγεγράφθω τοιοῦτος· ὅς κληρονόμῳ τῷ Ἰσιδώρῳ ἐχρήσατο, μηδένα πρὸς γένους ἔχων, μηδὲ ἄξιον ἄλλον ὑπολαμβάνων εἶναι τῆς ἑαυτοῦ οὐσίας, δυεῖν λέγω ἢ τριῶν βιβλίων.

Isidore befriended this man, who in piety and his overall philosophy of life surpassed all others except Isidore himself. He was so full of the truth in his behavior and speech that he provided a living example of the well-known adage "Live your life unnoticed", so that I doubt if any of his younger or older contemporaries would have known his true nature. Nor did anyone else know the kind of man Sarapio was, nor indeed would I have this knowledge now, had not the philosopher himself described Sarapio to me. For he said that there was no way that Sarapio could ever be persuaded to meet other people, especially as he hardly ever left his house once he grew old. He lived alone in a tiny house, embracing a life of utter solitude, in contact with a few of his neighbors only when absolute necessity required it. He said that Sarapio was exceptionally pious, going round dressed as a private citizen to the holy places wherever festival custom took him. But most of the time he spent at home, leading a life which was not that of a man, but quite simply a god-like existence, constantly addressing prayers and hymns to himself or to the divine, or rather meditating in silence. A seeker of the Truth and a man with a theoretical cast of mind, he could not bear to occupy himself with the technicalities of philosophy, but immersed himself in those vigorous concepts which fill one

with God. For this reason he possessed and read almost nothing except the writings of Orpheus, putting his questions as they arose to Isidore who was as it were invested with the absolute theological knowledge. It was only [Isidore] whom he recognized as a kinsman and received at home. Indeed, he thought he saw in him [Sarapio] the legendary Golden Age of Cronus. He spent his entire life in deed and word focusing his attention and concentrating as far as possible on the inner and the indivisible.

So great was his contempt for material goods that he owned nothing except for two or three books, among which was the poetry of Orpheus. And such was his scorn for bodily pleasures that from his earliest youth he offered his body the bare necessities only, while remaining throughout his life completely undefiled by sexual intercourse. Besides he so disdained social honors that not even his name was known in the city; nor would it have become known afterwards, had not some god desired to grace humanity with a model of the golden age of Cronus, so that this expression would not appear to refer merely to a legend, unsupported by historical evidence. For the so-called Cheiron seems to have stood on the dividing line between the reigns of Cronus and Zeus, hence his double nature. But this Sarapion, who was known by the philosopher, let him be recorded in this way. He made Isidore his heir, having no relatives, since he considered no-one else worthy of his property, that is his two or three books. (Transl. Athanassiadi, altered)

This is the longest fragment of Athanassiadi's edition of the *Philosophical History* and not without a reason. Most problems that have appeared in my discussion until now can find their unfolding in relation to that long passage. I will relate that passage to other 2 fragments about Isidore's absorption into the Ocean of Truth as the final conclusion.

Before starting the final phase of my reflection, one more theoretical excursus and digression is necessary to face the story of the mystic Sarapio. The narrative mixes many traditional Hellenic *topoi* on the biographies of philosophers with elements of paradoxographic and patriographic genres and certainly can be richly analyzed in such a way. The idea presented here is that of mysticism in terms of historical experience as the

nostalgia for a historical absolute that dissolved itself in the ruins of experience and the longing for the union with the Source of all that exists that can be manifested eternally in the kaleidoscope of mankind's experience of history, This is not a pure historicization of Ineffable experience but one specific way to look at Damascius' transcendental prosopography of the late pagan world in the 5th and 6th centuries as imbued of a mystical historical nostalgia beyond the divided and decayed state.

