

# POST-HERULIAN ATHENS

Aspects of Life and Culture in Athens  
A.D. 267–529

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# The Closing of the Neoplatonic School in A.D. 529: An Additional Aspect

## 1. The Traditional View

In numerous presentations, both old and new, one meets with a fairly uniform view of the last days of the Neoplatonic school in A.D. 529. This traditional view includes the following elements:

a) the Emperor Justinian I issued an edict in 529 A.D. demanding the closure of the Neoplatonic school (also known as the “Academy” and the “University of Athens”);

b) the edict was issued because of the emperor’s anti-pagan zeal in the interest of Christianity. The closure represents a land-mark in the relations between Christianity and paganism;

c) the seven professors of the Neoplatonic school fled/emigrated to Persia.<sup>1</sup>

This view, with minor variations, has found its way into numerous branches of scholarship. Thus it may be read in studies on the history of philosophy,<sup>2</sup> the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Barker (1966), 99 seems to assume more than seven scholars, since he writes about “a great exodus of pagan scholars” and a “large body of learning”.

<sup>2</sup> Zeller (1963), 915–917. The latter, however, was of the opinion that the Neoplatonic school would have died sooner or later anyway, since its philosophy had reached its logical end.

education,<sup>3</sup> the history of the (Byzantine) Church,<sup>4</sup> as well as of ecclesiastical legislation,<sup>5</sup> and the general history of Late Antiquity.<sup>6</sup> This interdisciplinary consensus, though not complete, seems to affirm the negative estimations of Procopius of Caesarea, according to which Justinian I was “the greatest possible destroyer of established institutions”.<sup>7</sup> It is possible, however, that scholars may have paid even greater attention to another, more recent, authority. Lynch suggests the famous Edward Gibbon.<sup>8</sup>

Theoretically speaking the traditional view is plausible enough. Presumably no-one would deny Justinian’s zeal for propagating Christianity, and historically the events presupposed by the traditional view seem possible enough, with one exception: the excursion to Persia could not have taken place in 529, for reasons which will be presented below.<sup>9</sup> In all other respects, however, the events could actually have taken place, and in fact numerous analogous cases exist from about that time. A few decades earlier in Alexandria the pagan Professor Horapollon had been forced to retire from his position and leave the city because of his religious beliefs.<sup>10</sup> As for the closing of schools, one may cite a parallel from 489, when Zeno closed the theological school in Edessa, whereby it reestablished itself in Nisibis, Persia.<sup>11</sup> Seen in this light, the closure of the Neoplatonic school in 529 appears as the logical culmination of repressive acts against inconvenient schools and their professors.

## 2. Some Non-Conformist Views

Though historically possible and widely accepted, the traditional view has met with doubts and criticism for over a century.<sup>12</sup> A number of modified or alternative theories have appeared. Bréhier was of the opinion that the Neoplatonic school “died away for want of pupils and perhaps of professors”.<sup>13</sup> In his *History of the Later Roman Empire*, Bury argued against point a) of the traditional view.

According to him no edict was needed, because Justinian’s general legislation against paganism sufficed.<sup>14</sup> This argument seems still to be valid, since the wording of *Codex Iustinianus* I.11.10.2 does not favour the interpretation/explanation that Justinian’s

<sup>3</sup> Walden (1909), 126–129; Clarke (1971), 102; Marrou (1957), 492.

<sup>4</sup> Frend (1984), 830–831.

<sup>5</sup> Alivisatos (1913), 48 is of the opinion that Justinian closed the philosophical schools in Athens, whereby the professors and students had to flee from the city.

<sup>6</sup> Ostrogorsky (1963), 54; Diehl (1909), 23; Vasiliev (1958), 150; Browning (1971), 100; Demandt (1989), 365–366; Gibbon (1911), 25–267 (without mentioning Justinian’s motives). Butler (1902), 473 considered the edict a “death-blow”, the end of *classical* Athens, which fell into the “night of oblivion”, but *pagan* Athens had lost its last stronghold when the statue of the goddess Athena was removed from the Acropolis. Hunger (1975), 342 speaks of “die meist überbewertete Schliessung der neuplatonischen Akademie”. Hunger nonetheless adheres to the traditional view in other respects.

<sup>7</sup> *Anecdota* VI.21.

<sup>8</sup> Lynch (1972), 163.

<sup>9</sup> See below Chapter 3.4.4.

<sup>10</sup> See Haussig (1959), 92–93 and the *Vita Severi* (PO 2,1, 15–35) by Zacharias Scholasticus.

<sup>11</sup> *CHI* III (1983), 579.

<sup>12</sup> As early as 1889 F. Gregorovius announced “entschiedensten Zweifel” as to the closure in 529, following a certain Paparrigopoulos. See Gregorovius (1889), 56, note 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bréhier (1965), 214.

<sup>14</sup> Bury (1958) II, 370. Puliatti, in a study concerning the legislation in the Byzantine Empire, argues that Justinian’s (general) anti-pagan legislation hit the Neoplatonic school badly, but that the exodus of the professors from the country was a voluntary one (Puliatti (1991), 279).

general legislation was directed *only* against *public* money spent on pagan professors;<sup>15</sup> it has sometimes been suggested that a special edict against the Neoplatonic school was needed because it was run with *private* resources.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960ies Alan Cameron, in an article which has directed much of the later scholarly discussion, argued at length for the opinion that the Academy survived the intermezzo caused by Justinian's edict of 529 and the short study trip to Persia.<sup>17</sup> Blumenthal argued in 1978 that a "closure" of the Academy was even less probable than Alan Cameron had suggested, though Justinian's legislation affected it "somehow".<sup>18</sup> Fernández cannot discover any consequences of the 529 edict whatever: the "legendary" exodus to Persia was not caused by the edict, which was quickly and completely forgotten.<sup>19</sup> From time to time financial considerations have been added to the discussion. Gerostergios argues that the Academy was not closed, rather it went bankrupt because of the actions taken by Justinian.<sup>20</sup> Alternatively it can be argued that the school was closed precisely in order to obtain the revenues, the famous *διαδοχικά*. The economic aspects of the closure are discussed also by Gucker in an "epilogue".<sup>21</sup> Differing from Alan Cameron's view Gucker maintains that the property of the Neoplatonic school may have remained untouched, and that Simplicius continued to write, although forbidden to teach, in Athens after the return from Persia. Gucker concludes that Justinian's edict, as related by Malalas, was directed against all pagans (in Athens) teaching *any* discipline, law as well as philosophy.<sup>22</sup> This does not, in his view, entitle us to speak of the closure of a "school", nor less of the "Academy", since Damascius' institution was a private initiative, totally different from the Academy of Plato.<sup>23</sup> Thus Justinian did not close the "Academy". Consequently we seem to have three main interpretations of the events of 529: a) an edict was issued and the "Academy" closed; b) no edict was issued, but the "Academy" was closed nonetheless; c) there was no "Academy" to close.

### 3. The Sources

The literary sources on which the traditional view is founded can be quickly enumerated: they consist of one passage in John Malalas' *Chronographia* and one in Agathias of Myrina's *Historiae*. The former text is the only sixth century source to mention Justinian's edict, and the latter the only one to mention the exodus of the seven professors. Other sixth century texts can be regarded as secondary sources at best, giving

<sup>15</sup> Gucker (1978), 324. The only explanation Gucker gives as to why an explicit edict had to be added to the general legislation is that Justinian was not "quite satisfied" with the latter – which is another way of saying that the problem remains.

<sup>16</sup> This solution is suggested by Alan Cameron (1969), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Cameron (1969).

<sup>18</sup> Blumenthal (1978).

<sup>19</sup> Fernández (1983), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Gerostergios (1982), 72–73. Evagrius Scholasticus points out the emperor's insatiable desire for people's money, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.30.

