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*Michael Psellos, Kommentar zur Physik des Aristoteles, editio princeps. Einleitung, Text, Indices* by Linos G. Benakis

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The first commentators on Aristotle began their work very soon after the edition that Andronicus of Rhodes made in the first century BC. The surviving works of ancient scholars such as Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200), Porphyry (third century AD), Simplicius and Philoponus (both sixth century AD) were edited well over 100 years ago under the auspices of the Academy of Berlin with Hermann Diels in charge of the project. They are still much used by modern Aristotelian commentators, and quite a few studies have appeared in recent times.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, there has been until recently little care for the Byzantine commentaries on Aristotle. However, things seem to be changing.<sup>2</sup> Granted, it may be that the level of philosophy and philosophical interpretation in these commentaries is not as high as in the works of their predecessors; and it is certainly true that the Byzantine Aristotelian commentators relied heavily on previous commentaries, sometimes to an extent that we would call ‘plagiarism’. But these commentaries are still very important in at least two respects: they contribute to our understanding not only of the personal traits of the individual scholars of Byzantium, in this case the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., [Sorabji 2003–2005](#) and [Tuominen 2009](#) with bibliographies. Also, Richard Sorabji is editing the series of translations, Ancient Commentators on Aristotle.

<sup>2</sup> Note, in particular, the two relatively new series *Commentaria in Aristotelem Byzantina* (of which the present book is part) and *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca et Byzantina*.

prominent thinker Michael Psellos (1018–after 1081),<sup>3</sup> but also of the general level of education, philosophy, and science in the Byzantine period. Linos Benakis' edition of Psellos' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, which is one of the oldest extant commentaries [11\* with n15] if it is actually by Psellos [see below], is a very welcome contribution in both respects, and an excellent scholarly work in its own right.

The book under review consists of two main parts: a careful introduction [3\*–94\*] and the text itself [1–430]. Indices [431–440] and eight photographic reproductions [443–450] occupy the last pages of the book. It is, then, primarily a critical edition of a previously inaccessible text, and as such it is obviously valuable.

In the introduction, Benakis discusses the *Stand der Forschung* concerning the commentary [3\*–20\*], Psellos' biographical details as they bear on the commentary [21\*–\*25\*], the nature and character of the commentary [26\*–46\*], and the textual transmission [47\*–64\*]. At the end, Benakis provides us with a substantial bibliography [65\*–94\*]. I find the introduction excellent, providing, as it does, all the necessary information and tools to read the commentary. Two general and important points seem, however, not to have been settled.

First, it is an important question concerning this commentary on the *Physics* whether it was written by Psellos at all. The very fact that this problem can be raised unfortunately limits our possibilities of saying anything about Psellos' character based on the commentary. And, even more importantly, it may have serious consequences concerning the date of the commentary. In 11th-century Constantinople, Aristotelian philosophy and science were apparently studied almost exclusively in the form of compendia that comprised Aristotelian thought in more accessible form; at least that is the general impression from the available material. Only the works on logic were normally studied in the original, and compendia were used for these as well. But if Psellos was indeed the author of the commentary on the *Physics*, then obviously this work was also read—and not only by Psellos himself but more generally in school, as Benakis points out [25\*]. Therefore, Benakis spends a number of pages [5\*–10\*] on

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<sup>3</sup> On Psellos, see, e.g., [Kriaras 1968](#); [Duffy 2002](#); [Moore 2005](#); the essays in [Barber and Jenkins 2006](#); and, of course, the introduction to the book under review.

Pantelis Golitsis' view [2007]<sup>4</sup> that the author was in fact Georgios Pachymeres (1242–ca 1310). It is, however, not easy to discern the truth here; and more can certainly be said about the problem: Golitsis' arguments on paleographical and codicological grounds are not substantially addressed and, to my mind, Benakis' own arguments based on parallel passages in the works of Psellos and on a stylistic comparison of Psellos with Pachymeres need further substantiation.<sup>5</sup> If Benakis is right, the commentary is extremely important for our understanding of 11th-century studies of the Corpus Aristotelicum and for our knowledge of the multi-talented Psellos; if Golitsis is right, it is further evidence of a period of Aristotelian studies that is much better known, and contributes to our understanding of another exceptional figure, Pachymeres. Surely, more work on this important topic can be expected in the near future. In any case, for the sake of convenience—and because Benakis certainly does have a case—I shall in the following refer to the commentary as being Psellos' work.

