

Priscianus of Lydia at the Sasanian Court: Solutionum ad Chosroem

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Abstract

Priscianus of Lydia's *Solutionum ad Chosroem* is a series of answers to questions asked at a philosophical debate held at the Sasanian court c. 530 CE. Priscianus of Lydia was one of seven non-Christian philosophers from the Byzantine Empire who journeyed to the Sasanian Empire to take part in the debate. Long overlooked in the history of philosophy, Priscianus of Lydia's text represents a branch of Neoplatonism that survived for centuries uninfluenced by the official Christianization of the Roman Empire. Priscianus of Lydia was one of the last remaining representatives of non-Christian Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity. *Solutionum ad Chosroem* provides a record of the world of Neoplatonism shortly before it disappeared under a tide of officially Christian philosophy and theology. I discuss the context of Priscianus' work and its relation to activities in the Byzantine Empire, such as Emperor Justinian's suppression of paganism and the closing of the Academy in Athens in 529 CE. I also discuss the specific contents of the *Solutionum ad Chosroem*, including questions on first principles, generation, natural history, and the relationship between the soul and the body.

Keywords: Persian philosophy, Sassanian wisdom, *Solutionum ad Chosroem*, Priscianus of Lydia.

The Neoplatonic philosopher Priscianus of Lydia would have had an unremarkable career had he not been mentioned by the early Byzantine historian Agathias as one of seven Hellenic (non-Christian) philosophers who journeyed to the Sasanian court at Seleucia-Ctesiphon early in the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (527-565). (Agathias, *Histories*, Book II:30:3) These philosophers felt compelled to leave the Byzantine Empire because "they did not share the view of God prevailing among the Romans and thought that the Persian state was far better." (Agathias, *Histories*, II:30:3) (1) Although the Hellenic philosophers decided to return to Byzantine territory after a relatively brief sojourn at the Sasanian court, the philosophers did participate in at least one debate on philosophical questions attended by the shah himself and some higher ranking members

of the Zoroastrian clergy. Priscianus of Lydia's contribution to this debate, *Solutionum ad Chosroem*, has survived in an edition edited by Ingram Bywater in 1886 and now difficult of access.⁽²⁾ Before considering the specific contents of Priscianus' surviving work, an examination of the historical context in which the work was written is necessary.

I. The Context of Priscianus of Lydia's *Solutionum ad Chosroem*

Agathias states that Priscianus and the other Hellenic philosophers travelled to the Sasanian Empire partly for religious reasons. Being pagans in an increasingly officially Christian empire had rendered their teaching positions more and more vulnerable. Also, Persia in their minds was "the land of 'Plato's philosopher-king' in which justice reigned supreme. The subjects too were models of decency and good behavior and there was no such thing as theft, robbery or any other sort of crime." (Agathias, *Histories*, II:30:3) There is nothing unusual in the philosophers' belief in these stories about life in the Sasanian Empire. Persia had long been looked upon by Romans as the place where Chaldean magic and astrology originated. Persia was also the gateway to India and all the wisdom of the Brahmins. It is therefore hardly surprising that an idealized notion of Persia loomed so large in the minds and hearts of those seven Hellenic philosophers from various places in Byzantine territory. Agathias mentions in passing another reason why these Hellenic philosophers looked to the Sasanian Empire. "They were forbidden by law to take part in public life with impunity owing to the fact that they did not conform to the established religion." (Agathias, *Histories*, II:30:4) Agathias, unfortunately, does not offer any further details concerning the law that prohibited these philosophers from playing any role in the public political life of the Byzantine Empire.

There is ample evidence from other sources that Emperor Justinian tried to enforce adherence to the imperial understanding of Christianity and that he did promulgate legislation meant to suppress both paganism and heterodox forms of Christianity throughout the Byzantine Empire. John Malalas of Antioch, who wrote a chronicle that continued down

through Justinian's reign, mentions Justinian's campaign against those who kept the older beliefs.