<sup>21</sup> Gucker (1978), 324–326. As for the *διαδοχικά* in general in Late Antiquity, see *id.* 246–255.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*, 328.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Gucker follows Lynch (1972), 174–175 who speaks against the existence of a "university" in Athens, maintaining that the professors taught privately in their homes. Demandt (1989), 365 refers to the fact that Eunapius explained why the Athenian professors taught in their homes by referring to the quarrels which occurred between students and settled Athenians when tuition was given in the Agora area.

indirect evidence for, or against, a closure of the Athenian school. Under these circumstances an analysis of the two main sources is necessary for an evaluation of the traditional view.

### 3.1. John Malalas

John Malalas was a native of Antioch in Syria, who moved to the capital at a date unknown to us, and died in the city in the 570's. His occupation cannot be precisely stated, but he seems to have been a government official. The opinion among scholars regarding the trustworthiness of John Malalas is not particularly encouraging.<sup>24</sup> Now and then it has been claimed that he reflects the views which were held at the Imperial court.<sup>25</sup> Be that as it may, as Malalas is the only source to mention the edict of 529, he is a key figure for our present purposes. From the *Chronicles* themselves, in particular from the eighteenth book dealing with the reign of "the most sacred Justinian", it appears that Malalas was a loyal supporter of the policy of the emperor, interested mainly in political events such as war and sedition, of natural phenomena, earthquakes in particular, and of ecclesiastical affairs such as the construction of churches, the conversion of peoples and individuals, and relations to heretics. Jews, Samaritans, Manicheans, pagans and other religious groups are mentioned time and again. The *context* in which the edict of 529 is mentioned is typical of the author. Malalas has proceeded in chronological order to the year A.D. 529, a year in which he says that there were quarrels between Christians and Samaritans in Syria, an earthquake in the Pontus area and another in Lycia. Roman law was codified and the monographies containing them sent to Berytus and Athens. A riot took place in the theatre of Antioch, and the persecution of pagans resulted in a law forbidding them to hold state offices. Heretics had to leave the country within three months. Furthermore Malalas tells us about the confiscation of the belongings of an ex-consul called Mundus. Then, in a passage immediately prior to the one dealing with the edict on philosophy, Malalas describes a successful war in Thrace. In a word, he presents short glimpses into different matters of interest, and the passage on Athenian philosophy is extremely short. His words are as follows:<sup>26</sup>

Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ὑπατείας τοῦ αὐτοῦ Δεκίου ὁ αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς θεσπίσας πρόσταξιν ἔπεμψεν ἐν Ἀθήναις, κελεύσας μηδένα διδάσκειν φιλοσοφίαν μήτε νόμιμα ἐξηγεῖσθαι μήτε κόττον ἐν μιᾷ τῶν πόλεων γίνεσθαι, ἐπειδὴ ἐν Βυζαντίῳ εὐρεθέντες τινὲς τῶν κοττιστῶν καὶ βλασφημίαις δειναῖς ἑαυτοὺς περιβαλόντες χειροκοπηθέντες περιεβωμβήθησαν ἐν καμήλοις.

"During the consulship of (the afore said) Decius the emperor issued a decree and sent it to Athens ordering that no-one should teach philosophy nor interpret

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- <sup>24</sup> Krumbacher (1897), 326–327; Rubin (1960), 231–232; Wolf (1916), cols. 1795–1796; Alan Cameron (1969), 8 goes as far as to say that it is "generally easier to disbelieve Malalas than to believe him". Somewhat more favourable is the presentation of Scott (1990b), 76. Fowden (1990), 501 regards the particular text dealing with the philosophical schools "extremely confused".
- <sup>25</sup> Scott (1985), 99–109 and Irmischer (1969), 337–346. According to the thesis of the former the emperors issued brief official reports of some events of interest, and the Byzantine chroniclers (Malalas among them) used these reports as sources.
- <sup>26</sup> John Malalas 18 (ed. Dindorf (1831), 451).

laws, nor should gaming be allowed in any city, for some gamblers who had been discovered in Byzantium had been indulging themselves in dreadful blasphemies. Their hands were cut off and they were paraded around on camels." (transl. Jeffreys-Jeffreys-Scott (1986))

In one single sentence Malalas mentions some prohibitions that Justinian enforced in different cities in 529. It is only in Athens that philosophy and law were forbidden, but gambling everywhere. Athens is thus dealt with only in passing; the emphasis is on gamblers in Byzantium. This can be concluded by the fact that the reference to the gamblers is at the end of the sentence, by the length of the description, and that the motivation for the decree is stated (ἐπειδὴ). Nothing at all is said of the motive for forbidding philosophy and law in Athens. The most central part of the traditional view rests upon a third of a sentence.

The sentence at issue consists of a mere enumeration of what Malalas considered historical facts, reported in the brief telegram-style he often used. He makes nothing further of the facts, that is, they are not used for the purpose of edifying, nor do they serve as background information for anything he intends to relate further on. This adds somewhat to the reliability of Malalas on this particular point. The traditional view, which stresses the emperor's anti-pagan attitude, receives no support from Malalas. True, this attitude becomes perfectly clear throughout the *Chronographia*, but as to the decree of 529 not one word is said which would show this bias.

It should be noted, too, that no school, Academy, nor less a "university" is mentioned in the decree against philosophy. As it stands, it seems directed to individual teachers: *no-one* is allowed to teach philosophy, regardless of external circumstances such as his official status.<sup>27</sup>

The activities prohibited in 529 were, then, three in number. Whithout doubt a closer look at them is required.

### a) Φιλοσοφία

Following a long and strong tradition in Christian idiosyncrasy Malalas connects no derogatory ring to the word "philosophy".<sup>28</sup> He even gives praise to the pagan female philosopher Hypatia for having been a famous thinker, though without mentioning her paganism.<sup>29</sup> A similar attitude is noticeable towards Proclus, a person of particular interest for our present purposes. Proclus is described as an Athenian and Asian philosopher,<sup>30</sup> both attributes that apply to Proclus from Lycia. The Emperor Anastasius turned towards Proclus in a situation of political trouble, that is to say, during the rebellion of Vitalian, and received advice which proved to be successful. This fortunate outcome was interpreted by Malalas as a victory for Christ and his Church. Proclus' paganism has been altogether overlooked, to an even greater extent than in the case of

<sup>27</sup> Thus also Lynch (1972), 174–175.

<sup>28</sup> For the term "philosophy" in Christian use, see the monography of Malingrey (1961).

<sup>29</sup> John Malalas 14.3 (transl. Spinka and Downey (1940)). In the same context another philosopher is mentioned, too, and again in laudable wordings: he was "a man wise in all things".

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* 16.3 (transl. Spinka and Downey (1940)). *PLRE* II, 915–919 splits the philosopher(s) called Proclus by Malalas in *three* different persons. His "Proclus 7" and "Proclus 8" are, at least in the Church Slavonian text, one and the same, being both "Asian" and "Athenian".

Hypatia.<sup>31</sup> The modesty of Proclus is emphasised by the fact that he did not wish for any reward for his services to the emperor. After this sympathetic description of the Athenian scholar the announcement that Justinian prohibited philosophical studies at Athens becomes not only unexpected, but, indeed, contrary to expectation, though the closing of the Neoplatonic school is presented in a context other than the deeds of Proclus.

