

ABSTRACT

THE NEOPLATONISM OF HERMIAS OF ALEXANDRIA: A STUDY ON THE IN PLATONIS PHAEDRUM SCHOLIA

The present study consists of a critical analysis of Book I of the *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus* by Hermias of Alexandria (fifth century AD), that is, the only ancient commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus* that has been handed down to us.

We have divided our work into three major chapters. In the first chapter, entitled 'The school of Alexandria', we have tried to outline a precise picture of the historical and philosophical context in which the figure of Hermias of Alexandria, professor of Platonic philosophy between around 435 and 455 AD, has flourished. We have preferred to trace a history of the philosophy in Alexandria in the Late Antiquity rather than the history of the 'commentary tradition' in Antiquity: in fact, numerous and important works have already been dedicated to the latter theme (Mansfeld, Hadot, Blumenthal, Baltussen), all of which are at the basis of our study and are often recalled. Rather, there are two points of interest in the first section of our thesis. On the one hand, we have put forth a new insight into the relationships of Hierocles and Hermias with the Christian authorities of Alexandria; on the other, we have undertaken a critical analysis of the *communis opinio* according to which the *Notes to the Phaedrus* – which is a translation nearer to the Greek Εἰς τὸν Πλάτωνος Φαῖδρον Σχόλια – would be nothing more than a commentary ἀπὸ τῆς φωνῆς: that is to say, nothing more than a collection of notes that the young Hermias put up during his master Syrianus' classes on the *Phaedrus*, in Athens. We try to argue, in one case, that Hermias has been deliberately preferred to Hierocles on the chair of Platonic philosophy in Alexandria by the Christian authorities of the city, headed by Patriarch Cyril. Hierocles, although he was older and more famous than Hermias, not only has not been officially recognized, through the concession of economic benefits, as was the case of Hermias, but he has also experienced the exile from Alexandria and the torture in Constantinople by the Christian authorities of the city. On the contrary, Hermias, described in our sources as a mild and studious personality, received some economic privileges from the city and, as we will see, made use in his *Commentary* of a lexicon attested only in the works of Cyril. In the other case, by critically sifting the arguments in support of the vulgate, we try to claim the authorship of the *Commentary* to Hermias himself, as the manuscript tradition suggests. Nonetheless, in the absence of irrefutable evidence in both directions, this section does not want and cannot be an apodictic section, but rather a problematic and hypothetic one. However, the first chapter is not limited to a historical examination, but also opens to a first philosophical analysis of the *Commentary*, addressing the questions of theurgy, that is to say, of rituality, material and immaterial, and that of the one of the human soul, that is, that divine component of the human soul thanks to which the human being is enabled to receive the divinity into himself, joining the divine in himself with the divine *tout court*.

The second chapter of the work, entitled ‘The first book of the *Commentary on the Phaedrus*’, represents the core of our thesis and is divided into twenty-three paragraphs and subparagraphs. Ample space is dedicated to the reconstruction of the figure of Socrates in the *Commentary*, to the point that we could define this section consisting of fifteen paragraphs as an authentic Socratic monograph (2.1.). In particular, the last six paragraphs put forth an innovative analysis of Hermias’ text aiming to bring out parallels and assonances with the Christian creed and literature and, above all, the study of a specific case of direct influence of Christian writings: we refer to the anti-Arian works by Cyril of Alexandria, Patriarch of the city when Hermias taught Platonic philosophy, whose lexicon has been taken up in the Neoplatonic *Commentary*. This constitutes not only an absolute novelty in Neoplatonic studies, but also an irrefutable proof in support of the authorship of the text to Hermias. The following five paragraphs outline five philosophical themes that find space in the first book of the *Commentary*: rhetoric, hermeneutics, mythology, physics, epistemology.

In ‘Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Commentary on the Phaedrus*’ (2.2.) (with its two subparagraphs: 2.2.1. ‘Rhetoric in the Late Antiquity’; 2.2.2. ‘Rhetoric in the *Commentary on the Phaedrus*’), we have tried to bring to light the effort of the Neoplatonic philosopher aiming to redeem the *Phaedrus* from the rhetoricians’ reading; responding to the criticisms addressed to Plato’s style, Hermias strives to revive the philosophical and theological value of dialogue, supporting with energy and determination the thesis that the philosophical-theological τέλος and the dignity of the entities under discussion urged Plato to make his stylistic-lexical choices.

An interesting case of comparative exegesis is then offered by the paragraph ‘Homer, Stesicorus and Socrates: Hermias and Proclus on *Phaedrus* 243a3-b5’ (2.3.). The synoptic analysis of the exegeses of Hermias and the co-disciple Proclus regarding the same *Phaedrus*’ passage allows us to gauge to what extent the σκοπός can influence in a decisive way the exegesis of the commentators. Thus, while Proclus interprets the Platonic passage in such a way that it could corroborate and support the apologetic aim of his *Dissertations on the Republic*, Hermias, aiming at the spiritual elevation of Phaedrus and of the student listening to him, presents an exegesis more anagogic and sublimating.

With ‘Hermias and Mythology’ (2.4.), we have tried to bring to the fore the exegetical techniques thanks to which a Platonic commentator of the fifth century AD addressed the Platonic myths. By knowingly collecting Hermias’ methodological statements, stemmed from the interpretation of the μυθολόγημα of Orithyia and Boreas, and, then, comparing them with the homologous ones of Proclus, we present an organic analysis of the Neoplatonic exegesis in mythological matter, that is to say, as Hermias puts it, in theological matter.

