

THE CHALDEAN ORACLES OF ZOROASTER, HEKATE'S COUCH,
AND PLATONIC ORIENTALISM IN PSELLOS AND PLETHON¹

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Frances Yates does not begin her introduction to Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Hermetic discourse with lofty praise for the wisdom of her subjects. Instead, she introduces them to us as dupes who are deeply devoted to a colossal failure: Lactantius' error of dating the wisdom of the thrice-great Hermes to the era of Moses. She refers to it again and again², a grand historical mishap which dramatically altered the West's intellectual discourse even to the present day³. However, little is said about another important error of sourcing, one which is tightly entwined with the fate of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in Renaissance and Modern Europe. I speak of George Gemistos Pléthon's claim that the fragments of text hidden in the libraries of Byzantium under the heading *Chaldean Oracles* were in fact written by Zoroaster. Indeed, Pléthon was the first individual to actually take the "Chaldean" aspect of the corpus—which is clearly limited to the title—seriously enough to identify the *Oracles* as Zoroastrian teachings. Pléthon's claim that the *Oracles* were Zoroastrian profoundly affected the development of Modern European discourse about the Hellenic themes of the *Oracles* and, more generally, "the Orient"⁴. As Michael Stausberg has written in his exhaustive study of the figure of Zoroaster in European culture,

¹ This paper has benefited from the attention of Profs. Kocku von Stuckrad (Universiteit van Amsterdam) and John Duffy (Harvard University). I am very grateful to them both for their valuable advice and suggestions.

² Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 13, 18-19.

³ Ibid. 1-2: 'The returning movement of the Renaissance with which this book will be concerned, the return to a pure golden age of magic, was based on a radical error in dating. The works which inspired the Renaissance Magus, and which he believed to be of profound antiquity, were really written in the second to third centuries A.D.'

⁴ I refer to the "Orient" fully in Said's sense of the term; Said, *Orientalism*, 1-9, 12, 15. Moore-Gilbert (*Postcolonial Theory*, 34-73, esp. 41-53) offers a very useful introduction to Said replete with criticisms, as does Kennedy (*Said*, esp. 21-48); Macfie (*Orientalism*) and Kurz (*Vom Umgang mit dem Anderen*) provide important discussions of the scholarly debate about and appropriations of Said's work. With Said one must read the counter of Baruma & Margalit (*Occidentalism*, 10): 'Occidentalism is at least as reductive (as Orientalism); its bigotry simply turns the Orientalist view upside down. To diminish an entire society or civilization to a mass of soulless, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites is a form of intel-

schon das Beispiel Plêthons macht daher deutlich, daß die Geschichte der Rezeption des Namens Zoroaster in Europa bzw. die Geschichte der mit der Rezeption dieses Namens verbundenen Motive und Interessen qualitativ etwas anderes ist als eine Geschichte von iranischen oder zoroastrischen "Einflüssen" auf Europa⁵.

Plêthon and his *Chaldean Oracles* clearly outdid Lactantius with his *Hermetica*; the *Oracles* were not only mistakenly assigned to an impossibly remote Antiquity, but an Eastern world of ancient wisdom. To be more precise: the European discourse fetishizing the East as a source of ancient wisdom came upon a dramatic and enduring *locus fascini* in the figure of Zoroaster when Plêthon titled his collection of the oracles the *Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster*.

This article is not an analysis of how that story unfurled and what happened in the end⁶, but of a hitherto unexplored subplot which transpired at the very beginning—in fact, the prologue. I begin there, with the 11th-century Byzantine theologian Michael Psellos. Psellos was one of Plêthon's chief sources not just for the *Oracles* but for general information about Greek philosophy—especially Late Neoplatonism.

'The Platonic and Orphic and, most of all, the Chaldean Writings'

Psellos was almost certainly inspired a great deal by the *Oracles* and treated them with respect, even going so far as to assert that Plato and Aristotle largely subscribed to their doctrines, and that all the great Neoplatonic thinkers agreed with them entirely⁷. In fact, he found many of the *Oracles* to be aligned with Christian doctrine⁸.

However, he also expresses some ambivalence about the content of the *Oracles*. The question of whether his reservations may have been feigned in

lectual destruction'. Despite the charge of Occidentalism (not to mention Said's failure to provide thorough investigation of gender and Orientalism [for which see Kennedy, *Said*, 37-46, and Kurz, *Vom Umgang mit dem Anderen*, 185-194]), I do find Said's general intuition worthy of application in numerous contexts besides (post)-Colonial literature and philology, such as the present topic, the interface of magic, religious identity, and idealized fonts of wisdom in the Late Antique and Medieval worlds.

⁵ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 971.

⁶ Readers intrigued by this subject will find all they desire in Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*.

⁷ Psellos, *Philosophica Minora II*, 148. See also idem, *Theologica I*, 16, 88-89. The translations of Psellos given here are my own except where noted otherwise.

⁸ Ibid. p. 129.

the better interest of self-preservation is probably unanswerable (at least until new evidence is brought forward) but need not concern us here⁹. Regardless of cause or motive, his comments about them are utterly contradictory. On the one hand, he hints that they are capable of imparting an undemonstrable knowledge, a perennial philosophy, and that the same divine revelation can be found not only in the Bible but the teachings of the Neoplatonists and their own inspired text¹⁰.

This revelation is a claim to absolute knowledge:

I heard it said by the more adept philosophers that there is a wisdom which is beyond all demonstration, apprehensible only by the intellect of a wise man, when prudently inspired. Even here my resolution did not falter. I read some of the occult books and grasped their meaning, as far as my human abilities allowed, of course, for I myself could never claim that I had an accurate understanding of these things nor would I believe anyone else who said he had¹¹.

Given Psellos' fierce admiration for Proklos, and Proklos' own zeal for the *Oracles*, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the *Chaldean Oracles* were one of Psellos' "occult books" transmitting 'a wisdom which is beyond all demonstration'. Hoping to salvage Plato and Aristotle in a letter to one of his critics, he distinguishes the philosophers from the occult wisdom of the supposedly ancient books:

And so on account of these things (I've said about Plato) I have come immediately to the text, speaking in defense of its insolence and demonstrating, as much as I can, that all Hellenic wisdom as old as 'the most ancient age'—including with this the text of the Chaldeans and the Egyptians or some other occult knowledge (*gnōsis aporrētos*)—is, I have concluded, as a whole less old¹².

He further decries the Neoplatonic champions of the *Chaldean Oracles*: 'I feel ashamed of Iamblichos and Proklos, and all of those couriers of *philosophia*, those bearers passing on the Chaldean nonsenses . . . But of this I've said enough'¹³.