Malalas' description of Proclus shows that the latter had acquired some traits of a *theios aner* in the sixth century. The *Vita Procli* by Marinus had initiated such a development. There we are told, for example, that Proclus saved Athens from drought by bringing about rain, and that he was able to avert earthquakes.<sup>32</sup> What is striking is that Proclus was "Christianised" in common opinion in less than one hundred years; it would be unfair to limit this favourable attitude towards Proclus to Malalas alone. Such "Christianisations" were not altogether unknown in Late Antiquity,<sup>33</sup> and later Byzantine legends delight in presenting Athenian philosophers as prophetic persons helpful to the Christian emperors.<sup>34</sup> But Malalas had failed to notice that Proclus was already dead by the reign of Anastasius. The tendency towards connecting famous persons with miraculous deeds was stronger than a precise chronology, a fact that can be observed not only in contemporary literature but also in ecclesiastical art.<sup>35</sup> Taking all things into consideration, there cannot have been any other Athenian philosopher, well-known as far as Byzantium, called "Proclus", than Proclus the scholar, who died in 485.

## b) Νόμιμα

The second thing prohibited in Athens, but only in Athens, was called νόμιμα. The term itself is rather uncommon; one late manuscript has chosen to substitute the more understandable ἀστρονομία. Lexically it means "legal", or, when (rarely) used as a noun, "law",<sup>36</sup> in which latter sense it occurs also in the *Codex Iustinianus* itself.<sup>37</sup>

The verb ἐξηγεῖσθαι, being a technical term, makes it clear beyond doubt that Malalas is speaking about the interpretation of law, an activity frequently mentioned and strictly regulated in the *Codex Iustinianus*. The fact that the existence of a "faculty of law" in

31 Zeller (1963), 841, note 4 says that the paganism of Proclus was not known, and our philosopher had good relations to the authorities. Malalas' presentation supports such a view, but the *Vita Procli* by Marinus strongly contradicts it, unless the persecution against him was a popular movement, unaccepted by the authorities.

32 Marinus 28 (ed. Masullo (1985)).

33 Already for centuries there had been the tendency among Christians to Christianise famous philosophers from ancient times, such as Socrates, Plato, and Seneca. A similar tendency can be traced in the attitude towards emperors as well, particularly towards Augustus. Remote parallels may be seen in the case of Pontius Pilate, who became a saint in the Syrian church, but in the West was considered to have committed suicide in desperation, and to Apollonius of Tyana, who became the Holy Balinos in Byzantine tradition.

34 In *Narratio de aedificatione templi S. Sophiae* 19.1 (ed. Preger (1901), 97) three Athenian philosophers are said to have cooperated with Justinian I (!) in connection with the building of the Hagia Sophia. I owe this reference to Mansfield (1985), 115. Another example of the same phenomenon is mentioned below in Chapter 3.2.

35 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite makes persons from different generations live together in his treatises, and wall-mosaics in Byzantine churches, later on e.g. in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, portray saints and emperors from different eras in the same composition.

36 Roussou (1948) gives the following Latin equivalents: νόμιμος: *legitimus*, for example νόμιμος καιρὸς γάμου (*legitima aetas ad matrimonium*); νομίμως: *licite*, for example νομίμως γαμεῖν (*licite nubere*); τὰ νόμιμα: *legitima, jura, leges*, for example κοινὰ νόμιμα (*ius commune*).

37 C/I 1.3.38.1 (ed. Krüger (1959)).

Athens cannot be archeologically verified does not make Malalas' narrative unbelievable. Only a small number of the buildings excavated are identifiable beyond doubt, and too little of the city has been excavated to allow trustworthy conclusions. Gregorovius is of the opinion that Malalas contradicts himself as to the teaching of law in Athens. Only shortly earlier he had told his readers that a "monobiblion" of Justinian's new codex was sent to Berytus and Athens. Did the Emperor change his mind about legal studies in Athens so quickly?<sup>38</sup> If Malalas is correct in both points Justinian can hardly be accused of enmity against Athens itself. If he had been planning actions against semi-pagan Athens for a long time, as the traditional view supposes, he is unlikely to have honoured the faculty of law there by sending one of the few copies of his masterpiece.

### c) Κόπτος

The prohibition against gambling is mentioned repeatedly in the *Codex Iustinianus*,<sup>39</sup> a fact that makes Malalas seem trustworthy at least on this point. Gambling was a popular activity, not least among students.<sup>40</sup> Agathias confirms Malalas' report that abusive language often occurred with gambling.<sup>41</sup> Probably Justinian's measures against it took no-one by surprise. The punishment Justinian inflicted on some of the transgressors is also known from other sources; Procopius in his *Secret History* says that people were set on camels to be jeered at by the people. Procopius, however, is speaking of a punishment inflicted on astrologers.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.2. Agathias of Myrina

In his *Historiarum libri quinque* Agathias (around 530–580) deals with the reign of Justinian and particularly with events not recorded by other authors.<sup>43</sup> As an inhabitant of Constantinople and, for some time, Alexandria, he had the opportunity to follow the events in the capital. He and Malalas must have lived in the capital at approximately the same time. The closure of the Neoplatonic school as suggested by Malalas must have taken place almost contemporaneously with Agathias' birth. He was, therefore, dependent on others for information about this particular event, in contrast to our other main source for the era of Justinian, namely Procopius. Agathias started writing his Histories some years after Justinian's death in 565.<sup>44</sup> By that time Justinian's decree of 529 should have been known to historians in the capital, if it was known in the Empire at all. It is of some importance for our present task to note, too, that Agathias had access to some information from *outside* the Empire. He did use some Persian sources,<sup>45</sup> but his

<sup>38</sup> Gregorovius (1889), 55–56. But also Constitution "Omnem" 7 (ed. Krüger (1959)), in the Digests, restricts the faculties of law to Rome, Berytus and Byzantium. This constitution is dated to A.D. 533.

<sup>39</sup> *CJ* I.4.25; III.43.1 (ed. Krüger (1959)).

<sup>40</sup> Haussig (1959), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Agathias II.29.5 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>42</sup> *Anecdota* XI.3.

<sup>43</sup> Agathias II.30–31 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>44</sup> Agathias, *praefatio* 21 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>45</sup> See Krumbacher (1897), 242 and Suolahti (1947).



narrative about the stay of the seven professors in Persia is, it seems, too critical of the Sassanide Empire to have derived from those sources.

Agathias interprets history very much in moral categories, a fact which has contributed to the strongly negative estimations as to his reliability.<sup>46</sup>

The text which according to the traditional view should be understood as referring to the decree of 529 is rather extensive. Thus we confine ourself to render only the central part of it in translation.

“Not long before Damascius of Syria, Simplicius of Cilicia, Eulamius of Phrygia, Priscian of Lydia, Hermes and Diogenes of Phoenicia and Isidore of Gaza, all of them, to use a poetic turn of phrase, the quintessential flower of the philosophers of our age, had come to the conclusion, since the official religion of the Roman empire was not to their liking, that the Persian state was much superior. So they gave a ready hearing to the stories in general circulation according to which Persia was the land of ‘Plato’s philosopher king’ in which justice reigned supreme... Elated therefore by these reports which they accepted as true, and also because they were forbidden by law to take part in public life with impunity owing to the fact that they did not conform to the established religion, they left immediately and set off for a strange land whose ways were completely foreign to their own, determined to make their homes there.”

Agathias II.30.3–4 (transl. Frendo (1975))

The *context* of the passage quoted needs some elucidation. Agathias is speaking about the Persian ruler Chosroes (Khusrau I Anushirvan) and comments thereby also upon the education of the royalty in question. Chosroes was famous for being well-acquainted with Greek philosophy, particularly with “the Stagirite” and Plato.<sup>47</sup> Some Byzantines regarded Chosroes as being himself an extraordinary philosopher, compatible with the best Greek ones. A Syrian called Uranius, who lived mainly in Byzantium, had recently returned from a visit to the court of Persia, and had contributed to the popular rumour that the king was a qualified philosopher.<sup>48</sup> Agathias makes it his task to prove that the Persians, Chosroes included, were morally and intellectually far below the Byzantines, and not least as regards philosophy. Agathias could hardly have made it more clear how highly esteemed philosophers were in the Byzantium of his day!

