

FAMILY, POLITICAL POWER AND MONEY IN THE NEOPLATONIC SCHOOL OF ATHENS

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ABSTRACT. How was the Neoplatonic School of Athens able to maintain itself for more than a century at Athens, in a hostile environment, while being the target of the opposition of the Christians who were not only in the majority, but also held political power? These are the questions this text seeks to answer. Although it does not promise any earth-shaking discovery, it will try to sketch a clear and precise portrait of the Neoplatonic School of Athens on the family, political and economic level.

KEYWORDS: Late antiquity, Neoplatonism, Plutarch of Athens, Proclus, Damascius.

1. *The family of Plutarch*

The history of the Neoplatonic School of Athens is associated with that of a family that goes back to a certain Nestorios, who occupied a religious function during the second half of the 4th century. When, toward the end of the 4th century, the supporters of Iamblichus managed to gain the upper hand at Athens, Plutarch, grandson of this Nestorios, became the first leader of the Platonic School to join this tendency, which made him, in the eyes of his successors and even of modern historians of philosophy, the founder of the Neoplatonic School of Athens. This Plutarch belonged to a wealthy family, attached to the values of religion at least since the time of the aforementioned Nestorios. This Nestorios had a son, Hierios, and a daughter, Asclepigeneia (the elder). Since Marinus specifies that it was she who transmitted the secrets of theurgy to Proclus, we may suppose that Asclepigeneia died without descendants, for it was to her children that she should have transmitted the secrets that belonged within her family, which went back at least as far as

Nestorios, grandfather of Plutarch, who was succeeded by Syrianus at his death in 432. Hierios taught philosophy “under Proclus”, who became diadoch upon the death of Syrianus in 437. This Hierios had two sons, Plutarch and Archiadas.¹

We know nothing about this Plutarch, except that he was the contemporary of Pamprepius, grammarian and poet and ambitious politician (*Philos. hist.* 112A–C and 115C)² and Hermeias the rhetor, who came to Athens around 460. Archiadas, who should have been born around 415, must have been slightly younger than Proclus, who was born in 412. In 432, Plutarch, on his deathbed, commended Archiadas and Proclus to Syrianus, who had been their teacher. Syrianus, who had become head of the School, therefore took them into his large house, close to the Asclepieion and the temple of Dionysus and visible from the Acropolis; the house had been left to them by Plutarch, who had also lived there. Proclus became the mentor of Archiadas, and a very strong friendship developed between them (*V. Procl.* 12, 27–36). Archiadas married Plutarchê, with whom he had a daughter, Asclepigeneia (the younger, *V. Procl.* 29, 5–6).³

It was in favor of this Asclepigeneia that the miraculous healing obtained by Proclus’ prayers occurred (*V. Procl.* 29). The event has been situated in the course of the decade 440–450, on the basis of this remark: “Indeed, at that time, the city still had the good fortune of benefitting from the presence of the god, and the temple of the Savior had not yet been sacked.” (*V. Procl.* 29, 19–21)⁴ If Asclepigeneia was “still a little girl raised by her parents” (*V. Procl.* 29, 7–8) between 440 and 450, that means that she was born between 430 and 440, very probably around 435, if one takes into account another anecdote concerning Theagenes (see *infra*), who was to become her husband.

The *Souda* relates the following anecdote about Theagenes, which should probably be situated in 447, right after the pillage of Athens by Attila: “Whereas most of this property had been pillaged, and when he realized that Theagenes, who was still a child, was sad at the sight of the destruction and devastation, Archiadas declared: ‘you must recover your confidence at once, and thank the gods for having saved our lives, instead of letting yourself be discouraged by the loss of our property. Indeed, if Athena Poliades had ordered us to spend this property for the Panathenaia, we would have made the necessary expenditures. In fact, we must consider the present trial as more filled with glory and piety than that of the

¹ On the history of the School of Athens, see the Introduction of Saffrey in Saffrey–Westerink 1968, ix–xxxv, and the genealogical table at p. xxxv.

² That is Damascius, *The Philosophical history* (= *Philos. hist.*), Athanassiadi 1999, 269 n. 301. For a critical review, see Brisson 2001.

³ Marinus, *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur* (= *V. Procli*), Saffrey–Segonds 2001.

