

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT ELISSAEUS (14th CENTURY), A TEACHER OF GEORGIOS GEMISTOS PLETHON (*CA. 1355 – † 1452)?

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It is not the first time in history that an anonymous person becomes famous. A notorious case is that of Ammonius Saccas (*ca. 180 – † ca. 242). A master of Plotin (*ca. 205 – † 270) for eleven years, as well as of Herennius and Origen, probable the pagan one and not the Christian writer, Ammonius, deemed from the very beginning to be the founder of Neoplatonic school, wrote nothing, but his thought certainly underlies his disciple's *Enneades*, despite the fact that the three afore mentioned disciples had sworn never to make their master's teachings known, after his death.¹ No one of them would respect the promise later, and Porphyrios would even consider the thought system of his master Plotin a mere reiteration of Ammonius'.² It is not only my opinion that Ammonius is the most famous unknown person.³ Elissaeus too, paradoxically acquires a historical identity only insofar he had been his disciple's master for over ten years. He was the master

¹ “[...] μηδέν ἐκκαλύπτειν τῶν Ἀμμωνίου δογμάτων” – PORPHYRIUS, *Vita Plotini*, 3. 25–26.

² Eduard ZELLER, “Ammonius Sakkas und Plotinus”, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 7/3 (1894), pp. 295–296.

³ On sources see: Hans von ARNIM, “Die Quellen der Überlieferung über Ammonius Sakkas,” in: *Rheinisches Museum*, 7 (1887), 276–287. On this famous unknown professor of both Plotin and Origen, see the classic, but still very important works: Eduard ZELLER, “Ammonius Sakkas und Plotinus”, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 7/3 (1894), 295–312; Fritz HEINEMMAN, “Ammonios Sakkas und der Ursprung des Neuplatonismus”, in: *Hermes, Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie*, 61 (1926), pp. 1–27; H. LANGERBECK, “The Philosophy of Ammonius Sakkas and the Connection of Aristotelian and Christian Elements therein”, in: *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77/1 (1957), pp. 67–74, on his relationship with Origen at pp. 72–74; J. C. HINDLEY, “Ammonios Sakkas. His Name and Origin”, in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 75 (1964), pp. 332–336; Willy THEILER, “Ammonius, der Lehrer des Origenes”, in: *Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus*, Berlin, 1966, pp. 1–45; Heinrich DÖRRIE, “Ammonios, der Lehrer Plotins”, in: *Hermes*, 83/4 (1955), pp. 439–477; IDEM, “Ammonios Sakkas”, in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (TRE), vol. II, Berlin-New-York, 1978, 463–471; Hans-Rudolf SCHWYZER, *Ammonios Sakkas, der Lehrer Plotins*, Opladen 1983; Frederic M. SCHROEDER, “Ammonius Saccas”, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II. 36. 1, Berlin, 1987. One might object that Socrates is the most famous case. Still, Platon does name his master, as testify the numerous dialogues where he appears as main character, although not all of them contain his thinking. Plotin, however, like Plethon later, never mentions Ammonios.

of the Byzantine philosopher and jurist Georgios Gemistos Plethon,⁴ a prominent figure of late 14th, early 15th century, and teacher of the most visible personalities of the last period in the millennium-old existence of the Eastern Roman Empire, conventionally called Byzantine today. Moreover, it was Plethon who, in times marked by a severe social-political and ecclesiastical crisis, dared to suggest an audacious solution, as curious and bizarre as it was revolting for his world, namely: the return to Greek religion.⁵ The Originality for this neo-pagan idea, the urge to apostasy, was not ascribed to Plethon, however, but the responsible one was considered his teacher, Elissaeus.⁶

In his turn, Elissaeus probably endures anonymously in the works of his disciple Plethon. His case, however, differs from the afore-mentioned model, as he exists only because Plethon existed. With the exception of one source, he is not mentioned anywhere else, at least so far he has not been identified with any 14th century homonym.⁷ He is even harder to identify, as his name was frequent with Jews in the respective period. All that is known on Elissaeus is related to the period of Plethon's philosophic education, at the court of sultan Murād I (1360–1389), a period which he does not mention anywhere, as he fail to mention Elissaeus as well. A common trait with the Plotin-Ammonius relationship. Still, Plethon would have probably not been the man he was, had he not met Elissaeus. In other words, there would not exist a Plethon Apostata today.