Agathias is unmistakably upset, personally irritated by the rumours circulating in the Empire. His irritation was due to the conviction that barbarians could not possibly be good philosophers. At most Chosroes could be the best among barbarian thinkers.<sup>49</sup> In order to prove his point he tells the story quoted above about seven professors going to Persia. He strongly emphasises that they were the greatest possible experts in the Empire, a complete team of seven scholars from different parts of the country. Again the attitude towards philosophy is positive. But as far as Chosroes is concerned, Agathias reaches his goal: the story provides incontestable proof of the emperor not being a real philosopher and of life in Persia being extremely immoral. The seven Byzantine

<sup>46</sup> “Anything whatever may be included in a history, if it makes men more virtuous.” (Averil Cameron (1970), 33.) The estimate of Ites (1926) is not in the least more favourable: only some basic facts are correct in Agathias’ narration, the rest is distorted by moralising and fantastic additions.

<sup>47</sup> Agathias II.28.1–2 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; *Id.* II.32.3 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* II.28.5 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

professors return “home” (οἶκαδε) utterly disappointed.<sup>50</sup> Thus they themselves are proof of the fact that Justinian’s Empire is the better (best) empire.

Though the story is a long one, it is nonetheless intended as an excursion.<sup>51</sup> Even temporally it belongs to a time other than the rest of Agathias’ presentation, which deals with the years 552–559.

Being an edifying story its *historicity* can be questioned even more than the other texts of Agathias. The fact that the professors are said to have been *seven* occasions some doubt. Not only does the number intimate a numeral mysticism of some kind, but it turns out to have some parallels or precedents, operating with the same number of wise men. A body of seven sages is documented as early as in the dialogue *Protagoras* of Plato.<sup>52</sup> There is an analogous story referring to events in the fifth century, though written down much later, in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*. Seven Athenian scholars are said to have moved with Empress Eudocia to Constantinople, there confirming the decline of paganism and the success of Christianity.<sup>53</sup> The story of Agathias has an almost similar conclusion: the Christian Byzantine Empire is far better than the Persian empire. In *favour* of the historicity of Agathias’ presentation, at least partially, is the fact that he enumerates the names and countries of origin of the seven sages.<sup>54</sup> Four of them are unknown to us, but Damascius the Syrian, Simplicius, and Priscian are well-known historical persons. Agathias correctly describes them as philosophers who are all fairly contemporary with Chosroes of Persia. Other sources confirm that during the reign of Justinian numerous non-Christians left the Empire for Persia.<sup>55</sup> Averil Cameron has noted that Agathias in his account uses the terminology of Damascius,<sup>56</sup> a fact that increases the credibility of the narrative, and Fernández has presented plausible arguments for Chosroes’ benevolence towards the seven.<sup>57</sup> There was a cultural revival in progress in the Sassanide empire in Chosroe’s days, and philosophy gained from it as well.<sup>58</sup> The archeological evidence shows that the so called House of Proclus, commonly believed to have been the dwelling-place of the Neoplatonist school, was abandoned at the beginning of the sixth century.<sup>59</sup> And finally, the information given by Malalas concerning the prohibition of philosophical teaching in Athens seems to fit in with Agathias’ presentation: Malalas seems to give the beginning, Agathias the end of the story. This is, however, precisely in line with Agathias own intentions, it seems, as he knew Malalas’ work and wished to avoid repetition.<sup>60</sup> Among sixth century authors Malalas is the *only* one to tell us about the decree, and Agathias the *only* author to inform

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* II.31.2 (ed. Keydell (1967)). Recently it has been argued that Simplicius went to Carrhae (Harran), south of Edessa; see Wildberg (1987), 12.

<sup>51</sup> In *Historiae* II.28.1 Agathias says he will write βραχεία ἅπτα περὶ Χοσρόου, and in III.1 he admits that the digression was a long one, μακρότερος λόγος (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>52</sup> *Protagoras* 343a.

<sup>53</sup> *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* 64 (ed. and transl. Averil Cameron and Herrin, (1984), 141–147).

<sup>54</sup> The names of the seven Athenian philosophers who moved to Byzantium are given in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, too, but not the country of origin, unless Athens itself is regarded as such. *Id.* 64 (ed. and transl. Averil Cameron and Herrin, (1984), 140, lines 17–18).

<sup>55</sup> According to John Malalas 18 (ed. Dindorf (1831), 455) thousands of Samaritans left the Byzantine Empire about 530. Procopius in his *Secret History* (for example in XI.23) states repeatedly that people were either exiled by the authorities or left Byzantium voluntarily.

<sup>56</sup> Averil Cameron (1970), 101. The expression ἡ κρατοῦσα δόξα, used by Damascius about Christianity, is used by Agathias in the episode about the seven professors also. Fernández (1987).

<sup>57</sup> See Frye (1984), 329–331.

<sup>59</sup> See the article by A. Karivieri in this volume.

<sup>60</sup> Agathias II.19.1 and IV.15.1 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

us about the exodus to Persia. Thus far the traditional view seems to harmonise fairly well with our two main sources.

### 3.3. Comparing Malalas and Agathias

The fact that Agathias seems to provide only the end of the story which was begun by Malalas is in itself no severe problem. A closer look at his narrative, however, reveals that there are difficulties in harmonising it with the traditional view.

Firstly, according to Agathias the initiative for the “embassy” to Persia came from the philosophers themselves, not from the emperor. *They* were discontent with the empire, not the emperor with them. The reason for their discontent was explicitly the *general* legislation in the Byzantine Empire, a legislation which resulted in their being unable to take part in public life. Not one word is said about an edict from the emperor. Without taking too great a risk one may suggest that Agathias wished to correct John Malalas on this point; his differing exposition cannot, as we have noted already, be ascribed to ignorance of Malalas’ work.<sup>61</sup>

Consequently, Agathias’ version does not allow the interpretation that the professors were expelled from the empire, nor in fact were they actually persecuted, as the traditional view sometimes presupposes. Their political activity was circumscribed, that much “criticism” Agathias allows himself to utter against the Byzantine empire. As for the future, the peace agreement between Persia and Byzantium granted impunity. Malalas, for his part, seems to suggest tougher methods, at least compulsory unemployment, but physical violence is not necessarily implied in his account.

Secondly, the chronologies in the narratives of our main sources are not quite compatible with each other. Malalas dates the edict of Justinian explicitly to A.D. 529. Agathias, on the other hand, allows the rumour of the Persian “philosopher king” to reach the Byzantine empire first, and only then the professors decide “at once” to emigrate. As Chosroes did not accede to the throne until 531 and some time would have had to elapse before the rumour reached the Byzantines, the Neoplatonic school could not have been closed as early as 529.<sup>62</sup>

Thirdly, the geographical information given by Malalas and Agathias can, at best, be harmonised, but there is nothing to say that this should be done. Perhaps Agathias wished to give an impression other than Malalas in this matter. He does not mention Athens at all, a most strange fact if he is describing the closure of the famous Neoplatonic school in Athens,<sup>63</sup> as the traditional view would like to interpret him. Instead, he stresses another geographical aspect, namely the “international” character of the group. The “professors” came from the most diverse parts of the Empire: Damascius from Syria, Simplicius from Cilicia, Eulamius from Phrygia, Isidorus from as far as Gaza. By writing in this manner Agathias creates the impression that the scholars formed a select *élite* from

<sup>61</sup> Averil Cameron (1970), 102 thinks “the whole commentary clearly alludes (though in deliberately oblique terms) to the state of affairs in 529, the time of Justinian’s edict”. However, such an “allusion” is discernible only if one is acquainted with Malalas’ story in advance. One who reads Agathias only would not be able to reconstruct anything like an edict against Athenian philosophers.