Just as the myth must never be interpreted as alluding to physical and material causes, so neither must physical reality be judged as an end in itself and *causa sui*. In ‘The Ilissos’ Landscape: A Class of Neoplatonic Physics’ (2.5.), we try to show how, in the eyes of a late antique Platonic philosopher, each element of the Ilissos’ landscape is a sign of the metaphysic dimension that is its cause. The sensible beauty, masterfully immortalized by the Athenian countryside – the stream, the plane tree, the lush grass, and the caressing breeze – reveals by its very nature the metaphysical causes on which it ontologically depends. Following Hermias, we are therefore able to appreciate from a different perspective Plato’s text, which now seems to disclose a new and sacred meaning.

This analysis is followed by a paragraph entirely dedicated to a thorny issue of the Neoplatonic epistemology (2.6. ‘The *Phaedrus* and the Doctrine of Articulation’). By reading Hermias’ *Commentary*, it is possible to appreciate how the Platonic philosopher had wittily managed to draw from an apparently anodyne joke of Socrates an epistemological doctrine that was originally Stoic. The articulation (διάρθρωσις) of the confused notions of the innate λόγοι thus becomes an integral part of a complex epistemological doctrine, including the Platonic metaphors of reminiscence, maieutic, and the autonomous learning of the soul, as well as the Aristotelian universals: the textual exegesis turns out once again to be a powerful and effective philosophical tool in order to forge a coherent and syncretistic theoretical system.

The central chapter of our thesis ends with a discussion regarding the ways in which Hermias approaches the *Phaedrus* together with the *Symposium* (2.7. ‘Socrates’ First Speech in the *Phaedrus* and Pausanias’ Speech in the *Symposium*: Hermias’ Synoptic Exegesis’). In particular, we tried to demonstrate how the commentator interpreted Socrates’ first speech in the *Phaedrus* in the light of Pausanias’ speech in the *Symposium*. This exegetical move aimed to save Socrates’ speech from a possible accusation of impiety, in that it would maintain the same thesis put forth by Lysias’ speech: ‘we should give ourselves to those who are not in love with us, rather than to those who really love us’. By reading the words of Socrates with those of Pausanias in mind, Hermias shows, *hoc erat in votis*, that Socrates actually wanted to maintain that ‘we should give ourselves to temperate lovers and recuse vile lovers’.

The third and last part of our work consists in the first Italian translation of the book I of the *Εἰς τὸν Πλάτωνος Φαῖδρον Σχόλια*, accompanied by an extensive apparatus of notes. The Greek text on which our translation is based is the one recently published by Carlo Martino Lucarini and Claudio Moreschini (2012). To take up Croce’s meaningful words, ours wants to be a translation without autonomy, a translation that is not complete in itself. By this the Italian philosopher intended to categorize that particular type of translation which is a tool ‘per l’apprendimento delle opere originali’, that particular type of translation, that is, by means of which the original works ‘vengono

praticamente analizzate e schiarite nei loro elementi verbali, preparando così l'ulteriore sintesi, che è da ricercare solo nella parola originale' (B. Croce, *La Poesia. Introduzione alla critica e storia della poesia e della letteratura*, Naples 2017, pp. 99-100 [I ed. 1935]). We are persuaded of the purely instrumental function of our translation, as the profound meaning of the ancient philosophy can hopefully be grasped only in the original, following the rhythm of the ancient Greek.

Our thesis therefore attempted to bring to light an ancient commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*, written by a zealous and erudite philosopher like Hermias of Alexandria. Regardless of the re-evaluation of the problem concerning the authentic authorship of the text, which, in our opinion, should be attributed to Hermias, we wanted to offer a careful analysis of this work, making sure that it was its philosophical content to be placed in the foreground. We wanted to show that it is above all the soul, considered in all its parts and faculties, the authentic object of this commentary, and that it has been considered both explicitly and under the guise of the characters of the dialogue, whose movements and reciprocal relationships mirror the psychic κινήματα. And it is still in view of the soul, or, *rectius*, of the soul's return to the intelligible, that Hermias elaborates his exegesis, always ready to read Plato's dialogue as an allusive description of the anagogic path. The so-called Neoplatonists, starting from Iamblichus (III-IV d. C.), consider beauty in all its forms as the real objective of the *Phaedrus* (περὶ τοῦ παντοδαποῦ καλοῦ) and Eros as the power that leads the human souls from the sensible and varied beauty to the intelligible and eternally stable Beauty. Hermias then draws before our eyes, thanks to both extensive and brief exegesis, the cathartic path that this anagogic movement implies, in order to reach the divine from which our souls descend.

Of course, much work remains to be done on this text. In particular, it would seem desirable to complete the Italian translation of the entire *Commentary* and to carry out an overall study, in order to better weigh its value and enrich our knowledge of the philosophical exegesis during Late Antiquity. Furthermore, it would be likewise desirable to conduct a comparative study of Hermias' *Commentary* and the work of Cyril of Alexandria, starting from the new awareness of a certain influence, in a very specific case that we present here, of the Patriarch on the Neoplatonist. More generally, the historical and philosophical reconstruction of the Alexandrian *milieu* between the fourth and the fifth centuries of our era undoubtedly represents a *desideratum*, provided, of course, that we do not limit ourselves to examine only the Neoplatonic works or only those of Christian theologians, but study synoptically the philosophical production *tout court* flourished in the Alexandria. Within this framework, the study that we offer aspires to present itself, if not as the first, at least as a further step towards a better appreciation of the *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus* by Hermias of Alexandria.