⁹ See, however, the view of Kaldellis, who argues quite forcefully that Psellos in no uncertain way favored Plato and Hellenic religion over the Christianity of his age. Athanassiadi, on the other hand, assigns Psellos a 'gloomy' Christianity torn between his genuine delight in Hellenic texts and the prevailing orthodoxy of his day (Athanassiadi, 'Byzantine Commentators', 245-247). For some middle ground with sympathy to Kaldellis, see the useful introduction to Psellos' philosophical character in Duffy, 'Psellos'.

¹⁰ My argument agrees with the brief but useful survey of Psellos' various comments about the *Oracles* offered by Duffy, 'Reactions', 85-90, esp. 86.

¹¹ Duffy's translation of Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, in *ibid.*, 87.

¹² Psellos, *Ep. Giovanni*, l. 234-239. See also *ibid.*, l. 15-20.

¹³ *Idem*, *Theologica I*, 37.6-8. However, as Duffy suggests, Psellos' commonplace denunci-

Yet Psellos also freely admits to having drawn magical practices from the *Oracles*. I refer of course to his famous reference to the iynx wheel made by attaching a leather strap to a golden ball, embedded with a single sapphire. Gripping the other end of the strap, the theurgist would swing the ball around like a bull-roarer¹⁴. Sometimes Psellos trumpets his own great knowledge of astrology, the manufacturing of apotropaic objects, and ancient Pagan cosmologies. Moreover, he writes very enthusiastically about theurgic practice and its consonance with Christian teaching because of its Platonic asceticism:

... We are also made like God according to the theurgic virtues. This is at any rate the most perfect similitude (we have to him). For purifying souls and theorizing about existents are not at all like the divine, for it is something greater than purity and theory. That which can divinely force man to depart from matter and delivers him from the passions, so that he can practice theurgy (*dunasthai thourgein*) on someone else, now this is the most perfect similitude (of the divine). 'And if you bring forth', as God says in the Gospel, 'the precious from the vile, you shall be as my mouth' (Jer. 15:19)¹⁵.

But Psellos also insists that he has never employed any of the magical techniques forbidden by the Church, rejecting the rituals associated with the *Oracles*. In response to a criticism of one Oualentinos, he says,

And concerning this great charge of Oualentinos', that I have fallen in with many books, Platonic and Orphic and especially Chaldean texts: in no way have I turned to a passage (in one of these books) for any practical purpose (*spoudasmati*). Rather I only do it with the very intention that I understand the records about the heresies¹⁶.

ations of Neoplatonic and esoteric texts could simply have been his way of ensuring that he would be able to read them at all without being put to the stake (Duffy, 'Psellos', 147-150, 154). Athanassiadi chides Psellos for his 'hypocrisy' (Athanassiadi, 'Byzantine Commentators', 246).

¹⁴ Psellos, *Ep.* 187, V.474.

¹⁵ Idem, *De Omnifaria Doctrina*, 45, 52.5-46, 12. See also Duffy's analysis ('Psellos', 147) of Psellos' exegesis (idem, *Theologica* 18.33-40) of Mark 10:17-18. Psellos also admires the *Chaldean Oracles* for their anticipation of Christian ascetic teaching (idem, *Philosophica Minora II*, 127, 13-14, 127, 25-128); as will become clear in the below, Pléthon's departure from Psellos in this matter is very significant.

¹⁶ Idem, *Theologica I*, 4.44-48, p. 16. The term I have translated as 'practical purpose' (*spoudasmati*) generally refers to a zeal for practice, an action. Psellos carefully chooses his words to try to show that in no way is he practicing anything he researches in the 'many books of the Platonists and Orphics and Chaldeans', but that he is simply engaging in the usual heresiology.

Psellos' strategy here is to paint himself as a heresy-hunter who does not practice any of the occult techniques he reads about¹⁷. This of course would include the various ritual practices and meditations described in the *Oracles*.

Michael Psellos, then, engages the *Chaldean Oracles* in two separate, but (for him) totally interwoven discourses. The first is that of the *philosophia perennis*: the existence of an absolute, undemonstratable wisdom which can be found in other canonical great thinkers—in fact, *every* thinker worth reading. Psellos then provides an example of a Byzantine version of the theme of the *prisci theologi*; it is notable that he always mentions the Hermetic (literally, “Egyptian”) texts on the level of the Neoplatonists and the *Oracles*, in contrast to two very prolific Neoplatonic writers: Proklos, who says nothing at all about Hermes Trismegistos, and Iamblichos, who describes the ‘Hermetic books’ with great reverence but in passing.¹⁸

But paradoxically, Psellos is also wary of assigning the Neoplatonists and the *Chaldean Oracles* the same status as Plato, Aristotle, or canonical Christian figures. He will not assign “occult knowledge” the authority of Antiquity or the mantle of philosophy. We should remember, however, that Psellos' remarks on the *Oracles*, perennial wisdom, and magic are not made freely. Openly admitting to the teaching and use of practices considered to be magical would be tantamount to death or expulsion from the empire. He seems to be especially sensitive to these issues when he discusses magical practices, with which he identified the rituals of the *Oracles*. There is an overwhelming heresiological discourse in Psellos' wavering stance the *Oracles*. He has to dance around not only the Hellenic wisdom of the *Oracles* but the practices described in them, which are bound by this overarching heresiological discourse to the discourse about magic¹⁹.

At this point in the *Chaldean Oracles*' history, the controversy over them departs from the Late Antique discourse of disputation over the efficacy of theurgic practice versus intellectual, philosophical contemplation²⁰ to one in which magic and supra-philosophical learning are bound together as hereti-

¹⁷ Ibid. 4.44-50, p. 16; Duffy, ‘Psellos’, 149-150; idem, ‘Psellos and Italikos’, 88.

¹⁸ Garth Fowden (*Hermes*, 134-141) surveys Iamblichos' evidence about the Hermetica (Iamblichos, *Mysteria*, Book VIII).

¹⁹ This statement follows from and agrees with Duffy, ‘Psellos and Italikos’, 84.

²⁰ See Iamblichos, *Mysteria*, II.11.96, 9-II.11.98, 11, Proklos, *Platonic Theology*, I.25, and Damaskios' famous statement that ‘while some, such as Porphyrios and Plotinos and many others, esteem philosophy more highly, Iamblichos, Syrianos, Proklos and the all the priests honor the hieratic art more instead’. (Damascius, *Phaedo*, 105) For general introductions to Neoplatonic theurgy see Shaw, ‘Rituals’, and Dodds, ‘Theurgy’.

cal, Pagan teachings. They become markers of alterity, of affinity with the “Other” in Byzantine theological discourse²¹. To understand Psellos’ periodic reticence about the *Oracles* as an act of identity formation through distancing himself from his “other”, it is helpful to glance at how other Byzantines thought about magic.