Additionally, Ahbel-Rappe⁷⁴¹, Athanassiadi⁷⁴² and Kalogiratou⁷⁴³ all reach the conclusion that Damascius' mystic and synthetic religious thought are a consequence of his endeavors in metaphysics, in the labyrinths explored by his thought at the limits of Platonism. But what if the thought was the consequence of life? What if he was led to think in such a way due to "exhilarating" experiences like the ones narrated in the *Philosophical History*⁷⁴⁴? The mystic Sarapio is the most enigmatic figure extant in the text. Apart from Isidore, he is said to have surpassed all men in piety and philosophical life (τὸν <ὑπερ>βαλόντα πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἐπὶ εὐσεβείᾳ τε καὶ ὅλῃ βίου φιλοσοφίᾳ). He was secretive and enigmatic like a typical Pythagorean sage and, as seen before, Pythagoras was the Iamblichean model for the pagan holy man among the Neoplatonists. But here we are in a long way from the times of Pythagoras or even Iamblichus and Sarapio was someone out of time, disengaged from his historical existence. If it is true that his existence overlaps with cultural features of late antique monasticism that may be shared with Christian monks and the overall historical features of that age, it is also true that he was perceived to be a Cronian, someone that preserved an ideal way of life among the formlessness of the age.

Sarapio was seen to be in such an alienation from his time that, according to Damascius, he lived in accordance to the Epicurean λάθε βιώσας ("Live Unnoticed"). It is unusual that an Orphic mystic adopted an Epicurean trope, but in the world of the 5th century the Epicureans had already vanished⁷⁴⁵, the same for the Cynics, the Skeptics⁷⁴⁶ and other non-Platonizing groups of Greek philosophers. In the *Philosophical History* we

⁷⁴¹ (1998, p. 362).

⁷⁴² (1999b, p. 173-174).

⁷⁴³ (2014, p. 47).

⁷⁴⁴ The link with Damascius more theoretical works, with extensive quotations and discussions, unfortunately could not be explored here in depth, but the suggestion of inverting the typical premise of metaphysics > life to life > metaphysics is a path that someone might trod in the studies of Damascius considering the interesting complementarity between the *Philosophical History*, his commentaries to Plato and the *De Princ.*

⁷⁴⁵ Cf. (Ramelli, 2014, p. 21).

⁷⁴⁶ (Ahbel-Rappe, 1998, p. 337-338).

have the notice of the “Cynic” Salustius⁷⁴⁷, but like Sarapio he was a philosophical syncretic and ascribed to many religious doctrines that were not part of the typical Cynic way of life in previous centuries. It seems that those mystics of late paganism embodied in their ways of life what has remained from the Hellenic *paideia* in forms that would be unusual in previous centuries and were thought to preserve the age of the gods in their own material existences. This phenomenon is related to the doctrine of embodiment analyzed in the chapter 3.

Damascius never met Sarapio. He only had the knowledge of his existence through the contact with Isidore (εἰ μὴ μοι αὐτὸς ὁ φιλόσοφος ὑπέδειξε τῷ λόγῳ τὸν Σαραπίωνα). Now, a monastic mystic living in contemplation isolated in the outskirts of Alexandria is not extremely unusual for the history of the region⁷⁴⁸, but the unusual and heterotopical aspect of Sarapio was that he was a silent and secretive Orphic mystic and as seen before, the theology of Damascius ends with the mysterious silence of Orphism⁷⁴⁹. The experiences of Sarapio, as they are related to us, were far above the initiation of Damascius at the Apollonian temple in Hierapolis, they had something god-like and were beyond even the ritualistic aim of the hieratic art in the pericomic world. Sarapio was a soul that was embodied in the service of anagogic purposes and in that he stands in profound contrast with Pamprepius⁷⁵⁰. The buffoon Pamprepius is the anti-mystical individual because he is devoted to rhetoric and to external purposes in conformation with Fate or Destiny, while Sarapio is someone that inhabit a non-history, a place beyond history, something that might be called heterostory rather than heterotopia.

As things unfold, it seems that the only character in Damascius’ anagogic prosopography that was superior to Sarapio was Isidore. And is with him and the most beautiful fragments of the *Philosophical History* that my story will unload⁷⁵¹:

δῆλος δ' ἦν οὐκ ἀγαπῶν τὰ παρόντα οὔτε τὰ ἀγάλματα προσκυνεῖν ἐθέλων, ἀλλ' ἤδη ἐπ' αὐτοὺς τοὺς θεοὺς ἰέμενος εἴσω κρυπτομένους, οὐκ ἐν ἀδύτοις, ἀλλ' ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ ἀπορρήτῳ, ὅτι ποτέ ἐστι, τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνωσίας. πῶς οὖν ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἴετο τοιοῦτους ὄντας; ἔρωτι δεινῷ,

⁷⁴⁷ *PH*, 60.