Unfortunately, all that is known about Elissaeus comes from a single source, namely Georgios Kurteses Scholarios (*ca. 1400/05 – † 1472/74), the future patriarch Gennadios II of Constantinople (ca. 1454–1455/56, 1463 and 1464–1465). Some do

⁴ On Plethon's life and works, see: Fritz SCHULTZE, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon und seine reformatorischen Bestrebungen*, Jena, 1874; Fr. MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris, 1956; Christopher Montague WOODHOUSE, *George Gemistos Plethon. The last of the Hellenes*, Oxford 1986; Brigitte TAMBRUN, *Pléthon. Le retour de Platon*, Paris, 2006; Vasile Adrian Carabă, *Pletho Apostata. Die Ablehnung des Christentums durch Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355–1452) und dessen Konversion zur griechischen Religion*, Giessen, 2010.

⁵ He states this at the very beginning of his main work, *The Book of Laws* (Nomoi), which could be considered as the dogmatic manual of his religion reconstructed on the "ruins" of the defunct Greek religion. See: Charles ALEXANDRE, *Pléthon. Traité de lois, ou recueil des fragments, en partie inédits, de cet ouvrage*, Paris, Librairie de Firmin Didot frères, 1858, pp. 1–2 și pp. 14–15.

⁶ Georgios SCHOLARIOS, *Ἐπιστολή τῆ βασιλίσση περὶ τοῦ βιβλίου τοῦ Γεμιστοῦ*, in: Gennade SCHOLARIOS, *Œuvres complètes*, edition: L. Petit – X. A. Sidérités – M. Jugie, vol. IV., Paris, 1935, pp. 151–155.

⁷ There are also doubts concerning Plethon's period of studying at Murād's court, which is considered as a mere invention of Scholarios in his attempt to find the roots of his adversary's apostasy. Thus Elissaeus' very existence as a person is questioned. Albrecht Berger considers that "es ist aber nicht sicher, ob dieser Aufenthalt wirklich stattgefunden hat, denn der einzige Bericht darüber wurde erst Jahrzehnte später nach seinem Tod verfasst und stammt von Gemistos' erbittertstem Feind Georgios Scholarios [...]. Da die Geschichte vom Aufenthalt des Gemistos bei den Ungläubigen von Scholarios dazu benützt wird, den Ursprung seiner häretischen Ansichten zu erklären, ist es durchaus möglich, dass er sie in polemischer Absicht frei erfunden hat – auch wenn man zugeben muss, dass spätere Werke des Gemistos deutliche Einflüsse der islamischen Philosophie aufweisen"; see: Albrecht BERGER, "Plethon in Italien", *Philhellenische Studien*, 12 (2006), p. 80.

not credit him, precisely on the grounds of his overt aversion to Georgios Gemistos; he was the one to burn the *Book of Laws*, Plethon's masterpiece. Scholarios provides two pieces of information concerning the Mystras philosopher – as Georgios Gemistos Plethon is known today due to François Masai⁸ – in a letter addressed to Theodora Asanina (of Bulgaria, † 1471),⁹ the second wife of the Mystras despot, Demetrius Palaiologos (1451–1460),¹⁰ and written, most likely, between 1454 and 1456, and in another letter addressed to the exarch Joseph,

⁸ *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris, 1956.