<sup>62</sup> Norwich (1988), 228 is of the opinion that Chosroes I welcomed the professors from Athens *before* his accession to the throne. This is, however, not what Agathias says.

<sup>63</sup> Averil Cameron (1970), 101, followed by Blumenthal (1978), 377, argues that all seven professors may not have been from Athens.

all over the Empire, the “quintessence of contemporary philosophers”, as he says himself. Not one of them was a native Athenian. They might of course have begun their common journey from Athens, for example, as they did not travel as individuals, but as a group having made a common decision. The shortest way to Persia from the regions Agathias mentioned was nonetheless not via Athens.

There is some reason to believe that the professors should be understood as Platonists, however. They had heard of Plato’s philosopher king and wished to find him. Their journey is thus a search after Platonopolis. Chosroes is said to have been an expert on Plato, too.<sup>64</sup> Agathias himself was particularly impressed by Plato.<sup>65</sup> All this does not automatically make the professors Athenians, but at least they *could* have been teachers at a Neoplatonic school.

We conclude that Malalas knew of an edict in 529, Agathias either did not know of it or did not wish to know it. He had good reason for the latter. As his story now stands, it is precisely the edifying narrative he always wants to serve his readers. The most learned men there are leave Byzantium to find a better place in which to live and work. Alas, there was not any! On the contrary, this intellectual *élite* bears witness that intellectually and morally the Byzantines stand miles above the pagan Persians. As prodigal sons they return “home”, as Agathias says, and the philanthropic emperor receives them back with open arms. Surely an edifying story. But an edict against pagan philosophy in Athens, not to mention the persecution of philosophers, would have spoilt this. It would have damaged the image of Justinian as the benevolent ruler. It would have meant an open attack on Platonism, which was so beloved by Agathias. And the end of the story would have been ironic indeed: at first Justinian closed the Neoplatonic school for religious reasons, then he receives the professors “home” again and this time with the written permission in the peace treaty with Persia to practise their religion for the rest of their lives!<sup>66</sup> Nor would that be the “death-blow” to paganism supposed by the traditional view.

### 3.4. Secondary Sources

#### 3.4.1. Damascius of Athens

The Athenian scholarch Damascius was one of those Agathias mentioned among the seven emigrants to Persia. Though born in Damascus, Damascius must have known more than most others of the situation in Athens from about 480 to 529. He spent some nine years in the city as professor of rhetoric,<sup>67</sup> and met Proclus in person during that period. He witnessed the difficult procedure of electing a successor to Proclus, but spent some of the years after 485 travelling in the eastern parts of Byzantium, until he was elected διάδοχος himself after Isidorus of Alexandria. While living in Alexandria he was chosen scholarch of the Athenian school. According to the narrative of Agathias, he must have been at least 80 years old when he returned from Persia in A.D. 533.

In writing the traditional biography of his predecessor, Isidorus, Damascius gives us valuable information about the years immediately preceeding his own time as head of the

<sup>64</sup> Agathias II.28.1–2 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>65</sup> *Id.* II.30.1 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* II.31.4 (ed. Keydell (1967)).

<sup>67</sup> This appears from his *Vita Isidori*, fr. 201 (ed. Zintzen (1967)), 274).

Neoplatonic school, that is, around A.D. 500. The actual writing of the *Vita Isidori* must have taken place after Isidorus' death, and some time after Damascius' appointment, which brings us even closer to the crucial year 529.<sup>68</sup> Fortunately, from our point of view, Damascius was fond of writing about himself, thus allowing us to study the sentiments of the last scholarch.

The *Vita Isidori*, extant today only in fragments from Photius and the *Suda Lexicon*, clearly reveals the threat hanging over the Neoplatonic school. Isidorus is said to have planned to do what Damascius actually did according to Agathias, namely to leave Athens altogether.<sup>69</sup> But similar situations had occurred earlier in the recent history of the Neoplatonic school. Before Isidorus, Proclus had feared that the end of the Neoplatonic school was near, if no-one accepted the office of scholarch.<sup>70</sup> Marinus, in his *Vita Procli*, says that Proclus had to leave the city for a year, due to religious confrontations in the city.<sup>71</sup> The end had clearly been imminent for some time when Damascius seized the pen.

Our scholarch says little about the external circumstances in which the Neoplatonic school operated. Instead, Damascius portrays the life and practice inside the school. We learn how the scholarchs were elected in those days. The headmaster in charge was indisputably in a key position in the process of appointing a successor. The following phases can be traced in the procedure:

a) an authoritative person (such as Asclepiodotus maior) may suggest a candidate to the present scholarch (for example Proclus);

b) the scholarch contacts a person of his liking personally or by letter. Even if an entire deputation is sent to a candidate to ask for his acceptance of the task, it will act in the name of the present scholarch;

c) the candidate had the right to accept or refuse the offer;

d) influential persons in Athens (such as Theagenes and his wife Asclepigeneia) may have had a word in the procedure, and so may the population, if the candidate was particularly inconvenient from its point of view (as was Marinus);

e) appeals to dreams and signs were made to confirm the choice.

Severe schisms resulted if the scholarch did not meet the expectations. In the *Vita Isidori* we learn that this was the case with Marinus, who was despised by his colleagues as well as by the mighty Theagenes.<sup>72</sup> But even Isidorus was not a qualified teacher in Damascius' view.<sup>73</sup> These internal problems may have been the consequences of external problems, such as pressure from the government, though if this was so it is not mentioned, or from the population. Nonetheless Damascius lays the responsibility of the

<sup>68</sup> *PLRE* II, 343 concludes that the *Vita Isidori* was written between A.D. 517 and 526.

<sup>69</sup> *Vita Isidori* 229 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 296).

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* 151 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 206).

<sup>71</sup> *Vita Procli* 15 (ed. Masullo (1985)).

<sup>72</sup> *Vita Isidori* fr. 42 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 66); fr. 144 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 198); fr. 261 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 211); fr. 275 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 304); fr. 276 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 304). All this possibly resulted in the "sedition" mentioned in fr. 277 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 304). στάσις could be understood as discord in the School itself, or in the city, but it is hardly a correct term to denote a decree from Byzantium.

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* fr. 142 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 226).

school's future entirely on its teachers. If the professors wished to continue their activities, they could do so.<sup>74</sup> Thus the *Vita Isidori* supports the narrative of Agathias rather than that of Malalas. The former described a *voluntary* exodus from the Empire, the latter implied a *compulsory* end to the School, ordered by the government, but Damascius knew nothing about such a compulsion. Our scholar wrote about a *planned* exodus, without mentioning any religious reasons for it, whereas Agathias wrote about one that had actually taken place, and he also mentioned the reason for it.

### 3.4.2. Aeneas of Gaza

Aeneas is known to have studied philosophy at Alexandria under Hierocles, and to have been active as a teacher of rhetoric and philosophy in Gaza and elsewhere in Syria. His great interest in Neoplatonic philosophy makes his two statements about philosophy in Athens particularly important for our present purpose, even more so because he actually experienced the year 529.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately we are left with conjectures as to whether he made his statements about Athenian philosophy before or after A.D. 529. It seems likely, however, that he wrote before that date, or else one has to conclude, as we shall see, that he was unaware of any closure of the Academy.

In a letter to a colleague<sup>76</sup> Aeneas states that present day young Athenians do not frequent their own schools, such as the Academy and the Lyceum, but “consider it worth while”, to visit Syrian schools instead. They are even said to think, that the two philosophical schools mentioned (nowadays) are “among us”, that is, in Syria. Aeneas seems to mean that the Athenians considered foreign schools to be better than their own, which is rather nonsensical if the Athenian schools had been closed by Justinian. If, on the other hand, Aeneas displays rivalry between Athens and Gaza, there should in all probability be something (academic) in Athens which was worthy of envy.

