Abstract: Michael Psellus was one of the most erudite and prolific thinkers of the Byzantine Middle Ages. His oeuvre includes historical writings, philosophical treatises and commentaries, theological writings, poems, speeches, legal, geographical, military, and medical works as well as works on music. Psellus taught all branches of philosophy, by closely reading and commenting on the works of ancient philosophers, and especially on Aristotle's logical treatises. At the same time he had a strong preference for Plato and the Neoplatonists, and especially for Proclus, whom he considered an authority among ancient authors. In this paper I will present the De omnifaria doctrina, a treatise which deals with various issues, such as Philosophy, Theology, Psychology, Ethics, Metaphysics, Biology, Cosmology, etc. The author attempts to present a worldview through the prism of Christian Theology and Ethics. Although Psellus depends on the scientific tradition, i.e. philosophy and theology, of both Classical and Late Antiquity, the De omnifaria doctrina constitutes an original work. A second feature by which one can speak of originality in De omnifaria doctrina is how to address the content: the Byzantine polygraph scientifically demonstrates a solvent and precise knowledge in his understanding of that. Lastly, the paper will attempt to present a synthesis of both science and philosophy in 11th century Byzantium.

Key Words: Michael Psellus, Byzantium, Plato, Proclus, John Damascene, Metaphysics.
1. Introduction

When in 1050 Michael Psellus¹ appeared in the Byzantine cultural scene, he has already made a qualitative leap compared to humanism of the previous era to which Photius and Arethas belonged.² The role of cultural activity represented by the imperial school of philosophy, promoted by John Maupropous and lifted up its ἀκµή by his disciple Michael Psellus, represents such a progress of philosophical activity in Byzantium, which can be characterized as a true “resurrection of Greek philosophy”.³ To the extent that the preference of Platonic philosophy for Psellus was clear and manifest, one can also speak of an authentic “Neo-Platonic renaissance”. The peripatetic tendencies of Photius and Arethas, which they tried to reconcile with some recognition of the theological value of Platonism, yield, with Psellus, to a strong preference for the Neoplatonic tendency,⁴ which remains, as has happened in Antiquity, a demure recognition of the explanatory value of Aristotelian philosophy. In his Chronography Psellus speaks of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus, whose company he went down the path that led to the mighty harbour of the admirable Proclus.⁵ This personal enthusiasm for Neoplatonic philosophy is, by itself, an innovative aspect, and, somewhat, transgressive, of the way in which, so far, the philosophical activity

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⁵ Michael PSELLUS, Chronography 6,38: “Ἐντεῦθεν οὖν ὁρµηθεὶς αὐτῆς ὥσπερ περιοδὸν ἐκπληρὼν ἐς Πλοτίνους καὶ Πορφυρίους καὶ Ιαµβλίχους κατήειν, μεθ’ οὗς δόξα προβάλλειν εἰς τὸν θαυµασιώτατον Προκλόν ὡς ἐπὶ λιµένα μέγιστον κατασχών, πάσαν ἐκείθεν ἐπιστήµην τε καὶ νοήσεων ἄκριβειαν ἔσπασα”.

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had been faced in Byzantium. Under the empire of Constantinus IX Monomachus (1042-1055), Psellus inaugurated the official position of «οὗτος τῶν φιλοσοφόρων», position that Psellus’ disciple John Italus inherited from him; Psellus had been also the teacher of the future Emperor Michael VII Ducas (1071-1078).

Psellus was a polymath whose enormous oeuvre encompasses historical, philosophical, rhetorical, theological, and legal texts as well as a collection of letters. As a philosopher Psellus emphasized the role of nature as physis, which, created as it was by God, functions according to its immanent laws, leaving a very limited place for the miraculous. We must have in mind that his philosophical oeuvre is the literary expression of his teaching and exegetical issues arising out of his profession as a “court philosopher”. In this regard, it is appropriate to draw attention to the fact that philosophical activity, which Psellus performed as a teacher and interpreter of classical and Hellenistic philosophy, within the officer corps of the higher educational institutions of the Byzantine Empire, represents, already, a “historic landmark”. In his writings Psellus addresses the most natural controversial issues which could result from a dogmatic interpretation of Christian Orthodoxy, the relative autonomy of the laws of nature and the difficulty that it is entirely subordinate to divine Providence and anthropological pessimism, and yet he remained faithful to the basic guidelines of Christianity, following the guidelines of his contemporary

6 I. PÉREZ MARTÍN, “Miguel Pselo y el neoplatonismo en el s. XI”, Debat 90 (2005), pp. 94-101, at 95: “Miguel Pselo y el neoplatonismo en el s. XI”, Debat 90 (2005) 98: “El propio Pselo afirma el carácter excepcional de su actividad en distintas ocasiones, aireando una inmodestia que constituye uno de los rasgos de su personalidad más llamativos y opuestos a una civilización como la bizantina, en la que priman la humildad intelectual y el anonimato”.

