THE NEOPLATONISTS AND THEIR BOOKS

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The ancient Greeks might aptly be called people of the word, but decidedly not people of the Book. That is, they reveled in their own words, in their speech acts—and their fascination with these peculiar products of their minds and bodies amounted to an unprecedented narcissism in the use of language. They refined them, polished them, developed a whole science of their production—and most of all, they preserved them. In the process, decisions were made about which of these products were the best, and so worthy of emulation, sometimes in the form of imitation, by those who aspired to do even better than their predecessors. Devoted as they were to their own words, however, the Greeks never collectively embraced or privileged a specific corpus of texts such that they might be thought of as scriptural, as a Book.

It needs no special pleading, then, to establish that the Greeks had no scriptural canon, but the status of canons in several other contexts in the Greek world remains problematical. By the fourth century B.C.E. their collections of preserved texts came to form the basis of the great libraries of the Hellenistic world. The Protean list known as the “Alexandrian canon”, laying out a cultural map of the proper objects of emulation among the authors of the past, genre by genre, came to function as an ideal that shaped both Greek and Roman elite education. Still, it was not really a canon. Quintilian, who provides the richest account of it in the literature, calls it the ordo a grammaticis datus (Inst. Or. 10.1.54), and immediately expands it, by adding not just Latin authors (understandably neglected by the Greek scholars who created the original) but by adding more Greeks, authors whose omission by the Alexandrians Quintilian felt a need to correct. If, then, a canon is a list of texts characterized by stability, the ordo was not a canon.

Along with stability, we expect a canon to have, or to be invested with, authority. The striking thing about the authority of the ordo

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73 Short Texts from Coptic Ostraca and Papyri, nr. 166 p. 41.
is that it was of an exclusively esthetic nature. This fluid list of the best literature of the past represented a remote, indeed a virtually inaccessible, ideal of culture—and the function of that culture was the production of more and better texts, the perfection of a fascinat- 
dia—an eloquence—that contributed to and expressed the exalted status of a tiny fraction of a percentile of the population.\footnote{On the *ordo* and the realities of Greco-Roman education, see Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, 1998), 37-38 and passim.}

Collectively, the Greeks (and the Romans to the extent that they aspired and consented to be, intellectually and esthetically, Greeks) had many books but no Book. We look in vain among them for texts that were privileged or endowed with any other authority than that of exemplary literary value. Most striking of all is the absence of the demand that exemplary texts be true. Even the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, entrenched in the modest but crucially formative role of first texts to be read and copied and studied in Greek education, were more derided than applauded, in the rare instances where their truth value was an issue at all. Xenophon, Heracleitus, Plato himself railed at Homer, with no apparent impact on his currency as first author. Most striking of all is the fact that, after Plato, nobody seemed to care anymore—perhaps because Aristotle and the Peripatos successfully shifted discourse about poetry away from content and in the direction of form, toward the esthetic object and its impact, precisely the issues where the rhetorical tradition was at home. For the next half millennium, the truth value of Homer ceased to be an issue. It was self-evident that poets were liars, The Poet no less than all the rest. When the issue again arose, beginning in the high Roman empire, we shall see that the terms of the debate were entirely new.

If Greco-Roman culture had, collectively, no Book, there were nevertheless groups within that culture who did privilege certain texts in ways at least distantly analogous to those that prevail in the monotheisms—the only true peoples of the Book. In the Greco-Roman world, these groups ranged from the esoteric, initiatory societies of the devotees of so-called mystery religions to the relatively open and permeable schools of higher learning—and in particular the schools of philosophy. In the former instance, certain texts were manifestly scripturalized, interrogated, and adopted as guides to some otherwise inaccessible truth. In the philosophical schools, the situation was more complex.

Among Greek intellectual traditions, that of Plato was initially singled out by the monotheisms as the most assimilable, a fact to which both Philo and Augustine bear ample witness. As the best known school tradition of the Roman Empire, later Platonism is also remarkable among the ancient philosophical schools for the way in which it privileged certain texts as paths to some truth. This is, of course, paradoxical when we look back at the dialogues of Plato, where on the one hand the appropriateness of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as educational texts is challenged and denied in favor of "new myths" to be invented for the purpose—and where, more generally, distrust of the written word is a pervasive theme. Plato, in *The Republic* elsewhere, seems to wage war against the authority of written texts, particularly poetic ones, while in the next generation, that of Aristotle, the issue was no longer even polemical. For Aristotle and the Peripatos, Hesiod or, for that matter, Empedocles might, despite their annoying, obscurest poetic mode of expression, provide evidence for certain archaic, pre- or proto-philosophical apprehensions of the nature of things—but their value was entirely evidential and whatever they might yield would be of use only in understanding the antecedents of newer, more up-to-date and sophisticated views, themselves closer approximations to the truth.

