

Platonism and Neoplatonism in the Roman Empire: Notes
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The philosophers of the classical world who followed in the tradition of Plato would all have regarded themselves as Platonists. However, modern scholars have identified various phases in classical Platonism, of which the most significant is the final phase, so-called Neoplatonism.

Middle Platonism, 2nd century BCE - 2nd century CE

Reconciles Aristotle's Divine Mind with Plato's world of Forms and Ideas.

Assumed a cosmic Hierarchy:

1. At the top: Divine Mind, God, first principle, the One, the Good. Changeless, eternal, transcendent, no direct contact with material world except in rare flashes of illumination. Home of the Ideas, Forms, Types
Being unchanging and eternal, the Supreme God does not create. Instead he derives from himself
2. a second Mind or God, subordinate to himself, who creates and governs the world, also known as the 'Demiurge' (from Plato's *Timaeus*).
3. The World Soul. Human souls are parts of the Divine that have drifted down to earth and become embodied.

Numenius of Apamea 150-200 CE

Pythagorean Platonist

Argued that Human soul is fragment of Divine.

Documents descent of soul through planetary spheres - At each level it forgets something of its origin but acquires that planets' characteristics.

Albinus 2nd c. CE

Argued that no part of the world is without a soul.

Sublunary sphere populated by gods and demons whose role was to order the world.

Following Plato, the goal of every human is to become as much like God as possible.

Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism is a term devised by 19th c German scholars who wanted to distinguish late classical Platonists from early.¹ Therefore, it's a term of convenience which we can accept or reject. However, its use is universally accepted.

¹ Honderich, Ted, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, p. 613.

- A philosophical school / movement in the Late Antique Period. A development within Graeco-Roman philosophy and religion.
- The Neoplatonists were pagan philosophers, beginning with Plotinus, who gave a new direction to Platonic philosophy between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD.
- The word 'Neoplatonists' and 'Neoplatonism' are modern terms. These philosophers thought of themselves as simply 'Platonists,' philosophers who followed Plato.
- Aimed for a comprehensive philosophy incorporating best of Aristotle, Pythagoras and Stoics into Platonism. They synthesised the thought of Plato with other main schools of Greek philosophy, for example, with the thought of Aristotle. They wrote philosophical commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as their own works on philosophical topics.
- Impact of their work: their religious and moral ideals, their conception of reality as spiritual activity or states of consciousness. For the Neoplatonists, philosophy was a way of life.
- They viewed the human soul as a voyager with its ultimate aim the re-ascent to its divine origins.
- Moved away from Platonic dualism (Being v Becoming) towards Monism - a single order.
- Practical purpose: showed how the individual soul might reach God.
- Emphasis on salvation.

Plotinus 203-270

Greatest Greek philosopher of late antiquity.

Prob. Born Lycopolis in Egypt

Accompanied emperor Gordian to Mesopotamia in order to learn eastern thought.

Then settled at Rome 244.

Writings arranged by Porphyry into six books of nine essays each - Enneads.

Universe arranged as hierarchy of realities - or *hypostases*.

Each reality is the cause of and gives existence to the one below it in a process of emanation (termed the Great chain of Being by Lovejoy).

Every reality is slightly inferior to the one above it.

1. The One (*Hen*): supreme Goodness, Plato's Good.
2. Mind (*Nous*) - below the One. Is a fragmented image of the One which derives its form from contemplating the One, corresponds to intuitive thought. Home of the Platonic Ideas.
3. Soul (*Psyche*) - derives from Mind. Can only contemplate its objects in succession moving from one to the other - hence creates time and space.
Generates the next level of reality:
4. Nature (*Physis*), the principle of life and growth.
5. Matter - material objects

Human beings are microcosms, containing within themselves parts of Matter, Nature, Soul and Mind.

The ascent of the soul to the stars may be accomplished

1. via intellectual discipline to the Mind. The intellectual ascent is impelled by love and enthusiasm and/or (the two paths are not mutually exclusive).
2. via ecstasy and contemplation to the One (but not, as in Christianity, via Grace).

Aesthetic innovation

Whereas Plato said art imitates natural objects, Plotinus propounded the view that art and nature both impose a form on matter in accordance with an inward visions of archetypal Forms or Ideas. **This makes possible a Platonic theory of magic.**

On Astrology

Plotinus, 'On Heaven', 'On the Movement of Heaven', '**On Whether the Stars are Causes**', Against the Gnostics, Ennead II, 1 - 3, Vol., 2, trans., A.H.Armstrong, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1929.