7 The Byzantine historian Michael ATTALEIATES (1020-1085) is the principal source of knowledge of that office by the Emperor Constantinus IX Monomachus: «οὗτος καὶ τὴν μάχην κατορθώσας ὁ βασιλεὺς ἥγετα καὶ τῶν πολιτικῶν πραγμάτων ἥδεας ἀντείχετο, μουσείον τῆς νομοθετικῆς ἀναγείρας καὶ νομοφύλακα προστησάμενος, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ τῆς φιλοσοφίας σύραναβομένῳ ἐπεμελήθη μαθήματος, προέδρου τῶν φιλοσόφων προχειρισάμενος ἄνδρα τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς διαφέροντα γνώσει, καὶ τοὺς νέους πρὸς ἄσκησιν τῶν σοφῶν λόγων καὶ μαθημάτων προστηρέματο σὺν τῷ εὐμαρέτῳ τῶν διδασκάλων καὶ γέρων τούτους ἐν τῷ δημεγίσαν νεότητων βασιλικῶν ἀξίων».


theologian Nicetas Stethatos (11th c.). Indeed, one of the general features which must be taken into account as a historical and doctrinal contribution of Psellus is his sense of scientific responsibility, which himself as Greek completes.

2. Psellus’ preference for Neoplatonism

Psellus’ overall philosophical program constitutes an appreciation of the more direct and objective Neoplatonism, than the one Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene, as also Philoponus and Stephen of Alexandria have adopted. Psellus also goes beyond the attitude that their immediate predecessors had adopted in relation to philosophy. If, on the one hand, Photius had restored the habit of writing Neoplatonic commentaries to the works of Aristotle and if, on the other hand, Arethas had contributed to that with a copy of some Alexandrian commentaries, Psellus reinforces this trend, as he was devoted to comment not only the logical works of Aristotle, but also he does the same with his Physica; and, what is even more important from this point of view, Psellus restores the habit of writing comments to Platonic works, as the platonic dialogue of *Timaeus*. The fact that Aristotelian philosophy occupies a prominent position in the exegetical treatises of Psellus, especially in regard to the examination of the soul and the theory of knowledge, in addition to biological and physical issues, this shall not prevent the discovery of pamphlets dedicated to analysis and exegesis of Platonic philosophy *per se*. The titles of the Psellus works devoted to this purpose are the following:

a) Εἰς τὴν ψυχογονία τοῦ Πλάτωνος.

b) Ἑξήγησις τῆς ἐν τῷ Τιµαίῳ τοῦ Πλάτωνος μαθηματικῆς περὶ ψυχῆς ὑπάρξεως καὶ γενέσεως.

c) Ἐτέρας πλατωνικῆς διανοίας ἑξήγησις ἀπὸ Τιµαίου.

d) Ἑξήγησις τελεωτέρα τοῦ λείµµατος.

e) Εξήγησις τῆς πλατωνικῆς ἐν τῷ Φαίδρῳ διφρείας τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ στρατείας τῶν θεῶν.

f) Περὶ τῶν ἰδεῶν, ὡς ὁ Πλάτων λέγει.


12 Tatakis 1949: p. 196.


16 L. BENAKIS, “Μηταῆ Ψᾶλλοι, Περὶ τῶν ἰδεῶν, ὡς ὁ Πλάτων λέγει. Εἰσαγωγή, κριτικὴ ἐκδόση, καὶ νεοελληνικὴ μετάφρασις”, *Φιλοσοφία* 5-6(1975-1976), 393-423. The same edition,
This activity of commenting and exegesis has made Psellus a promoter of the study of ancient philosophy as a whole; he does not only deal with Plato and Aristotle, but also from the Presocratics to the Neoplatonists, to Stoicism and the Church Fathers. A program of such historical and philosophical dimensions, which requires the foundations of a rationalist attitude,\(^{19}\) could not be carried out only with the accentuation of the pedagogical nature of his treatises and the consequent absence of systematic coherence.\(^{20}\)

### 3. The philosophical treatises of Michael Psellus

From a philosophical point of view, the *œuvre* of Psellus can be, considering the format and style, divided into two groups. The first group is represented by two hundred and one paragraphs which consist of *De omnifaria doctrina*; the

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\(^{17}\) Ibidem, pp. 114-116.