It is something of a paradox, then, that Neoplatonists from Porphyry in the third century—the student and literary executor of Plotinus—to Proclus in the fifth, and beyond, explicitly privileged certain texts we would classify as non-philosophical and treated them as potential sources of wisdom, for which special hermeneutic techniques were sometimes required.

It is these non-philosophical texts and the Neoplatonists' use of them that will concern us here, but their status must be viewed against the background of the philosophical canons themselves and the sense in which the ancient philosophical schools privileged their own core texts. To yield any real insight, of course, the issue would have to be addressed school by school and even scholar by scholar, but an overview may serve to point to the diversity of attitudes attested, and at the same time to give some preliminary definition to philosophical canonization in the Greek schools.

There seems to be a scale of possibilities here ranging from the pedagogy of the Cynics (where books presumably had little or no part)\footnote{This must have been true at least at the extreme represented (parodically) in} to the communities of the Epicureans, where the founder's
portrayed was prominently displayed and his texts treated as privileged, if not exclusive possessions. We do not, to the best of my knowledge, hear of Epicureans giving courses on specific texts of Epicurus, but it is clear that the study of those texts and the mining of them for principles of conduct and thought were central to their activity. The philosophy of Epicurus was in fact unique in its accessibility to his followers in the founder's own words, and though their individual philosophical activity seems typically to have taken the form of independent essays and treatments of problematic topics (as the gradually emerging example of the oeuvre of Philodemus illustrates), what bound them together as an intellectual community was adherence to a relatively short list of prominent principles easily derived from the founder's texts. These included disinterested and remote divinities, atomism, and of course, pleasure (or lack of pain) as a goal in itself.

Neither the Platonists nor the early Peripatets were so fortunate in their texts. Under the first two successors of Aristotle, Theophrastus and Straton, the school seems to have shrunk from some two thousand students (according to Diogenes Laertius, 5.37) to very few (on the anecdotal evidence of Plutarch, De tranquilitate animi 472c), before being taken over by the dim Lykon, who in Diogenes Laertius's account sounds more like a headmaster than a philosopher. We can only surmise just what these students had in front of them for texts—aside from the popular or exotic works of Aristotle, which circulated continuously until they disappeared from the direct manuscript tradition in the later years of the Roman Empire. The "esoteric" or "school" works of Aristotle, supplemented by those of Theophrastus, were edited in the mid-first century B.C.E. by Andronicus of Rhodes, with whom the rich tradition of Aristotelian commentaries begins. The early Peripatets clearly built on Aristotle's work in several areas, notably the natural sciences, comparative politics, and logic. The Aristotelian teachers of this period are assumed to have imparted to their students what from our perspective are the central doctrines of the Aristotelian texts Andronicus was to edit—but the details of influence and even of access are far from certain. It is important to understand, though, that the activity of the Peripatets, often compared to that of the modern university, seems not in any meaningful way to have been text-oriented. It was compartmentalized and analytic, involving research in relatively clearly defined disciplines ranging from logic to biology to politics and poetics. Each of these was independent and progressive, cumulative in its accomplishments. Texts might be objects of study, or tools for the acquisition of knowledge, but they were never ends in themselves. The "esoteric" works of Aristotle, once rendered accessible, generated a vast literature of commentary. The core of the contribution of the Peripatets to the history of philosophical inquiry, however, is the logical works, the organon, studied and commented upon not just by self-styled Aristotelians but by Platonists and others alike. Virtually every known scholar of the later Platonic tradition in Athens and Alexandria wrote on Aristotelian logic. This "tool" was the defining text, if there was one, of Greek philosophy in general, and it was not a text that prescribed the truth about anything. It was a workbook, an exercise book for learning the forms and the limits of logical discourse—learning the use of language and reason to arrive at conclusions and formulations that are, given the limitations of human intelligence, sound. Beyond the era of the ancient schools and on into that of the monoteists, in those environments where disputation and hence analytic thought are prized, it is these texts from the Greek tradition that we find as objects of study again and again.