In the Byzantium of Late Antiquity, the use of magical objects, amulets, and spells was commonplace and could be explained away to the authorities relatively easily. By Psellos’ own time, however, only obsequiously Christian magical practices were tolerated, and “magic” became synonymous with anti-Christian heresy²². Alexander Kazhdan has demonstrated this by observing

²¹ Levinas (*Alterity and Transcendence*, 103), working with reference to Buber, coined the term “alterity” to describe the ethical relationship of the subject with its “other” (‘In that relation to the other, there is no fusion; the relation to the other is envisioned as alterity. The other is alterity . . .’), but the term has been reinterpreted in a Lacanian sense in cultural studies with the aim of discussing the process of identity formation through conceiving the “other”: ‘All human cultures articulate, situate themselves by categorizing the world. Such a predicative act necessarily involves a distinction between that which is allowed into a sphere of culture, and that which is excluded; the circumscription of cultural identity proceeds by silhouetting it against a contrastive background of Otherness’ (Corbey and Leerssen, ‘Studying Alterity’, vi). See also Kippenberg & von Stuckrad (*Einführung*, 155): ‘Erst mit der kulturwissenschaftlichen Neuorientierung der Disziplin setzte sich zunehmend die Erkenntnis durch, dass man Gruppenbildungsprozesse nicht ohne einen Rückgriff auf geschichtliche Narration, geteilte Erinnerungen oder auch das Ausgrenzen und Konstruieren des “Anderen”, also jener Menschen und Gruppen, die nicht dazu gehören sollen, erklären kann . . .’.

²² Duffy, ‘Psellos and Italikos’, 95. Late Antique Byzantium also saw the copious use of textiles and floor mosaics decorated with Christian incantations and geometric symbols to invoke apotropaic power (Maguire, *Rhetoric, Nature, and Magic*, 265-274). During the debate of iconoclasm in the early Medieval period, however, the sort of “Christian magic” of these textiles was removed from a magical discourse. Maguire (‘Magic and the Christian Image’, 70) describes how Christian tapestry art of Late Antiquity and the early Medieval period illustrates ‘how the church after iconoclasm was successful in redefining and recontextualizing Christian imagery, so that it no longer was able to play a role in unofficial practices and belief systems that the church could not reconcile with the theology of the icon, and had previously associated with “magic”’. The crucial change was that ‘Christian images lost the status of powerful signs, becoming instead the representations of powerful individuals’ (ibid. 71). In other words, images that would have been conceived as magical became simply Christian, leaving “magic” as a category of alterity to Christian identity.

Marie Theres Fögen has provided valuable evidence to support this conclusion in her comparison of fourth-century Roman law about magic and the 12th-century testimony of Balsamon: ‘(1) Whereas the character and works of the culprits (magicians) remain vague and undifferentiated in the fourth century, they later receive a more and more detailed description. (2) *Whereas fourth-century legislation was not concerned with a neat distinction of pagan and Christian practices and rites, this separation was later provided by a social and mental discrimination of the pagan forms.* (3) Whereas for the emperors of the fourth century (and still for Basil), magicians, diviners, and their clients were nothing other than murderers, canon law categorized

the difference in Medieval Byzantine discourse about miracles and magic. By and large, this discourse had ‘no palpable boundary between evil magic and the beneficial miracle’, but the ‘difference between the holy and unholy miracle becomes evident in the stories about contests between the saint and magicians’²³. In these stories, Christians triumph over Pagans, Muslims, and Jews through martyrdom, the resurrection of animals, or ‘a miraculous locking up of the mouth of the saint’s opponent—the saint just makes him mute and unable to continue his slander of the Christian faith’²⁴.

The evidence of the famous Byzantine historian Nikētas Choniates is also revealing in this respect. He admits that some events clearly unexplainable by natural causes were clearly the works of ‘sorcerers’. The descriptions of these warlocks, Kazhdan tells us, ‘contain the paraphernalia typical of the ambiance of hagiographical demons: lust and rape, the bathhouse, the serpent’²⁵. One of their villains, the astrologer Skleros Seth, uses a ‘Persian apple’ to seduce a virgin, conjuring the familiar Orientalist portrait of anti-Christian, Asiatic decadence²⁶. The hazy image of the Persian, his magical tricks and tools, and Pagan idolatry conjoin in the common Medieval Byzantine imagination as a powerful image of the “other” by which Christians could identify themselves²⁷.

Psellos’ wrestle with his own stance on the *Oracles* takes place in this workshop of Christian identities constructed through differentiation from an anti-Christian ideal²⁸. His writings on the *Oracles* reveal that despite his admiration for them and interest in the practices described in them, he does not, for whatever reason, identify himself (publicly) with a discourse of Pagan

and treated them according to their conscience and guilt in respect not to murder but to heresy and apostasy’ (Fögen, ‘Balsamon on Magic’, 110; emphasis mine).

²³ Kazhdan, ‘Miracle Workers’, 81, 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁶ *Ibid.* It is entirely probable that the individuals he describes were in fact charlatans; the point is how he describes them.

²⁷ The world of the Persian empire is, in the Byzantine mind, that of ‘the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorroah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet, and dozens more; settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires’ (Said, *Orientalism*, 63).

²⁸ Valerie Flint (‘The Demonisation of Magic’; *The Rise of Magic*, esp. 397) has argued that it was precisely through the sort of ambivalent hand-wringing about magic we see in Psellos that magic survived Antiquity at all; while Christian authorities condemned practices deemed magical, they ultimately compromised it and failed to wipe it out.

philosophia perennis and magical practice. Rather, he uses this hybrid discourse of Pagan beliefs and magical practices as the foil of alterity in formulating his own identity as a Greek Orthodox theologian, Neoplatonic learning notwithstanding.

The Newest Oldest Sage

George Gemistos Plēthon's treatment of the *Chaldean Oracles*, on the other hand, displays no such equivocation, vacillation, or confusion. Whilst 14th-century Byzantium was slowly devoured from the bottom up by the Turks, Plēthon happily whiled away his days in the Peloponnessus, exiled for a clearly articulated, vigorous self-identification as a Pagan heretic. I will attempt to demonstrate in this section how Plēthon not only accepted and defined himself by Psellos' treatment of the *Oracles* as a marker of an heretical, Pagan, magical identity, but in fact intensified his anti-Christian identity through his unprecedented attribution of the authorship of the *Oracles* to the Persian sage Zoroaster.

Plēthon believes that Zoroaster was the most wise and ancient (having apparently lived 5000 years before the Trojan War) of all sages²⁹. Indeed, he includes Zoroaster as the very first perennial philosopher usually (for his lists vary, but not very significantly) alongside Orpheus, Musaeus, Pythagoras, the Presocratics, Plato, some Stoic thinkers, and the Neoplatonists³⁰.

