

Introduction

The Author, His Times, and His Work

Porphry (ca. 232–ca. 304), from Tyre in Phoenicia, was one of the most important representatives of early Neoplatonism. Because our basic source of information about his life is the *VP* itself, there is no need to expand on that theme here.¹ It is enough to remark that before he went to Rome and Plotinus' school there, he spent some time in Athens, where he studied with the mathematician Demetrius, the grammarian Apollonius, perhaps the rhetor Minucianus, and—most important—with the philologist and philosopher Longinus, with whom he maintained long-lasting and warm relations. But it is obvious that the most significant and definitive influence on him was that of Plotinus. He remained in his school in Rome for about five years (263–68) and quickly came to play an important role within it. By his own account, Porphyry was assigned by P., among other things, the editing and publishing of his writings, a task that Porphyry would accomplish with great success, but also with notable delay, as the edition appeared thirty years after the death of his teacher. After a psychological crisis, Porphyry left Rome, only a little before P.'s death, and settled in Lilybaeum in Sicily. The evidence suggests that from there he journeyed to North Africa and to his homeland, Phoenicia, before returning again to the imperial capital, probably during the reign of Aurelian.² We know precious little about his life after this return. It is reasonable to suppose that it was during this period that he was most active as writer and teacher, but it is debatable whether he succeeded P. as leader of the philosophical school in Rome—if there even existed a school in which such a succession could take place. Late in life he married Marcella, the widow of a friend and mother of seven children. There are good reasons to suspect that he took part in the preparations for the Great Persecution of the Christians, and it appears that he died before Diocletian's abdication in May 305.³

The history of the tumultuous time in which P. and Porphyry lived, and which more recent historians usually term the "Third-Century Crisis," cannot be presented here, even in brief.⁴ Suffice it to say that in the period of one hundred years between the birth of P. and the death of Porphyry, there reigned some thirty emperors, among whom—if we exclude the members of the tetrarchy, all of whom died after 304—only two, Septimius Severus and Claudius II, died a natural death. For a very summary picture of the

¹ Some additional information is contained in the *Vitae sophistarum et philosophorum* of Eunapius of Sardis (*VS*). Among more recent research, besides the classic study of Bidez 1913, see also Beutler 1953, 275.66–278.35; Smith 1987, 719–22; and appendix C below.

² This may explain the expression "he established himself (*gegonōs*) under Aurelian" used in the *Suda*, s.v. Porphyry. See also appendix C.

³ "He was living until the time of the Emperor Diocletian": *Suda*, loc. cit.

⁴ It is clear at least that Porphyry's contemporaries had a pronounced sense of crisis and general upheaval: "Everything is being moved and, so to speak, transferred in another land, while the exercise of power is shifting as if in a violent storm or earthquake. It is like a ship ready to sink being carried to the edge of the world," as the situation is described by the anonymous author of the oration *To the King*, a panegyric for the emperor Philip the Arab, which is preserved among the works of Aelius Aristides (*Or.* XXXV 14 = [Ael. Arist.] II, 256.21–2.4); in addition, see Alföldi 1974, 89–111.

4 Introduction to the *VP*

political and cultural setting for this period, readers may refer to the chronological table following the “System of Dating” section below.

Porphiry was a multifaceted and prolific writer. The primary features of his work are exceptionally wide-ranging knowledge combined with a sensitivity characteristic of his era, which causes him to oscillate between scholarly sobriety and the occasionally melodramatic sentimentality of the “torch-bearer.”⁵ He was concerned about the broader dissemination of Neoplatonic philosophy, with the result that some of his works possess a marked popularizing and introductory character.⁶ This fact has earned him the dubious reputation of a *vulgarisateur*, especially because his great works of systematic philosophy and his philosophical commentaries have been lost.⁷ He also wrote on historical themes, religion, philology, grammar, astrology, music theory, and other subjects. These writings bear witness to a very broad competence in all the areas of study that would soon constitute the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* of medieval education.