⁷⁴⁸ The text known as *De vita contemplativa*, ascribed to Philon of Alexandria, describes the existence of a series of mystics called Θεραπευταί that dedicated themselves to hymns, ascetic practices and solitary prayers. In Egypt, the Hermetists lived their contemplative lives and many Gnostic sects also proliferated.

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⁷⁵⁰ Cf. *PH*, 112.

⁷⁵¹ *PH*, 36A.

ἀπορρήτω καὶ τούτῳ. καὶ τίς δὲ ἄλλος ἢ ἄγνωστος καὶ ὁ ἔρωσ; καὶ τίνα τοῦτόν φαμεν, ἴσασιν οἱ πειραθέντες, εἰπεῖν δὲ ἀδύνατον, καὶ νοῆσαί γε οὐδὲν μᾶλλον ῥάδιον.

It was clear that he disliked the present circumstance, neither was he willing to reverence the statues of the gods, but he was moving immediately towards the gods themselves, that are hidden within, not in the temples, but in the very mystery [ἀπόρρητος], whatever he is, in the completely unknowable [τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνωσίας]. How did he move towards them when they are like this? Due to a terrible love, equally mysterious. What is love if not the unknowable? Those with the experience know what I say, because saying it is impossible and nor is in any way easier to comprehend it with thoughts.

The present circumstance (τὰ παρόντα) is a pagan euphemism for Christianity's prohibition of pagan worship⁷⁵². In order to avoid direct references to the Christians, the pagans used euphemisms. I believe that in terms of mystical experiences, the fragment 36A is the most significant of the *Philosophical History*. It opens with a dissatisfaction with the historical circumstances and ends with a blend of Plotinian, Chaldean and Hermetic religion of the inner temple or *religio mentis*. Despite Isidore's paganism and involvement with Chaldean rituals⁷⁵³ here he is mirroring Plotinus' response to Amelius when he invited Plotinus to the religious festivals: "they [the gods] ought to come to me, not I to them"⁷⁵⁴. At the same time, here the gods are already within, in the inner temple of the mystic, in the ἀπόρρητος that cannot be known by any means beyond intuition and direct experience.

What is the terrible and Ἄγνωστος Love that Isidore can know but no one else in the text can? Is it the Chaldean love in the fragments 39-46 of the Chaldean Oracles? This is an apophatic mystery, like the incomprehensible Father in the first fragment of the Oracles. The Oracle 39 says to us:

Ἔργα νοήσας γὰρ πατρικὸς νόος αὐτογένεθλος
πᾶσιν ἐνέσπειρεν δεσμὸν πυριβριθῆ ἔρωτος,
ὄφρα τὰ πάντα μένη χρόνον εἰς ἀπέραντον
ἐρῶντα, μηδὲ πέση τὰ πατρὸς νοερῶ ὑφασμένα

⁷⁵² Cf. (Athanasiasiadi, 1999a, p. 115-117, n. 77).

⁷⁵³ *PH*, 59F.

⁷⁵⁴ *Vita Plotini*, 10. Transl. A.H. Armstrong.

φέγγει· ὧ̄ σὺν ἔρωτι μένει κόσμου στοιχεῖα
θέοντα.

For after he thought his works, the self-generated Paternal Intellect sowed the bond of Love, heavy with fire, into all things in order that the All might continue to love for an infinite time and the things woven by the intellectual light of the Father might not collapse. With this Love, the elements of the world remain on course. (Transl. Majercik, altered).

This Love⁷⁵⁵ is the mystical intuition and apprehension of the Unknown, of the Father that generates the cosmos and sow [ἐνέσπειρεν] the symbols of demiurgic activity. Isidore has attained the homology with the self-generating Love of the Father, he is god-like:

αὐτὴν δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐν ταῖς ἱεραῖς εὐχαῖς πρὸς ὄλον τὸ θεῖον πέλαγος ἔλεγε, τὰ μὲν πρῶτα συναγειρομένην ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος εἰς ἑαυτήν, αὐθις δὲ ἐξισταμένην τῶν ἰδίων ἡθῶν καὶ ἀναχωροῦσαν ἀπὸ τῶν λογικῶν ἐννοιῶν ἐπὶ τὰς τῷ νῷ συγγενεῖς, ἐκ δ' αὖ τρίτων ἐνθουσιῶσαν καὶ παραλλάττουσαν εἰς ἀήθη τινὰ γαλήνην θεοπρεπῆ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνην.