²⁹ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra*, 60.

³⁰ Plēthon's paradigmatic treatment of the idea of "perennial wisdom" discovered by a variety of thinkers is aptly described by Woodhouse: 'if there were a common substratum to all religions, it would be natural to identify it with the oldest known form of religion. Gemistos, who had no idea of the comparative antiquity of religions, looked to Zoroaster, Moses, and various legendary Greeks as the nominal sources of his system. But he formulated its content in terms of what he believed to be the oldest surviving religion, and also the best known to him, which was the Olympian religion of this ancestors, including its pre-Olympian core. This reversion to paganism on his part was deliberately provocative, but it was not mere foolishness' (Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 168-169). See also Woodhouse's paraphrase of the beginning of Plēthon's *Book of Laws* (ibid. 326-328) and Masai, *Plēthon*, 130-141. It is significant that Plēthon does not seem to associate a very specific sort of truth claim, besides a rejection of Islamic and Christian thought, with his ur-Platonism. He did take seriously Plato's argument in the *Phaedrus* that true wisdom can only be disclosed in a personal pedagogical encounter rather than through book-learning (Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 67), but there is no evidence to align him with Psellos' consideration that this wisdom is an unfalsifiable, revelatory truth-claim, even if it is probable that he would have been amenable to this concept, especially considering his use of Plato's *Seventh Letter* and Proklos' works.

The “Zoroaster” of Plēthon keeps appropriate company, for all of his ideas were not simply Greek but Platonic. Plēthon, reading Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride* 369d-e, thinks that Zoroaster was the first to assert that a triple deity ruled over the cosmos, a doctrine consonant with Platonic theology (he was most likely thinking of Plato’s *Seventh Letter* 312e)³¹.

Is it possible, then, that Plēthon actually knew anything about the historical Zoroaster or the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism? There is no evidence to suggest that he did. The only ideas he cites as Zoroastrian are Platonic and were available to him in Platonic sources (indeed, he says as much whenever he asserts, as he does in the title of one of his treatises, on the agreement of the ideas of Plato and Zoroaster). The only clear evidence regarding the question of his knowledge of Persian language shows that Plēthon knew nothing of Persian. He offers an etymology of the name of the ancient Persian king Cyrus, concluding, wrongly, that it meant “sun”, that most hallowed of Platonic metaphors³². Plēthon is a “Platonic Orientalist”, deriving from Neoplatonic sources a fascination with the exotic, decadent East as the source of arcane mystical wisdom³³.

Plēthon actually does not say very much about what particular aspects of the *Oracles* he thinks are particularly Zoroastrian; the text, to him, speaks for itself. Plēthon does, however, mention that the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, described in the first two lines of his edition of the *Oracles*,

³¹ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 60.

³² *Ibid.* While Woodhouse acknowledges that the references to Zoroaster in Gemistos’ work can all be traced to Greek sources, he is unwise to hint that Gemistos had any instruction at all in Persian religion when his every mention of Zoroaster points to the Platonism of the *Oracles* and not to Persia. (Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 63-64) Similarly Athanassiadi overreaches when she argues that ‘the oral tradition of an Oriental mysticism—not necessarily Islamic—which had flourished since the ninth century in the greater Middle East and which had been abundantly fertilized by Neoplatonism, was a primary influence on him’. This argument rests entirely on speculation about Plēthon’s activities during his Ottoman period and is bereft of any textual evidence.

³³ John Walbridge coined the term in his study of the great Sufi mystical philosopher Suhrawardī. As he argues, ‘there certainly is no warrant whatever for considering Suhrawardī as an exponent of any sort of genuine pre-Islamic Iranian wisdom. He shows no evidence of knowledge of ancient Iran beyond what might be expected of an educated Muslim of his time and place . . .’. ‘He certainly was a mystic, but the mysticism, as befits a Platonist, is firmly placed in a rational setting and put in the service of epistemology. The romantic Orientalism is likewise authentic, but it is secondhand, like that of the Greeks. He is a champion of the ancient Persians, not because he is an Iranian himself, or even knows much about them, but because this kind of Orientalism is an integral feature of Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonism’ (Walbridge, *Wisdom*, 13, 83). See also the discussion, without recourse to Orientalism, of Athanassiadi, ‘Byzantine Commentators’, 249-250.

is Zoroaster's³⁴. He also says that Zoroaster is in agreement with 'Platonic and Pythagorean wisdom' on the relationship between the body and the soul³⁵.

In that context Plēthon deals with the quite literally "psychological" discussions in Greek thought typified by Aristotle's *De Anima* or Plato's *Timaeus*, a conversation which need not delay us here. For us, the crucial aspect of the relationship between the body and the soul in Plēthon's thought is his rejection of the phenomenon of dualist asceticism in so many strands of Platonic philosophy. Unlike Plotinos, Plēthon was not ashamed to be in a body, something he did not regard as a prison at all³⁶. He despises the Greek Church's consecration of asceticism; and, as we will see below, he simply can not accept the clear distaste for the body manifest in his own copy of Zoroaster's "Chaldean" *Oracles*³⁷.

Why does Plēthon attribute the authorship of the *Oracles* to Zoroaster? For the same reason that Psellos does not (publicly, at least) accept the *Oracles* as truly consonant with orthodox Christian teaching: they aren't Christian. In Psellos' time and before, their title was clearly a play on the fascination with Persian magic and wisdom fathered in mainstream Greek literature by Aeschylus in *The Persians*. Any educated Greek, in Athens or Constantinople, knew that *magos* was originally a Persian word³⁸. Plēthon raises his own heretical ante by retaining the Hellenic theme of *philosophia perennis*, probably using Proklos and Psellos, and introducing Zoroaster, a classical Greek Orientalism, into it³⁹.

³⁴ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 59; Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 54.

³⁵ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 60.

³⁶ Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 1.

³⁷ Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 64; contra Bidez/Cumont (*Mages hellénisés*, 161): 'De même que les Mages, ses disciples, les Λόγια Χαλδαϊκά ne prêchaient-ils pas, avec une sorte de dualisme, le culte du Feu divin?'

³⁸ Aeschylus, *Persians*, 684-688: 'As I behold my wife by my tomb I am overcome by dread, but graciously accept her libations. And while you, milling about my tomb, lament, shrieking piteously, you call me with the magicians (*goois*) who conduct the dead (*psukhagōgois*)'. For more on the Greeks' ancient and persistent association of illicit magic with the East, see Bidez/Cumont, *Mages hellénisés*, 144-145; Graf, 'Magic', 35-36. And see, more generally, Said, *Orientalism*, 56-58.

