

Preface

In 2021, a previously unknown work by Porphyry of Tyre (d. 301/305 AD) preserved in a Syriac translation was made available to historians of philosophy (Arzhanov 2021). The treatise, which has come down to us without any title, was published as *On Principles and Matter* (abbreviated as *PM*). This text not only enlarges our knowledge of the legacy of the most prominent disciple of Plotinus but also serves as an important witness to Platonist discussions of first principles and of Plato's concept of prime matter in the *Timaeus*, since it contains extensive quotations from Middle Platonist philosophers (e.g., Atticus and Severus).

Soon after the edition of the *PM*, Alexandra Michalewski published a review of it in the journal *Études platoniciennes* (Michalewski 2022), stressing the importance of the newly discovered text both for our understanding of Porphyry's views and for our knowledge of the Middle Platonist interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*. In addition, the French scholar pointed out the similarity between some portions of the *PM* and the final part (*De Silua*) of the commentary on the *Timaeus* composed in Latin in the fourth century AD by Calcidius (see Michalewski 2022, §§19–21). The close proximity between the published Syriac treatise and the Latin text of Calcidius has been established independently by Michael Chase (see his chapter in the present volume).

Parallels between the treatise preserved in Syriac translation and the Latin text of Calcidius turn out to be one of the most important keys to our interpretation of the *PM*. These parallels further strengthen the attribution of the original Greek text that underlies the *PM* to Porphyry, since scholars long assumed that the section *De Silua* in Calcidius' commentary depended on a work of Plotinus' disciple. In addition, a number of publications which appeared after the edition of 2021 made apparent the value of the quotations from other philosophers (which mostly belong to the period of Middle Platonism) preserved in the *PM* (Ge 2022).

However, together with the new evidence, new questions have arisen to stimulate further scholarly discussion. To name only few:

1. Was the *PM* a separate treatise written by Porphyry or a fragment deriving from a larger work? According to Michael Chase, both the *PM* and the section *De Silua* by Calcidius derive from Porphyry's lost commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* (see his contribution to the present volume). This assumption, nevertheless, does not exclude the possibility that *PM* also circulated as a separate treatise, and the evidence of Calcidius speaks in favour of it. This separate treatise might originally have been larger than the text transmitted in Syriac. Thus, a number of possibilities could be considered: either (1) it was conceived by Porphyry and transmitted as a separate work; or (2) it was composed as a separate treatise but included by Porphyry himself in his large commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*; or (3) it was originally composed as part of a larger work, from which it was later separated either in the form transmitted in Syriac or in a different one.

2. What was the original title of this treatise? The answer to this question largely depends on how one answers the previous one. It could have been either “On Principles” or “On Matter”, both of which are recorded by the Suda (IV 178.19 Adler), while Calcidius gives good reasons for preferring the latter variant. It is interesting to note, however, that Waszink (1962, xxxiv), in his edition of the Latin text of Calcidius, separated chapters 302–320 (i.e., those that are closely related to *PM* §§17–67) as *Ipsius Calcidii opinio de silua et in uniuersum de principiis*, which provides another reason to maintain the title *On Principles and Matter* for the Syriac text.
3. What is the nature of differences between the Latin text of Calcidius and the Syriac translation? Which version better reflects the Greek original? There remains little doubt that both Calcidius and the Syriac translator (who in all likelihood was the seventh-century abbot of the monastery of Qenneshre, Severus Sebokht) changed and adopted the original text for their audience. However, each of these versions contains smaller or larger portions that are absent in the other, and it remains a puzzling task to analyse them.
4. What is the place of the *PM* in the Syriac philosophical tradition? Was it a separate episode or just the tip of an iceberg which remains unknown and unseen to us? Though *PM* seems to be a unique text in many respects, one has to admit that a full-scale history of what might be called “Syriac philosophy” has not yet been written. A number of recent findings (like the discovery of the *PM* in the Egyptian monastery Dayr al-Suryan) suggest that both the writings of Porphyry and Platonic teachings should occupy a larger place in this unwritten history than scholars have assumed thus far.

Further questions remain open, and the present volume of collected studies suggests tentative answers to some of them. This volume includes papers presented on April 8, 2022, at a workshop organized by George Karamanolis and the editor of this volume in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. The workshop aimed at summing up the new information about Porphyry’s philosophical work and its reception in the Greek, Latin, and Syriac traditions in light of the discovery of the Syriac text. Besides the authors who have contributed to this volume, Sebastian Brock, István Perczel, and Carlos Steel took part in the workshop, providing feedback to the papers presented. In addition to the proceedings of the Vienna workshop, this collection of studies also includes two contributions from M. Bergamo and R. Chiaradonna.

I would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this volume of collected studies, providing an in-depth analysis of nearly all aspects of the Syriac treatise published in 2021. The chapters by G. Karamanolis, R. Chiaradonna, and J. Greig contextualize the *PM* in the history of philosophy, evaluating it against the background of Porphyry’s extant texts and within the context of Middle Platonism which predates Porphyry. The chapters by J. Dillon and A. Michalewski analyze how the *PM* contributes to our knowledge of Porphyry’s role in the transmission of Middle Platonic material to later generations of philosophers. The chapter by M. Bergamo provides a comprehensive

examination of the first part of the *PM*, contextualizing Porphyry in the history of doxography. The study of M. Chase focuses on the relation between the *PM* and Calcidius and suggests multiple scenarios for which source might have underlain the Latin and Syriac translations. Finally, the chapters by J. Watt and I. Jurasz set the Syriac version of the *PM* in the context of the Syriac intellectual and philosophical tradition. Together, these contributions provide us with a thorough analysis of various aspects of the newly discovered text and may serve as a detailed commentary to the 2021 edition of the treatise *On Principles and Matter*.

The present volume forms the inaugural entry in a new series from De Gruyter, focused on philosophical and scholarly treatises either composed or preserved in the languages of the Christian Orient. This series has the aim of making apparent the role of Oriental Christians in the transmission of late antique sciences and philosophy, in their creative reception and adaptation for Christian culture, and in the transmission of philosophical and scientific knowledge to the Arabic and (later) European worlds. It is my pleasure to thank Matthias Perkams for collaborating with me on this scholarly endeavour and the staff of De Gruyter for supporting our initiative in launching this project.

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