He used to say that when the soul is in holy prayer facing the Ocean of the Divine, at first, separated from the body, it concentrates on itself, then it abandons its own conceptions, retiring itself from logical into intuitive thinking. Finally, in the third stage, it is possessed by the divine and drifts into a strange calmness, divine rather than human.

The three phases of the contemplative ascent are the movements from the divided and known – the abandonment of the common conceptions of the terrestrial life – to the calmness and serenity of the place beyond knowledge. The gods that are hidden within have been assimilated, homologized, as they are the cosmic principles and only the Unnamable and Unknowable (ἀγνωσία) remain. I believe that here, finally, we might have arrived at θεοκρασία or closer, if it can ever be conceived.

⁷⁵⁵ Cf. (Majercik, 1989, p. 160): “Eros is the first issue from the Paternal Intellect, even prior to the Ideas, as his binding quality is an essential ingredient if the Ideas are to function properly in their capacity as connective entities.”

We are coming close to conclude the chapter and the whole enterprise. Based on what has been shown, and that is a preliminary beginning for future adventures, it seems that the *Philosophical History* contains different degrees of initiation and ascent in the stories narrated by Damascius. The degrees correlate with both religious practice and/or natural talent or – in Iamblichean terms – classes of souls. The experience of Damascius at the temple of Apollo was a type of ecstatic initiatory type, a hieratic experience that opened his way to philosophy when he was reaching the age of 30. The experiences of Isidore – on the other hand – were not merely hieratic, or initiatory.

The master of Damascius was really endowed with a pure (ἀκέρατος) soul and thus had arrived in this world as someone endowed with a cosmic mission. That is why Isidore could naturally experience states of mystical union, θεοκρασία or ἔνωσις παντελής.⁷⁵⁶ Someone might wonder what relation might have existed between this ascensional or anagogic narrative and the crisis of the late Neoplatonic syncretic religion with the persecutions and tortures promoted by the Christian state and the Christian mobs. Someone might wonder if the young Damascius, when he arrived in Alexandria in his late teens to study rhetoric with Horapollon from a Syrian pagan family, did not feel the longing and the melancholy of the closing of an age. Something that we know is that the experiences, ecstasies and “enstasies” narrated in the *Philosophical History* are among the last pagan spiritual documents to remain accessible to our modern gaze.

Despite being almost forgotten by the historians of philosophy and religion, Isidore of Alexandria apparently escaped to a place far beyond the possibility of writing and communication, a world we cannot conceive through our historically mediated existences. My text cannot reach him from this point and at this time. If there is any truth in his experiences I cannot say, there are no more temples of Serapis or Isis to fall, no journeys into hidden shrines, no divine ecstasies conceivable. The only religious agony of our times – I am referring, of course, to the former Christian countries – is the slow and painful transformation of Christianity into secularism, a phenomenon so silent that we might never be amazed like the pagans were at the destructions in Menouthis or Canopus. The Cathedrals will slowly become shopping malls. Like Michel de Certeau correctly diagnosed, the *impetus* of the mystics took refuge in modern poetry⁷⁵⁷:

⁷⁵⁶ Cf. 9D: καὶ τάχα ἂν ἦδε ἡ πάθη ἀπροαίρετος ἂν εἴη, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο συμβαίνοι ἂν ἴσως καὶ ταῖς ἀκηράτοις.

⁷⁵⁷ Cf. (1982, 411).