The Composition and Character of the *VP*

As appears from its title and final phrases, the *VP* was written as an introduction to the edition of the *Enneads*, P’s complete written work, organized by Porphyry in a systematic manner according to themes. To judge by a reference Porphyry apparently makes to his own age (23.13–14), this work must have been composed during the period between the summer of 299 and the summer of 301. The phraseology at 26.37–40 gives one to understand that during this period the editorial work on the *Enneads* had not yet been completed, but cannot have been much further delayed, making it possible for us to say that the entire work was published in about 300–301.

The result is a work of exceptional importance, the like of which has not been preserved from antiquity: the presentation of the life of a great philosopher written by a close friend and disciple, who was also an unusually learned philologist with notable experience as a historian, and a determination to undertake his subject with completeness and—to the extent that the spirit of his age allowed—sobriety. But in order to ap-

⁵ See Eunapius, *VSV* 2.2–3, 9.11–19; and Eus. *HE* VI 19.9. Cf. the famous oracle of Pythian Apollo (No. 474 Parke-Wormell) related by David *Prol.* 4, 92.3–5: “About . . . Porphyry and Iamblichus the Pythia said: ‘The Syrian is divinely inspired, the Phoenician is deeply learned.’ By the deeply learned Phoenician she means Porphyry . . . by the divinely inspired Syrian she means Iamblichus.”

⁶ Such works include, for example, (a) the *Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes*, which presents in a simple and brief manner subjects often derived from the *Enneads*; (b) the famous *Isagoge*, the best known and most commented upon of his writings, which—contrary to what is usually thought—is not an introduction to Aristotle’s *Categoriae* but rather a simplified presentation of the conceptual armory of the *Topica*, as a preparation for the study of the (Aristotelian) theory of the categories; (c) the short commentary on the *Categoriae* “by question and answer”; (d) his letter *ad Marcellam*; et al.

⁷ Such as, e.g., his massive commentaries on Aristotle’s *Categoriae* (*Ad Gadalium*), *De interpretatione*, and *Physica*; on the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, and the *Timaeus* of Plato; the *De silva* (in six books); the *On the Soul against Boethus* (in five books); and, of course, the monumental *Contra Christianos* (in fifteen books), about which in 448 a special edict of Theodosius II and Valentinian III was required in order that “everything written by Porphyry, who was driven by his rage against the pious religion of the Christians, found by whomever, should be consigned to the flames” (*CIC, Codex Iustinianus* I 13).

precipitate properly its contents, as well as its omissions, we must bear in mind its place in the entire undertaking of the publication of the *Enneads*. We will then understand why, for example—even though it would not be fair to call this work a “hagiography”—only the positive aspects of P.’s personality are emphasized, and in particular those which pertain either directly or indirectly to his teaching activity;⁸ why stress is laid on the circumstances surrounding P.’s various writings and the order and manner in which they were produced; why Porphyry foregrounded so prominently his own role as instigator of, and confidant in, his teacher’s intellectual production; and finally, why there is such a preoccupation with contemporary opinions of P.’s books, where the modern reader would prefer fuller and more substantial information about subjects such as Ammonius, P.’s adventures in Mesopotamia, the story of Platonopolis, the development of the relationship between P. and Amelius, the economic and social arrangements during the period when he was living and teaching in Rome, and so forth.⁹ Porphyry’s purpose is not historical, nor is it purely biographical. First and foremost it is introductory—he is primarily concerned to prepare readers and to entice them toward the text of the *Enneads*.

The Organization and Sources of the *VP*

The organization of the *VP* is quite clear, straightforward, and at the same time revealing of the preferences and interests of its author. It can be presented in outline as follows (the arabic numerals are the numbers of the chapters):

- I. Prologue: The philosophical and physical death of P.
 - 1 His shame of being in a body
 - 2 His illness and death
- II. Narration of P.’s life
 - 3 His youth until his establishment in Rome
 - P.’s writing activity
 - 4 The first period
 - 5 The second period
 - 6 The third period
 - P.’s circle

⁸ Neither is it “The Gospel of Plotinus according to Porphyry,” as Jerphagnon 1990, 43 (unfoundedly, in my opinion) refers to it.