The story of the Platonic relationship to the text of Plato's dialogues is more complex than any of the others mentioned thus far. The fact that around 100 B.C.E. Posidonius is credited with a commentary on the Timaeus is an indication that he taught a course the subject of which was not cosmogony or cosmology or the world, but the Timaeus. Philosophical education in the tradition of Plato seems

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5 On the legacy of the organon in early Christianity, see Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1995), 134 and passim.

6 Posidonius fr. 85 (Edelstein and Kidd), cf. irr. 86c and 86d.
from the first generation to have involved study of the dialogues—not, if you like, "merely" exoteric like the Protrepticus of Aristotle, but dramatizations for a general literary audience of both the means and the content of philosophical inquiry as Plato understood it. The Platonists also had Plato's lecture "On the Good"—for what good it may have done them—but otherwise it seems that the texts of Plato they had before them and studied were by and large the ones we read today. Their access to the words and thought of their founder was probably not significantly different from our own.

The dialogues are both highly seductive (and hence tried and proven protreptic texts) and deeply problematic, for their very elusiveness. It is therefore no surprise that they should have generated a huge literature of commentary from within the schools of Platonic philosophy, extending from the end of the second century B.C.E. down to the sixth C.E.. The hermeneutics of this literature of commentary is for the most part quite pragmatic. Iamblichus, early in the fourth century C.E., is credited with the formulation of the powerful interpretive principle that each dialogue has a unique skos—a thing envisioned, a target, or goal, or subject. In practical terms, this strategy offers a solution to the poikilia (or "diversity") of the dialogues, their dramatization of sound and unsound argument on a range of topics. Armed with this interpretive tool, Iamblichus and his followers were able to satisfy their own demands for intellectual and compositional unity and focus—they organized the meaning of the dialogue and its parts around the skos they postulated. One thinks of Gadamer's famous insight that we take hermeneutic control of the texts we read by means of the questions we ask them. Iamblichus is credited as well with the definition of the Platonic curriculum as it was to be taught down through the end of the polytheist educational tradition, though he may in fact have found most of the elements already in place.

Thanks to the account of Iamblichus's curriculum in an anonymous sixth-century preface to Plato, we can say that, from shortly after the year 300 at the latest, students of Platonic philosophy typically read a sequence of twelve dialogues, hierarchically arranged according to their subjects. They learned ethics from the First Al-

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7 See John Dillon, ed., Iamblichus Chalcidianus in Platonis dialogos commentarii (Leiden, 1973), 92, 2-5.
teaching of Plutarch, in the late first and early second centuries (in his relatively modest way a teacher of Platonic philosophy even if not a scholar), and notably in that of Plotinus in the third. Both the Athenians and the Alexandrians of the fourth, fifth and early sixth centuries devoted a good deal of time to mathematics. (For those who create a hierarchy of truths by placing at the top those which are applicable to the largest number of specific instances, statements like the Pythagorean theorem must of necessity take on a very special importance.) The schools of Platonic philosophy of the later Empire were organized around the study of the dialogues, but they did and studied a great deal more, besides.

Beginning in the second century, we begin to see among Platonists indications of a new interest in texts from beyond the philosophical tradition—and notably, texts of non-Greek origin. These appear alongside the dialogues of Plato as potential sources of something of value, and are taken, by various Platonists at various times, to encompass a truth that is real and recoverable. These texts range from the very familiar and very old—archaic Greek poetry—to the decidedly foreign—the Book of Genesis and books of Egyptian and Iranian wisdom—and the decidedly new—the Chaldæan Oracles, composed in the second (if not the third) century by two known and named “theurgists”, but nevertheless credited with the capacity of delivering something of philosophical value.

These three categories of texts are treated quite differently, and though all seem to have been privileged in new ways in this period, the traces that they have left on the surviving literature are quite uneven.

