On the Significance of the Manuscript Parisinus graecus 437. The Corpus Dionysiaca, Iconoclasm, and Byzantine-Carolingian Relations

The donation of a manuscript containing a set of philosophically informed theological texts, the so-called Corpus Dionysiaca, by the Byzantine Emperor Michael II the Stammermer to the Carolingian Emperor Louis the Pious in 827 ranks among the most influential events in 9th-century intellectual history as well as in the history of medieval Latin philosophy and theology in general. This collection of four treatises—On the divine names, On the celestial hierarchy, and On Mystical Theology—and of ten letters to the Byzantine Emperor Michael II the Stammermer, the convert of Saint Paul, and were believed by subsequent generations to have been the actual work of Dionysius himself. The treatises transpose the Pagan Neoplatonism of Proclus into a Christian context. In the present contribution, I would like to discuss the ideological context of this diplomatic gift offered by the Byzantines and its background in the intellectual history of the 9th century. This will show that cultural exchanges or transfers are rarely independent of the social and political context of their actors. I will first start with a summary of the events.

The context of the embassy of 827

The reign of Louis the Pious (813-840) was a time of recurrent contacts and frequent embassies between the Byzantine Empire and the Frankish Kingdom. Louis the Pious is even said by Thegan of Trier to have learned some Greek. On the Byzantine side, the Emperor, Michael II the Stammermer (820-829), was consolidating the restoration of official iconoclasm, initiated under Leo V. Michael is often described as a moderate iconoclast; his convictions were nevertheless strong enough to appoint the main iconoclast intellectual, John the Grammarian, as a tutor for his son, the future Emperor Theophilos.

Rome, notably during the reign of Pope Paschal I, was a refuge for monks fleeing the iconoclast persecution and, under various popes, inclined to sympathize with the iconophile position. Theodore of Studios, in a letter to Pope Paschal I, describes Rome as a «city of refuge» for iconophiles (ὡς ἡ θεολεκτος πόλις τοῦ φυγαδευτηρίου τῆς σωτηρίας). Paschal himself wrote a letter to Emperor Leo V the Armenian, delivered to Constantinople by a papal embassy between 817 and 819, which proclaimed the orthodoxy of image veneration. Paschal I also commissioned artists to adorn churches in Rome with mosaics and include in their iconographic programme the image of Christ pantokrator. Excellent illustrations of Paschal's artistic projects, which also function as a response to Byzantine iconoclasm and as an iconophile manifesto, are the churches of Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia and Santa Maria in Domnica in Rome.

To diffuse his iconoclast policies and to prevent supporters of icons in Byzantium from finding support in Rome, Michael II attempted to undermine the iconodule position of the pope by sending embassies to Louis the Pious. In 824, on the 10th of April, Michael sent a letter to Louis asking him to intervene with the pope to obtain a condemnation of icon veneration. Michael II, then, sent an embassy to the Franks. Louis received it at Rouen on 17 November 824. The Byzantine imperial legates discovered then that Denys's relics were venerated there, but that the writings included in the Corpus Dionysiaca were largely unknown to the Carolingians.

1 As an illustration of the influence of the Corpus Dionysiaca on Latin medieval thought, see de Andia, Denys. – Boudijev/Kapriev/Speer, Dionysius-Rezeption. – Dondaine, Corpus.
2 The treatise On Mystical Theology is not included in the Byzantine manuscript offered to the Franks, in its current status of conservation. According to H. Omont, this absence is due to an accident in the transmission not to a deliberate choice of the Byzantines not to include this treatise, see Omont, Manuscrit 235-236.
3 On the philosophical content of the Corpus Dionysiaca, see for example Perl, Theophany. – Schäfer, Philosophy. – Kiltenic Wear/Dillon, Dionysius. – The dependence on Proclus was first proven by H. D. Saffrey, in two articles: Saffrey, Lien. – Saffrey, Nouveaux.
4 Theganus, Gesta Hludowici imperatoris c. 19 (Tremp 200). This remark should probably not be taken too seriously.
5 On John the Grammarian, see Gero, Grammario. – Magdalino, Patriarche.
6 Cf. Englen, Difesa.
7 Ep. 272 (Fatouros 402, 26).
8 The letter is edited in Mercati, Lettera. – A description of its content is given by Noble, Images 257-259.
9 Cf. Goodson, Rome.
10 The letter is published in Michael/Theophilos, Epistola (no. 44A).
In 825, Louis gathered a meeting (conventum) of the Frankish bishops in Paris to investigate the questions of images. It is almost certain that Hilduin (c. 785 – c. 860), abbot of Saint-Denis in Paris and archchaplain to Louis the Pious, attended the discussions and took an active part in the debate.

