7. A LOGICAL JOUST IN NIKEPHOROS BLEMMYDES’ AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹

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In his seminal book Commentators and Commentaries on Aristotle’s Sophistici elenchi, Sten Ebbesen is rarely complimentary about the Byzantine scholars who worked on logic. He seems, nevertheless, to respect, at least to some degree, Nikephoros Blemmydes (1197/8–ca. 1272), the thirteenth-century monk and scholar who composed, among other philosophical and theological works, an introductory compendium in two books, the first summarizing logic and the second physics.² Ebbesen’s verdict on Blemmydes’ Epitome logica is the following:

Blemmydes’ compendium is no brilliant work and contains few, if any, surprises for the reader. But it is neither verbose nor foolish… Blemmydes was no mere copist… although almost all examples and explanations that occur in the chapters on fallacies have parallels in the scholia and Anonymus Heiberg, we never find a long passage verbatim repeated from them. Blemmydes used them, but he rephrased the passages he borrowed, and he did so in a way that proves he understood them.³

In fact, Blemmydes’ logical textbook is said to have been both the most circulated compendium of logic during the Byzantine era as well as very influential in the West after its 1607 Latin translation.⁴ This is not, however, the work by Blemmydes that I intend to focus on here. Rather, I want to study more closely some paragraphs from another work by him,

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namely, his autobiography in two books, which has been edited and translated under the title A Partial Account by Joseph Munitiz.\(^5\)

The Partial Account is Blemmydes' spiritual testament that was originally delivered to the monks of his foundation, the monastery of the Lord Christ Who Is, when he reached his sixty-sixth year. The first book was delivered in May 1264 and the second in April 1265. The contents of the two books overlap at times, but they are mostly complementary and deal with different aspects of Blemmydes' life, displaying a difference of emphasis and selection. The first traces the path that led him to the monastic life and its consequences, whereas the second narrates his career as a scholar and a theologian. In general, the material we find in Blemmydes' text cannot be said to present what we nowadays would expect from the autobiography of someone who was treated both by his contemporaries as well as by the immediately following generations as the leading philosopher of his time, as the true and paradigmatic philosopher. For instance, Blemmydes' pupil, the historian George Akropolites (1217/20–82), describes him as 'the most accomplished in the academic branches related to philosophy',\(^6\) while George of Cyprus (ca. 1241–90), the Patriarch Gregory II, declares that Blemmydes was not only the most learned among the Greeks of the time, but even 'the most learned Greek ever'.\(^7\) In the two books of his autobiography, however, Blemmydes includes little information about his intellectual development and writings, scarce information about his teaching—mainly about his problematic relations to his students and not about the philosophical content of his courses—, no information about his philosophical leanings and preferences.

What Blemmydes chooses to narrate, instead, are events which sound so weird and bizarre that they have raised modern scholars' eyebrows and

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