

Richard Sorabji—Michael Griffin (eds.)

Ancient Commentaries on Aristotle Priscian: Answers to King Khosroes of Persia

(trans. Pamela Huby, Sten Ebbesen, David Langslow, Donald Russell, Carlos Steel, Malcolm Wilson) London—N.Y. (Bloomsbury Academic) 2014. Pp. 162. 2016. \$122
ISBN: HB 978-1-47258-413-7; ePub 978-1-47258-413-4; erPDF 978-1-47258-415-1.

Agathias' touching account of the end of the Neoplatonic school of Athens and the secession of its philosophers to the Sassanid court of Persia would be imagined the stuff of legend were it not for the survival of *Solutionum ad Chosroem Liber* (ed. Bywater, *CAB Supp.* 1.ii 1886). This work is the record of the Neoplatonist commentator, Priscian of Lydia, who accompanied Damascius, Simplicius and other members of the school to the multilingual and cosmopolitan court of the Sassanid monarch, Chosroes I (531-533 CE). The response of the philosophers to the questions purportedly set by the king encompassed a wide range of metaphysical and physical problems ranging from the essence of the soul, to questions of astronomical, medical, meteorological and cosmological interest. Priscian himself cites an impressive list of philosophical, scientific and medical sources that his colleagues consulted in order to formulate their responses (pp. 13-14).

Unfortunately, the original text does not survive in Greek, but is preserved in a mangled Latin translation of uncertain date. Since the latter is often unintelligible, the editors of this and past editions saw it necessary to speculate on the lost Greek source that lay behind our surviving version in order to explicate its meaning. However, as Richard Sorabji explained in his introduction, this endeavor is fraught with a number of methodological problems (pp. 5-9). In the present edition, Pamela Huby prepared an English working copy of the often unintelligible Latin text as a preliminary working copy. At a second stage, a separate team of scholars worked over each response adopting the method of "retroversion" suggested by Bywater for the *apparatus* of his text, but here directly incorporated into the English translation. The aim was to attempt to "retro-translate" the Latin back into Greek before working up a final English version. While this method has the advantage of furnishing the English reader with the immediate results of the research by directly inserting its meaning into the translation, the hypothetical element of retroversion is more easily overlooked than with Bywater, who confined his speculations to the *apparatus*. On the other hand, the path by which the English translation evolved can be configured from the word lists appended to the volume ("English-Latin Glossary" pp. 134-142; "Latin-English Index", pp. 143-150; and a useful "Latin-Greek Index", pp. 151-156). However, since the *onus* has correctly been placed on discovering the meaning of the original source of the Latin, the final

product does not always make easy reading in English. This may also result from the fact that the volume is a work of collaboration by teams of scholars with many cooks working on the same pot. Since Priscian's responses are devoted to separate philosophical issues, drawing on Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Porphyry, Iamblichus and many other thinkers, each chapter is translated by a separate expert in its own field of reference and subsequently annotated by additional teams of scholars.

In addition to his contribution to the notes on the text, Richard Sorabji introduces this short work with a discussion of the historical and textual background (pp. 1-10). The Preface and responses are then allotted separate chapters (pp. 15-86), each headed by an "introductory note" where its source material and philosophical background are examined as follows:

"Preface" where Priscian sets out his aims and source material (pp. 13-14; tr. Carlos Steel)

1. "About the Soul, and especially the Human" (pp. 15-26; tr. Carlos Steel);
2. "On Sleep" (pp. 27-33; tr. Donald Russell);
3. "On Dreams as a Source of Prophecy" (pp. 34-39; tr. Donald Russell);
4. "Astronomy and Climate" (pp. 40-46; tr. Donald Russell);
5. "On the Efficacy of Contrary Medical Prescriptions" (pp. 47-58; tr. Sten Ebbesen);
6. "The Tides" (pp. 50-58; tr. Donald Russell);
7. "How Elemental Bodies get Displaced Up and Down from their Natural Places" (pp. 59-69; tr. and variants Donald Russell; Pamela Huby; Richard Sorabji);
8. "How Location Affects the Character of Living Things" (pp. 70-75; tr. Sten Ebbesen);
9. "Why do Things in a Good Universe Harm Each Other?" (pp. 76-81; tr. David Langslow; Sten Ebbesen);
10. "Of What is the Wind Made and Where does its Motion Come From?" (pp. 82-86; tr. Malcolm Wilson).

As the translators noted in their introductions, Priscian is testimony to the wide range of philosophical issues discussed in this school at the very moment of its demise. Whether Priscian should be ascribed the surviving commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* is left undecided in this volume (pp. 1, 16). However, the evidence it gives for the influence of Iamblichus on the last stages of this school is interesting. Some of the questions underlying the responses may also reflect the interests of the Sassanid court in physical phenomena, aware as it