³⁹ The question of the status of the ancient Byzantine foe, the Persian, in the eyes of the Medieval Byzantine must at least be considered tangentially. In Psellos' time, the Byzantines dominated the Muslim caliphates to the South. By the 12th-century, however, Turkish Muslims had become a force to be reckoned with in the South. The identification of this southern threat with anti-Christian Persian barbarism is manifest in Theodore Prodromos' panegyric to John II after a battle in which he compares the Emperor to the infant Christ in a painting of the adoration of the Magi: '... And the Emperor has entered out of Teman bearing victory. The star of God announces His Advent to the Magi, but the very stars of his trophies declare the Emperor.

Plêthon perpetrates Psellos' heresiological discourse but magnifies it by intensely amplifying the Orientalist discourse of his Antique sources⁴⁰. The move worked; Scholarios, who viciously attacked Plêthon's reputation, was acutely aware of and disgusted by this enthusiasm for non-Christian, (supposedly) Eastern teaching⁴¹. It is significant that Plêthon asserted the consonance of the doctrines of Plato and Zoroaster while giving lectures to Italians on the disagreement between Plato and Aristotle, sparking the controversy in Europe over the philosophers' disparity⁴².

There is no need to imagine Plêthon as some demented antichrist maliciously slapping Zoroaster's name on the *Chaldean Oracles* to attack Christendom and confound modern historians. Neoplatonic to the core, he betrays no sense of cunning, cynicism or sarcasm in his writings, despite his occasional ferocity or harshness. Moreover, he speaks of Zoroaster so reverently that one cannot imagine that his mistaken attribution of the *Oracles* to the Persian sage was intentional; and to leave the matter as a case of philological naiveté is uncurious and boring (a great Zoroastrian sin!). Rather, it

One of them has three Persians doing obeisance to Him as He lies in His crib; the other has all of Persia bending its neck under his feet . . . Both of them regenerate the whole of Creation, both ascend on high, both . . . defeat all the barbarians, destroy cities, increase the boundaries of New Rome, and become saviors of the Christian clergy' (Maguire, *Style and Ideology*, 229). For the impact of the Latin world's reception of Islam on Orientalism, see Said, *Orientalism*, 59-62.

⁴⁰ Stausberg puts it quite well when he says that 'das Zoroaster-Pseudepigraph ist demnach das Relikt, das Monument einer ursprünglichen, zunächst in Asien beheimateten philosophischen Weisheit der Menschheit, die sich über Ägypten bis nach Griechenland ausgebreitet habe' (Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 66). See also Masai, *Plethon*, 57: 'Pour Plêthon, Zoroastre est l'ancêtre du platonisme, l'inspirateur des *Oracles Chaldaïques*, c'est à ce titre seulement et en dehors de tout opportunisme qu'il en reconnaît l'autorité'.

What about Plêthon's contemporary Orientalist discourses about Judaism and Islam in his birthplace and long home, the Byzantine empire? Plêthon expressed admiration for the capability and discipline of Islamic governments, and Scholarios attests that, as a youth, Plêthon had been instructed by a Jew named Elisha. (Bidez/Cumont, *Mages hellénisés*, 160; Woodhouse, *Plêthon*, 23-28, 71-72; see also Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 40-41) But one does not get the sense from Plêthon that he thought Islam was nearly as profound as the perennial wisdom of the Greek and Persian sages; Muhammad lived a thousand years after Plato, much less Zoroaster! Similarly, Plêthon never discusses Judaism, and no trace has been found of his mysterious Jewish tutor, who could as easily have existed as been invented.

⁴¹ Bidez/Cumont, *Mages hellénisés*, 160; Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathusthra*, 41.

⁴² Stausberg discusses in some detail Plêthon's conflict with Greek Orthodox Aristotelianism and his substitution of Zoroaster and his *Oracles* for Aristotle as the great equal to Plato, a conflict which is at the root of the dispute between Plêthon and Scholarios. (ibid. 66-69; 165-170; 240-266; 283-307). For Plêthon's hand in instigating the Plato-Aristotle controversy, see Monfasani, 'Marsilio Ficino', 183-186.

is helpful to think of Plēthon as participating in the process of forming his own identity through defining himself consciously and strongly against “others”.

As Plēthon negotiated the complex theological boundaries of his period, infinitely complicated by his rejection of Christianity in favor of his own Pagan ideas and practices, it must have been much easier for him to define himself as anti-Christian once he considered himself a proponent not only of ancient Pagan but Eastern wisdom. The *Oracles*, as observed already in the above, signaled an identity of otherness in the theological discourse of medieval Byzantium. Psellos admired the *Oracles*, but refused to identify himself with them as the “other” in the Byzantine theological community.

Plēthon, on the other hand, enthusiastically painted himself as a figure of theological alterity. Not only did he accept the form of the polemical “other” described by Psellos—an entwinement of “Pagan” identity and mystical wisdom—he also transformed it, stoked it, by introducing an identification with the “East”.

Plēthon also graciously accepted Psellos’ association of magical practices with these “occult books”. As observed in the above, it is precisely on the subject of magical practices that Psellos equivocates the most. Plēthon, on the other hand, consciously translates the *Oracles* to the end of creating a discourse about magic. Instead of interpreting the famous inuxes of the *Oracles* cosmologically as entities, hypostasized “connectors” on the anagogic highway, he interprets them to be spells, as ritual practices⁴³. Psellos, too, says the inuxes are theurgic tools—which he would never use.

Why Plēthon? Why did not Proklos or Psellos attribute these oracles to Zoroaster before him? His two predecessors were equally conscious of the

⁴³ Majercik and Lewy describe the inuxes as mediating entities—abstract, Platonic demigods (Majercik, *Oracles*; esp. Lewy, *Oracles and Theurgy*, 250: ‘we have already seen that the function assigned to the “Iynges” by the Oracles is that of a magical mediation between the Supreme God and the invoking theurgist. They are designated in these texts as the “powers” or “thoughts” of the “Father” who, when their “ineffable magical names” are invoked, “hasten forth” out of Him, “leap” into the spheres and then “return” to Him . . . This practice of theurgy is accordingly, judged by the action, a magic of the celestial sphere’). Plēthon on the other hand called them ‘spells’, and equated them with the ‘act’ and ‘act of piety’ mentioned in the *Oracles* (Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 53, 53 n. 41). Plēthon believed that ritual was an absolutely necessary part of everyday life. Introducing his hymns to the various Greek deities at the end of his *Book of Laws*, he remarks that they are intended for use by the government of his Pagan *politēia*. This social appreciation of ritual should be set alongside Athanassiadi’s portrait of Plēthon as a mystic, not a magician, who is entirely uninterested in the ritual discourse of the *Oracles* (Athanassiadi, 241-242, 249).

political and theological dominance of their Christian authorities, and their two copies of the *Oracles* were always Chaldean, after all.

Another Mistake: Plēthon's Edition of the Oracles and their de-Hellenization

To answer this question I return to the first observation of this paper: how one historical accident, Lactantius' dating of the writings of Hermes Trismegistos to the time of Moses, is echoed by the much less frequently mentioned but entirely analogous dating of the *Chaldean Oracles* to a period of impossibly remote Antiquity, an error perpetrated, as we have seen, by Michael Psellos. As we've seen, Plēthon added a second historical accident: the dating of the *Oracles* not only to the ancient East but specifically to the Persian sage Zoroaster, a move which is best described as a major-turning point at a meeting of Hellenic and heresiological (which is to say "Pagan" with fully orthodox distaste) discourses in the transmission of a central document in the history of Western esotericism⁴⁴.

To explain why Plēthon in particular made this attribution despite the availability of almost identical sources to Neoplatonists a thousand years dead⁴⁵, I will offer a brief glance at yet a third historical accident in this tale of philological error committed in the name of the pursuit of supraphilosophical wisdom: Plēthon's own edition of the *Oracles*. In his text, two Platonic, Pagan, dualist ideas were missing; their absence made it easier for Plēthon to formulate as strongly as possible an anti-Christian identity beyond his love of Pagan Neoplatonism.

His version of the *Oracles* consisted of sixty Greek hexameters—considerably smaller than Psellos', and surely also than the versions possessed by the Neoplatonists. Today we have the blessing of two scholarly reconstructions of the *Oracles* (des Places' and Majercik's—I use the latter here) which

⁴⁴ Ficino, Pico, the Romantics, and even Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society all used versions of Plēthon's manuscript of the *Oracles* and continued to ascribe the document to Zoroaster (Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 83-91). It was not until Hans Lewy's revolutionary study of the *Oracles* in the 1940s that the question of a possible Mesopotamian origin for them was finally dropped—although not entirely, as Peter Kingsley's comment that they exhibit 'genuine elements of both Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions' shows (Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy*, 304; Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 54-55).

⁴⁵ It is fair to assume with Bidez/Cumont (*Mages hellénisés*, 161), however, that the theurgic Neoplatonists probably considered the *Oracles* to have something to do with Zoroaster, following Plutarch of Chaeronea's fascination with the figure.

contain 226 fragments, drawn mostly from Damascius, Psellos and Proklos—far more than Plēthon could leave for us⁴⁶.

How does his version fare with the modern reconstructed text? At first glance, the main features of the *Oracles* as we know them today—a second or third-century document poetically mixing Middle Platonic cosmological claims, references to Greek deities, enigmatic aphorisms, and descriptions of arcane rites—are also present in Plēthon's edition.

There is a clear emphasis on the differentiation between a supreme, transcendent deity and a second god who creates various intermediary entities⁴⁷. The Stoic conception of the divine as a fiery being is as strong in Plēthon's text as it is in modern editions. Plēthon's text also mentions another Stoic idea, 'dread *heimarmenē*'⁴⁸. Fate governs the soteriological ascent narrative which is also present in Plēthon's text: employing a number of practices which include the use of symbols and ritual breathing, the soul withdraws from the body and ascends through the cosmos on the famous "vehicle of the soul", a kind of body of light which guides the soul from the body to heaven⁴⁹.

But two features of Plēthon's text differ significantly from modern reconstructions of the *Oracles*. First, Plēthon's *Oracles* do not mention Hekate, who Psellos refers to so often⁵⁰, and reportedly purified Proklos prior to his initiation into the Chaldean mysteries⁵¹. Plēthon does have a corrupt, rather puzzling version of one of Psellos' fragments about Hekate which omits the goddess' name and replaces it with the somewhat similar *koitēs*, "couch": 'in the left flanks of the couch is the source of virtue which remains wholly within and does not give away its virginity'⁵². Psellos quotes an uncorrupt

⁴⁶ Athanassiadi criticizes the editions of both Des Places and Majercik for their uncritical use of Kroll (Athanassiadi, 'Byzantine Commentators', 238-239). She also offers a useful summary of the debate over Psellos' own sources for the *Oracles*, especially regarding the commentary of Proklos (ibid., 238 n. 3).

⁴⁷ I use the able translation provided by Woodhouse of Opsopoeus' text in Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 51-53. The supreme deity is described in lines 9, 46, 52-55, and 58-60; the second god and lesser gods in l. 10-12, 32-34, and 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid., l. 4-6, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., l. 13-16, 19-20, 25, 30-31, 38, 39-40, 46-48, and 55-56. For the vehicle of the soul in the *Oracles* see Lewy, *Oracles and Theurgy*, esp. 182-185; Majercik, *Oracles*, 31-45; and, from the view of Late Neoplatonism in general, Finamore, *Vehicle*.

⁵⁰ See, for example, his description of Hekate in a discussion of the *Oracles*' general cosmology (Michael Psellos, *Theologica*, 88.38-41) or of divine circular motion. (idem, *Philosophica Minora II*, 133, 16-21).

⁵¹ Marinos, *Vita Procli*, c. 28.

⁵² Opsopoeus' text in Woodhouse, l. 17-18.

copy of the same fragment in his commentary on the *Oracles*⁵³, so the oracle must have been corrupted in the centuries between Psellos and Plēthon. The absence of this Pagan, feminine hypostasization of mediation between the soul of the theurgist and the pure Intellect of the second, creator divinity is a major turning point in the history of the *Oracles*⁵⁴. The vacuum left by Hekate is filled by a further emphasis on the abstract first principles of a transcendent deity and a creator-deity; moreover, the absence of the Pagan identity-marker becomes the presence of the Zoroastrian one.

Second, Plēthon's *Oracles* are much more ambivalent about the nature of matter and the body. The *Chaldean Oracles* of Late Antiquity had a strongly dualist, ascetic flavor which considered matter as an evil principle and the body as evil's instrument in the human experience⁵⁵. Plēthon's *Oracles*, on the other hand, do refer to matter as "evil", but only in an offhand remark⁵⁶.

Moreover, the concept of matter as an evil principle seems to be more abstract than the sort of matter of the everyday world: Nature (*phusin*). 'Do not call', Plēthon's *Oracle* warns, 'upon the self-revealed image of Nature'⁵⁷. To be sure, this is not a statement of nature's divinity either. Plēthon's oracle bids the theurgist to interact with the intelligible deity instead of the material world, but does not say that the body is evil and must be rejected in order to do so.

Similarly, to describe how the world appears to the theurgist who sees the 'word' (*lepton*), or deity, Plēthon's text uses naturalistic similes as a nega-

⁵³ Michael Psellos, *Philosophica Minora II*, 135, 9-18, and Majercik, *Oracles*, fr. 52.