De cet esprit de dépassement, séduit par une imprenable origine ou fin appelée Dieu, il semble que subsiste surtout, dans la culture contemporaine, le mouvement de partir sans cesse, comme si, de ne plus pouvoir se fonder sur la croyance en Dieu, l'expérience gardait seulement la forme et non le contenu de la mystique traditionnelle. C'est, dit dans un poème Nelly Sachs, *fortgehen ohne Rückschau*, « partir sans se retourner ». Et René Char: « En poésie, on n'habite que le lieu que l'on quitte, on ne crée que l'œuvre dont on se détache, on n'obtient la durée qu'en détruisant le temps. » Désancré de l'« origine » dont parlait Hadewijch, le voyageur n'a plus de fondement ni de fin. Livré à un désir sans nom, c'est le bateau ivre. Dès lors, ce désir ne peut plus parler à quelqu'un. Il semble devenu infans, privé de voix, plus solitaire et perdu qu'autrefois, ou moins protégé et plus radical, toujours en quête d'un corps ou d'un lieu poétique. Il continue donc à marcher, à se tracer en silence, à s'écrire.

For now, I believe that I have nothing else to say.

Conclusion: Prosopography and Anagogē

This work pretended to be a blend between the history of religions, the history of philosophy and a general “history of spirituality”, if spirituality can be understood as a series of techniques that human beings use in order to alter their consciousness through spiritual exercises and methodic practices. At the same time, what was aimed here was to delineate a certain historical relationship between the miraculous or mystical experiences of the individuals presented by Damascius in the *Philosophical History* and the theme of “pagan decadence.” I believe that what was attempted here was almost a micro-history of the last generation of pagan philosophers through a reading of the text of Damascius and some investigations on the countercultural aspect of paganism in the Roman society of the 5th and 6th centuries. The novelty of the argument here is an engagement with the *Philosophical History* as a possible anagogic text and the discussion of the related problem of “mysticism”. I believe that there is a certain logic underlying the chapters and I will try to demonstrate this logic here.

The work is divided in two thematic parts: a first part with biographical and historical inquiries and a second part with the cosmological, mythological and mystical material.

In the first chapter, I offered basic biographic and bibliographic discussion about the life of Damascius, his relationship with Isidore, his refuge in the Persian court, the possible establishment of a school at Harran and the polemic thesis of his authorship of the Dionysian corpus. The first chapter was basically introductory and aimed at preparing the reader through basic historical information. It was also deliberately conceived to be the most basic as this text is conceived as a ladder in terms of thematic importance.

The second chapter thematizes the perceptions of Damascius about the political and historical state of paganism in his times and try to correlate them with some basic Neoplatonic concepts about time, procession, creation and with the Christian contemporary text of the *Theosophia Tubingensis*. This chapter is a preparation for the cyclical philosophy of history discussed in the chapter 6.

The third chapter thematizes the influences of the Iamblichean theory of embodiment in the *Philosophical History* and I believe it contains themes that have not

been worked in the specialized bibliography until this point, at least to my knowledge. The main themes that run throughout the chapter are the theory of the soul as the ideological justification for the mission of the “pagan holy man” and the Christian pushing of the Neoplatonic philosopher to the margins, to the realm of the magical and occult and the historical and psychological consequences of this fact. I believe that there is no study until the present moment analyzing the uses of the word *αὐτοψία* in the *Philosophical History* or in Damascius in general. Isidore’s conversion of Dorus is paradigmatic of the mystical and miraculous powers of the wandering pagan sages.

The fourth chapter is a comparative study of the so-called story of Paralius and a comparative anthropology of pagan and Christian perceptions of the events that led to the destruction of the secret temple of Isis at Menouthis. I believe that this event has never been analyzed comparatively before and through this comparison I tried to delineate how the world of the pagans and the Christians operated through different social ontologies and deepened the analysis of pagan “marginality”. It is impossible to know if the original text of Damascius detailed the conflict between Paralius and Asclepiodotus in a more detailed manner, but the available fragments allow us to see that no reconciliation between the two parts was possible because the basic anthropocosmical conceptions of the two groups were radically different. The chapter also works with the idea of Christian “proto-secularization” or rationalization of the pagan myths through the monk Stephen.

The fifth chapter pretends to delineate how Damascius appropriates Hermetic *topoi* about the cosmic centrality of Egypt in order to combat the Christian narratives and to present himself and the Neoplatonic exegete in general as the privileged interpreter of myth and the possibilities of mystical ascension. The Egyptian myth in Damascius is articulated as part of a general Neoplatonic interpretation of mythology outlined in the fragment 2A.

