CHAPTER 19

Valuing Antiquity in Antiquity by Means of Allegoresis

Ilaria L.E. Ramelli

The ancients were not people of no account, but were also able to understand the nature of the cosmos and had the ability to philosophize on it by means of symbols and enigmata.

Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 35

1 Introduction: Methodological Guidelines and Main Arguments

An important case of how antiquity was valued in antiquity comes, I think, from philosophy, and particularly from allegoresis, that is, the allegorical interpretation of texts, rituals, traditions, iconography, cultic epithets, etc. Allegory is not only a manner of composing, but also an interpretive method: for the latter I use the term ‘allegoresis’.¹ The term ἀλληγορία is far more recent than the thing allegory and the practice of allegoresis, and it entered rhetorical terminology relatively late. I suspect this is because theoretical reflection on allegory was born within philosophy and not within rhetoric. Thus, theories of allegory had from the beginning, and continued to have, broad implications for the history of thought.

Allegoresis—as I have extensively demonstrated elsewhere,² against tendencies to reduce Stoic allegoresis to an ‘etymologizing’ with little philosophical relevance³—was part and parcel of philosophy in Stoicism from the Old Stoa to Roman or Imperial Stoicism or Neostoicism (although not all Stoics were allegorists; for instance, not Seneca); and then in so-called Middle and Neopla-

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¹ Copeland and Struck 2010, 1–11, with the review article by Ramelli 2011c, and Rolet 2012.
² Ramelli 2004a, chs. 1 and 9.
tonism, when the remarkable issue arose of which ancient texts were eligible to be allegorized, and thereby valued as bearers of truth. There existed also non-allegorical approaches to the valorization of the past, for instance Posidonius’ theory of the ‘golden age’ discussed in Seneca’s Letter 90.

After an analysis of Stoic allegoresis from Old to Imperial Stoicism, and the way it bears on the valuing of antiquity, I will argue against the thesis of the merely apologetical role of Stoic allegoresis, i.e., its use as a defense and legitimization of Stoic philosophy. I will propose that the Stoics’ use of allegory did not aim only at reinforcing their philosophical system—otherwise allegory should have faded away over time instead of becoming more and more prominent—but also, exactly, at valuing antiquity: allegory could value ancient cultural traditions (such as ancient myths, rituals, poetry, visual representations of deities, etc.), partially eroded by rational criticism, and integrate them in a vast cultural system, unified by the Logos, i.e., the Stoic system itself, comprising theology, cosmology, ethics, etc.

In the second part I will explore how allegoresis functioned as a powerful means of valuing antiquity in Middle and Neoplatonism (in turn influenced by Stoic allegoresis) and worked in the Imperial debate on which traditions should be considered authoritative and susceptible of allegorical exegesis. This debate was especially lively across ‘pagan’ and Jewish-Christian Platonism; it involved thinkers such as Philo, Plutarch, Celsus, Clement, Origen and Porphyry, and was still a hot issue as late as Proclus’ time. All of these Platonists—‘pagan’, Jewish or Christians—were allegorists, and used allegory to value their own favorite antiquity: Porphyry, for instance, to value Homer as endowed with perfect wisdom; Philo to value Mosaic scriptures as the source of all philosophy, including Greek philosophy; and Clement and Origen to value Jewish-Christian scriptures and interpret them in the light of Platonism.

2 Stoic Allegoresis as Philosophy and a Means to Value Antiquity: Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus

For the Stoics allegory was part of philosophy and not only a rhetorical device or an etymologizing exercise, even though etymologies were often used in Stoic allegoresis. Stoic allegory was a powerful means for valuing the ancients, and

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4 This component has been emphasized e.g., by Blönnigen 1992, 33, and it is there, but it is far from being the only reason, or the predominant, for Stoic allegoresis.

5 See in this volume Nethercut (ch. 17, 436n.3) on allegorical interpretations of Homer and their influence on later philosophers and poets.