On Whether the Stars are Causes

- I.1-4. Stars indicate what is going to happen but do not cause events.
 2.5-10 also 11, 12. Planets exert general influences (cf Pliny) but these cannot predict particulars.
 13.1-4. Some things do happen as a result of the movement of the heavens but others do not.
 13. 10-15. External influences may harmonise with intention of nature of a thing or conflict with it.
 7. All things are full of signs (= Stoic, see Seneca) and by looking at one thing one can learn about another.
 7.5-7 'Let us suppose that the stars are like characters always being written on the heavens'. We read them and find out about other things. (10.1-2 the stars signify).
 7.17-20, 12.29. Universe a single living creature, operates according to a rational order (13.6-7).
 13.11-13. 'All are ordered to the whole because they are part of it'.
 15.10-15. All happenings form a unity, signified by the three Fates.
 13.30-37. Therefore stars and planets are part of the order.
 8. 5-10. Soul orders everything, 'the stars cooperate towards the whole'
 8.10-16. Circumstances, e.g., wealth, poverty, due to chance encounters in the material world.
 9.13-15. Moral character comes from the stars.
 9.20-49. We are compound - matter and soul. To the part of the soul outside the body belongs the ascent to the stars (cf Aquinas).
 The stars show signs.
 But the person who is bereft of the higher soul lives as part of destiny - i.e. no control.
 15. 12-20. Some men are part of the order, others rise above it.

18. 20-5. Key mechanism is movement of forming principles from higher to lower forms of soul.

Criticism of conventional astrology

1.5-10. Astrologers are in error because they say planets cause everything, including poverty, sickness and ugliness.

(HOWEVER: 14.1-10. stars announce the birth of a rich man and a poor man. If wealth comes from manly virtue then it will result from the body's vigour, assisted by the parents, heavenly regions and earth of Ptolemy).

2.15-20. if the planets have souls and conscious purpose, what reason do they have to harm us?

3. Objects to idea of compulsion - i.e., planets behaving is different easy in different positions.

4. Whole structure of astrological interpretation, e.g. aspects, is irrational.

See 5, 6,

Porphyry 213-c.305

Student, editor and biographer of Plotinus

Born in Tyre

Studied philosophy at Athens.

Met Plotinus at Rome in 262

Very anti-Christian - wrote *Against the Christians*: survives only in fragments..

Wrote history of philosophy down to Plato, from which life of Pythagoras derives

Introduction to Aristotle trans. Into Latin by Boethius and was v. influential in the medieval schools.

The ineffable could be accessed through philosophical contemplation, thought to touch, or to be capable of participating in Divine Mind (*Nous*). (NB in modern accounts we tend to read that Porphyry thought we could access the ineffable through 'logic' and 'reason', but we have to understand that those words, as we use the word today, have a very different meaning from what Porphyry would have meant by the term.

Porphyry was very interested in oracles and other forms of divination and religious practices in general: he wrote a work (now lost but a few fragments survive) entitled *Philosophy from Oracles*, which quoted traditional oracles from oracular temples and sanctuaries. Some of these oracles use astrology. He also wrote a work entitled *On Cult Statues* (now lost but, again, a few fragments survive) which discussed the symbols and statues of the gods and goddesses of traditional Graeco-Roman religion. Porphyry also wrote a *Letter to Marcella*, a letter to his wife (whom he married in old age) which endorses and encourages traditional religious practices. He also wrote the *Letter to Anebo*, a series of questions about religious practices which caused Iamblichus to write his famous work, *On the Mysteries (De Mysteriis)*.

Porphyry's treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs* discusses the zodiac and the gates of Cancer and Capricorn. It also has much on Mithraism. The following is from Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*, a revised text with

translation by Seminar Classics 609, State University of New York, Arethusa, 1969):

Chapter 21: "Taking the cave as an image and symbol of the Cosmos, Numenius and his pupil Cronius assert that there are two extremities in the heavens: the winter tropic than which nothing is more southern, and the summer tropic than which nothing is more northern. The summer tropic is in Cancer, the winter tropic is in Capricorn. Since Cancer happens to be closest to us upon earth, it has, with good reason, been assigned to the Moon, which is nearest to the earth; since the southern pole is as yet invisible to us, Capricorn has been assigned to Saturn, the most remote and highest of the planets. (Chapter 22) The signs of the Zodiac, in fact, are situated in this order: from Cancer to Capricorn we have, first of all, Leo, which is the house of the Sun; then Virgo, the house of Mercury; Libra, the house of Venus; Scorpio, the house of Mars; Sagittarius, the house of Jupiter; and Capricorn, the house of Saturn. Then from Capricorn back, Aquarius has been assigned to Saturn; Pisces to Jupiter; Aries to Mars; Taurus to Venus; Gemini to Mercury; and finally, Cancer to the Moon. The theologians spoke of these, Capricorn and Cancer, as two gates, and Plato called them orifices. Of these Numenius and Cronius say that the gate through which souls descend is Cancer, but that they ascend through Capricorn. And Cancer is northerly and suited for descent, while Capricorn is southerly and suited for ascent. (Chapter 23) The northern quarters of the heavens are for souls descending to genesis, and correspondingly the northern gates of the cave are rightly said to be for the descent of men; the southern quarters of the heavens, however, are not for gods but for souls ascending to the gods and for the same reason, Homer does not speak of a 'way for gods' but 'for immortals' – a term applicable in common to souls as well, inasmuch as they are immortal either of themselves or in essence."