We may start with the middle category, simultaneously the broadest and the least satisfactorily defined: what Momigliano called “alien wisdom”. The source to which scholars turn for the proclamation of a new philosophical Orientalism in the high empire is a programmatic statement cited by Eusebius from an obscure but pivotal figure of the second century named Numinus. In a book whose title echoed that of the unpublished lecture of Plato, peri tagathou, he wrote,

[With regard to theology] it will be necessary, after stating and drawing conclusions from the testimony of Plato, to go back and connect this testimony to the teachings of Pythagoras and then to call in those peoples that are held in high esteem, bringing forward their initiations and doctrines and their cults performed in a manner harmonious with Plato—those established by the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi, and the Egyptians.\(^\text{11}\)

Numinus was, as far as we can tell, not even a teacher, much less a scholar, but on matters of psychology, among others, his ideas so nearly anticipated those of Plotinus that the latter was accused of appropriating his work. Numinus also wrote a history of the early Academy and its “betrayal” of dogmatic Platonism that has the unexpected virtue of being extraordinarily funny in its parodic portraits (fr. 24-28, Des Places). He defined his own position, then, in terms of the traditions of school Platonism, even if that definition was in large part negative. There is no mention of texts in the programmatic fragment from “On the Good”—only teletai and dogmata—but Numinus, who was from Apamea in Syria, demonstrated elsewhere that he had at least an elementary knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures (and this in turn explains in large part why the Church fathers liked to cite him). What access he may have had to the dogmata of Brahmans, Magi, and Egyptians we do not know. His notions about these intellectual traditions may in fact have been quite naive. What is important from our point of view is only that he took those traditions of wisdom seriously and tried to find in them ideas (and practices) compatible with his notions of the theology of Plato—

Implied in Numinus’s program, then, is an incorporation into school Platonism of an Orientalism of a sort that had been spreading through Greek intellectual life since the time of Alexander. We are probably safe in assuming that he knew virtually nothing of substance of the thought of the “Brahmans”—indeed his notion of them may well have been no more sophisticated than the portrait of naked, levitating Pythagorean sages provided by the Alexander romance. Egypt was another story. Even the dialogues of Plato provided support for the notion that there was wisdom to be found in Egypt, and a thousand years later, Alexandrian Platonists were still writing about “Egyptian wisdom,” as Damascius’s Life of Isidore testifies. Strikingly absent from all this, however, is any indication that texts of Egyptian origin, tapping ideas authentically deriving from Pharaonic Egypt, played any role. Plutarch, who gives us in his “Isis and Osiris” the earliest account of Egyptian religion from a Platonist

\(^{11}\) Fr. 1a, Des Places. Cf. R. Lamberton, Homer the Theologian (Berkeley, 1986) 60 with n. 33.
of the Roman Empire, writes of myths and practices, but not of texts. Whatever texts first- and second-century devotees of the Egyptian Gods may have had were clearly kept secret and did not escape the initiatory seclusion in which they were stored. Iamblichus, two centuries later, tapped “Hermetic” doctrine when he wrote On the Mysteries, and from his time we can see the far-reaching influence of the body of Greco-Egyptian literature we know as the Hermetica. Along with the Chaldæan Oracles, to which I shall turn in a moment, these are perhaps the most influential texts in the Platonic “underground” of the later Empire. Their influence, along with an emphasis on theurgy and other ritual or magical practice, is coextensive with that of Iamblichus—which is to say that it is pervasive in the Platonism of the schools of Athens and Alexandria in the fifth and sixth centuries. Pervasive though it was, however, its impact on the curriculum of the schools—likewise to be traced to Iamblichus, as we have seen—is less obvious. A Hermetic “system” parallel to Platonic metaphysics and to the Chaldæan “system” was clearly of importance for Proclus, but of the three, it was primarily the dialogues of Plato that provided texts for study and analysis. The evidence, once again, is that of the commentaries. The Platonists’ books, the ones they taught, were primarily those on which they wrote commentaries and the overwhelming bulk of that commentary served for the explication of Plato and Aristotle.

Of privileged texts that were unashamedly and unambiguously new, the Chaldæan Oracles were perhaps the only example, and they constitute a decidedly odd one. The Neoplatonists who took these texts seriously distinguished carefully, if perhaps not clearly, between what they took to be the words and ideas of the theurgists, the vehicles of these oracular utterances, and those of the oracles themselves, spoken by various gods (and in particular Apollo and Hecate). If the utterances could indeed in some sense be taken to be those of the divinities in question, then the wisdom imparted was therefore timeless, and might be seen as antecedent not just to Plato, but to all the other privileged texts that were not granted the status of revelation.