After the return of the 824 embassy, a copy of the Corpus Dionysiacum was commissioned from scribes of the best monastic scriptorium in Constantinople. This copy would be brought to Francia at the next diplomatic mission. The iconoclast Emperor Michael II sent an embassy to offer the manuscript in 827. The embassy was led, as the former iconoclast Emperor Michael II sent an embassy to offer the precious gifts, and ask them to provide him with the books of philosophy that were in their possession; they provided him with copies of the books of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid and Ptolemy as well as those of other philosophers. He hired the ablest translators and charged them to do their best in translating these books, which they did. Then he encouraged his people to read and study them, as a result of his efforts, a scientific movement was firmly established during his reign.

Nicolas Drocourt has suggested that the Byzantine emperor who agreed to the request was very probably Michael II. An argument in favour of this solution is that Emperor Theophilos is described, notably by the author of the Theophanes continuatus, as not very keen to share the rich knowledge of the Byzantines with the Arabs. It is said that Theophilos refused to send Leo the Philosopher to court of the caliph al-Ma’mūn who asked for Leo’s presence, »judging it to be out of place and unreasonable to give one’s own advantage to others and to betray to foreigners the knowledge of existing things, whereby the nation of the Romans is admired and honoured by all.«

The manuscript

The manuscript offered by Michael II to the Louis the Pious in 827 – which is now in Paris at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (ms. gr. 437) – is a medium-sized codex (250 mm × 175 mm) of 216 parchment folios. It is a beautiful manu-
Motivation

Explaining the motivation behind an act is always a risky move for a historian, as it is often closer to speculation than to demonstration. In our case, though it is impossible to reach a definitive conclusion, it is still relevant to ask why the Byzantines, out of all the Greek texts then unavailable in the West, should have privileged precisely the Corpus Dionysiacaum. The activities of the two embassies are known from Frankish sources, so the question of the choice of this precise gift can not be solved by means of Byzantine documents. Three main reasons in support of this particular set of texts may be proposed.

The first reason is indeed the (fictive) identification of three figures: 1) Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the Athenian judicial council, the Areopagus, who according to the Book of Acts was converted instantly by St. Paul; 2) the author of the Corpus (which was composed between the lifetime of Proclus [† 485] who was a decisive influence on the author of the corpus, and 518/528 when it is quoted for the first time by Severus of Antioch) who assumed the persona of Dionysius; and 3) the martyr of Gaul, Dionysius, the first Bishop of Paris. This is the reason advanced by Raymond Loenertz: «La présence d’un manuscrit des œuvres du pseudo-Athénapage parmi les présents que fit l’empereur d’Orient à son collègue d’Occident n’est pas un effet du hasard. C’est une attention délicate, due au fait qu’on savait à Byzance, au moment où l’on choisissait les cadeaux, que les écrits dionysiens feraient plaisir à la cour franque, pour la raison évidente qu’elle identifiait leur auteur avec le patron du sanctuaire national».

The second reason is the role played by propaganda, as has been recently masterfully claimed by Paul Magdalino. An objective of the embassies was to promulgate iconoclasm. Dionysius was perceived as being favourable to the iconoclastic view. Did John the Grammarian, advisor to Michael, together with Theodore Krithinos, suggest picking this text to show that Dionysius was also reluctant to worship images and that his authority, highly respected by the Franks, should be followed on this as well?

This hypothesis has in its favour the absence of decoration in the manuscript, the fact that the embassy was headed by Theodore Krithinos, and finally the fact that two passages including the word eikôn are omitted in the manuscript (De coelesti hierarchia XV 2: ἴστι δὲ καὶ καθ᾽ἑκατέρω ὡς ὀμοιόν ἡμῶν ἑκάτερον ἐναρμονίους ἐξευρέτησεν, De ecclesiastica hierarchia IV 2: καὶ άρξεται ὁ ἄλλης ἐν τῷ ὀμοιώματι καὶ τὸ ἄρχεται ἐν τῇ εἰκόνι, καὶ ἐκάτερον ἐν ἐκάτερον). Paul Magdalino has good reasons to conclude: «Tout porte donc à croire qu’il [=Theodoros Krithinos] prépara sa deuxième mission en Francie avec l’intention de poursuivre son discours contre les icônes, et de rendre l’iconoclasme encore plus orthodoxe aux yeux des évêques carolingiens. Le cadeau qu’il allait apporter devrait contribuer à ce but. Ainsi, de concert avec Jean le Grammairien, conseiller intime de Michel II, il aurait recommandé à celui-ci et commandé ensuite une copie de l’œuvre de Denys l’Athénapage pour l’amener à Paris, non seulement comme une contribution au culte du martyr parisien, mais aussi comme une preuve de l’orthodoxie, c’est à dire la méfiance, de ce père de l’église envers les icônes. Revenu auprès de Louis le Pieux, à Compiègne, avec le manuscrit, Théodore n’aurait pas manqué d’expliquer comment il fallait lire et interpréter le texte en relation avec la querelle des images.»