\(^{18}\) Ibidem, p. 107.


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\(^{17}\) Ibidem, pp. 114-116.

\(^{18}\) Ibidem, p. 107.


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The De omnifaria doctrina is, overall, a very rich work, from the philosophical point of view. Having being dedicated to the emperor Michael VII Dukas (1071-1078), who, as noted above, was a pupil of Psellus, we do find within the work several interpellations to him. This is an aspect that gives to the work the pedagogical nature of a deferred dialogue, complementary to that is implied in the form of ἐρωταποκρίσεις of Psellus' philosophical treatises; at the same time the Byzantine philosopher allows to read more lightly, densely and concisely the amount of knowledge on different subjects reflected in the work.

The various paragraphs are arranged thematically in the following order: Theology (§§1-20), Psychology (§§ 21-61), Ethics (§§ 62-81), Metaphysics (§§ 82-107), Biology (§§ 108-119), Astronomy (§§120-150), Cosmology (§§ 151-162), Geophysics (§§ 163-193), again Psychology (§§ 194-197), a second group of treatises on Metaphysics (§§ 198-201) and three appendices on Theology and Metaphysics, among which one is of utmost importance to us about how the author, on the one hand, accepts and, on the other hand, criticizes the Platonic theory of Ideas.

The variety of topics and the art of synthesis and concision with which it is presented to us make us assume that we are dealing with a work of encyclopedic character, an epitome or a manual of the most important physical, biological, metaphysical and theological issues that every cultivated man should know. Psellus follows closely John Damascene and Maximus the Confessor, in Theology, and several authors of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, in Cosmology, Psychology, and Metaphysics, among whom we should mention Aetius, Plutarch, Plotinus, Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Among them Proclus occupies a prominent place, philosopher especially

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22 Cfr. L. G. WESTERINK (ed.), Michael Psellus. De omnifaria doctrina. Critical Text and Introduction Centrale Drukkerij, Nijmegen 1948, pp. 2-4, where the editor cites the variant titles of the manuscript tradition.

23 CRISCUOLO 1990, p. 34 has emphasized, moreover, the strong dependence Psellus maintains with respect to John Damascene, who, in addition to Logic, has played a key role in guiding the confession of faith of 1054 -year of the Great Schism between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, after the allegations of Patriarch Cerularius. According to the author, the importance of John Damascene in the work of Michael Psellus is even higher than that recognizes to Basil of Caesarea or to Gregory Nazianzenus.

24 E.g. Psellus uses John Damascene as a fons unicus in §§ 2-5; he follows with Maximus the Confessor in § 6. The presence of Neoplatonic authors is constant throughout the whole treatise, although Psychology takes precedence, i.e. in §§ 21-61.
nominated by Psellus, who sometimes “uses” him as a single source in the writing of a single treatise. Moreover, the absence of references to Neoplatonic authors of the Alexandrian school casts further to see into the absence of reference to the universal triple Alexandrian classification.

Although Psellus depends on the scientific tradition, i.e. philosophy and theology, of both Classical and Late Antiquity, the *De omnifaria doctrina* constitutes an original work, once we estimate that from the historical point of view of the scientific and philosophical thought, since, retreating in time, we find no theoretical synthesis of such magnitude into the *oeuvre* of the philosophically respectable John Damascene. A second feature by which one can speak of originality in *De omnifaria doctrina* is how to address the content: the Byzantine polygraph scientifically demonstrates a solvent and precise knowledge in his understanding of that. Psellus compares with wit and ease the different views that several authors of Classical or Late Antiquity have on the same subject, boasting of his own criteria at making personal judgment to the worldview of Orthodox Christianity.25

