
Alessandro di Afrodisia. Commentario al de caelo di Aristotele. 1. Frammenti del primo libro. 2. Frammenti del secondo, terzo e quarto libro by Andrea Rescigno

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Reviewed by
Andrea Falcon
Concordia University
afalcon@alcor.concordia.ca

Titus Aurelius Alexander (this is his full name as it emerges from a recently found inscription from his native city of Aphrodisias in Caria)¹ was the most influential Peripatetic philosopher of late antiquity. We do not have precise dates for him but we know that he was active in the late second and early third century AD. It has long been clear that his lost commentary on the *De caelo*, together with his lost commentary on the *Physics*,² stood out as an elaborate presentation, clarification, and defense of Aristotle's physics in the context of the debate between philosophical schools. By collecting, editing, translating, and commenting on all the evidence that goes back, directly or indirectly, to Alexander's commentary on the *De caelo*, Andrea Rescigno has put together a tremendous amount of information that helps us to appreciate not only the theoretical concerns motivating Alexander's exegetical activity but also his achievements and their subsequent *fortuna*.

Sources of Alexander's lost commentary on the *De caelo*

Simplicius' commentary on the *De caelo* and Themistius' paraphrase of the same work (which is not extant in the original Greek but is preserved in Arabic-Hebrew and Hebrew-Latin versions) are our two most important witnesses for Alexander's lost commentary. Because of the learned nature of his commentary, Simplicius is by far our principal source of information. Themistius is rarely as helpful: his paraphrase is a restatement of the original

¹ On this inscription and its implications, see Sharples 2005.

² On the latter, see Rashed 2011.

text with little or no room for elaboration. In a number of cases, the hidden presence of Alexander in Themistius becomes apparent thanks to explicit references in Simplicius. In addition, Philoponus uses Alexander's exegesis of the *De caelo* in the *Contra Proclum*.³ Although his use of Alexander is limited to the final part of the first book [*De caelo* 1.10–12], it is of some interest to us because it overlaps with that of Simplicius. We have here a unique opportunity to control how free Simplicius is in his use of Alexander's commentary. I will return to this topic shortly. For the time being, I am content to add that a few scholia on the *De caelo* have been transmitted to us as well. These scholia are the result of a condensation and reworking of an ancient commentary tradition that is at least in part independent from both Simplicius and Themistius. Hence, they can be used either to confirm or to supplement the evidence provided by Simplicius and Themistius.⁴

Ipsissima verba? Fragmenta, testimonia, and vestigia

There are a few cases where Simplicius quotes Alexander's actual words—or at least claims that he is doing so. For instance, in fragments 67a [Heiberg 1894, 249.3–17], 129b [Heiberg 1894, 377.20–378.29], 129d [Heiberg 1894, 379.18–381.2], and 136c [Heiberg 1894, 404.4–30], Simplicius tells us that he is reporting Alexander's words (ρήματα). Does this mean that there is no manipulation of the original wording in the form of rearrangement, addition, omission, or replacement in these cases? We cannot answer this question for the simple reason that we have no independent way to assess how faithful Simplicius is in reporting Alexander. In a couple of cases, fragments 96b [Heiberg 1894, 293.11–295.26] and 97b [Heiberg 1894, 297.9–298.20], we can see how Simplicius uses his source because we have a parallel use in Philoponus, *Contra Proclum*: fr. 96a [Rabe 1899, 212.16–213.4] and fr. 97a [Rabe 1899, 213.17–216.23]. Rescigno engages in a comparative study of how both Proclus and Simplicius use Alexander's exegesis. The upshot of his study and its implication for how Simplicius uses Alexander can be summarized with the help of a brief quotation:

³ Philoponus also used Alexander's exegesis of the *De caelo* in the lost *Contra Aristotelem*. What we know about this work depends on Simplicius and his commentary on the *De caelo*.

⁴ On these scholia and their provenance, see also Rescigno 2013, 479–516.

the comparison...highlights some freedom of use of the model [on the part of Simplicius] and at the same time makes us sure of the dependence [of Simplicius] on Alexander. [1.532]

In other words, Simplicius does not simply copy from Alexander's commentary. Rather, he makes a conscious effort to insert Alexander's exegesis in the fabric of his own commentary. This entails disassembling and reassembling the original text as appropriate. This way of proceeding makes it difficult, if not outright impossible, for us to extract Alexander's *ipsissima verba* from Simplicius' commentary.