The sixth chapter is an analysis of the fragment 18 in connection with the Proemium. In the fragment 18, Damascius articulates, according to Hoffmann, an anti-Christian philosophy of history. The novelty of my argument is the link between this fragment and the first 4 fragments of Athanassiadi’s edition, in this way linking his philosophy of history with discussion on the hieratic arts. The Christians are, for Damascius, part of the most decayed and divided historical era because they reject the hieratic arts – understood here as the scattered remnants of pagan practices – as preparatory techniques for the mystical ascent and the overcoming of the divided state of

embodiment. The Christian rejection of the cyclical cosmology characteristic of the pagan religions is seen as responsible for the “dissolution” of pagan ontological conceptions and cultural crisis.

The seventh and last chapter is divided in two parts: one about the fall of the Serapeum and the prophecies of Antoninus and Olympus and the second with an analysis of two sets of fragments: the fragment 87 with Damascius’ initiatory experience in a sacred cave of Apollo at Hierapolis and the fragments about the mysticism of Sarapio and Isidore. The experiences of Sarapio and Isidore are understood as being part of the higher mystical experience – a philosophical ascent called θεοκρασία, while the experience of the newly initiated Damascius at Hierapolis is seen as a preparatory stage, rather than the higher type of mystical union.

As a conclusion of the overall argument, I present the idea that the “transcendental prosopography” of the *Philosophical History* is an anagogic narrative in which the different individuals present in the text are symbols for the different states of ascent and mystical experience and that the historical experience of the crisis of pagan religions in the 5th and 6th centuries are central elements in the elaboration of a mystical discourse, in which the escape from the currents of time and history is seen as the highest goal for the Neoplatonic holy man. I also need to remark that many of the conclusions reached here are preliminary and germinal and that new conclusions depend on new evaluations of the philosophical, religious and material sources.

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Appendix I: Athena of the House C



Appendix II: Mutilated Relief



Appendix III: The Sources for Fragment 18 in Greek and English

Photius Fr. 22

Τριῶν δὲ ὄντων μερῶν ἢ εἰδῶν τῆς ψυχῆς, ἢ ὅπως ἂν τις ἐθέλοι καλεῖν, τριττὴν ἔφασκε γίνεσθαι πολιτείαν, ἔχουσιν μὲν ἐκάστην τὰς τρεῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ κρατοῦντι ἐνὶ τὸ πᾶν μορφουμένην· καὶ τὴν μὲν προΐεναι μάλιστα κατὰ λόγον, ἦν ἂν τις οἶμαι τὸν ἐπὶ Κρόνου βίον ἐπονομάσειεν ἢ τὴν χρυσοῦν γενεάν ἢ τὸ θεῶν ἀγχίσπορον γένος, οἷα ἐν σχήματι μύθου σεμνύνουσιν ἐν τῷ τρίποδι τῆς Μούσης καθήμενοι ποιηταί.

Since there are three parts in the soul or there are three aspects – whatever term we want to use – he had been accustomed to say that there exists a triple way of life [πολιτεία], each of which contains the three regimes, but as a whole receives its form of the only predominant way. The first proceeds mainly in accordance with the Holy Word; this is the one we could name, I believe, life in the time of Cronus, or the Golden Age, or “the race [of men] kin of the gods”, which are celebrated in the form of fables by poets seated on the tripod of the Muse.