Of the theurgists themselves (Julian the Chaldæan and his son, known simply as Julian the Theurgist) we have only anecdotal evidence from late and problematic sources—in particular the Suda—evidence which is in some instances at odds with statements by earlier and generally more reliable authors. If the stories could be believed, they would locate the theurgists firmly in the period from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius. The Oracles, however, are at best obscurely visible in the literary record before Porphyry, late in the third century. Hans Lewy was convinced that Porphyry himself was the pivotal figure, introducing the oracles into the school of Plotinus and clothing them in philosophical respectability. But if Porphyry was the first to bring these texts—famously characterized by E. R. Dodds as “theosophical rubbish”—within the sphere of school philosophy, he also explicitly circumscribed their usefulness, recommending them only for those unable to embrace the philosophical life. The Oracles had a manifest relevance to Porphyry’s own obsession with the embodiment and fate of the soul—a subject on which he was, by his own account, both tireless and tiresome (Vit. Plot. 13). But if Porphyry maintained that these texts might serve some purpose for the unphilosophical, he nevertheless distinguished clearly between the advantage they might bring such people and the complete liberation of the soul. This was a state that he, along with his teacher Plotinus and most of the later polytheist Platonists, took to be accessible only through embracing the philosophical life and so cultivating the rational, unified, “highest” soul and correspondingly allowing the passions and appetites to wither away. True, we find parallel to this commitment, and impinging on it, the Iamblichean emphasis on ritual and theurgy as paths leading to the same goal as philosophy. The tension between these two notions of the ends and means of philosophy was a tangible focus of philosophical concern around the year 300, when both Porphyry and Iamblichus were active. Subsequently, however, the two tendencies clearly managed successfully to occupy the same space. The later Platonists both studied Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato and pursued wisdom and the liberation of their souls through ritual and magical means. The fact that we have far richer documentation of the former activity is responsible for the fact that we view the schools of Athens and Alex-

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12 On the Hermetica, and their use by the Neoplatonists, see Garth Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes (Cambridge, 1986).
15 H. Levy, [n. 13 above], 449-56, esp. 456.
andria as the direct extension of the earlier schools of Greek philosophy. Evidence for the latter activity comes largely from the biographies of the scholars, and even there is presumably underplayed. The books of Hermetic and Chaldaean wisdom had a similar role in the schools: their presence is undeniable, but obscure. For whatever reason, these texts bound up with ritual, which seem to have played an important role in the polytheists’ resistance to Christianity, seem never to have been able to penetrate, much less to displace, the philosophical core of the curriculum.

Even if the rituals associated with the oracles were subordinated to the real work of philosophy, however, the Chaldaean Oracles clearly remained privileged texts for the later Platonists. Whatever magical procedures were involved in their use were clearly practised in the time of Porphyry and Iamblichus, and the text itself had a place in the Platonic curriculum, at least in Athens. The proof of this is that Proclus, in the fifth century, wrote a commentary on the Oracles, now lost. The Oracles are frequently mentioned in the surviving works of Proclus, and it is clear that over the two centuries since Porphyry studied them in Plotinus’s school, the Platonists had discovered more and more “parallels” between the ontology they themselves developed out of Plato and the ontological system they discovered in the Oracles. By the fifth century, these had come to stand as complementary evidence for the truth of the ontological hierarchies the Neoplatonists derived from the text of Plato, and there is little point in denying that some students of Plato, at any rate, bought into the notion that this complementary evidence came straight from the mouths of the gods. Even if, for purposes of study, ritual and text were effectively divorced—and this is by no means certain—we have here the single example in these circles of the incorporation into the curriculum of a text that had a ritual dimension. This is perhaps less surprising when we consider that Proclus himself wrote an extant collection of hymns to the Olympian deities. Surrounded by a Christian majority, some of whom were their own students, the later polytheist Platonists seem inevitably to have taken on many of the characteristics of their environment.

We have still before us one remaining category of texts that were privileged in new ways by the Platonists of the Roman Empire: archaic Greek poetry. Here again, the picture is complex and to make things more difficult, the history of the special treatment of these texts is an extraordinarily long one. From a classical perspective, there were four semi-mythic poets who stood at the source of Greek tradition, Musaeus (of whom we can say little), Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod. Despite the Aristotelian maxim that whatever is oldest is most respected, this oldest Greek poetry does not constitute a uniform category, nor was it afforded uniform respect. In the chronology of myth, Orpheus was the oldest of these poets, since Orpheus was an Argonaut and the voyage of the Argo was situated a generation before the Trojan War. Orpheus also had the most developed mythic persona: no one tries to convince us that Homer or Hesiod visited the underworld to bring back a lover—or that they charmed the trees and the wild animals with their songs.