One may say that if propaganda was the main motivation, the Byzantine moderation in altering Dionysius’s text could seem surprising. One would expect more interventions (changes, suppressions or additions) in the text copied, as highly selective reading and forgery were common during the iconoclast debate. Why not make the writings of »Dionysius« more obviously iconoclast, when the Franks have nothing to
compare the received texts with in order to check their ex-
actitude and have no conception of what to expect?

It is also possible to mention a third explanation, namely that the choice of this gift was suggested by the Franks
themselves, or at least that they played a role in the story. It
is possible that it was a request of the archchaplain, Hilduin,
in order to increase the prestige of his abbey. This does not
contradict the «iconoclast» explanation, as any possible re-
quest by Hilduin would have had to be approved by the
iconoclasm authority, notably John the Grammarian, in order
to be granted. Hilduin was probably as much interested in the
text of the texts (as attested by the quick start of the
translation process) as in acquiring for his abbey a manuscript
which could be venerated like the relics of Dionysius himself,
as suggested by the later insistence of Hilduin in a letter to
Louis the Pious\(^\text{29}\) on the miracles – 19 healings! – accom-
plished by the manuscript during its first night in the Abbey.

**Could »Dionysius« really be invoked in sup-
port of iconoclast views?**

If the iconoclast conviction of the members of the embassy is
clear, it is not so obvious from the reading of the texts that
»Dionysius« could or should have served as an ideal authority
for the iconoclasts.

The author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is not obviously
interested in the veneration of icons. We do not find there
any statement about the value of the veneration of images,
or any condemnation of practices related to icon veneration.
»Dionysius« often speaks about images, but focuses on their
educative purpose: they lead the viewer from the realm of
the senses up to the realm of the invisible. This thesis was
accepted by – at least some – thinkers of both camps. As
well summarized by Andrew Louth: »Denys as an ambiguous
witness: he is full of images, but his attitude to them is ambi-
valent. He prefers images that are not about veneration, but more generally about the relation
between visible images and intelligible realities.

The main example of an iconophile use of »Dionysius« is
the theologian John of Damascus. John refers several times
to »Dionysius« in his three treatises in favour of image veneration.
When he produces a florilegium of supporting patristic
authorities, he includes four passages from the *Corpus Dio-

31 For example, »the extensive writings of the Patriarch John Grammatikos were
destroyed by the iconophile victors, although it is clear that he remained active
for some years«: Brubaker/Haldon, Byzantium 226.

32 Even if the florilegium is by John of Damascus, it is quite possible that it has
been altered afterwards.

33 Ioannes v. Damaskos, Contra imaginum calumniatores (Kotter 144-5).

34 Van den Ven, Patristique.

35 Louth Denys 332.

36 Fatouros 516,163-517,168.

30 Louth, Denys 329.

29 Hildunus, Epistola ad Chludovicum (Dümmler 330, 3-11).

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These four quotations assert that visible images reveal the in-
visible or that, through images, one can ascend to the Divine.

As well noted by P. Van den Ven\(^\text{34}\) and A. Louth, »Dionys-
ius« was not used as an authority at the Seventh Ecumenical
Council held at Nicaea in 787. Andrew Louth notes »It makes
one wonder […] whether the Fathers of Nicaea knew Denys
at all well […] What the evidence so far seems to suggest is
that Denys was much better known in Palestine than in the
Queen City [i. e. in Constantinople]«\(^\text{35}\).

Theodore the Stoudite, one of the two principal defenders
of the veneration of icons at this time, considers »Dionysius«
to be opposed to iconoclasm, as it appears from his Letter
380\(^\text{36}\). Theodore says that if we accept the reasoning of the
iconoclasts, then the image of the cross is vain, the form of the
lance is vain, the form of the sponge is vain and to speak in a
Dionysian manner, all other sensible images are vain (μάτην
de ἡμῖν ὡς ἡμῶν ὅσον ἐπὶ τῇ τοιῇ ἐπὶπάται καὶ ἡ αἰσθητοὶς μίμησις, μᾶτην καὶ ἔριξας ὑπερούσια, ἡμῖν ὥς ὅσον ἐπὶ τῆς νοητῆς κατὰ τὸ διανοήν, ἡμῖν ἀναγόμεθα ἔθεωρια.