⁹ John Dillon in his introduction to MacKenna 1991, lxxxiv, is particularly concerned with these omissions, which can be arranged into three categories: (a) the events about which Porphyry is ignorant, for example, those in P.’s youth; (b) facts that he considers to be well known, such as the social conditions in which P. lived; (c) episodes “over which he might wish to draw a discreet veil.” I believe that at least as far as categories (b) and (c) are concerned, the fact that Porphyry is focusing on information that illuminates the contents of the *Enneads* directly is of decisive importance. It is for this reason, for example, that he lets the story of Platonopolis pass with scarcely a reference, because, as is well known, political philosophy is almost entirely absent from the *Enneads*.

On the other hand, Cox 1983, 143, introduces the view that the primary purpose of the *VP* was “the creation of a school tradition [that] also entailed, of course, the creation of a revered founder.” I do not think that either the work’s contents or any other evidence indicates that Porphyry had such intentions: see also Goulet-Cazé 1982, 246–48; and the more recent speculations of Saffrey 1992, 53–57.

6 Introduction to the *VP*

- 7 The students
- 8 *Digression*: How P. composed his works
- 9 Women and children
- 10 Stories about the school
 - Olympius
 - The invocation at the Iseum
 - Amelius' love of sacrificing
- 11 The necklace of Chione
- Polemon
- Porphyry's melancholy
- 12 P.'s relations with the imperial couple and Platonopolis
- 13 *Transition*: How P. taught
- III. P.'s intellectual presence
 - His relations with the other philosophers
 - 14 Earlier thinkers
 - Longinus
 - Origen
 - 15 Porphyry
 - 16 The Gnostics
 - 17 Numenius
 - Amelius' *Letter*
 - 18 Comments on the *Letter*
 - External assessments
 - 19 Longinus
 - The *Letter* to Porphyry
 - 20 Comments on the *Letter*
 - The *On the End*
 - 21 Comments on the *On the End*
 - 22 The oracle of Apollo
 - 23 Comments on the oracle
- IV. The arrangement and publication of the *Enneads*
 - 24 The first volume
 - 25 The second volume
 - 26 The third volume
 - The administration of the publication

It is evident even from this outline that Porphyry collected a sequence of documents at the end of the biographical part of the *VP* (17–23), where he presents them unaltered but also extensively annotated by himself. Nevertheless, other sections of the work also obviously depend on evidence whose sources Porphyry only sometimes divulges. We know, for example, that the description of P.'s illness and death (2.11–31) depends on Eustochius (see 2.12, 23, and 29), that the information relating to his youth (3.1–35) comes from P. himself (see 3.1), and that Amelius is the source for everything concerned with his first years of teaching in Rome (3.35–43; see 3.37–38) and the oracle of Apollo

(22.8–63; see 22.8–9). But we can also deduce that the description of the incident with Olympius derives from P. himself (10.1–13; see my comments ad loc.); while Amelius is the source for the testimonies about the portrait of P. (1.4–19; see my comments at 1.14–17), the invocation at the Iseum (10.15–33; see my comments at 10.31) and perhaps also the episodes surrounding Chione’s necklace (11.2–8), “Platonopolis” (12.3–12), and the appearance of Origen at P.’s seminar (14.20–25). We should consider the remaining material to be derived from Porphyry’s own personal experience during the five years he spent at his teacher’s side.

All the sources Porphyry uses are the best we could hope for. But their trustworthiness necessarily varies in relation to the idiosyncrasy of each author. It is the elegant and loquacious Amelius who most reasonably incurs our suspicion that he elaborated his materials in a novel-like manner, but we should not overlook the probable effect on his own testimony of Eustochius’ rather naive admiration for P.