⁴ On the aggressivity of the Christians, see Henri Dominique Saffrey (1990 a, b).

Panathenaia or any other festival.’” (*Philos. hist.* 105A) This is why he was known as the “most pious Archiadas”. As far as Theagenes is concerned, to whom this edifying response was given, Archiadas may have adopted him, or at least have already chosen him as his future son-in-law, since he himself had only a daughter and no son to transmit his property to. If this was the case, the anecdote would take on a particularly poignant aspect, for it was when contemplating the ruin of the property that was to be his, and which was also the property of the School of Athens, that Theagenes would have been overwhelmed with despair. This would place the birth of Theagenes between 430 and 440, and hence around 435, like Asclepigeneia: at the time, he must have been between 12 and 17 years old.

Born at Athens, Theagenes came from a noble family: his father’s name may have been Ichtyas (*Philos. hist.* 100A, B). He was said to have been the descendant of such great figures as Miltiades and Plato. His marriage with Asclepigeneia, the only daughter of the wealthy aristocrat Archiadas, might explain the fact that Theagenes quickly became well-known. Theagenes seems to have made concessions to Christianity. These concessions, together with the abrupt character of Marinus, seem to have precipitated the break between Theagenes and Marinus.

From the marriage of Theagenes to Asclepigeneia, daughter of Archiadas, a son, Hegias, was born in about 465. Despite his youth (he may have been around 15 at the time), he was accepted into the classes Proclus gave on the *Chaldaean Oracles* near the end of his life (*V. Procli* 26, 46-55), that is, between 480 and 485. Hegias played a part in the School between Proclus’s death in 485 and the arrival of Damascius as head of the School. He therefore knew Marinus, who led the School until his death, which must have occurred between 495 and 500, but he was primarily the student of Isidorus. After the death of Isidorus, he must have taught philosophy in the School, which he probably directed, together with Asclepiodotus, at the very end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century. He must have been quite bad at it, however, for according to Damascius, under his direction philosophy fell into deep disrepute in Athens, probably because Hegias’ fascination with religion entailed a lack of interest in philosophical questions (*Philos. hist.* 145A, B).

Hegias had two sons, who must have been born at the end of the 5th or the beginning of the 6th century: Eupeithios and Archiadas, named after his great-grandfather. Eupeithios, gifted with intelligence, had a taste only for private life. Archiadas, for his part, had no predisposition for philosophy: he was a pious man, although involved with life in the world (*Philos. hist.* 145A, B). Thus, the influence of Plutarch’s family in the Neoplatonic School of Athens died out.

Politics

In order to keep teaching Plato, whose philosophy was considered as a theology that was to be harmonized with all other pagan theologies, in an Athens where the Christians had acquired political power, it was necessary to have considerable protection. Plutarch's family also played a political role of the first importance at Athens.

The relations Proclus maintained with Archiadas, son of Plutarch, illustrate this kind of relation. Proclus, who had acquired the moral virtues by reading the political works of Aristotle, in addition to Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*, encouraged Archiadas, to whom he also gave lessons in financial liberality, "not only to concern himself with the affairs of the city in general, but also to show himself to be benevolent with regard to each person in particular, displaying all the kinds of political virtue, and above all justice". (*V. Procli* 14, 10-14) Everything indicates that the wealth and political power of Archiadas were a powerful aid to the School, although Proclus himself intervened from time to time at a political level: "Sometimes as well, the philosopher himself became involved in political deliberations: he attended the public assemblies on the affairs of the city, gave his opinion wisely, addressed requests <to the> governors to defend what was right, and not only encouraged them, but, in a certain way, by making use of the freedom of speech proper to a philosopher, he constrained them to give each person his due" (*V. Procli* 15, 1-8). We may imagine that Proclus had to expend a great deal of effort to defend himself against the attacks, which the Christians launched against him. Archiadas helped him, and this was true, perhaps even more so, in the case of Theagenes, who, as we have just seen, Archiadas must have adopted in order to make him his son-in-law.