Following this, Porphyry discusses the fact that the Romans celebrate the Saturnalia (festival for the god Saturn) when the Sun is in Capricorn. He also discusses Egyptian ritual practices in relation to astrological timing.

Porphyry's *On Cult Statues*, of which fragments survive, contains discussion and exegesis of the symbols of the gods and their roles, attributes and associations since these were used to construct statues of the gods. It contains much that is relevant (mythical background, associations of the planets with the gods) for ancient astrology. If you want to recommend it, an English translation of the fragments should be available online. David Fideler's edition is online. The following is an example:

Fragment 10 (Chapter 12): "In the mysteries at Eleusis the hierophant is dressed up to represent the demiurge, and the torch-bearer the sun, the priest at the altar the moon, and the sacred herald Hermes."

Fragment 10 (Chapter 12): "In the mysteries at Eleusis the hierophant is dressed up to represent the demiurge, and the torch-bearer the sun, the priest at the altar the moon, and the sacred herald Hermes."

We may consider the astrological significance of this fragment, and the relation it suggests between ancient astrology and the mystery cults of Antiquity.

Iamblichus d. c. 245-325

Born in Syria.

Studied under Porphyry in Rome or Sicily

Later founded his own school in Syria (recent research suggests his school was in Apamea, the home of Numenius).

Emphasised use of ritual magic performed correctly and using the power of symbols comprehensible only the gods to achieve unity with the One, rather than Plotinus' intellectual path.

There are two ways to access the divine:

(a) directly from signs transmitted through the good geniesurgic daemon

(b) **theurgy** – 'god work' (as opposed to theology – god knowledge)

Whereas Porphyry had emphasised the classic Platonic view that the ineffable could be accessed through 'reason' and 'logic' (see above for explanation), Iamblichus emphasised the use of theurgic ritual (theurgy), a type of religious ritual with some external similarities and methods to ritual magic, performed correctly and using the power of symbols. Theurgy is sometimes confused with magic. However, Iamblichus himself emphasizes many times that theurgy is NOT magic and he explicitly condemns 'ritual magic.'

Comment on the above from Crystal Addey:

However, we need to recognise that this is the orthodox view in academia at the moment (the view of Gregory Shaw and others). However, I have been trying to challenge this view somewhat, as has some of the work of Zeke Mazur and John Bussanich (both Neoplatonic scholars). If Porphyry thought that the ineffable could be accessed through philosophical contemplation (following Plotinus' view) and Iamblichus thought the ineffable/divine could be accessed through theurgy, what is theurgy if not a system of using symbols for inner contemplation to connect the 'divine in the soul' to the divine? Certainly their goals were the same and their methods were not as different as people say. Zeke Mazur has written about Plotinus' 'philosophical contemplation' as inner visualization using symbols.

Works:

Protreptikos Logos - 'Exhortation to Philosophy'

De mysteriis - 'On Mysteries' - defence of theurgy and religious ritual'

http://www.theurgia.org/taylor_on_the_mysteries.html

Work on Pythagoreanism

Commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, now lost but quoted by Proclus.

'Only divination, therefore, in uniting us with the gods, truly enables us to share in the life of the gods', On the Mysteries X.4 in Gregory p. 222.

X.5: knowledge of the gods leads to liberation from Necessity and Fate.

The daimon is fixed by the lord of the geniture: Section IX, p. 143.

Synesius of Cyrene 370-413.

Poet and orator

Left collection of humsn and letters

Dion - an attack on both excesses of Christian asceticism and pagan theurgy

Bishop of Ptoemais in Lybia

He wrote a work entitled *Concerning Dreams (De Insomniis)* – on dream divination (*oneiromancy*).

Hypatia d. 415

Philosopher, Mathematician (daughter of Theon the mathematician)

Murdered by Christian mob.