In his main work *Theophrastus* Aeneas presents a Syrian student Euxitheus, who is said to have planned a stay in Athens in order to study philosophy. But visiting per chance Alexandria he came across a native Athenian called Theophrastus, who informs him that philosophy is altogether unknown in Athens at present, παντελῶς ἄγνωστος.<sup>77</sup> Euxitheus is said to have believed in the existence of philosophical teaching in Athens, a fact which suggests a period prior to 529. Neither Euxitheus nor Theophrastus knew of Justinian's edict. One may possibly find a trace of rivalry between the Alexandrian and Athenian schools in Theophrastus' statement that philosophy is unknown in Athens. However, the one purported to say it was himself an Athenian! Thus *Theophrastus* confirms Letter 18 as to the Athenian attitude towards their own schools. Rivalry presupposes, again, the existence of a fairly successful competitor, but Theophrastus does not even admit the *existence* of such. We may conclude that Aeneas' text is in agreement with Damascius' description of the Isidorian era insofar that

<sup>74</sup> Damascius claims that it was the duty of Syrianus and Hegias to “save” (ἀνασώσασθαι) philosophy, which was declining (ὕποπρέουσα), *id.* fr. 230 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 296). Thus the fate of the School cannot have been entirely in the hands of outsiders.

<sup>75</sup> The precise dates of Aeneas' birth and death are not known. *PLRE* II, 17 gives A.D. 484 as the *terminus post quem* of Aeneas' dialogue *Theophrastus*; Aeneas is likely to have died some time after A.D. 538 (Sauget (1983), 1154). Wacht (1969), 15, however, seems to favour an earlier dating without determining it definitely.

<sup>76</sup> Letter 18, to Theodorus the Sophist (ed. Positano (1962), 40–41).

<sup>77</sup> Aeneas of Gaza, *Theophrastus* (PG 85, col. 877).

philosophy was in serious trouble in Athens at that time. Aeneas, however, portrays an even worse decline, Theophrastus himself being the only hope, but alas, he moved to Alexandria.<sup>78</sup>

However, the Alexandrian school also faced severe difficulties. Aeneas says that the teachers were unqualified, as said Damascius of the Athenian professors. The students were uninterested, and the lecture rooms deserted.<sup>79</sup> So philosophy was almost unknown in Alexandria, too! But Aeneas was convinced that the future looked better: Theophrastus had arrived in Alexandria three days ago, and with his arrival a new glorious time had begun. With Theophrastus *Athens had moved to Alexandria*, an Egyptian interlocutor says! This is already the *fourth* philosophical exodus from Athens mentioned in our sources! According to one of them (the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*) there was an exodus to Constantinople, according to another (Agathias) the exodus went to Ctesiphon in Persia, according to Aeneas' letter the "Academy" was nowadays situated in Syria and according to *Theophrastus* one Athenian philosopher went to Alexandria. Only a century earlier Christians and non-Christians alike had boasted of having studied in Athens, that famous centre of learning.<sup>80</sup>

Nothing is known about a revival of philosophical studies in Alexandria through the activities of Theophrastus. What is clear, however, is that Aeneas provides us with one more text illustrating a general decline of philosophical studies in the Byzantine Empire in the early sixth century. Euxitheus, when planning where to study, was very uncertain as to whether there was a suitable school to be found. Rather pessimistically he thought he might at least try Athens as a starting point in order to find out whether εἰ τίς που σοφὸς παρὰ Ἀθηναίοις ὑπολείπεται.<sup>81</sup> In Gaza there was nothing of interest for a philosophical scholar, in Alexandria he found a school lacking students and qualified teachers. Philosophy was evidently experiencing difficulties all over the Empire. The existence of just one chair of philosophy in Byzantium confirms rather than diminishes this impression.

### 3.4.3. Romanus Melodus

Romanus was born in Emesa but active as a deacon first in Berytus and then in Byzantium. The precise dates of his life have been much discussed and are still uncertain to some degree. In one of his poems he seems to refer to the Nika riot,<sup>82</sup> and in another to the earthquakes which occurred in 552 and 555 in Byzantium.<sup>83</sup> As he is known to have moved from Berytus to Byzantium already in the times of the Emperor Anastasius (about 516), he is likely to have been in the city in 529 and should have been aware of the closing of the Neoplatonic school, if such an event was mentioned in everyday

<sup>78</sup> Needless to say, no trace of the philosophical "revival" which Alan Cameron (1969), 28–29 suggested under Damascius' time as scholar can be found in Aeneas, any more than in our other sources. Alan Cameron suggests that Aeneas wrote about the situation (in Athens) following immediately after the death of Proclus in 485, an improbable dating.

<sup>79</sup> Aeneas of Gaza, *Theophrastus* (PG 85, col. 876).

<sup>80</sup> See Schemmel (1908). But admittedly Schemmel also noted a rather pessimistic utterance by Synesius concerning philosophy in Athens from the early fifth century, *i.e.* the times before the revival through the activities of Proclus.

<sup>81</sup> Aeneas of Gaza, *Theophrastus* (PG 85, col. 877).

<sup>82</sup> *Canticum* 54: *On Earthquakes and Fires* (ed. Maas and Trypanis (1963)); see also Grosdidier de Matons (1977), 176.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

conversation. Romanus does, in fact, refer to Greek philosophy a couple of times. In *On Pentecost* he writes:

“Was it not granted to them (the apostles) to be superior to all the others, through the tongues they spoke? And whatfor were the Greeks proud and humming? Why do they exalt themselves? In the light of the three times cursed Aratos, why do they err to the (companion of) Plato? Why do they love the weak Demosthenes, why do they not know that Homer is an empty dream? Why do they babble about Pythagoras, whose mouth was justly closed? Why did they not haste to the holy Spirit in belief, to whom he showed Himself?”<sup>84</sup>

The context reveals that Romanus is drawing up a contrast between the apostles, filled by the Spirit, and well-known Greek intellectuals. The relation between them is that of humble men to proud men, and truthful men to loquacious deceivers. The miracle of Pentecost, however, gave the victory to the former, and to the simple message they preached. Rivalry between the ancient Greek and the present Byzantine cultures is unmistakably implied. Among philosophers Pythagoras and Plato are particularly blamed, as they are in the thinking of Justinian I himself.<sup>85</sup> But the victory of Christianity over Greek philosophy is not said to consist of the cancellation of Neoplatonic teaching in Athens. It took place in Jerusalem at Pentecost five centuries earlier.

In another hymn, which deals with Christ sending his apostles as missionaries into the world, Romanus touches upon our topic a second time. He has his Christ to say the following:<sup>86</sup>

“I do not rejoice in the followers of Plato, but I have loved the simpletons of the world, I, the only one who knows the secrets of man’s heart.

Thus I give you power as well, the power which can make many to rise through the fall (of one), and a language which will make you wise. Your assembly will scare away Demosthenes, and the Athenians will be defeated by the Galilaeans. And so will Cefas bring the (pagan) literature to silence, in proclaiming me. The word ‘Maranatha’ will silence excessive speech as well as the myths; Nazareth will make Corinth tremble. You shall speak and I shall convince (them), I, who am the only one to know the secret of man’s heart.”

The context deals with Christ comforting his apostles before the formidable task of preaching the Gospel all over the world. The apostles differ from their pagan audience in a number of ways. Every quality among the former has a (negative) counterpart among the latter. The comparison between the famous rhetorician Demosthenes and the apostles, speaking in tongues at Pentecost, is in itself interesting as regards the understanding of the charisma implied, but irrelevant for our present purpose. The contrast between Ἀθηναῖοι and Γαλιλαῖοι should be understood in the light of the preceding pair of

<sup>84</sup> *Canticum* 33: *On Pentecost* (ed. Maas and Trypanis (1963), 265). A short comment on these lines of Romanus is given by Grosdidier de Matons (1977), 184–185.