Orphic poetry itself has had an odd history. We have a good deal of it—an intact version of the Argonautica as performed by Orpheus, as well as a generous volume of fragments. Until a generation ago, it was possible—and popular—to assume that none of this poetry predated the Hellenistic period, that it all fell in the category of “late” pseudopigrapha that can tell us nothing about classical or archaic Greece. The chance discovery in 1963, near Thessaloniki, of a charred fourth-century B.C.E. papyrus—the first and oldest ever recovered from Greek soil—changed all that. We now know that Orphic poetry—poetry spoken through the persona of Orpheus—was read in the time of Socrates and before, and we ourselves can actually read a small sample of that poetry. Most of what has been transmitted as Orphic is certainly later, but in the fifth century B.C.E. Orphic poetry was submitted to a mode of analysis, illustrated in the papyrus text, that has distinct affinities with later developments in the interpretation of Homer. It was, after all, Orpheus who was known in the Hellenistic period simply as “The Theologian”—much the way Homer might be designated simply as “The Poet”. What all this suggests is that Orphic poetry, down to the Hellenistic period, was a privileged possession. If almost all of it is lost, and if what we have is later pseudopigrapha, that is because it was at the opposite end of the scale of accessibility from the Iliad and Odyssey. Its readers seem to have been devotees, initiates, who kept Orpheus’s poems to themselves, and among themselves subjected them to paradoxical and implausible interpretive strategies—treated them.

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15 The sad state of the study of this important but elusive document may be sampled in André Laks and Glenn W. Most (eds.), Studies on the Doreian Papyri (Oxford, 1997). Of particular value is the bibliography (175-86) prepared for the volume by Maria Serena Funghi.
in a word, as scripture. We have at best a few windows into this tradition of poetry and its interpretation. The Derveni Papyrus is the first. Perhaps the latest is the moving portrait provided by one of the last Platonic scholarchs, Damascius, of an Alexandrian friend of his own predecessor, Isidore. This man lived late in the fifth century of our era, over a millennium after the Orphic interpretive text from Derveni was written. Damascius’s account of Sarapion offers a vivid portrait of one of the last polytheist Platonists and his books: 17

Isidore befriended this man, who in piety and his overall philosophy of life surpassed all others except Isidore himself. He was so full of the truth in his behavior and speech that he provided a living example of the well-known adage “Keep your light under a bushel” 18—so that I doubt if any of his younger or older contemporaries would have known his true nature. Nor did anyone else know what kind of man Sarapion was, nor indeed would I have this knowledge now, had not [Isidore] himself described Sarapion to me. For he said that there was no way that Sarapion could ever be persuaded to meet other people, especially as he hardly ever left his house once he grew old. He lived alone in a tiny house, embracing a life of utter solitude, in contact with a few of his neighbors only when absolute necessity required it. [Isidore] said that Sarapion was exceptionally pious, going round dressed as a private citizen to the holy places wherever festival custom took him. But most of the time he spent at home, leading a life which was not that of a man, but quite simply a god-like existence, constantly addressing prayers and hymns to himself or to the divine, or rather meditating in silence. A seeker of the Truth and a man with a theoretical cast of mind, he could not bear to occupy himself with the technicalities of philosophy, but immersed himself in those vigorous concepts which fill one with God. For this reason he possessed and read almost nothing except the writings of Orpheus, putting his questions as they arose to Isidore who was as it were invested with absolute theological knowledge. It was only [Isidore] whom he recognized as a kinsman and received at home. Indeed [Isidore] thought he saw in him the legendary golden age of Cronus. He spent his entire life in deed and word focusing his attention and concentrating as far as possible on the inner and the indivisible.

So great was his contempt for material goods that he owned nothing except for two or three books, among which was the poetry of Orpheus. And such was his scorn for bodily pleasures that from his earliest youth he offered his body the bare necessities only, while remaining throughout his life completely undefiled by sexual intercourse. Besides he so disdained social honors that not even his name was known in the city; nor would it have become known afterwards, had not some god desired to grace humanity with a model of the golden age of Cronus, so that this expression would not appear to refer merely to a legend, unsupported by historical evidence... [Sarapion] made Isidore his heir, having no relatives, since he considered no one else worthy of his property—that is, of his two or three books.