Macrobius c. 400

Probably African

Generally identified with Praetorian Prefect of 430

Works

Saturnalia

Somnium Scipionis

Commentary on bk VI of Cicero's *De Republica*, depends largely on Porphyry's commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Survived and studied extensively in the Middle Ages.

Proclus 412-485

Born Lycia but spent most of life in Athens.

Head of Academy

Prolific writer

Works:

Elements of Theology - concise summary of Neoplatonic metaphysics

Commentaries on Plato

Commentary on Euclid

Commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days*

Book of Hymns

Proclus was also a theurgist, like Iamblichus, and his biographer Marinus emphasizes his extensive religious and ritual practices. For example, Marinus tells us that he experienced visions of the goddess Hekate during theurgic ritual. He learned theurgy from Asclepigeneia, the daughter of an eminent philosopher in the Athenian school.

With later Neoplatonists developed demonology and angelology - *kosmos* inhabited by good and bad demons.

Adaptation of Hellenistic philosophy to meet religious needs of the time – to provide means of salvation, to adapt Pythagorean/Platonic/Aristotelian/Stoic theory to practice.²

Many of Proclus' writings and ideas on theurgy and ritual influenced Pseudo-Dionysius, who used them in his ideas of the sacred Liturgy. In this way, conceptualizations and ideas based on theurgy pervaded Late Antique Christianity. (The writings of Pseudo-Dionysius were influential amongst Christians because they were ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, a convert of St. Paul - Acts 17.34).

Agapius

Student of Proclus, lectured in Constantinople

John of Lydia

Student of Agapius in Constantinople.

Author of *On Signs*, c 550.

Ammonius

Student of Proclus

Returned to home, Alexandria, v. influential teacher and writer - reached an agreement with the Patriarch of Alexandria.

John Philoponos

Monophysite Christian, student of Ammonius.

Attacked eternity of world.

Simplicius

Student of Ammonius

Criticised John Philoponos

He wrote many philosophical commentaries on Aristotle.

Damascius

Syrian

He succeeded Proclus as Head of the Academy at Athens, a position he held in AD 529 when the emperor Justinian shut down the Academy.

Plato was then translated into Latin by Erigena in the ninth century - regarded as second only to Augustine.

- Neoplatonic teaching ceased at Athens 529 and in Alexandria at end of sixth-century because the school there was Christian.
- Revived at Byzantium by Psellus in 11th c.

² Dodds, E.R., 'Introduction', in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, trans. E.R. Dodds, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1963, p. xviii.

- Then returned to Italy in the 15th c.

Additional Bibliography

Wallis, R.T. (1972), *Neoplatonism*, London: Duckworth

Philip Merlan, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960.

R. Baine Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976:

A useful collection of articles on Neoplatonism. The following articles may be particularly useful:

Richard T. Wallis, "Nous as Experience"

John Dillon, "Image, Symbol and Analogy: Three Basic Concepts of Neoplatonic Allegorical Exegesis."

John Finamore and Robert Berchman (eds.), *History of Platonism: Plato Redivivus*, New Orleans, LA: University Press of the South, 2005:

A great collection of articles on Neoplatonism

John Finamore and Robert Berchman (eds.), *Metaphysical Patterns in Platonism: Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Modern Times*, New Orleans, LA: University Press of the South, 2007:

This contains four particularly relevant articles:

my article: Crystal Addey, "Consulting the Oracle: The Mantic Art and Its causation in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*."

Marilynn Lawrence, "Who Thought the Stars are Causes? The Astrological Doctrine criticized by Plotinus."

Gregory Shaw, "Astrology as Divination: Iamblichean Theory and Its Contemporary Practice."

Atsushi Sumi, "The Primordial Tradition of the World's Religions and the reconstruction of Neoplatonic Metaphysics."

For the Late Antique period (the intellectual milieu of the Neoplatonists):

Ra'anan S. Boustán and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: A valuable collection of essays on Late Antique religions, many of them relevant for star worship and astrology in Late Antiquity, particularly Katharina Volk's essay, "Heavenly Steps:" Manilius 4.119-121 and Its Background" and Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, "The Faces of the Moon: Cosmology, Genesis, and the Mithras Liturgy."

Scott Noegel, Joel Walker and Brannon Wheeler (eds.), *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique world*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003: a very useful collection of essays on divination, astrology, astral religion and magic.

For discussion of Middle Platonism see Tripolitis, Antonia, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2002, p. 41-6.

For the Neoplatonists see Gregory, John, *The Neoplatonists*, London: Kyle Cathie 1991 - translations and commentary, mainly from Plotinus, but also Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus.