

Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes: 2. Translations and Acculturations edited by Dragos Calma

Michele Abbate

Volume 3, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107160ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v3i1.41824>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

ISSN

1549-4470 (print)

1549-4497 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Abbate, M. (2022). Review of [Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes: 2. Translations and Acculturations edited by Dragos Calma]. *Aestimatio*, 3(1), 170–175. <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v3i1.41824>

© Michele Abbate, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes: 2. Translations and Acculturations
edited by Dragos Calma

Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021. Pp. vii + 492. ISBN 978-90-04-44068-5. eBook
Open Access: <https://brill.com/edcollbook-0a/title/34819?rskey=1e99CT&result=1>

Reviewed by
Michele Abbate*
University of Salerno
mabbate@unisa.it

The reception of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* and the *Book of Causes* is certainly one of the most significant and complex themes for understanding the influence of Neoplatonic thought from the sixth century to the modern age. This volume is the second of three edited by Dragos Calma, in which the proceedings of the Parisian conference (12–13 February 2016) dedicated to the reception of the *Elements of Theology* and the *Book of Causes* are published. It gathers 18 contributions (12 in English, 5 in French, and 1 in German) by various scholars who have addressed the topic in question by focusing on specific aspects of the reception of these two texts between the sixth and 16th centuries in very different periods and cultural contexts. For this reason, the weighty volume is divided into five sections according to the cultural and geographical areas examined:

- (1) Byzantium,
- (2) The Caucasus,
- (3) The Lands of Islam,
- (4) The Latin West, and
- (5) The Hebrew Tradition.

In view of the breadth and richness of the themes dealt with, I will limit myself to some brief and summary remarks on the main topics addressed in each essay.

* MICHELE ABBATE teaches the history of ancient philosophy and the history of late ancient thought at the University of Salerno. From 2005 to 2007 he was “Humboldt Stipendiat” at the University of Würzburg. His research and publications focus on Presocratic thought and on the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, with particular attention to ontological conceptions and linguistic theories developed within ancient and late ancient philosophical thinking.

The first section, “Byzantium”, contains four contributions, all in English. In his paper, Frederick Lauritzen [19–31] examines the reception of Proclus in the Byzantine context, more specifically in Michael Psellus and Gregory Palamas. It highlights the elements of continuity between aspects of their thought and Proclus’ metaphysical perspective in conjunction with that of Maximus the Confessor.

In the second contribution, Stephen Gersh [32–55] focuses on the influence of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* and *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements* on Eustratius’ theory of universals, as can be inferred from his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*. Gersh brings to light the fundamental and, at the same time, problematic differences detectable in these two texts.

Next, in his contribution [56–93], Joshua M. Robinson deals with the interpretation and use of Proclean metaphysics by Psellus, focusing on the differences between Psellus’ position and that of Nicholas of Methone. Robinson also points out that in Psellus the number of references to Aristotle and Plotinus is higher than the number of references to Proclus. Robinson also notes that in some cases Psellus intentionally modifies Proclean conceptions in order to make them compatible with Trinitarian dogma.

In the final contribution to this section, Anna Gioffreda and Michele Trizio [94–135] discuss extensively the authenticity of Methone’s *Refutation of Proclus Elements of Theology*, drawing on some interesting paleographical arguments. Furthermore, they significantly challenge the thesis that Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* was widely known and read by Byzantine scholars between the 11th and 12th centuries.

The second section, “The Caucasus”, contains a single contribution (the only one in German). In it, Tengiz Iremadze [139–153] deals with the presence and reception of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* in the context of the Caucasian philosophical and theological tradition. Among the various topics addressed in his study, Iremadze dwells especially on the Georgian translation of this treatise and its interpretation by Ioane Petritsi, according to whom the fundamental aim of Proclus’ work was to lead to the knowledge of the transcendent nature of the One systematically by way of a logical-syllogistic path.

The third section, “The Lands of Islam”, is comprised of five contributions. Michael Chase [157–181] highlights the relevance of Porphyry’s lost commentaries (ὁπομνήματα) on the *Enneads* for the composition of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle* against the commonly held view that Porphyry played

no role in the elaboration of this work. As he points out, within the *Theology of Aristotle* the First Principle is identified with pure Being according to a perspective, it should be noted, that is neither that of Plotinus nor that of Proclus since, as is well known, both regarded the Principle as beyond both being and thought.

In his paper, Peter Adamson [182–197] examines the earliest allusion to the *Theology of Aristotle* (which can be traced back to the al-Kindī circle) in the *Harmony of the Two Sages* (scil. Plato and Aristotle) with the aim of highlighting how references to the *Theology* allow the author of the *Harmony* to support and argue his thesis. Indeed, according to Adamson, the fundamental purpose of the *Harmony* (perhaps an early work by al-Fārābī) is to show that the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle are essentially in agreement. Furthermore, as he points out, the use of Proclus in the *Harmony* has, among others, the aim of supporting the identity between Aristotle's God [Meta. book Λ] and the First Principle, the True One, which is the authentic and absolute source of all unity and, at the same time, prior to all multiplicity.

In her contribution (in French), Elvira Wakelnig [198–210], comparing some passages of the work *Chapters on Metaphysical Topics* by al-ʿĀmirī with the two preserved Arabic versions of the *Book of Causes*—the *Book of Causes* and the so-called *Book of Causes II*—puts forward the hypothesis that al-ʿĀmirī knew a more extensive version (probably by al-Kindī) than the one translated into Latin. Furthermore, in light of a comparison between the paraphrases contained in al-ʿĀmirī's work and the anonymous *Book of Motion*, she shows how the author of the latter text may also have had access to the older version of the *Book of Causes* (a “Proto-*Book of Causes*”).

Next, Richard C. Taylor [211–232] notes that some of the themes and propositions contained in the original Arabic version of the *Book of Causes* are absent from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. In this context, particular relevance is given to the conception—very different, as was said, from both Plotinus' and Proclus' perspective—of the One/Principle as pure Being, First Cause of all things, based on a substantial reworking of Aristotelian metaphysics.

In the fifth and final contribution (in French) of the third section, Jamal Rachak [233–244] examines the presence of the *Book of Causes* in the work of Ibn Bāġġa (known in the Western tradition as Avempace) and pseudo-Ibn Bāġġa within the peripatetic tradition of the 11th–12th centuries in the Islamic west. Rachak points out that in Ibn Bāġġa's works only Aristotle, Plato, Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themstius, Philoponus, Al-Fārābī,

and Al-Ġazālī are explicitly mentioned, but neither Proclus nor Plotinus. However, Proclean concepts are indeed present in Ibn Bāḡḡa. Moreover, Rachak takes into consideration some fragments of letters attributable to Ibn Bāḡḡa and observes that these fragments, if their authenticity is accepted, represent one of the first attestations of the circulation and knowledge of the *Book of Causes* in Islam.

The fourth section, “The Latin West”, is the largest of the entire volume. It has six contributions. In the first study of this section, Dag Nikolaus Hasse [247–274] examines, by means of special software, the Latin translations of al-Kindī’s *On the Intellect*, al-Fārābī’s *Enumeration of the Sciences*, and Isaac Israeli’s *On Definitions and Descriptions*. He points out that Gerard of Cremona can be considered the first translator of these texts, while Dominicus Gundisalvi seems to have provided an overall revision of these translations. Nevertheless, so far as the Latin translation of the *Book of Causes* is concerned, Hasse shows that it seems to be attributable to Gerard alone, without Gundisalvi’s revision.

In his contribution (in French), Jules Janssens [275–316] also deals with the topic of “double translation”, but he uses a different approach and methodology than Hasse. Through many pertinent examples, Janssens stresses in particular the fundamental importance of having a solid and secure edition of the Latin translation, which, in all cases, will remain deeply dependent on a solid and secure critical edition of the Arabic text.

In his contribution (also in French), Pascale Bermon [317–339] deals with the difficult issue of which text Thomas Aquinas actually had at his disposal for his commentary on the *Book of Causes*. He points out that the Latin text of the *Book of Causes* printed in Saffrey’s edition of Aquinas’ commentary is not the same as the one Aquinas had available. Bermon concludes that Aquinas probably possessed a manuscript whose text has features in common with the manuscript Vat. lat. 2089, which Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny dates to the second half of the 13th century and which she considers French, probably Parisian.

In her contribution, Alessandra Beccarisi [340–375] examines the influence of the *Book of Causes* and of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* on Meister Eckhart and shows how he seems to prefer the *Book of Causes* to Proclus’ work. With particular reference to the Eckhartian interpretation of proposition 15 of the *Book of Causes* and of the notion of *negatio negationis*, Beccarisi points out that Eckhart elaborates his own account of the nature of the Neoplatonic One that is in line with God’s self-revelation in Exodus (*ego*

sum qui sum). God is thus understood as pure Being, absolute plenitude, and self-identity above any specific ontological determination. This can be considered further evidence that in Eckhart, Proclus has less importance than some scholars have supposed. Finally, Beccarisi concludes that Eckhart himself translated part of his Latin work into German, reshaping and broadening some sources used in his academic output.

In her paper, Victoria Arroche [376–390] shows that Dante uses the *Book of Causes* in relation to some fundamental political theories that he formulated in the *Monarchia* and the *Convivio*. She makes particular reference to the concepts of *potentia* or *virtus*, the two terms also used by Dante to indicate the power that flows through the different grades constituting the overall structure of reality from the First Cause (God) to the last levels and entities. Analogically, the Monarch is conceived as a form of First Cause and ordering intelligence in the domain of temporal and human matters. According to Arroche, Dante thus uses the *Book of Causes* both in a metaphysical perspective and in relation to his political conceptions. Indeed, the close connection between politics and metaphysics represents one of the fundamental features of Dante's political thought.

In the sixth and last contribution of section 4, Sokrates-Athansios Kiosoglou [391–403] examines some significant references to Proclus' *Elements of Theology* in Ficino's *Commentary on the Philebus*. By comparing the references in Ficino's commentary with the corresponding Proclean passages based on Moerbeke's Latin translation, Kiosoglou shows how Ficino does not simply reproduce the concepts and ideas of his sources but reformulates and reworks them even radically. Kiosoglou also highlights how Ficino's *Commentary on the Philebus* outlines a conception of happiness as something originally connected to our own nature, which is determined and governed by a divine plan. Such a conception remains totally compatible with a Christian worldview.

The fifth and final section, "The Hebraic Tradition", contains two contributions. In his paper (in French), Jean-Pierre Rothschild [407–454] examines the production of Hillel of Verona (late 13th century), the first translator and commentator of the *Book of Causes* in Hebrew. (Hillel's is the only running commentary in Hebrew on the *Book of Causes* that has come down to us.) In particular, Rothschild shows how Hillel rejects the doctrines of the *Book of Causes* as contrary to the faith. Moreover, as a trained physician, Hillel criticizes some fundamental Neoplatonic principles from the point of view of medieval medicine. Rothschild concludes with an appendix in which an

edition with a French translation of Hillel's glosses and commentaries are provided.

In his contribution, Saverio Campanini [455–479], like Rothschild, underlines the vast interest in the *Book of Causes* in medieval Jewish thought and focuses on the presence of this text “in Kabbalistic literature of the origins, with some perspective views on further developments”. Thus, he dwells, in particular, on Abraham Abulafia (second half of the 13th century), who was Hillel's pupil, and on Jochanan Alemanno's commentary on the *Canticle* (end of 15th century). Alemanno appears to be fully aware that the *Book of Causes* is the expression of the metaphysical thought of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, whereas Abulafia attributes the text (which he refers to by the unusual title “Book of the Highest Substances”) to Plato. From Alemanno, the references to the *Book of Causes* move on to other later authors belonging to the Kabbalistic tradition, such as Isaac Abravanel (15th century) and Joseph Del Medigo (17th century). As Campanini points out in the conclusion of his contribution, the *Book of Causes* is used by Kabbalists mainly for apologetic purposes and to prove God's undefinable and ineffable nature.

As is evident from this necessarily brief presentation, the contributions contained in this important volume develop in a capillary way various aspects of the difficult and complex issue concerning the history of the diffusion and reception of the *Book of Causes* and Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. Each essay offers a significant and original contribution in relation to this issue, and some of them propose radically new perspectives of analysis—also through innovative methodologies of investigation—which deeply question some theses taken for granted and as established until now. This volume is surely destined to be a fundamental reference point for further investigation and research on the reception of the *Book of Causes* and, at the same time, of some fundamental metaphysical conceptions of Neoplatonic origin in the Western as well as in the Arabic and Hebrew traditions.

The volume includes three analytical indexes of manuscripts, ancient and medieval authors, and modern authors that are very useful, if not indispensable, in view of the many texts and authors examined. However, there is no index of subjects.