<sup>85</sup> *Liber adversus Origenem* (PG 86.1, col. 949). Justinian’s attack on Plato seems to emerge from his Christological interests. The philosophy of Plato promoted a subordinationist Christology, in Justinian’s view. Podskalsky (1977), 70 pays attention to the fact that there were rather favourable attitudes towards Plato also among the early Byzantines. Anastasios Sinaites, for example, thought that Plato was the first pagan to turn to Christianity at Christ’s preaching in the underworld!

<sup>86</sup> *Canticum* 31: *On the Mission of the Apostles* (ed. Maas and Trypanis (1963), 247).



opposites: Demosthenes and the apostles form a pair, independent of time, and so do the Galileans and the Athenians. One should not have sixth century A.D. Athenians in mind here, but pagans of all times. Similarly the "Galileans" are not only first century Christians, but representatives of the Church of all eras. Romanus' text is an instances of Christian polemic against pagan (Greek) culture, but as such no evidence for Justinian having closed the Academy recently. "Athens" had been in the shooting-line numerous times before, in a figurative sense. "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem", was Tertullian's famous rhetoric question, a question that had nothing to do with early third century topography.<sup>87</sup> Almost two centuries later Chrysostom in his turn asked rhetorically: "Where is Plato now? His teaching has disappeared and come to silence, he is dead, many have not even heard his name. The Academy has rotted away."<sup>88</sup> From this we do not infer that the Academy was *closed* in about 400, and Romanus is not saying anything more about the fates of the Academy than Chrysostom was.

#### 3.4.4. Procopius of Caesarea

Walden was of the opinion that Procopius, our best source for the era of Justinian, does mention the closing of the Academy.<sup>89</sup> A suitable context for such information had, theoretically, been Procopius' work *De aedificiis*, a flattering description of the achievements of Justinian in the field of architecture. In this work the author not only described what Justinian built; he also reported what the emperor demolished, that is, pagan or barbaric structures of any kind.<sup>90</sup> However, not a word is said about the Neoplatonic school in the treatise. Athens itself is mentioned three times. The only reference of interest here is *De aedificiis* IV.2.24. Procopius says that total negligence had caused the poor state of the defence walls of Athens (as well as of some other Greek cities). Also in the *Secret History* he blames Justinian personally for impoverishing Greece economically to the extent that no public buildings could be restored, not even in Athens. Things were not going well in sixth century Athens.<sup>91</sup> This could, perhaps, provide something of an explanation for why a centre of learning was closed, but in no way does it support the traditional view.

There is, however, one text from Procopius' pen which deals with the emperor's attitude towards teachers. In the *Secret History* Procopius states that Justinian gave pagan teachers and doctors three months to convert or to emigrate.<sup>92</sup> This would partly confirm Agathias' narrative of the seven professors, but three months is too short a time to fit perfectly into the story. We are still within the year 529, if three months is added to the promulgation date of this law. Chosroes was not yet the ruler of Persia. But as already

<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* VII.9 (ed. Refoulé (1954), 193).

<sup>88</sup> Ref. see Coleman-Norton (1930) (in particular *PG* 57, col. 392; *PG* 59, col. 31; *PG* 60, col. 47; *PG* 63, col. 501; and *PG* 64, col. 26). Fernández (1983), 29 called this *topos* an "oriental current", giving further references to texts. Tertullian, however, proves that such comparisons between Christianity and philosophy to the favour of the former were not unknown in the West, either.

<sup>89</sup> Walden (1909), 126, note 2.

<sup>90</sup> This is not the place to discuss the complicated question of Procopius' attitude towards Christianity. Aspects on this theme can be found in Averil Cameron's article "The Scepticism of Procopius" in her study (Averil Cameron (1981)).

<sup>91</sup> *Anecdota* XXVI.35. Alan Cameron (1969), 8 points out that "the general decline of Athenian prosperity" in the sixth century has passed unnoticed by scholars only too often.

<sup>92</sup> Procopius' account is confirmed by *CJ* I.5.18.4 and I.11.10.2 (ed. Krüger (1959)).

mentioned, if such a law against pagan teachers existed the edict concerning philosophy in Athens would seem superfluous.

#### 4. An Alternative Interpretation

In searching for an alternative interpretation of the events of 529 the following facts should be taken in account:

a) The closing of the so-called Neoplatonic school is very poorly attested in contemporary literary sources, as far as explicit statements are concerned. Neither Justinian's admirers nor his critics paid attention to the event. We have nothing more explicit than one third of a sentence in Malalas' *Chronographia*.

b) Malalas does not connect the 529 edict with the conflict between religions, or with religion at all, nor can any triumphant "hallelujahs" be heard in any other Christian sources. Sixth century Christians had no notion of a great victory for their religion through the closing of the Neoplatonic school. They rejoice in Christianity being more successful than Greek philosophy, but so they had been doing since the second century apologists, and would go on doing for centuries.

c) From a legal point of view no edict against pagan philosophy in Athens was needed, since such tuition was forbidden already, be it public or private.

d) The sources dealing with philosophy around the turn of the century display a serious decline all over the empire. Nonetheless philosophers enjoyed an extraordinary authority among educated people in those same times (so Malalas, Agathias, and Damascius).<sup>93</sup>

e) Severe measures against paganism in the Athens area are indicated in the literary (*Vita Procli*) and archeological (Omega building, possibly Proclus' house) material from the fifth and early sixth centuries.

There can hardly be any discord among scholars as to the fact that Justinian would suppress paganism whenever he had the chance.<sup>94</sup> But we cannot infer that *any* measures taken by him had a religious and *only* a religious motivation. Interpreting the 529 events a priori and exclusively from religious viewpoints would be more "Gibbonish" than Gibbon himself.

It is odd, and possibly a consequence of the strong position of the traditional view, that a *political* explanation of the 529 events is not discussed among scholars, regardless of the fact that philosophers had been persecuted by emperors in centuries past for being

<sup>93</sup> Damascius, *Vita Isidori* fr. \*104 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 79) gives the information that members of the city councils in Alexandria and Athens used to visit the philosophers before their sessions in the fifth century, and that "still (today)", when philosophy as a discipline was declining, its "great and wonderful ring" survived.

<sup>94</sup> Justinian could be pragmatic enough to tolerate a practising pagan in his own court as minister of law when the welfare of the empire seemed to need it. But Tribonian was an exception, the general tenor in Justinian's religious legislation was strongly anti-pagan, though even more strongly anti-heretic.

politically dangerous. Damascius himself suggests an instance of such persecutions in the fifth century A.D.<sup>95</sup>

The only explicit source we have, that of John Malalas, is reticent as to both religious and political motives, however. Instead, it seems to suggest an alternative motive. Malalas has, in his text, combined the edict against philosophy with an edict against jurisprudence in Athens. The latter measure could hardly have been religiously motivated in the first place. Justinian took a keen interest in juridical studies and reorganised them thoroughly and into the smallest details. The need for such a reorganization was due to the low standard of juridical knowledge among professors as well as students.<sup>96</sup> Such a decline was, as noted above, mentioned frequently in texts regarding philosophy. The emperor fixed the length of legal studies, the books that had to be read, the way of life of the students, the number of copies allowed to be made of the *Codex Iustinianus*, and so forth. He even made his own corrections, however small, in both old and new laws in the *Codex*.<sup>97</sup> He also concentrated the teaching of jurisprudence to three cities, that is, to Byzantium, Berytus, and Rome. Illegal teaching was prosecuted.<sup>98</sup> There may have been some pagan lawyers, such as Tribonian, in the empire, but the above-mentioned measures cannot possibly be explained by the emperor's anti-pagan bias.<sup>99</sup> They are first of all exponents of his interest in jurisprudence in general,<sup>100</sup> an interest which made him regulate its teaching. The overall result of his education reform seems to have been positive in the sense that there were more academic chairs than before in jurisprudence.<sup>101</sup>