Second, one of Benakis' main points in the introduction is that much can still be learned from the commentary. In fact, he seems to say that Psellos' commentary could well be used on a par with the ones from late Antiquity as well as those from modern times [see, e.g., 11\*, 28\*, 37\*–40\*], thus adding effectively a third reason for studying the commentary to the two mentioned above. Certainly, a commentary is usually better than no commentary when studying Aristotle; but the use of Psellos, or any other Byzantine commentary, for the sole purpose of understanding the text seems unreasonable.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently accepted, albeit with slight hesitation, by Ierodiakonou and Bydén [2008].

<sup>5</sup> For instance, the parallel passages between the commentary and Psellos' other works are only valid evidence in this context if it can be shown that they are particularly Psellian, and Benakis does not do this. Also, it seems somewhat unfair to compare the techniques and style of the *Physics*-commentary with Pachymeres' *Epitome*, which is obviously a different kind of 'commentary' or rather 'philosophical work'. Also, it does seem strange that an introductory commentary written in a period in which Aristotelian works, apart from the ones of the *Organon*, were little used makes casual references to Aristotelian treatises such as *De caelo*, *De anima*, *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and others: see 6.10, 11.16–17, 63.6–9, 70.21–23, 155.4–20, 192.4–5, as well as Benakis' comments on 37\* and 437–439 of the index.

First of all, we have excellent modern commentaries, as Benakis well knows [67\*–68\*], that are much more accessible; second, contrary to Benakis, it might well be claimed that Psellos' commentary on the *Physics* does not reach the standards of ancient and modern commentaries [see below]; and finally, all Byzantine commentaries depend heavily on ancient ones, and this tends to make the individual commentaries much more eclectic and uneven in quality, style, and point of view. I also believe that the few passages which I describe below show that the commentary is not likely to be of much help at a high scholarly level. Still, Benakis is undoubtedly right that if any Byzantine commentator brings us an independent, coherent, and interesting interpretation of Aristotle, it would be Psellos [see, in particular, 29\*–31\*]. This is also clearly brought out by Benakis' analysis of Psellos' rather unique personality and philosophy [21\*–25\*]. Furthermore, its brevity compared to other commentaries does in some respects make it more accessible for beginners.

Much can be gathered, then, from Benakis' introduction, which is very useful for the understanding of Psellos' commentary. It is also to be applauded that the book is furnished with an introduction that is longer and more careful than can usually be expected from a critical edition. As will be clear from my comments above, I believe a number of important problems will remain disputed; but Benakis has given the reader extremely good tools for tackling the commentary and making up his or her own mind about these problems.

The commentary itself is too long to be treated in detail—but, on the other hand, it may be noted that it is much shorter than, e.g., the corresponding works of Simplicius and Philoponus. On the philological side, Benakis is probably more familiar with the contents of the commentary than anyone else today: he has critically evaluated the modern scholarly literature and he knows the manuscripts extremely well.<sup>6</sup> In the light of Golitsis' research [2007], one might dispute Benakis' basic choices of manuscripts for the edition; but the resulting text would in any case most likely look very similar to Benakis'. Moreover, the printed edition is certainly solid and a very welcome addition to the accessible Byzantine literature. The only thing missing, from my point of view, is a simple description of Benakis' methods of editing.

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<sup>6</sup> For Benakis' work on these and similar matters, see also [Benakis 2002](#).

As regards the contents of the commentary, a brief discussion of the introduction and the first part of the commentary proper will illustrate Psellos' approach. (I suspect that books 1 and 2, and book 1.1 in particular, will also be the most interesting for a modern audience.) The eight books of Aristotle's *Physics* may not be science in the modern sense of the word; but as a work of *Aristotelian* science it is an extremely important treatise since it provides the basic concepts of his views on the natural world. Book 1 is concerned with the fundamental principles of Aristotelian natural science. Books 2–4 examine, in particular, the concepts of nature, movement, cause, time, space, and void, which are crucial in Aristotelian natural science. Books 5–8 delve deeper into the problems connected with movement, this concept being the defining feature of natural science according to Aristotle. The commentary proceeds in orderly fashion through all of these, and Benakis has added an *apparatus criticus* and an *apparatus fontium*.

#### Psellos' introduction

Psellos explains that the work he is about to comment on is by Aristotle and is entitled 'Physics' (φυσική ἀκρόασις) [2.4–5]. This is a theoretical science concerned with the basic principles of nature [2.1–4], and as such it is the most difficult among the treatises on natural science/philosophy [2.5–9]. Principles, Psellos continues [2.10–19, 3.1–6], can be conceived both as principles of things (πράγματα) and as principles of cognition (γνώσις), that is, they can be ontological or epistemological. In the *Physics* they are both, according to Psellos. These brief comments constitute the content of the introduction; and it is fair to claim that they are simply minimum requirements for any student of *Physics*. In short, there is nothing new or particularly exciting here. Indeed, it is clear already from the introduction that the commentary is an elementary work designed obviously and explicitly [1.7–13] for students who have worked their way through the logical writings (the *Organon*) but who have not necessarily read any other works by Aristotle.