⁵⁴ The "Chaldean Hekate", so to speak, was a generative deity: 'for from the salty hole on her right side a full, plentiful stream of primordially generated soul gushes forth, utterly ensouling light, fire, aither, worlds' (Majercik, *Oracles*, fr. 51; see also *ibid.* fr. 32, 35, 50). But Hekate is not the first cause of the universe; rather, through her status as a producer of lower particulars she also has the power to elevate them to the level of her own producer. As one oracle states, division into plurality begins from perfect, transcendent unity along a 'girdling, intellectual skin' (*ibid.* fr. 6). Sarah Iles Johnston has persuasively argued that 'Hekate, by means of her womb, plays the same role as does the Cosmic Soul in other Middle Platonic doctrines. She receives the noetic Forms or Ideas and brings them forth anew for use in structuring—indeed creating—the physical world' (Johnston, *Hekate*, 51; see also *ibid.*, 18-20, 54-70).

⁵⁵ 'The soul delivered from the body is immortalized by theurgical ascension—Iamblichus' spiritualistic formulas fail to disguise this cardinal Chaldean dogma' (Lewy, *Oracles and Theurgy*, 188). Majercik compares the *Oracles*' 'extreme derogation of material existence' to that of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and various Nag Hammadi texts (Majercik, *Oracles*, p. 4).

⁵⁶ Opsopoeus' text in Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, l. 28, 35. My argument here agrees with that of Athanassiadi, 'Byzantine Commentators', 242-245.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 44.

tive definition: ‘. . . then the curved mass of heaven is not visible, the stars do not shine, the light of the moon is veiled, the earth stands not firm. All things appear as lightning’⁵⁸. Again, while the oracle uses nature as a prop, a simile, a mild negative theology even, it does not damn matter and the body either.⁵⁹

Do these characteristics of Plēthon’s text significantly influence his interpretation of the *Oracles* and hence the doctrine of “Zoroaster”?

Yes. For one, as already mentioned, Hekate is altogether absent in the text. This absence is filled by the greater presence of the first and second deities. In other *Oracle* fragments, fire is associated with anagogy in general, all the gods encountered on the road to heaven, and, as one would expect, Hekate in particular⁶⁰. Plēthon, however, opens his *Brief Explanation* by stating that ‘these Oracles mean by fire the deity’ which is ‘flashing with quivering flames through the recesses of the whole world’⁶¹. He exhorts his reader to engage the ‘reins of the fire’ manifest in religious rituals and practices. Fire, then, loses its status as a metaphor for the various steps of the ascent to heaven, and instead begins to express the individual’s encounter with the transcendent divinity in ritual.

It should also be noticed that Hekate had, without doubt, a more personal presence than any other deity in the original *Oracles*. She is the only Pagan deity mentioned in them at all besides Rhea, who seems to have fulfilled the same generative/mediating dual function⁶². Her high profile in the text necessarily labeled it as a Pagan discourse. Even if he had wanted to declare

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I. 41-43.

⁵⁹ For passages from other fragments which display Middle Platonic geological and meteorological theories, see Majercik *Oracles*, fr. 54, 57, 61-62, 64-70. There can be no doubt that the *Chaldean Oracles* as reconstructed today display a strongly ascetic hylopathy: ‘do not hasten to the light-hating cosmos, violent and corporeal, for thither there is murder, discord, the foul vapors of nature, desiccated plagues, corruptions, and fluctuating actions. He who wishes to desire the Intellect of the Father must flee these things’ (*ibid.* fr. 134). Matter is the source of *lubēn*, the turbulence of the world of Becoming (*ibid.* 180. See also *ibid.*, fr. 88, 94, 98, 100, 114, 129, 181).

⁶⁰ Lewy describes the invocation of Hekate as follows: ‘Hecate herself appears in this “most sacred fire”’; out of it she answers the questions of the conjuring theurgist. From these verses we learn that the goddess did not manifest itself in a corporeal shape but in fire’ (Lewy, *Oracles and Theurgy*, 245).

⁶¹ Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 53; and Opsopoeus’ text in *ibid.* 53, I. 46-7.

⁶² Majercik, *Oracles*, 35, 37. Proklos mentions Aphrodite in the same breath as the *Oracles* in *ibid.* 173; Hephaestus in *ibid.* 114. In some doubtful fragments left by Lydus, Synesius, and Proklos, Zeus, the gods Dionysius, Osiris, and Helios appear (*ibid.* 215, 218, and 226).

the exact consonance of the *Oracles* with Christianity, Psellos would have been at great pains to explain the strong presence of Hekate, mistress of Pagan khthonia. Her transformation into a couch ‘which does not give away its virtue’ allowed Plēthon, on the other hand, to historically locate the *Oracles* by their name alone: thus they become the *Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster*.

The ambivalence towards matter in Plēthon’s edition is also deeply entwined with the relationship between his theory of asceticism and of Zoroastrianism. As stated above, a strong ascetic streak flowed through the *Oracles* of Antiquity. Plēthon, as mentioned above, eschewed ascetic practice, prized by the Greek Church. The tempered, more ambiguous ascetic discourse in his own copy of the *Oracles* gave him much more freedom to interpret them as he might like on matters of ascetic living.

Plēthon cosmologically interprets the *Oracles*’ slightly negative hylology in his *Brief Explanation* as follows: ‘when they call matter evil, they do not mean purely evil, for they would not say that things “worthy and good” spring from it, but they mean it is evil in comparison with the whole of formal being, by reason of its being last in the whole of essential nature’⁶³. Thereupon, even though he attributes the doctrine of metempsychosis to Zoroaster, he refuses to attribute to the Persian sage the ascetic anthropology which usually accompanies the Orphic/Platonic doctrine: ‘by the “dung of matter” they mean this mortal body. They bid us not to neglect it, though perishable, but to preserve it so far as possible’⁶⁴. And in his *Commentary*, ‘it follows that one must not “make away with the soul from the body” for this would mean the soul making away with itself, contrary to the laws of nature’⁶⁵.

Plēthon was the first transmitter of these *Oracles* of Chaldea who was capable of actually attributing them to a Chaldean because he had a slightly different copy of them than did his predecessors. This copy differed in two important ways. First, they no longer held the irascibly Pagan element of Hekate. A Greek deity in a supposed centerpiece of ancient Persian religion would have been difficult for Plēthon to explain. Because of his copy, he didn’t have to. Second, none of his *Oracles* display the strident ascetic ethic common to Middle/Neoplatonic texts. Plēthon’s particular edition of the text, then, greased the wheels of his identification with the Byzantine “other” by

⁶³ Woodhouse, *Plēthon*, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

facilitating his self-alignment of his own identity with an arch-“other” Eastern figure and his rejection of asceticism, a way of life on which Psellos found the *Oracles* to be in agreement with the Gospel.