Photius Fr. 238

ὅτι τριῶν ὄντων εἰδῶν τῆς ψυχῆς τριττὴ καὶ ἡ πολιτεία, καὶ ἔχει μὲν ἐκάστη τὰς τρεῖς, ἀλλ’ ἐνὶ διαμορφοῦται καὶ ὀνομάζεται τῷ ἐπικρατοῦντι. καὶ λόγῳ μὲν ἰθύνεται, ὡς ὁ ἐπὶ Κρόνου βίος, ἢ λεγομένη χρυσοῦν γενεὰ ἢ τὸ θεῶν ἀγχίσπορον γένος, οἷα ἐν σχήματι μύθου σεμνύνουσιν οἱ ἐν τῷ τρίποδι τῆς Μούσης καθήμενοι ποιηταί· θυμῷ δὲ διανισταμένην πολιτείαν τὴν ἐπὶ πολέμους καὶ μάχας, καὶ ὡς ἐπίπαν φάναι, τὴν περὶ πρωτείων καὶ δόξης ἀγωνιζομένην, οἷαν γενέσθαι τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς ἱστορίας ἐκάστοτε θρυλουμένην ἀκούομεν· ἐπιθυμία δὲ τὴν πανταχῇ διαρρέουσιν καὶ ὑπὸ τρυφῆς ἀκολάστου διεφθαρμένην, ταπεινὰ καὶ γυναικεῖα φρονοῦσαν, δειλία σύνοικον καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ὑψηλῇ καλινδουμένην, φιλοχρήμονα, μικροπρεπῆ, δουλεύειν ἀσφαλῶς ἐθέλουσαν, οἷα τῶν ἐν τῇ νῦν γενέσει πολιτευομένων ἡ ζωὴ.

Since there are three aspects in the soul, there is also a triple way of life: undoubtedly each contains the three regimes, but it receives its form and its name of the only regime which predominates. By the Holy Word is governed – like life in the time of Cronus – what we call the Golden Age, or “the race [of

men] related to the gods”, which is celebrated in the form of fables by the poets seated on the tripod of Muse. By the Irascible Hearth is inspired the regime which rushes towards the wars and fights and who, in general, fights for the first ranks and for glory, as we hear that was the one which we talk about on every occasion in History. By Concupiscence is governed the regime which is spreading on all sides, which is corrupted by an intemperate enjoyment, which has only base and womanish thoughts and that is inseparable from cowardice, that wallows in every kind of mire, that is greedy for riches, that is petty, that only wants the security of slavery, such as life that men living in generation nowadays.

Suda, IV 852, 19-853, 3 (n. 164 ψυχή); IV 637, 10 (n. 78 ὕηνεία); 637, 17-25 (n. 79 ὕηνεία)

ὅτι μέρη τῆς ψυχῆς ἢ εἶδη τρία· λογιζόμενον, θυμούμενον, ἐπιθυμοῦν. ἀναγκαῖον οὖν καὶ τριττὴ πολιτεία ἐγένετο, ἔχουσα ἐκάστη τὰς τρεῖς, ἀλλὰ τῷ κρατοῦντι ἐνὶ τὸ πᾶν μορφουμένη. καὶ τὴν μὲν προϊέναι κατὰ λόγον, ἣν ἂν τις τὴν ἐπὶ Κρόνου ὀνομάσειε ζωὴν καὶ πολιτείαν· τὴν δὲ κατὰ θυμόν, διανισταμένην εἰς πολέμους καὶ μάχας περὶ πρωτείων καὶ δόξης, οἷα τὰ ἐν ταῖς ἱστορίαις θρυλλούμενα· τὴν δὲ κατ’ ἐπιθυμίαν, πανταχῇ διαρρέουσαν καὶ ὑπὸ τρυφῆς ἀκολάστου διεφθαρμένην, ταπεινὰ καὶ γυναικεῖα φρονοῦσαν, δειλία σύνοικον καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ὕηνεία καλινδουμένην, φιλοχρήμονα, δουλοπρεπερῆ, οὐδὲν τίμιον οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερον διαπραττομένην, ἀνδραποδώδη καὶ ἀσθενῆ, γαστρὶ καὶ αἰδοίοις ἀεὶ τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν μετροῦσαν οὔτε θυμῷ γενναίῳ χρωμένην· οἷον σῶμα παρειμένον ἐν μιᾷ χώρᾳ, κείμενον ἐκνευρισμένον, οὐδὲ κινεῖσθαι ἔτι δυνάμενον· καὶ πολλῷ χαμαιπετεστέραν ἐπεδείκνυτο τὴν ζωὴν τῶν νῦν ἐν τῇ γενέσει πολιτευομένων ἀνθρώπων.