Also, in light of this fact, I agree with Rescigno's decision to avoid the distinction between *testimonia* and *fragmenta*.⁵ I also approve of his decision to refrain from setting out in print Alexander's putative *ipsissima verba* from the context in which they are embedded.⁶ However, speaking of fragments as he does is a bit misleading. In a few cases, we are dealing neither with *testimonia* nor with *fragmenta* but rather with *vestigia* of Alexander's lost commentary. Fr. 128b is a good example of this phenomenon. Simplicius is here referring to Alexander by using impersonal expressions such as 'they solve [this problem] by saying that' [Heiberg 1894, 373.3–4 λύουσι λέγοντες] and 'they take as evidence' [Heiberg 1894, 373.6 τεκμήριον ποιούντες (fr. 128b)]. Other cases where the presence of Alexander remains hidden in the text could be given. In all of them, it takes some ingenuity on the part of the editor to prove that the exegetical position defended depends on the same source, and that this source is to be identified with Alexander and his lost commentary on the *De caelo*. In my view, *testimonia* would have been a more precise, and indeed more appropriate, description of the various and complex nature of the extant evidence that the editor has collected and evaluated in the two volumes.

⁵ This decision is defended in the foreword to Rescigno's first volume [1.9].

⁶ The practice of setting out the stretch of text that is believed to go back to Alexander as an extract is adopted by Ian Müller and Jim Hankinson in their separate translations of Simplicius' commentary on the *De caelo* produced for the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle Project. This practice fortifies the impression that, after all, we can extract Alexander's *ipsissima verba* from the fabric of Simplicius' commentary.

Exegetical work and philosophical debates

The extant evidence suggests that Alexander was not content to explicate the text of the *De caelo* but also enlarged upon it. Such amplifications are common in the context of the commentary to the second book of the *De caelo*. Aristotle's celestial physics poses enormous challenges to the ancient and modern interpreter. Alexander did not shy away from these challenges. Quite the opposite. He confronted them by engaging in more or less independent inquiries (ζητήσεις), which may have also entailed the presentation and resolution of certain difficulties (ἀπορίαι). Here is one example taken from Alexander's exegesis of *De caelo* 2.3. In fragments 136c and 136d [Heiberg 1894, 404.4–30 and 405.8–27], Alexander amplifies the Aristotelian text by discussing how divine providence extends to the sublunary world through the motion of the heavens. The context of this amplification is an inquiry (ζήτησις) into how circular motion contributes to the explanation of the mutual transformation of the four simple sublunary bodies. The whole discussion is prompted by a post-Aristotelian (mainly Stoic) concern but is conducted solely on the basis of what is found in the *De caelo*: more importantly, it is presented as an explication of the Aristotelian text.

The exposition of an authoritative text such as the *De caelo* was for Alexander the occasion to expand on doctrines that were perceived as core, and as such non-negotiable, doctrines in the Aristotelian system. Fr. 91a [Heiberg 1894, 284.28–285.5, 285.21–286.27] is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. This fragment is from the commentary on the first book of the *De caelo*, where Aristotle says that there cannot be place, void, or time outside the world since there is no body outside it [Heiberg 1894, 279a11–12]. Alexander expands on the Aristotelian thesis by engaging in an extended refutation of the Stoic claim that there exists an extra-cosmic void. Such an expansion on the Aristotelian text makes sense only if we assume that there existed a debate between the Peripatetic and Stoic schools on this very point, and assume that this debate was still very much alive at the time when Alexander composed his commentary. Interestingly enough, we do have independent evidence of an ongoing post-Hellenistic debate on this very topic: Cleomedes (his *floruit* is to be placed around AD 200) discusses objections that bear

some resemblance to those advanced by Alexander from a Stoic standpoint in his lectures on astronomy.⁷