The attitude that explains the interest of Psellus at thematizing a matter, or indicating the different solutions that have been proposed, leaving a margin of freedom to the reader that he choose which, in his opinion, could be closer to the truth, or simply to be informed of a culture that should not be ignored on pain of falling irresponsibly in the pit of ignorance. Many of the issues addressed in the first instance from the solutions proposed by Plato and Aristotle, philosophers that Psellus values as the two greatest philosophers of the Hellenic culture, using several expressions: “οἱ δὲ τελεώτεροι τῶν φιλοσόφων, Πλάτων καὶ Αριστοτέλης”.26 Accordingly, it can be said that these philosophers are the two main pillars of the *De omnifaria doctrina*. However, in no way can be said, therefore, that there is dogmatism. On the contrary, Psellos exerts an acute, deliberate and forceful criticism on the content, who, as a Christian thinker, can

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25 In the *De omnifaria doctrina* Psellus is referred to Christianity repeatedly. Sometimes, he is referred to his doctrine with the expression “καθ’ήμας”, as in § 156,1, or in § 157,1: “οὐτε ἀγέννητος παρ’ ἡμῖν ὁ κόσμος δοξάζεται οὔτε ἄφθαρτος”. Sometimes, he uses other other expressions: “διότι γὰρ ἡμεῖς οἱ τῷ ἀποστολικῷ λόγῳ”. In the comparison of pagan and Christian authors, who are represented in the case of Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius, he does make clear his preference for the version of the processional reditus of the Divine beings of the last author mentioned above, cfr. § 101, 9-11: “τὸ γὰρ τὸ φιλόσοφηµα καὶ ὁ φιλόσοφος Πρόκλος ἐν τοῖς κεφαλαίοις αὐτῶν τίθησι καὶ διευκρινεῖ, καὶ πρὸ τούτου ὁ Ἀρεοπαγίτης Διονύσιος σαφέστερον τούτου διακριβεῖ”. Other times again, he is referred to the Hellenes, § 49, 7-8: “Εἴτε γὰρ ὁ ποικίλωτερον περὶ τούτου διεξάγεται”. For the evaluation of Plato and Aristotle, cfr. *De omnifaria doctrina*, § 156, 1-2. Compare this evaluation of with that of Proclus, in which the Byzantine polymath is referred to him as the great Hellenic philosopher: Michael PSELLUS, Theologia I § 22, 38-39, ed. P. GAUTIER (1989): “οἱ τοίνυν θεολογικῶτατοι τῶν Ἐλλήνων, ὃν δὴ Πρόκλος κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν ἡμῖν ψήφον τὸ κεφάλαιον”; Idem, Historia syntomos, ed. W. J., AERTS (1990), § 52: “Πρόκλος ὁ μέγας ἦνες φιλόσοφος, ὃν ἐγὼ μετὰ γά Πλάτωνον τίθηµι”.

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not tolerate. Therefore, *De omnifaria doctrina* represents a proof that, after theological systematization efforts of John of Damascus, following the troubles of Photius to recover the cultural awareness of all the Greek literary tradition and following the progress of Aretas, both in transmitting Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, as well as in the recovery of the genre of commentary on the Aristotelian logic, Byzantine culture lives with Psellus a renaissance and even a fullness in regards to skill in the use of concepts and the learning of science in a broad sense and philosophy in particular.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the writing of the *De omnifaria doctrina*, is, by itself, a sufficient fact to speak of a vigorous flourishing of science in Byzantine culture of 11th century, that, by making the holistic and systematic conception, has no precedent comparable before John Damascene and that unlike what happens with other Psellus' pamphlets; one should share the impersonal tone of treatises such as *Institutio elementaris*, *Dialectica* and *Expositio fidei*, and gets more expositional clarity than that which characterizes these treatises. In particular, philosophy meets in this philosophical treatise of Psellus all its relevant content, expressed concisely and accurately, and it is presented with a systematic organization and discipline that makes each part acquire its significance in relation to the place that occupies in the whole.

**Sources and Bibliography**

Sources


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28 In the case of Michael Psellus, *De omnifaria doctrina* § 14; ed. L. G. WESTERINK (1948), p. 43; in this paragraph we should refer the two senses of λόγος, as φύσις and as ὑπόστασις, according to which one should say that in the Incarnation of Christ there was or there was no flesh passions, Psellus is based on John Damascene, achieving, by the effort of synthesis, a relative expository clarity.

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