The System of Dating

Much ink has been spilt over the chronological data Porphyry provides in considerable abundance at various points in the *VP*.¹⁰ For that reason, it is somewhat disheartening that one of the most recent studies on the subject concludes with a reference to “the hope for a new investigation of the chronological system of the *Life of Plotinus*.”¹¹ I shall not attempt here to engage in the details of this complex problem. But because I am not in complete agreement with any of the views thus far espoused, a brief review of the problem is necessary.

Porphyry gives us three forms of time reckoning: (a) absolute dates, based on the corresponding regnal year; (b) dates tied to either P.’s or Porphyry’s age; (c) calculations of the length of time intervening between two events.

(a) For the first type, a substantial number of dating systems have been proposed—as well as various combinations of these systems—on the basis of which it is possible to calculate the regnal years in such a way as to correlate them with contemporary evidence from other historical sources. But both the manner in which Porphyry chooses to express himself (usually with the general phrase “the *n*th year of the reign of *x*”) and the improbability that in the introduction of such an ambitious endeavor as the publication of the *Enneads* Porphyry would employ a geographically restricted calendar—such as the Egyptian,¹² or Syro-Macedonian—or some specialized system of his own invention¹³ strongly suggests, in my opinion, the *dies imperii* as the starting point. That is to say, Porphyry’s system employed a year that began with the ascension to the throne of

¹⁰ The most significant scholarly studies on this subject are the following: Oppermann 1929 (mainly the second part, titled “Die Chronologie in Porphyrios’ *Vita Plotini*”); Boyd 1937, 241–57; Igal 1972a; Barnes 1976b, 65–70; Goulet 1982b, 187–227; Edwards 2000, 117–19. For a catalogue of all the chronological material contained in the *VP*, see Igal, op. cit. 11–13.

¹¹ Goulet, op. cit. 227.

¹² This possibility has attracted the favor of quite a few scholars, among them Oppermann and Barnes.

¹³ Such as the very complicated combination of the Julian calendar and a system of antedating and post-dating that Goulet introduces. The latter’s observation that “everything is as if Porphyry presupposes that his

8 Introduction to the *VP*

the emperor of the day. All scholars agree that this is the most obvious solution. However, all but Boyd eventually reject it because of difficulties that emerge from attempts to link this dating system with information relayed in the *VP*. Nevertheless, after the most recent findings concerning the death of Claudius Gothicus (about which see my comments at 2.29–31), a careful investigation reveals that all the difficulties derive from the acceptance of P.'s date of birth according to Porphyry's calculations. In my commentary on 2.34–37, I question the accuracy of Porphyry's calculations and attempt to identify the reason for the error. If my estimation is correct, then P. was born not in the thirteenth, but the twelfth year of Septimius Severus' reign (April 204–5). In this way, all the remaining dates in the *VP* fall into line, if interpreted in accordance with a system based on the *dies imperii*, as mentioned above. That this is correct is affirmed by a glance at the chronological table below, in which appear all the dates and their equivalents in the Julian calendar.

(b) The dates based on the ages of either P. or Porphyry are, as a rule, linked to those of the first category and provide the opportunity to cross-check and verify information. In most instances ages are expressed by inclusive reckoning and refer to the as-yet-uncompleted current year of the age of the person in question (usually with a phrase such as "in his *x*th year"). In three cases, however (2.29–30, 3.23–24, and 4.8–9), exclusive reckoning is used, registering completed years of age: the first of these occasions refers to P.'s age at the time of his death, as mentioned earlier. For the other two, there is no reason to suppose, as do many scholars, that Porphyry confuses exclusive with inclusive reckoning.¹⁴ The somewhat indefinite reference to P.'s age at 4.6–8 allows us, as I argue in my comments *ad loc.*, to accept without any problem that the date is determined according to exclusive reckoning.