In his commentary, Alexander tackled one of the most intractable problems of the *De caelo*, namely, that of the unity and integrity of its four books. Our source of information is Simplicius [Heiberg 1894, 1.2–24], who reviews the ancient views on the aim (σκοπός) of the *De caelo*. Apparently, Alexander argued that Aristotle in the *De caelo* was concerned with the world (περὶ κόσμου). It is not immediately clear what may have motivated Alexander to put forward this overall interpretation. It has been suggested that framing the *De caelo* as a work on the world (περὶ κόσμου) has the implication of putting the *De caelo* in direct contention with the pseudo-Aristotelian work circulating under the title ‘On the World’ («Περὶ κόσμου»).⁸ Moreover, it has been suggested that both *On the World* and Alexander’s interpretation of the *De caelo* are to be regarded as two independent attempts on the part of the Peripatetic tradition to fill what was perceived as a lacuna in Aristotle’s physics *vis-à-vis* the Stoic practice of writing on the world (περὶ κόσμου).⁹ If we accept this suggestion, we can see how a certain interpretation of the *De caelo* may have been prompted by theoretical pressures that are not only external to the Peripatetic tradition but also the direct result of a close confrontation with Stoic physics.¹⁰

⁷ For an English translation of Cleomedes’ lectures on astronomy, see Bowen and Todd 2004.

⁸ This work is also known with the Latin title of ‘De mundo’.

⁹ For both suggestions, see Kukkonen 2014, 311–352. That the *De mundo* is a post-Hellenistic attempt to fill a lacuna in the Aristotelian tradition *vis-à-vis* the Stoic practice of writing on the world (κόσμος) was first suggested in Mansfeld 1992, 391–411. The following Stoic philosophers are credited with a work entitled ‘On the World’ («Περὶ κόσμου»): Sphaerus, Chrysippus, Antipater, and Posidonius. For a discussion of the extant evidence, I refer the reader to the article by Mansfeld.

¹⁰ From the scholia to the lost commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*, we learn that Alexander adopted the definition of the world (κόσμος) as a system (σύστημα): see Rashed 2011, 219. Interestingly enough, this definition is found also in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* 391b9–10: ‘[the] world (κόσμος) is a system (σύστημα) composed of the heavens, the Earth, and the natures contained in them.’ The Stoic origins of this definition are beyond dispute: it is ascribed to Chrysippus (the relevant testimonies are collected in von Arnim 1903–1905, 2.526–528) and Posidonius [Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 7.138 = Edelstein and Kidd 1972, fr. 14]. More importantly, it is regarded

Alexander and the earlier Peripatetic tradition

In his commentary, Alexander was critically engaged with prior attempts to explicate the *De caelo*. Fr. 145 [Heiberg 1894, 430.12–431.37] is a good case in point. In this fragment, Alexander builds on an exegetical tradition that included Alexander of Aegae (first half of the first century AD), Aspasius (first half of the second century AD), and Herminus (second half of the second century AD). Rescigno offers a useful discussion of this fragment not only in his second volume but also in the introduction to the first volume. I refer the reader to his discussion for a full treatment of the relations among these interpreters. What matters here is the general observation that what we know about the early engagement with the *De caelo* is filtered through Alexander (and mediated *via* Simplicius). While we have no choice but to look at the early engagement with the *De caelo* through the lenses of Alexander, we should be aware that what we see is somehow distorted by his exegetical and philosophical concerns. Elsewhere I have tried to show that this is certainly the case for another interpreter of the *De caelo*, Xenarchus of Seleucia (second half of the first century BC) [Falcon 2011]. The results that I reached in the study of the extant evidence for Xenarchus invite some pessimism on the prospects of arriving at a fair view of the Peripatetic tradition before Alexander. This tradition did not simply prepare the ground for what Alexander accomplished in his commentary on the *De caelo*. In some cases, the philosophers working in this tradition before Alexander were motivated by a different set of exegetical and philosophical concerns and, as a consequence, arrived at different results.

Conclusion

Rescigno has recovered, collected, edited, and translated into Italian 231 fragments from Alexander's lost commentary on the *De caelo*. He has also offered a detailed analysis of each of these fragments, which is not easy reading even for a native speaker of Italian. In my view, the work as a whole would have benefited from having a much shorter discussion of the fragments. In saying this, I do not mean to take away anything from what Rescigno has accomplished. One can only congratulate him for having put

as a standard definition in post-Hellenistic Stoicism. Tellingly, Cleomedes opens his lectures on astronomy with this definition: see Todd 1990, 1.1.13.

together a vast amount of information which will be an indispensable starting point for future studies of the Peripatetic tradition in antiquity.

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