CHAPTER FIVE

USING CALCIDIUS’S COMMENTARIUS
IN CAROLINGIAN ASTRONOMY

The fourth-century commentary by Calcidius on Plato’s Timaeus offered far more astronomy than the works we have studied in previous chapters, yet Calcidian astronomy found no audience before the second quarter of the ninth century, and there is no direct evidence of critical study of the manuscripts of his translation and commentary until the last quarter of the century.1 Our earliest witness to the use of Calcidius comes in an excerpt in a theological collection from the circle of Alcuin. Here some four lines from the commentary were adapted as a summary of the harmonious order of God’s creation, especially its material components.2 Previously accepted evidence that the Commentarius was at the court of Charlemagne has been seriously questioned, although there remain reasons to believe that a complete manuscript of Calcidius’s translation of the Timaeus with his commentary existed at the Aachen court ca. 800.3 The library catalogue of Reichenau on Lake Constance

1 The standard critical edition is Waszink, Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus (CCT hereafter); the second edition differs primarily in the addition of eleven pages to the introduction of the first edition. For introduction to the commentary and extensive bibliography, see Gersh, Middle Platonism, vol. 2, pp. 421–92. Additional information about Calcidius, his correspondent Osius, and the manuscripts appears in Dutton, “Medieval Approaches.” Waszink, Studien zum Timaioskommentar, vol. 1, is of limited use for Calcidius’s astronomy, since it omits the basic astronomy of cc. 65–91 and treats only cc. 92–97, 108–112, and 114–118 among the astronomical-cosmological sections. On the translations by both Cicero and Calcidius and the latter’s commentary in the Carolingian era see Somfai, “Transmission and Reception.” Suggestions for the wider awareness of the Timaeus and Calcidius’s commentary in the ninth century appear in McKitterick, “Knowledge of Plato’s Timaeus.”

2 CCT 305.21–306.2 (c. 304). The full capitulum in which this excerpt appears is printed in Marenbon, From the Circle of Alcuin, p. 167, item C; it is followed in the collection by a glossarial note on terms in the excerpt. The complete collection of excerpts, known as the “Dicta Candidi,” whose author has been identified as Wizo, a student of Alcuin, is described by Ineichen-Eder, “Theologisches und philosophisches Lehrmaterial;” Calcidius is mentioned at pp. 193, 196 (# 14), 199.

3 Bischoff, Manuscripts and Libraries, pp. 29, 64, 139, used the distinctive script to date Paris 2164 at s. IX in. as one in a group copied in northeastern France. This dating has been cast in doubt by Huglo, “Trois livres manuscrits,” pp. 278–82, whose codicological study gives Paris 2164 a date of s. X¾. However, because of the script,
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recorded a copy of *Kalchidius in Thymeum Platonis* sometime after 842 during the ninth century.⁴

1. *The Paris Compend: the Earliest Use of Calcidius for Astronomy*

While knowledge and some use of Calcidius’s work may go back to the court of Charlemagne and the teaching of Alcuin, it seems clear that use of the *Commentarius* for astronomy did not begin until much later, apparently during the second quarter of the century. And for astronomy it was the commentary rather than the *Timaeus* that deserved and found use among Carolingian scholars. Ninth-century references to Plato could as often be to Calcidius’s commentary as to the *Timaeus*, and other sources such as Macrobius’s commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis* gave many ideas and doctrines under the name of Plato.⁵ Calcidius included in his commentary a long string of paragraphs (cc. 56–118) on astronomy and cosmology that carried out his goal of demonstrating the rationality of Plato’s physical macrocosm in more contemporary (Middle Platonist and Aristotelian) terms.⁶

Our first significant excerpts from Calcidian astronomy appear anonymously in the text we have called the Paris Compend, probably brought together during the 830s and by 840, which contains texts of some length from Macrobius and Pliny as well as Calcidius.⁷ The

Huglo proposes that Paris 2164 is an exact copy of a model brought to Fleury sometime after 816 by Helisachar, a friend of Alcuin and later chancellor for Louis the Pious and abbot of Saint Aubin at Angers.

⁴ *Mittelalterliche Bibliothekskataloge Deutschlands und der Schweiz*, vol. 1, p. 266.

⁵ Dutton, “Medieval Approaches,” p. 193, supports the notion that the two could be confused, offering a nice example from Eriugena’s *Periphyseon*. We should notice that Macrobius named the *Timaeus* ten times and Plato at least 32 times in his commentary.

⁶ See Appendix for a list of these numbered sections with their contents.

⁷ I base the dating of the Paris Compend in part on the following: Leonardi, “I Codici” (1960), pp. 443–4 (nr. 171) with bibliography; Bischoff, “Hadoard,” *Mittelalterliche Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 58–9; Corsetti, “Note sur les excerpta,” pp. 113, 114 n. 7, 127 n. 7. These sources, with Corsetti depending on personal notices from Bischoff, would tend to place Paris 13955 overall in the third quarter of the century. In addition, Bischoff seems to have been correct in regarding the folia with the glossed copy of Capella’s astronomy as an insertion in the ms. towards the end of the century. An earlier copy of Capella, possibly with all nine books, may have been used as a reference before this copy of Book VIII alone was made available. However, more detailed study of the hands in the manuscript by Wesley Stevens in 1993 and later produced the identification of one copyist involved in the astronomical excerpts in Paris 13955 as the