In that year there was a great persecution of Hellenes. Many had their property confiscated. Some of them died: Makedonios, Asklepiodotos, Phokas, the son of Krateros, and Thomas the quaestor. This caused great fear. The emperor decreed that those who held Hellenic beliefs should not hold any state office, while those who belonged to the other heresies were to disappear from the Roman state, after they had been given a period of three months to embrace the orthodox faith. This sacred decree was displayed in all provincial cities. (John Malalas, *Chronicle*, Book 18:42)

Many scholars combine the above entry from Malalas with the following brief entry, also from Malalas, dated to the year 529 C.E. "During the consulship of Decius, the emperor issued a decree and sent it to Athens ordering that no one should teach philosophy nor interpret the laws." (John Malalas, *Chronicle*, Book 18:47) Many scholars then argue that both entries pertain to the persecution of Hellenes and that part of this persecution of Hellenes involved the closing of the Platonic Academy in Athens. They argue further that the closing of the Academy in Athens was the catalyst for the seven Hellenic philosophers to depart for the Sasanian court.⁽³⁾ However, no other Greek, Syriac or Arabic source besides Malalas reports that Justinian issued a decree prohibiting instruction in philosophy in Athens. Nor does Malalas himself specifically connect the suppression of paganism throughout the Byzantine Empire with the prohibition of philosophical instruction in Athens. Nor, according to Malalas' account, does it follow of necessity that the Academy in Athens was specifically targeted for closure for whatever reason. Only when these two entries from Malalas are read in conjunction with the information in Agathias does any type of connection appear. This connection is based partially on the fact that one of the seven philosophers who went to the Sasanian court was Damascius the Syrian who was head of the Academy in Athens during at least part of the reign of Emperor Justinian. Damascius had ambitious plans for reinvigorating the Academy in Athens, plans which he was well on his way to implementing by 529. He wanted to model the Academy in

Athens after the school of Aphrodisias which he had visited as a young man. Damascius envisioned the Academy in Athens as an educational and cultic center.⁽⁴⁾ Agathias does not state that Damascius and Priscianus and the other philosophers were from Athens. He enumerates several persons including Damascius known to have been associated with the Academy at the time. Other scholars have constructed the connection between Priscianus and the Academy in Athens given Priscianus' relation with Damascius while they were both at the Sasanian court. On the face of it, the connections between Justinian's decision to limit the public role played by anyone other than orthodox Christians, some decree aimed specifically at a situation in Athens, and the appearance of a group of Hellenic philosophers at the Sasanian court at about the same time are neither implausible nor farfetched. Neither are these connections inherently necessary.

Given the present state of the primary sources it is simply not possible to know precisely what Emperor Justinian's policy was towards suppression of paganism in the Byzantine Empire nor what his actions, if any, were towards the Academy in Athens in particular. I suggest that the Hellenic philosophers decided to travel to the Sasanian court for reasons having little to do with the religious policies in force in Byzantine territory at the time. Greek and Latin sources for the late antique period are replete with examples of philosophers from Byzantine territory who journeyed to Persia in pursuit of 'the wisdom of the East'. In 242 C.E. the philosopher Plotinus accompanied the army of Emperor Gordian III (238-244) when it invaded Sasanian territory. Plotinus was trying to get through Persia to India. (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 3) The philosopher Metrodorus went from eastern Roman territory to India via Persia in 337. On his return trip, many of his luxury goods were confiscated by Persian soldiers. Metrodorus' complaints to Emperor Constantine I (306-337) led the emperor to threaten the Sasanian shah with war if some sort of restitution was not made to Metrodorus. (Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, Book 25:4:23) In 358 the Neoplatonic philosopher Eustathius was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Sasanian court to forestall Sasanian invasion plans. According to an account of

Eustathius' life, the shah was impressed with Eustathius' eloquence and would have given up his own crown to become a philosopher like Eustathius had not members of the Zoroastrian clergy intervened. (Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists*, 6:5:2-10) According to Agathias, Shah Khusro was so impressed with one philosopher from Byzantine territory, Uranius, that "he swore on many occasions that he had never before seen his equal, in spite of the fact that the shah had previously beheld real philosophers of great distinction who had come to his court from Byzantine territory." (Agapius, *Histories*, Book II:30:3) These examples of philosophers who journeyed to the Sasanian Empire do not give any evidence that a trip to Persian territory was an extraordinary undertaking or that it involved any negative catalyst on the part of Roman or Byzantine authorities to force such a trip.

