DEMOCRITUS’ WORKS:
FROM THEIR TITLES TO THEIR CONTENTS

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1. Introduction

Democritus is the only Presocratic philosopher to whom a rather large number of works are attributed. Most of the Presocratic philosophers are supposed to have written just one work or very few. (Melissus, Parmenides and Anaxagoras are explicitly mentioned by Diogenes Laertius, proem., I 16, as having written just one work. The same author mentions one title in the case of Heraclitus, cfr. IX 13. In the case of Empedocles there is a scholarly controversy going on as to whether he wrote one or two works, but in any case the possibility of his having written more than two works is generally excluded.) In the case of Democritus, not only are various titles mentioned by a number of sources but we are left with a rather long list of titles of works (70 titles, excluding double titles) which is found in Diogenes Laertius (the greater part of this list, as we shall see, is said by him to go back to Thrasyllus). In stark contrast with these testimonies there is the article Demokritos in the Suda Lexicon (cf. 68 A 2 DK = 0.2.2 Le.)\(^1\) which contains the assertion that only two works by Democritus are authentic: The Great World-system (Μέγας διάκοσμος) and On the Nature of the World (Περὶ φύσεως χώσμου). Some of the articles in the Suda are, or include, reproductions of passages in Diogenes Laertius, but in this case the source is evidently different,\(^2\) and is in contrast with the fact that this author, in the pas-

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1 In what follows the references to the Vorsokratiker by Diels and Kranz are accompanied by indications, of the type ‘o.2.2 Le.’, as in this example, or without ‘Le.’, which are to my collection of the texts of the first atomists. The publication of the volume of the texts translated into Italian, optimistically announced for the year 2002 in my contribution to Qu’est-ce que la Philosophie Présocratique? édité par A. Laks et C. Louguet, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Lille 2002, 142 n. 4, is in fact to take place in the year 2007, in a collection of the Academy ‘La Colombaria’ published by Olschki of Florence.

2 It is supposed that it is, directly or indirectly, a lost work by Hesychius Milesius,
sage referred to above, lists Democritus among the philosophers who wrote many works (he is associated with Zeno, manifestly intending the Stoic, Xenophanes, Aristotle, Epicurus and Chrysippus). Not only is the testimony of the *Suda* in contrast with our other main sources but its credibility is also impaired by the fact that its author treats the *Letters* under Democritus’ name as being authentic. (The reference must be to the *Letters* which he was supposed to have exchanged with Hippocrates and which have come down to us as part of the *corpus Hippocraticum*. That these documents are a later fabrication is generally recognized by scholars; see on this matter e.g. Rütten (1992).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his early philological writings, was inclined (not without some uncertainties) to give credit to the testimony of the *Suda*, maintaining that the reference to the *Letters* was a later addition and that the reference to Democritus in Diogenes Laertius’ list of *polygraphoi* is a mistake. The reference should be to Demetrius. (These writings by Nietzsche, which belong to his *Nachlass* and are collected in full in the volumes I refer to below, show a very great interest in Democritus and are complementary to his exposition of the position of Leucippus and Democritus in §15 of his *Vorlesungsmanuskript* entitled *Die vorplatonischen Philosophen*.) He thought that attributing more than two works to Democritus would go against the attitude of restraint and simplicity that was typical of a Presocratic and was instead in conformity with a practice of ‘polygraphy’ which started with the Socratics and the scientific practice of the Peripatetics. Yet Democritus’ polygraphy

who lived in the sixth century, but of course nothing is known of the sources of this author.

3 Perhaps an error for Xenokrates, as suggested by Ritschl and Nietzsche.

4 This is available in the partial edition of the manuscript included in *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, edited by M. Riedel, Stuttgart 1994, and in the following French translation by N. Ferrand, with introd. and notes by P. D’Iorio and F. Fronterotta: *Les philosophes préplatoniciens*, Paris 1994.