Why did Plēthon have these particular sixty lines of the *Oracles*, and not others? Nobody knows Plēthon’s exact sources for the *Oracles*, but he almost certainly relied on Psellos’ text and supplanted it with the fragments transmitted from Proklos⁶⁶. In an important article on Plēthon’s reading of the text, Athanassiadi argues that he consciously excised six fragments from Psellos’ copy in view of his own Pagan and anti-ascetic theology—that the different copy was no accident but a case of intentional philological malpractice⁶⁷. However, the case of Hekate’s couch presents the possibility of corruption of Psellos’ text. If we follow Athanassiadi’s reasoning on this matter, Plēthon could have simply done away with the fragment like the six others instead of rendering it incomprehensible and having to admit confusion as to its meaning in his own commentary. Slips of the dictating tongue or trembling pens were not unheard of, and the wear of the centuries between the commentators could certainly have done of some of Plēthon’s editing for him. Of course, it was also commonplace for an editor to, per Athanassiadi’s argument, simply ignore inconvenient or disagreeable aspects of a text and fail to transmit them.

Regardless, the historical accident(s) by which these specific verses of Antiquity found themselves in Plēthon’s tomes gave him enough freedom of interpretation to assert their consonance with the “doctrines of Zoroaster” he drew from other Hellenic sources. Thus do the *Chaldean Oracles* and the Hellenic, magical *philosophia perennis* of Michael Psellos find themselves transformed into a more deeply liminal space in the Western imagining of Persia than ever before. At the same time, they continued to instill, nourish, and shield the intense conviction held by Proklos, Psellos, Plēthon, and eventually so many esotericists of the Renaissance and early Modern Europe, that the wisdom of the ancients and the wisdom of the East are absolute, incommunicable, identical—and, moreover, manifest in magical practices.

Plēthon’s Paganism was not that of the public cults of Graeco-Roman religion. He theorized a totalitarian Pagan regime devoted to Zeus⁶⁸, and in the

⁶⁶ Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra*, 57: ‘textgeschichtlich ist Plēthon von Michael Psellos’ *Kommentar zu den Chaldäischen Orakeln* (also der *Exegēsis*) abhängig’.

⁶⁷ These are fragments 107, 149, 150, 159, 206, 212; Athanassiadi, ‘Byzantine Commentators’, 239-245.

⁶⁸ Plēthon describes with elaborate detail his radical political programme in his *Laws*; for an excellent discussion see Wokart, “Hellenische Theologie”.

process adopted the esoteric Platonism of the Late Antique intellectual milieu, although eschewing its generally ascetic ethos. Ficino and esotericists who lived after him did not read the *Oracles* of Psellos. They read the *Oracles* of Plēthon; they even read his commentary⁶⁹. While Psellos left a greater number of fragments of texts from this Antique esoteric milieu for modern philologists, Plēthon had a far wider impact on Western culture through the assimilation of his text of the *Oracles*, his ideas about the *philosophia perennis* and the Persian East as the most ancient font of wisdom⁷⁰.

Plēthon's philological mistake—the assignment of the *Oracles* to Zoroaster's remote Antiquity—was made possible, at least in part, by the historical accident of his edition. Plēthon was no naïve fool, and to weave the story of his reception of Psellos' *Oracles* with thread of error's hue might be exact but not entirely true. Plēthon believed that they bestowed an incredibly ancient, profound wisdom, surpassing all that Christendom had to offer. This conviction proved to be contagious.

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⁶⁹ Stausberg (*Faszination Zarathusthra*, 83-92) relates the pervasiveness of the idea that Zoroaster authored the *Oracles* in some detail.

⁷⁰ 'Dennoch hat Plēthon der europäischen Zoroaster-Rezeptiongeschichte die entscheidenden Impulse gegeben: Ohne Plēthons Zuschreibung der *Chaldäischen Orakel* an "Zoroasters Mager" hätte das Interesse an Zoroaster wohl nie jene Intensität erlangt, die vorliegende Untersuchung überhaupt erst legitimiert' (ibid. 44).

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Die Chaldäischen Orakel des Zoroaster, die Couch der Hekate und platonischer Orientalismus in Psellos und Plēthon

Die vorliegende Untersuchung geht der Frage nach, auf welche Weise Michael Psellos und Georgios Gemistos Plēthon die *Chaldäischen Orakel* als eine Quelle uralter orientalischer Weisheit interpretierten. Psellos geht als ein Häresiologe an die *Orakel* heran, wenn auch mit ambivalenten Aussagen hinsichtlich der Rolle von Magie sowohl in der Lehre der *Orakel* als in seiner eigenen Philosophie. Der Artikel untersucht, inwieweit in der mittelalterlichen byzantinischen Vorstellung Magie mit Konstruktionen orientalischer "Dekadenz" verbunden war, die ihrerseits Einfluss hatten auf Psellos' eigene Auffassung, bei den *Orakeln* handele es sich um illegitime östliche Zauberkunst, ungeachtet des Wertes ihrer metaphysischen Lehre.

Plēthon hingegen greift die *Orakel* im Kontext eines Diskurses neopaganer Alterität auf, in welchem er sie mit einer antiken östlichen Weisheit identifiziert, die gegen das orthodoxe Christentum in Stellung gebracht wurde. Obwohl er keinerlei Kenntnisse über persische Religion besaß, schrieb er dem Zoroaster die Autorschaft der *Orakel* zu, und zwar nicht aus schlichter Naivität, sondern im Zuge eines gängigen Deutungsmusters, das James Walbridge "Platonischen Orientalismus" nennt: die Neigung neoplatonischer Denker, uraltes Wissen nicht nur Platon zuzuschreiben, sondern auch anderen Weisen aus dem Osten. Plēthon, selbsternannter Neuheide in einem christlich orthodoxen Reich, fühlte sich angesprochen von der orientalischen *Otherness* der *Orakel* und identifizierte sich mit ihnen.

Sein Manuskript der *Orakel*, welches ursprünglich Psellos gehörte, half ihm bei diesem Unternehmen. Seit Psellos waren wichtige Fragmente, die Askese, Dualismus und pagane Gottheiten betrafen, verloren oder doch unvollständig. Ohne diese fehlenden Fragmente war es ein Leichtes für Plēthon, die *Orakel* als eine holistische persische Theologie zu lesen, und nicht

als eine hellenistische, mittelplatonisch-dualistische. Die Unterschiede zwischen Plēthons Exemplar der *Orakel* und jenen der frühen Neuplatonisten mögen ein Grund dafür sein, dass Plēthon der erste Platonist war, der Zoroaster als den Autor der *Orakel* identifizierte, eine Zuschreibung, die entscheidend werden sollte für die Rezeption und Interpretation der *Orakel* in Renaissance und moderner Esoterik.

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