There are three parts or forms to the soul: that which reasons, that which is irascible, that which desires. It was therefore necessary that there also be a triple way of life, each containing the three ways but receiving its form, as a whole, of the only way which predominates. And the first regime proceeds according to Holy Word: we could call it Life and locate it in the time of Cronus. The second proceeds according to the Irascible Heart and rushes into wars and fights for the front ranks and for glory, as we constantly talk about in History. The third proceeds according to Concupiscence: it spreads to all sides, it is corrupted by intemperate enjoyment, it only has base and feminine thoughts, it is inseparable from cowardice and wallows in all kinds of mire, it is eager for riches, servile, it accomplishes nothing estimable or free, it is worthy of slaves and idiots, it always regulates its happiness on the stomach and on the penis and never shows a noble heart; it is like a body abandoned somewhere, lying angry and incapable to move again; and it is in even more vile colors that he represented the lives of men who now lead their existence in the world of generation.

Appendix IV: Preliminary Portuguese Translation of the Proemium

A tradução que se apresenta aqui é preliminar e segue a ordenação dos fragmentos por P. Athanassiadi. É, sobretudo, um exercício de interpretação do texto como ferramenta intelectual. Alguns fragmentos ininteligíveis foram suprimidos, como o fragmento 4B de Athanassiadi. O sentido final da História Filosófica como texto anagógico nunca será recuperado sem uma possível redescoberta do manuscrito completo, qualquer tentativa de tradução moderna é, no máximo, uma aproximação. Os fragmentos foram traduzidos diretamente do grego, nem sempre recorrendo a soluções símeis às de Athanassiadi.

História Filosófica – Vida de Isidoro: Proêmio

1

Que os egípcios são a mais antiga e venerável raça de homens de que já ouvimos falar, ninguém é ignorante o suficiente de não ter apreendido de muitos ditos e escritos.

2

A Sapiência deste tipo, oculta no templo da verdade expressada pelo mitólogo, é, desta forma, suavemente e quietamente revelada àquele que pode elevar a luz sagrada de sua alma ao Divino.

B Os sacerdotes egípcios executam mistérios esotéricos em lugares secretos, insondáveis e livres da esperança de qualquer recompensa nesta vida, em busca de sua própria salvação celestial e da esperança de bem-estar para todos os egípcios.

3

A Desta forma, diz Damásio: “Os deuses venerados pelos egípcios são principalmente Osíris e Ísis, ele é o criador de todas as coisas, estabelecendo a matéria por forma e número; ela, nutrindo e aspergindo a demiurgia incessante pelos infindáveis fluxos da vida infinita.

B Alguns dizem que Osíris é Dioniso, outros que é outro deus. Ele foi cortado em pedaços pelo demônio Tifeu, o que aos egípcios muita tristeza causou. Seu desmembramento é lembrado e ritualizado para todo sempre.

C Osíris, Dioniso.

4

A A arte hierática e a filosofia não principiam das mesmas fontes celestiais. Da causa primeira de todas as coisas vem a filosofia, direcionando-se para a compreensão do ser por todas as ordens intermediárias: a mais excelente, o Divino, a que vem depois do divino e a que chamam terceira, o mundo das aparências. A arte hierática, que é o culto dos deuses, é de onde, da terceira e mundana esfera, as correntes da ascensão da alma derivam. De raízes pericósmicas, este é seu corolário: a imortalidade da alma – sobre a qual os egípcios filosofaram – e a determinação no Hades dos infindáveis destinos de acordo com as virtudes e os vícios, e também as infinitas transformações das formas de vida, como em diferentes tempos as almas transformam-se em corpos de humanos, animais e plantas. E sobre todas estas coisas, nada é restrito aos filósofos de cada lado [do mediterrâneo]; de modo que é fácil ajustar as teorizações dos egípcios às dos gregos. Os egípcios foram, desta forma, os primeiros a filosofar sobre tais coisas. E foi dos egípcios que os pitagóricos as trouxeram para os gregos.

B Essa seria a absorção no divino, sem dúvida a união total, a ascensão de nossas almas a Deus enquanto elas retornam e se unificam após as múltiplas divisões. Pode-se mesmo dizer que após se fragmentarem e tomarem corpos terrestres, elas se desintegram a partir de si mesmas e dispersam-se por muitas maneiras por sofrimentos não somente tifonianos, mas também por outras aflições terrestres, creio eu, ainda mais tortuosas.