CHAPTER 20

Ammonius and the Alexandrian School

Michael Griffin

1 Introduction

In AD 415, the Alexandrian philosophical establishment was shaken by the murder of a widely respected public philosopher, Hypatia, in an atmosphere perceived to be growingly hostile to pagan intellectualism. Cultural and rhetorical teaching proceeded normally, but the best philosophy students left Alexandria for Athens, where Plutarch and Syrianus helmed a resurgent Platonic Academy. Syrianus’ personal connections in Alexandria, coupled with Athens’ reputation as a safe haven for Hellenic religious and philosophical activity in the tradition of Iamblichus, may have helped to draw students to the Greek mainland. When Syrianus’ Alexandrian pupils returned home from Athens later in the century, they brought his philosophical outlook with them, together with a revitalized Hellenic piety that encouraged religious experimentation among Alexandria’s student body.

Alexandria appointed one of Syrianus’ most talented pupils, Hermeias, to a publicly funded chair in philosophy. His second son Ammonius (ca. 435/45–517/26), who inherited his chair, was exceptionally influential. Ammonius trained many of the most important philosophers of the following generation, including Damascius, Simplicius, and John Philoponus. Ammonius was succeeded (indirectly) by Olympiodorus (ca. 495/505–after 565), who may have been the last Alexandrian teacher to profess philosophy without at least a nominal commitment to Christianity. His own pupils, active in the later sixth and early seventh centuries, had Christian names; but they kept their philosophy and their Christianity broadly separate, and likely preserved the school’s pedagogical tradition into the seventh century. Copies of the school’s lectures

*I am indebted to Andrea Falcon, Richard Sorabji, and Mossman Roueché for valuable criticism of earlier drafts of this chapter; its remaining faults are solely my responsibility.


2 For an overview of these early years, see for example Westerink 1990, Blank 2010. For the religious atmosphere of the school, see Watts 2010: 23–88; Hoffmann 2006.
and commentaries resurface briefly in the “philosophical collection” of the tenth century, and many would reach Italy in the fifteenth century.3

This chapter presents the Alexandrian school as maintaining the basic philosophical positions and curricula developed by Syrianus and Proclus, with few amendments.4 Following Ammonius, the school pays especially careful attention to Aristotle. It endorses the three Neoplatonic hypostases One, Intellect, and Soul. Even positions contrary to contemporary Christian orthodoxy—such as the eternity of the world, the rationality of the heavens, and the pre-existence of the soul—continue to be taught at the end of the sixth century. The school’s attitude to the doctrinal convictions of its students, however, remained flexible and conciliatory.

2 Sources

Damascius, the last head of the Academy in Athens, composed a biographical history of his contemporaries and predecessors, focusing on the life of his teacher Isidore. Fragments of this history survive in Photius and the Suda.5 Damascius displays a clear agenda in composing this Life of Isidore or Philosophical History (hereafter cited according to Athanassiadi 1999).6 He critiques the triumph of rhetoric over philosophy as a guiding intellectual and political standard for his age, he castigates politicized Christianity as a symptom of the resulting social corruption, and he draws attention to human exemplars, both positive and negative, to drive home his message. The Life is a helpful resource, so long as it is interpreted as a work of hagiography and literature and not straight history.

We can also draw on several distinguished actors in the events of the later fifth century (discussed below), including critiques by Zacharias7 and reports from John Philoponus (ca. 490–575), a Christian pupil and editor of Ammonius

---

3 Usener 1879 proposed that Stephanus accepted an imperial appointment in AD 610, and Westerink suggested that he brought the school’s library to Constantinople (Westerink 1986; see also Rashed 2002, Goulet 2007). But Roueché has provided strong reasons to doubt this narrative (see Roueché forthcoming and 2012, and below).


7 See now Dillon, Russel, and Gertz 2012.