Theagenes was a figure of the first importance in Athens. Damascius describes him as an archon: the title of eponymous archon, which was purely honorific at Athens, was sought after by the members of the local aristocracy (*Philos. hist.* 100A). Theagenes was a member of the Roman Senate, and a member of the Senate of the capital, Constantinople. If the panegyric composed in his honor by Pamprepus was written before 476, this means that Theagenes was already a senator by this time. He was a skilled orator with a pleasant character, assisting cities and individuals by his wealth. At Athens, he gave his support to teachers and to doctors. Damascius even describes him as a philosopher. However, relations became difficult between the philosopher, Damascius, and the wealthy politician, Theagenes. According to Damascius, Theagenes let himself be led by flatterers to despise philosophy, which implies that he compromised with the Christians in one way or another.

All indications are that the family's political influence continued after the death of Theagenes, particularly with Hegias, whose behavior Damascius criti-

cizes (*Philos. hist.* 145A–B). Although “Hegias was better than his father in the virtue of eloquence”, he does not seem to have helped the School as much as his father: “In Hegias there was also something of the generosity of Theagenes, but he was more attentive than the latter in his expenditures in favor of his friends and of the poor”. What is more, Theagenes seems to have been less interested in philosophy than in the *Chaldean Oracles*, to which he had been initiated by Proclus, as we said above. This is probably what Damascius implies in this severe judgment on the period in which Hegias must have led the Academy: “We have never heard it said that philosophy was more despised at Athens than what we had the opportunity of seeing under Hegias”. Damascius, moreover, hints that Hegias was surrounded by Christians, probably on his wife’s side of the family: “Those people corrupted Hegias’ life, pushing him to a practice of philosophy that was not legitimate. It was by following another path that he desired to know everything that allows nature to be explained. Sometimes, following this other method, he even departed from correct reasoning. Wishing to be the most pious of men, he carried out the sacred rites on the territory of Attica for those close to him without notifying them, since he had not persuaded them to carry out those rites himself; thus, he overturned many religious practices that were very long established, with a zeal that was more inconsiderate than pious. This is why he was denounced in the city, and gained dangerous enemies, who wished to seize his vast wealth and set traps for him, relying on the current laws”. This passage is enigmatic, but it suggests that part of Hegias’ circle was made up of Christians, and that these people had led him away from the paths of Platonism, particularly with regard to “nature”: perhaps an allusion to the question of creation and hence of the origin of the world. In addition, his one-upmanship in the field of pagan religion inspired the disapproval of his fellow-citizens and drew upon him the ill-will of people who wanted to see him fall, by despoiling him or hauling him into court. It is understandable that the members of the School considered this behavior unnecessarily provocative.

Money

Perhaps more than its political support, it was the School’s financial independence that allowed it to maintain itself for so long in the hostile atmosphere of the Christians, who, if we may believe some testimonies, tried to plunder it on several occasions.

The Neoplatonic School of Athens did not directly continue the School organized by Plato: its geographical location and its economic basis were different. The Neoplatonic School of Athens was no longer situated in the Academy, but in a large house at the foot of the Acropolis, which had been owned by Plutarch, and which he had transmitted first to his grandson Archiadas, and then, through him, to The-

agenes, his daughter's husband, and to their descendants. Finally, the School was a private philosophical community living off the income from its property. Hence the importance of its benefactors, and of the main one, who belonged to the family of Plutarch and must have been the manager of this property.

In Proclus' time, the Academy possessed a capital, constituted from a bequest by Plutarch and by private gifts, that produced more than a thousand *nomismata* per year: "The property possessed by the successors of Plato did not have their origin in Plato's fortune, as most people believe. Plato was poor, and possessed only the garden of the Academy, the income from which was three *nomismata*: the income from their total fortune amounted to one thousand *nomismata*⁵ or more under Proclus, because many people, at their death, bequeathed their possessions to the school" (*Philos. hist.* 102). What did this wealth consist in, land or money? Probably both, but in what proportion? We cannot say. Proclus himself was one of the donors: "In addition, Proclus inspired a kind of emulation in Archiadas, for he offered him a model of liberality with regard to money and munificence, because he made gifts, sometimes to his friends, sometimes to his relatives, whether they were foreigners or co-citizens, and because in every circumstance he showed himself above the desire to acquire wealth. He also attributed large sums for public buildings, and at his death he left property, first to Archiadas, and then to his fatherland, as well as to Athens." (*V. Procli* 17, 14-22) Everything leads us to believe that the gift Proclus made to Archiadas was in fact made to the School, of which Archiadas was still the manager in 412. These financial resources guaranteed the School's independence with regard to the City, from which it did not expect grants, and from its auditors, who did not have to pay fees as was the case at Alexandria. We may assume that this property was confiscated, although a text by Olympiodorus implies that even in 560, the essential part of the School's property had been preserved.