The Sasanian ruler at the time of the seven Hellenic philosophers' visit to the Sasanian court was probably Khusro I "The Immortal One" (c.530-579).⁽⁵⁾ Throughout his period of rule, Shah Khusro I remained openly tolerant of the Christian church as well as other religions in the Sasanian Empire. He instituted reforms to improve the agricultural infrastructure of parts of Mesopotamia and Iraq. He also began sweeping economic reforms throughout the Sasanian Empire. Shah Khusro was "well versed in philosophy which he had learned, it is said, from Mar Barsauma, Bishop of Qardu, when Khusro stayed in the region. He also learned philosophy from Paul the Persian philosopher who, not having been able to obtain the metropolitan throne of Persia, renounced the Christian religion."⁽⁶⁾ It is quite possible that the Hellenic philosophers considered Shah Khusro to be the idealized philosopher-king. There was a long tradition of translating Hellenistic philosophical, scientific and literary works from their Greek originals into both Syriac and Middle Persian editions for use in the Sasanian Empire. By early in the sixth century C.E., portions of Aristotle, including major portions of the *Organon*, had been translated into Syriac. Sergius of Reshaina was a doctor who translated many medical as well as philosophical works including Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, twenty-six works by Galen, twelve by Hippocrates and at least part of an agricultural treatise, the *Geoponica*.⁽⁷⁾ Sergius is also

credited with translating a version of the collected works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.(8) Paul the Persian philosopher, the man from whom Khusro I learned his Neoplatonism, is credited with a commentary on *Peri Hermeneias* and another commentary on the logical works of Aristotle.(9) It is quite reasonable to conclude that, regardless of any action on the part of Emperor Justinian, the Hellenic philosophers "gave a ready hearing to stories in general circulation"(Agathias, *Histories*, Book II:30:3) that Hellenic philosophy was alive and valued at the Sasanian court, particularly during the period 528-532. It was during this period that a conference or series of debates on religious and philosophical questions occurred at the Sasanian court. Representatives from the various religions and philosophical systems in the Sasanian Empire were invited to attend the conference, having first set out in writing a statement of belief in order for this to be presented at the Sasanian court so that the shah could judge which statement was best. (*Histoire Nestorienne, Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (1910), 126) (10) Priscianus of Lydia's *Solutionum ad Chosroem* is one such example of a statement of belief and answers to questions posed at the conference, questions similar to those posed at a conference at which the Byzantine philosopher Uranius participated, "questions as to the origin of the physical world, whether the universe will last forever and whether one should posit a single first principle for all things." (Agathias, *Histories*, Book II:29:11)

II. The Contents of Priscianus of Lydia's *Solutionum ad Chosroem*

Priscianus' *Solutionum ad Chosroem* consists of ten chapters, each chapter consisting of one or more questions and Priscianus' answers to the questions. There is no specific dedication to Shah Khusro in the opening section, which is primarily a list of the authors and works with which Priscianus was conversant. Here one finds the standard acknowledgement to Plato's *Timaeus*, *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, as well as Aristotle's *Politics*, *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *Generation and Corruption*, *On Dreams* and *On Prophecy by Dreams*. There are also references to

Hippocrates, Strabo's *Geography*, Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Iamblichus' *On the Soul* and the works of both Plotinus and Proclus. The list is a catalog of Neoplatonic works on cosmology and natural history.

Chapter one addresses the human soul and the greatness of humanity. Naturally the first question is what is the nature of the human soul, followed by questions about whether the soul is essential or by accident, whether the soul is incorporeal, whether the soul can exist separate from the body, questions on the immortality and incorruptibility of the soul, what is the nature of the relationship between the soul and the body, and questions about how the soul is composed without either mixture or parts. All these questions are covered in chapter one in the space of ten pages in the Bywater edition, thus giving some indication of the superficial treatment of these questions by Priscianus of Lydia.

In chapter two Priscianus discusses the nature of sleep and what happens to the soul when the body is asleep. What happens to the various sensory perception organs during sleep? How can a sleeping person perceive hot and cold? How does sensory perception function in non-human animals? Much of this chapter appears to be heavily dependent on Aristotle.

Chapter three contains questions on how to establish the existence of a thing. If a thing is visible must it therefore exist? Does the class the entities that are not visible, such as gods and demons, nevertheless exist? How are these invisible entities perceptible to the senses?

Chapter four is a brief treatise on astronomy, equinoxes and how the solar year effects different climatic zones. Chapter five is a brief discussion of the human characteristics and temperments most commonly found in various climatic zones. Both chapters four and five are indebted to Ptolemy and Strabo.