Psellos on *Physics* 1.1

In book 1, Aristotle identifies the most basic principles of natural science and discusses the views of his predecessors. Psellos' procedure is similar to, but not quite the same as, that of the ancient commentators: he inserts brief quotations from Aristotle's text (*lemma*) and then comments on and paraphrases both the *lemma* and text following and related to this *lemma*. Through such comments and paraphrases, he explains, analyses, discusses, and elucidates the contents of the entire Aristotelian text. The first *lemma* reads 'Since to know (τὸ εἰδέναι) and to know (τὸ ἐπίστασθαι) ...',<sup>7</sup> and thus the first problem to be explained under this heading is rather obvious. What is the difference between the two Greek words for 'to know'? There are two possibilities, he says: either εἰδέναι is simply a more general term than ἐπίστασθαι (and in that case the latter is used to narrow down the concept of knowledge in this context); or εἰδέναι is simple and general knowledge of the kind that everybody has, whereas ἐπίστασθαι is knowledge proper, that is, (scientific) knowledge of things that cannot be otherwise than they are. These suggestions are possible; but in Psellos' description the difference between the alternatives is not clear. Moreover, as it turns out, the suggestions are not Psellos' own, but a truncated version of those found, discussed, and determined in the commentaries of Simplicius and Philoponus.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, these ancient commentators are both clearer and much more thorough in their treatments of the problem. Philoponus explains that the difference implied by Aristotle's wording is indeed the one that Psellos also describes, but he clarifies it further by saying that the second solution suggests a difference between demonstrative and non-demonstrative knowledge. This is important, since the reader can now see the actual difference between the two solutions. In addition, Philoponus' interpretation provides students who have read the *Organon*—which Psellos' students are supposed

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Phys.* 1.1 184a10–12: 'Since to know (τὸ εἰδέναι) and to know (τὸ ἐπίστασθαι) occur in every investigation/science (περὶ πάσας τὰς μεθόδους) of which there are principles (ἀρχαί) or causes (αἴτια) or elements (στοιχεῖα), by cognizing these [*scil.* principles, causes and elements] ...' (my translation); treated by Psellos on pages 3.8–23 and 4.1–3.

<sup>8</sup> For Philoponus, see Vitelli, 1887; for Simplicius, see Diels 1882, 12.14ff.

to have done before reading the *Physics*—with a better understanding of the text, and enables them to place these species of knowledge in Aristotle’s overall theories of knowledge and science as found in the *Organon*, particularly in the *Posterior Analytics*. Simplicius is even more thorough and distinguishes the individual cognitive components (perception, opinion, and so forth) of the two Greek words.

Similar problems arise immediately afterwards with three other words in the same sentence when one asks what is the difference between principles, causes, and elements [see 185n7 above]. Again, Psellos is much briefer—and, to my mind, less clear and certainly less deep in his analysis—than his ancient predecessors; and he has again taken much of his argument and descriptive vocabulary from them. Furthermore, he oddly fails to say anything about elements.<sup>9</sup>

These brief passages are, I think, representative of the commentary in general. It is elementary and rather heavily dependent upon the earlier commentary tradition. In some instances, one would even benefit from supplementing it by looking also in Philoponus and—especially—in Simplicius. But it is not a sloppy work; and the author, whether Psellos or Pachymeres, is obviously very well acquainted with his material. This also means that it is extremely important when one is examining the kind of basic scientific training that students were given in Byzantine times—whether in the 11th or in the 13–14th centuries, although the former would naturally be the more interesting.

In conclusion, this book is a valuable addition to our understanding of the scholarly and scientific methods and standards of the Byzantines. The introduction equips the reader with the necessary tools, and the commentary itself opens the door to the science of the Greek Middle Ages. I am not convinced that high-level scholars would then, not to mention now, benefit much from it in their usage and understanding of Aristotle; but it certainly reveals the training that a first-rate teacher would give his students. No one able to read

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<sup>9</sup> There is, in fact, a rather obscure brief note on ‘element’ in the manuscripts, but Benakis deletes it—rightly I believe—as being a secondary intrusion.

Greek and interested in the science and scholarship of this period will want to ignore this volume.

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