What we see here is clearly the scripturalization of a text, but of one we know so imperfectly that it is impossible to say much more about its stabilization or canonization. It was used by a community, which defined itself through the text itself. It is probable that this community was never large, but in any case we see it most clearly only in the brief biography of this peculiar recluse who must have been one of its last survivors, and who brought his own difficulties in the interpretation of Orpheus to the prominent local teacher of Platonic philosophy.

Teachers of Platonic philosophy interpreted and took seriously other old poetry in the fifth and sixth centuries. Proclus of Athens was the most conspicuous among them. He read and commented on—and so presumably taught—the “Golden Verses” attributed to Pythagoras. He also pondered the meaning of the Iliad and Odyssey. I have written elsewhere about his extensive defense of Homer against the Socrates of the Republic. 19 It occupies two books of his commentary on that seldom-taught dialogue, and any satisfactory account of it is far beyond the scope of this paper. I would like to close, though, by evoking some of the strangeness of Proclus’s relationship to Homer.

The Iliad and Odyssey were, in the fifth century of the common era, the introductory texts read and copied by schoolchildren learning to read and write Greek. They had served that function for perhaps a millennium and were to go on doing so in the schools of Byzantium. Everybody who knew Greek knew Homer. By the fifth century, however, a majority of those schoolchildren were being raised to be Christians. A century earlier, the polytheist emperor Julian had made a vain attempt to prevent Christian teachers from reading such texts with children—but like much imperial legislation, this order

17 Polynnia Athanasiadi (ed. and tr.), Damascius, The Philosophical History (Athens, 1999), Fr. 111 (265-69). I have cited her translation with a few interpolations and modifications.
18 The Greek is ἄνενθε κρίνει— a controversial Epicurean injunction: more literally, “Let no one notice that you live your life.”
19 See n. 11, above.
was unenforceable. Why Julian wanted to stop such teaching is vividly illustrated in a letter by his contemporary St. Basil of Caesarea on teaching polytheist texts to young Christians. Basil and his co-religionists were very sophisticated in their use of texts—much more so than Julian. They knew how to deliver an Iliad and an Odyssey stripped of theological authority—texts that could serve as sources of edifying anecdotes and messages consistent with and supportive of Christian ideals. What those texts claimed about the gods might either be swept aside or debunked, the myths exposed for the contradictory but attractive fables they were to become for the subsequent European tradition. This is what Julian dreaded and opposed as best he could.

In Proclus’s time, the battle had long been lost. The epics had survived the gods. Every day, in every elementary classroom, they were being taught by teachers who mocked their theology—often undoubtedly evoking the same absurdities that had been the target of critics of Homer in the centuries before Plato. Proclus, like several of the other later scholarchs, is presented by his biographer as a restorer of temples and of neglected cults. It is clear from his discussion of the Homeric poems in the Republic commentary that he blamed the neglect of those cults and the collapse of the Greco-Roman order in large part on perverse or ignorant readers. Those who saw in the episode of the “Deception of Zeus” or the “Song of Ares and Aphrodite” only the humor and the obscenity of the surface of the fiction were the real barbarians at the gates. And they were already inside and in control of the educational system. Proclus’s response was clearly to teach the Iliad and Odyssey as he understood them, elucidating their theology with the help of a rich tradition of commentary that had accumulated for centuries. But he did it only for his tiny circle of advanced students of Platonic philosophy. With them, he shared the keys that unlocked the old stories and revealed the truth behind the screen of fiction—but he demanded that they keep those interpretations to themselves and not expose them—along with Homer and the theological truths he wove into his fiction—to the scorn of the ignorant. The Homeric poems, the elementary school texts of antiquity, had become, among the last polytheists, material reserved for graduate courses of severely limited enrollment.

The anecdote with which Proclus’s biographer Marinus sums up his teacher’s assessment of contemporary popular culture is perhaps the most revealing of all the tales of the Neoplatonists and their books. Himself the most eminent representative of an interpretive community that was dwindling to the point of extinction, Proclus (Marinus tells us, Vit. Pr. 38) was accustomed often to observe, “If I ruled the world, of all the old books I would have preserved only the [Chaldean] Oracles and the Timaeus, and I would hide all the rest from our contemporaries, since those books do serious harm to some of those who read them casually and uncritically.”