With Marinus, relations seem to have deteriorated between the philosopher and Theagenes, son-in-law and heir of Archiadas, the benefactor on whom the political and financial support of School relied. Initially, Damascius has nothing but praise: "Marinus kept to the traditional gravity of philosophers, and respected Theagenes as was appropriate. With regard to Marinus, then, Theagenes was not a braggart, rough, or haughty in his approach nor difficult in his relations, nor, in general, did he seek to be of the condition of an ordinary man, but he showed himself to be welcoming, and escorted him, rendering him the honors that were due, as should be rendered by a man who occupied the first position in the city,

⁵ A *nomisma* (in Greek) is a *solidus* (in Latin). In those days, a doctor was on an annual basis paid 35 solidi, and a stone carver 12 solidi. So 1 000 *nomismata* was a large amount of money.

and perhaps in the entire Roman Empire" [...] That is why Marinus tried to increase the grandeur of his reputation in all things." (*Philos. hist.* 100 A, B) The portrait sketched here of Theagenes, as a public figure, is flattering. In contrast, Marinus was a difficult man: "Although Marinus was abrupt in his relations, he was pleasant in his actions and manifested great perspicacity". What seems to have been the turning point, however, was the change in relations between Theagenes and the Christians: "Yet since he was moody and could not stand it when people paid him no mind, and wanted, on the contrary, to be flattered by everyone, and above all by those who practiced philosophy, that he looked down upon the others and spat upon them, and especially those who seemed to be in power and who tried to shine in the imperial government. Since he preferred the new dogmas to the ancient customs of piety, he did not realize that he was falling into the way of life of the vulgar, separating himself from the Hellenes and his more ancient ancestors. Nor did he realize that the people around him were no longer true friends, but deceptive flatterers. He no longer maintained his previous respect for philosophy, and whereas in theory, he surrounded himself with philosophers, in fact they were flatterers." (*Philos. hist.* 100 A) This convoluted text insinuates that Theagenes had compromised himself with the Christians and had separated himself from the Platonic philosophers. Without having converted, Theagenes seems to have distanced himself from the School of Athens, probably because it was the best way to save his fortune, his social position, and his political power. Indeed, it seems that political tensions were high at this period, between 495 and 500. At one point, Marinus, fearing for his life, had to leave Athens and take refuge at Epidaurus. At Marinus' death, which happened a few months later, Isidorus even considered leaving Athens (*Philos. hist.* 101 C).

After Marinus' death, the School of Athens was led jointly by Asclepiodotus and by Hegias. Under their direction, the School entered a period of decadence on the philosophical level, for Hegias seems to have been more interested in pagan religion than in philosophy. What is more, his provocation in the field of religion increased the number of his enemies, who sought to plunder him or take him to court. Beginning in 515, Damascius tried to set things right, particularly by re-establishing the entire program of studies (of Aristotle, Plato, and the *Chaldean Oracles*). It may have been precisely this renaissance that was the cause of the order given by Justinian in 529, under the consulate of Flavius Decius Junior and sent to Athens, which forbade the teaching of philosophy.⁶ Damascius left Athens, but he thought this exile would only be temporary.⁷

⁶ Malalas, *Chronographia* xviii 47, p. 379 Thurm. On the subject, see Beaucamp 2002 and 2008.

⁷ Cf. Hoffmann 1994.

The Neoplatonic School of Athens seems to have been closely linked to the life of a family of aristocrats, originally associated with practice of pagan cults, possessing a considerable personal fortune and exerting no inconsiderable political influence. It was in a house belonging to this family that the activities of the School took place, and it was the head of this family who managed the property that ensured the financial independence of the School and who, it seems, appeased the conflicts that might arise between these convinced pagans and the Christians in power. What is more, at the beginning and the end of its history, the members of this family played a role in the intellectual life of the School, for better or worse.

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