(c) Finally, scholarly opinion also differs with regard to the precise meaning of the expression *holōn etōn*, which we encounter at various points in the *VP*, referring to some (usually large) time span (see 3.20, 34, 41, and 9.20). If, as seems more reasonable at first sight, we consider that it refers to full years, then certain problems arise with the dating of events. The most significant refers to the length of time Amelius spent with P. (3.38–42): the third year of Philip's reign began in March 246, and the first year of Claudius' ended in August 269. It is impossible for twenty-four full years to fit between these dates, and it is worth noting that even translators who in other cases follow the interpretation referred to above (such as, e.g., MacKenna, Harder, and Armstrong) are forced at this point to abandon that system. Boyd 1937, 252n.34, already argued that the phrase means "in all," and that consequently it is not necessary for the years to be complete. Igal 1972a, 86, advanced serious objections to this but was forced to take refuge in the desperate solution that Porphyry did not write what he meant (see also nn. 22, 24, and 50 in his translation). Goulet 1982b, 206–7, returns to Boyd's view but without supporting it with new arguments.

reader has in front of him a chronicle, or at least tables where each regnal year corresponds to some definite chronology" (op. cit. 206) demonstrates sufficiently that his efforts have finished up *ad absurdum*.

¹⁴ Goulet in particular devotes a great deal of space to arguing this view. Igal, on the other hand, believes that Porphyry maintains the distinction.

However, in my opinion, there is a fragment of Porphyry (apud Proclus *In Ti.* I, 63.29) that justifies Boyd's view. There it is recounted that the Platonist Origen developed an argument over the course of three days (*triōn bolōn hēmerōn*): obviously, it is not meant that his lecture lasted three full twenty-four-hour periods, nor—as Igal 1972a, n. 41, would understand it—three days without interruption, but that from the beginning of the argumentation to its completion more than two days had passed, while the emphasis is on the fact that it was an exceptionally long period of time. I believe that we should understand the phrase in the *VP* in a similar fashion: the period when P. did not write lasted ten “whole” years (3.34), that is, more than nine years, namely, from the second half of 244 until (at most) September 254; Amelius was with P. for twenty-four “whole” years (3.41), from 246 until 269; and P. himself sojourned in Rome, without making any enemies, for twenty-six “whole” years (9.20), from the second half of 244 until the first half of 270. For the period when P. studied with Ammonius (3.20), we cannot cross-check our information, which anyway does not derive from Porphyry, but from P. himself.

The other chronological calculations present no particular problems, and they all fit easily into the chronological table that follows below.¹⁵

We may conclude that Porphyry's dating in the *VP* is, generally speaking, accurate; it follows consistently a system that was widely accepted in his day and one that corresponds to what we would expect from an experienced chronographer and historian, especially in a work as important as this was for him and one that he clearly made constant efforts to substantiate as best as was possible.

Chronological Table

The purpose of the following table is to present in outline form all of the chronological data contained in the *VP* and to fit them into the Julian calendar, indicating at the same time—and, naturally, in a very summary fashion—the environment in which P. and Porphyry lived. In the first column appears the year, according to the Julian calendar, in which the events referred to in the other columns took place. In the second column are recorded the emperors who ascended to the imperial throne in that period, with the exception of a few whose reign was exceptionally short-lived, and who are mentioned instead in the last column. In the third and fourth columns, respectively, are given the dates Porphyry records and, on the basis of the *dies imperii* system, their corresponding dates in the Julian calendar. In the fifth column is given the age P. had reached at the time of the events noted in the other columns. In most cases, information about P.'s age is again derived from Porphyry. The dated events from P.'s life are contained in the sixth column, while the seventh presents various parallel occurrences in contemporary political and cultural life. Such a brief presentation cannot possibly aspire to completeness; but, in any case, an attempt was made to include events that illuminate—however remotely or even indirectly—the personalities and activities of the first two Neoplatonists.¹⁶

¹⁵ On 5.1–5, which presents a problem on account of Porphyry's attempt to put greater emphasis on the period of time he spent with P., see my comments ad loc.

¹⁶ The indications 1/2 and 2/2 refer to the first and the second half of a year, respectively.