This brief survey offers a contrasting picture and, at least, the
impression that »Dionysius« was not an authority avoided by
the iconophiles.
A sole manuscript?

The last question which I would like to raise is whether the manuscript containing the Corpus Dionysiacum was the only manuscript given by the embassy at the time. The sources do not mention other codices – a fact which could easily be explained by the special place occupied by Dionysius in the Frankish pantheon–, but there is one reason to consider the question as relevant. The Paris manuscript of the Corpus Dionysiacum would be used by John Scotus Eriugena a few decades later for a new translation commissioned by Charles the Bald in 862. Charles, who could rightly be characterized as a Byzantinophile, was deeply impressed by Byzantine imperial practice and attracted to Greek culture. He encouraged the Irish scholar to make a new translation of the Corpus Dionysiacum. Eriugena was himself fond of Greek learning. He wrote that, for him, Greeks have a double superiority over the Latins: they have a more acute mind and they are able to express themselves more effectively (Graeci autem solito more res acutius considerantes expressissuque significantes).

We know that Eriugena had also translated Maximus the Confessor's Ambigua ad Iohannem and Quaestiones ad Thalassim and Gregory of Nyssa's De imagine, (this Cappadocian text had already been translated into Latin by Dionysius Exiguus). The Greek manuscripts used by Eriugena for his translations have not been identified. In the case of the model for his translation of Gregory of Nyssa's Περὶ κατασκευῆς ἀνθρώπου, Édouard Jeannine has, on the basis of several passages, suggested that the manuscript may be of the same tradition as the Parisian manuscript BNF Coislin 235. He encouraged the Irish scholar to make a new translation of the Corpus Dionysiacum. Eriugena was himself fond of Greek learning. He wrote that, for him, Greeks have a double superiority over the Latins: they have a more acute mind and they are able to express themselves more effectively (Graeci autem solito more res acutius considerantes expressissuque significantes).

37 See Jeannine, Grec. 38 Eriugena, Periphyseon V 955a (Jeannine I. 4272-3). 39 Jeannine, Ergéine 65-67. 40 See Jeannine, Maximus 140-3. 41 This hypothesis has already been mentioned by C. Laga and C. Steel in the introduction to their critical edition of Maximus’s Quaestiones ad Thalassim: ‘Il n’est pas exclu qu’un manuscrit contenant les textes de S. Maxime ait été apporté en France par la même délégation byzantine qui a offert le codex dionysian. ’ (Maximus Confessor, Quaestiones CVII).

42 Maximus Confessor, Ambigua, Proemium (Jeannine 3, 15-25): Fortassine autem qualcumque apologia defensus non tam densas subierim caligines, nisi uidemem praefatum beatissimum Maximum saepissime in processu sui operis absurdisimas sanctissimi theologos Dionysiarii Ariopagite sententias, cuixi symbolicos theologicos que nuper, Vobis similiter iubentibus, transulii, introduxisse mirabili modo delucidasse intantum ut nulla modo dubitari dixniam elementiam, quae illuminat abcondita tenebrarum, sua ineffabili prudentia hoc disposuisse ut ea quidem nobis quae maxime obscura in praedictis beati Dionysi libris ac uel perua sensus que nostros fugere idem autem aperiret, sapientissimo praefatio Maximo lucidissime explanante.

In a moderate form, was not actively adopted by the Franks. But they soon adopted pseudo-Dionysius as a guide for theological speculation. The reading of Dionysius had a profound influence on Eriugena’s thinking. He adopted enthusiastically the Areopagite’s main ideas: that God is beyond essence, that the divine names are applied only metaphorically (metaphorice, per metaphoram) and not literally (proprie) to God, and that we do not know God directly but only through his theophanies or divine appearances.

A significant trend in medieval Latin thought originated from this very manuscript. On divine names was soon to become essential reading for negative theology. Just to take one example, the idea that the deity is superior to all discourse, to all knowledge and is beyond intellect and essence was to be far more influential than any consideration about images 48.

Conclusion

The diplomatic gift of the Corpus Dionysiacum was definitely a great success, but certainly not the one expected by the donors. This set of texts was extremely influential on several points, but not on the question of images. Iconoclasm, even

Bibliography

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