Chapter six is a study of lunar phases and the impact lunar activity has on tidal variations. This chapter also includes specific examples related to tidal changes in the Red Sea and quite a lengthy discussion of the geography and natural history of the ancient and late antique world.

Chapter seven is a discussion of the four primary elements and whether each element can exist in actuality or in potential in its opposite, that is, can weight exist in air or fire in humidity? This

chapter also contains a discussion on the various ways in which the different elements can combine with one another.

Chapter eight deals with questions concerning generation and how members of a species can be both similar and yet remain individually distinct. Priscianus also discusses notions of immortality and immutability as well as the virtues proper to each entity according to its nature.

Chapter nine discusses how every entity is composed from the four elements and how species may differ from each other, and how different ethnic groups differ from one another, the Scythian from the Persian from the Italian, in characteristics that are dependent upon the physical environment.

The tenth and final chapter discusses the precise nature of spirit and its power of motion or change. What is the first principle of the body, its beginning and its end? The work ends with that most Platonic of questions: how is virtue to be manifested?

Priscianus' answers end rather abruptly and there is no information in a colophon on the circumstances of the work's composition. Priscianus was not an independent, original thinker, at least not from the evidence supplied in *Solutionum ad Chosroem*. He was, however, a faithful and accurate compiler of his philosophical predecessors. His work is valuable in several respects not least in that he has preserved information from a number of sources popular at the time he wrote. Priscianus' work also represents a branch of Neoplatonic philosophy that was enjoying its last days in the sun, a Neoplatonism untouched by the Christianizing influences that had so powerful an impact on Christian Neoplatonists such as St. Augustine. Priscianus' work preserves a record of Hellenic philosophy at the point of vanishing under the tide of Christianization that shortly afterwards engulfed the Byzantine Empire, the heir of much of what was most precious from centuries of Hellenistic culture.

Notes

(1) Agathias, *Histories*, Book II:30:3. For a translation of Agathias' *Historiarum libri quinque*, see Agathias, *The Histories*, J.D. Frendo, tr., (Berlin & New York, 1975). All quotations from Agathias in this paper are from this edition.

(2) On Priscianus of Lydia's work relating to the Sasanian court, see Ingram Bywater, ed., *Prisciani Lydi Solutionum ad Chosroem liber* (Berlin, 1886).

(3) For a recent survey on Justinian's treatment of paganism in the Byzantine Empire and the suppression of the Academy at Athens, see Gunnar af Hällström, "The Closing of the Neoplatonic School in A.D. 529: An Additional Aspect," in Paavo Castrén, ed., *Post-Herulian Athens. Aspects of Life and Culture in Athens A.D. 267-529* (Helsinki, 1994), 141-165 with extensive bibliography.

(4) For a discussion of Damascius' career and his work, see L.G. Westerink, *Damascius, Traité des premiers principes I* (Paris, 1986). On the Hellenistic Academy at Aphrodisias, see Charlotte Roueché, *Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity* (London, 1989).

(5) Khusro was fighting with his father, Shah Kavād (488-531), and another brother over right of succession. Both men claimed to be the rightful Sasanian ruler, though neither man could muster enough power to force his claims outright. This confusion over who precisely was the legitimate Sasanian ruler during this period is reflected in many late antique sources.

(6) Addai Scher, ed., *Histoire Nestorienne (Chronique de Seért)*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (1910), 147. For an analysis of Khusro's reign, see Zeev Rubin, "The Reforms of Khusro Anushirwan," in A. Cameron and L. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), 227-297.

(7) Gérard Troupeau, "Le rôle des syriaques dans la transmission et l'exploitation du patrimoine philosophique et scientifique grec," *Arabica* 38 (1991), 2. For a discussion of the translation and transmission of Greek medical works, see Michael Dols, "Syriac into Arabic: The Transmission of Greek Medicine," *ARAM* 1:1 (1989), 45-52.

(8) Polycarp Sherwood, "Sergius of Reshaina and the Syriac Versions of the Pseudo-Denis," *Sacris Erudiri* 4 (1952), 174-184.

(9) Henri Hugonnard-Roche, "Introductions syriaques à l'étude de la logique: à propos de quelques *Divisions de Porphyre*," *Hautes Études Médiévales et Modernes* 73 (1994), p.385.

(10) For a discussion of the circumstances at the Sasanian court leading up to the conference, see Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1944), 355-362.



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