Malalas does not mention the reason why jurisprudence was prohibited in Athens, nor does he tell us why another academic discipline mentioned by him, that is to say philosophy, was likewise prohibited. The former prohibition is best explained by Justinian's high-school policy. The latter is easily explained by the same motive, and fits the sources presented better than the traditional view or other explanations stressing religious aspects. By regarding the closure of the Neoplatonic school first and foremost as a high-school measure we can easily solve a number of problems connected with the traditional view and understand the sources as they stand:

a) the problem of the 529 edict being "superfluous" disappears. The law forbidding pagans to teach and the law closing down two academic branches have little to do with each other and thus both are needed. Thus the account of Malalas as regards the edict gets a *raison d'être*;

<sup>95</sup> Damascius seems to draw a parallel between the (persecution of) philosophers in Alexandria under Zeno and armed attempts to restore pagan rule in the Empire (*Vita Isidori* 303 (ed. Zintzen (1967), 241–243)). At any rate he has noted the *political* danger any influential pagan assembly constitutes for the Christian society.

<sup>96</sup> See Rubin (1960), 154 and Alan Cameron (1969), 8, referring to Constitution "*Omnem*" 7 (ed. Krüger (1959)).

<sup>97</sup> See Rubin (1960), 89 for "Justinianism"; Schindler (1966), 2.

<sup>98</sup> Rubin (1960), 155, referring to Constitution "*Omnem*" 7 (ed. Krüger (1959)).

<sup>99</sup> Correctly Bury (1923) II, 369.

<sup>100</sup> It is often claimed that Justinian had studied jurisprudence himself, e.g. Rubin (1960), 90; Schindler (1966), 2 is undecided whether Justinian received "eine volle juristische Ausbildung". The emperor's interest can at least partly be explained by the fact that he was fully aware of laws being the "weapons" by which the Empire was controlled, Constitution "*Summa*" (ed. Krüger (1959)).

<sup>101</sup> So Hunger (1965), 349, according to whom the number of chairs rose from six to eight in the Empire.

b) the fact that Malalas does not mention *religious* motives for the closing is accounted for: the motives were not predominantly religious, but “academic”;

c) the fact that the Christians paid no attention whatever to the closing of the Neoplatonic school (argument *e silentio*) is explained: they saw nothing particularly important in an academic affair. Byzantine believers showed equally little interest in the removal of the Alexandrian school to Antioch after Olympiodorus, and of the Berytian law school to Sidon after the disastrous earthquake of 557. Presumably for a long time only a few were aware of the closure;<sup>102</sup>

d) Procopius was quite correct in maintaining that Justinian closed down ancient institutions (not for religious reasons but) in order to realise his own innovations: “The maintenance of established institutions meant nothing to him: endless innovations were his constant preoccupation. In a word, he was a unique destroyer of valuable institutions;”<sup>103</sup>

e) Agathias is given right in maintaining that the professors left the empire out of discontent with public affairs and by their own free choice. *No* surviving text combines the closure of the Neoplatonic with compulsory exile. The closing was compulsory (Malalas), the exodus not (Agathias);

f) the seven professors had plenty of time to leave the country, as *Agathias* presupposes. The act of high-school policy did not imply quick emigration, just the cessation of teaching;

g) Justinian did not recall a measure against the religion of the professors by admitting them religious freedom after their return from Persia. He had never interfered with the religious beliefs of these professors, merely issued general laws in religious matters. Thus *Agathias*’ account becomes intelligible;

h) the different treatments of the Athenian and Alexandrian philosophical schools has a natural explanation. Philosophy was not going well in the Empire, and particularly not in Athens. The closing down of one “faculty” was tempting, particularly since the school of law in Athens was also to be closed;

i) a hitherto popular explanation as to why the Alexandrian school survived can be dropped as implausible. Scholars have presupposed that a considerable difference as to the attitude of the professors to religion existed between the two schools.<sup>104</sup> In fact very

<sup>102</sup> Alan Cameron (1969), 25 pays attention to a piece of information, according to which Theodorus of Tarsus had studied philosophy at Athens in the 7th century. This statement can, however, easily be explained by the fact that the 529 events did not merit as an important piece of news in the Empire and was unknown to the author.

<sup>103</sup> *Anecdota* VI.21.

<sup>104</sup> Hunger (1965), 342 is of the opinion that the Alexandrian philosophical school survived because the professors agreed to compromise (more than their Athenian colleagues) in religious matters. See also Fowden (1982), 38, Glucker (1978), 324 and Alan Cameron (1969), 9–10. The difficulty in maintaining such a view is evident in the last mentioned article itself. The Athenians are said to have been overtly anti-Christian and uncompromising, but the Alexandrians not so. Nonetheless the Athenians are said to have embraced the policy advocated in Epictetus’ *Encheiridion* not to provoke the authorities (p. 19). Having been uncompromising at least from Proclus till Damascius, they

little can be said in support of such a view. The most determined pagan at the Athenian school, Proclus, had studied in Alexandria for some time. Close connections between the two schools continued even after his time. It appears from the *Vita Isidori* that Isidorus spent four periods in Alexandria, and four in Athens. Damascius, who was responsible for the Athenian policy for decades, spent a considerable part of his life in Alexandria. Simplicius, too, one of the seven who left for Persia with the supposed Athenians, was equally at home in both cities. Olympiodorus was openly a pagan, but taught philosophy in Alexandria three decades after the Neoplatonic school in Athens had been closed.<sup>105</sup> Both schools were also predominantly Platonic. Under these circumstances religious motives could play only a small part if any in Justinian's decision to close one school and leave the other school intact;

j) by interpreting the 529 events as high-school politics we can understand why the Neoplatonic school was *closed* and not *reorganised*. Among the Byzantines of the day a certain "imperialistic" tendency was evident, manifest in the numerous cases where pagan edifices were changed into Christian churches; for example, the Asklepieion next to the House of Proclus was made a Christian pilgrimage site,<sup>106</sup> the Parthenon into a Christian church. The Neoplatonic school was not Christianised, however. Christian professors were soon to find their way to Byzantium and Alexandria, but not to Athens. A reorganization of the Athenian school was, according to our view, not needed, since the school was regarded as superfluous rather than dangerous, in the same way as the Athenian "faculty" of law;

k) Justinian's tendency towards centralisation and "monopolies", so bitterly criticised by Procopius in his *Secret History*, is commonly acknowledged among scholars. A centralisation of higher tuition is precisely in line with Justinian's policy in other areas of life.

In conclusion we can state that if Justinian, by closing the Athenian school of philosophy, also succeeded in suppressing paganism and perhaps by getting financial advantages from the closure, he certainly acted in accordance with his well-known manners. But our sources rather suggest that the Emperor had other interests in mind when forbidding philosophy and jurisprudence in Athens, namely the reform of higher education. This reform, at least as far as jurisprudence was concerned, culminated in 529 with the appearance of the first edition of the *Codex Iustinianus*. As for philosophy, its few but highly esteemed professionals and students were henceforth directed to the biggest metropoleis of the Empire.

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suddenly decided in 529 not to provoke anyone (p. 21). Wildberg (1987), 11 states optimistically that "recent work has rejected the idea that in Alexandria the Neoplatonists compromised with Christian monotheism".

<sup>105</sup> Alan Cameron (1969), 9 with references; Westerink (1962), XV–XX.

<sup>106</sup> Karivieri (in press).