⁹ The text on Elissaeus in: SCHOLARIOS, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 152–153: “Τὸ δὲ κεφάλαιον αὐτῶ τῆς ἀποστασίας Ἰουδαίος τις ὑστερον ἐνειργάσατο, ὃ ἐφοίτησεν ὡς εἰδοῖται τὰ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐξηγηεῖσθαι καλῶς. Ὁ δὲ ἦν Ἀβερόη προσεσχηκῶς καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐκ Περωσῶν καὶ Ἀράβων ἐξηγηταῖς τῶν Ἀριστοτελικῶν βιβλίων, ἅς Ἰουδαῖοι πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν γλῶτταν μετήγαγον, Μωσέως δὲ καὶ ὧν Ἰουδαῖοι πιστεύουσιν ἢ θρесеκεύουσι δι’ αὐτὸν ἦκιστα ἦν φροντίζων. Ἐκεῖνος αὐτῶ καὶ τὰ περὶ Ζωροάστρου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐξέθετο. Ἐκεῖνῳ δὴ τῶ φαινομένῳ μὲν Ἰουδαίῳ ἑλληνιστῇ δὲ ἀκριβῶς, οὐ μόνον ὡς διδασκάλῳ πολὺν συνῶν χρόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπηρετῶν ἐν οἷς ἔδει καὶ ζωαρκοῦμενος ὑπ’ ἐκείνῳ τῶν γὰρ τὰ μάλιστα δυναμένων ἦν ἐν τῇ τῶν βαρβάρων τούτων αὐλῇ Ἐλισσαῖς ὄνομα ἦν αὐτῶ τοιοῦτος ἀπετελέσθη. Εἶτα πειρῶμενος μὲν λανθάνειν, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἠδύνατο, προαγόμενος τοῖς ὀμιληταῖς τὰς δόξας ἐνσπείρειν ὑπὸ τοῦ εὐσεβεστάτου βασιλέως τότε Μανουῆλ καὶ τῆς ἑκκλησίας ἀπεπέμφθη τῆς πόλεως τοῦτο μόνον οὐ καλῶς βουλευσαμένων, ὅτι φεισάμενοι οὐκ ἐνεδείξαντο τοῖς πολλοῖς αὐτόν, οὔτε ἀτίμως ἢ εἰς βάρβαρον ἀπῆλαννον γῆν, οὔτ’ ἄλλον τινὰ τρόπον τὴν μέλλουσαν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ βλάβην ἐκώλυσαν. Τοιαῦτα μὲν ὡς ἐν βραχεῖ τὰ αἷτια τῆς πλάνης ἐκεῖνῳ”. Charles Alexandre ignores this information; see: Ch. ALEXANDRE, *Pléthon. Traité de lois*, p. VI, note 2. Also published in: Sp. Lambros (ed.), *Παλαιολογία καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, vol. II, Athens, 1924, pp. 19–23.

¹⁰ Mystras was not actually a Byzantine town. It had been built as a stronghold by Guillaume II (Wilhelm or William) Villehardouin († 1 May 1278) in 1249 – thus under the Eastern Latin Empire – on top of Mount Mystras. Soon, in 1262, it was conquered by the Byzantines and turned into a real Byzantine fortress. In 1383 it became the capital of the Despotate of the Morea, where the first despot was Manuel (1349–1380), the second son of Emperor John VI Cantacuzene (1347–1354), succeeded until the Turkish conquest of 1460 by descendants of Palaiologos dynasty/house: Theodore I (1383–1407), Theodore II (1407–1443), who Plethon warned in a letter concerning the urgent issues in Peloponnese, then Constantine Palaiologos, the future Byzantine emperor Constantine XI (despot between 1443–1449, emperor between 1449–29 May 1453) then his brothers Thomas (1428–1460) and Demetrius (de facto 1436–1438 and 1451–1460; de jure 1438–1451), under whom the Byzantine despotate outlasted Constantinople by seven years, until 1460. See: Nicolae IORGA, *Istoria veștii bizantine, Imperiul și civilizația după izvoare (Histoire de la Vie Byzantine, Empire et civilisation, d’après les sources)* Romanian translation by Maria Holban, Bucharest, 1974, pp. 574–582, 585, 587, 595. Also, regarding the Despotate of the Morea, still of interest is the excellent work of Dionysios ZAKYTHINOS, *Le despotat grec de Morée*, vol. I: Histoire politique, Paris, 1932; vol. II: Vie et institutions, Athens, 1953. Mistra is also the town where Johann Wolfgang Goethe sets one of the *Faust* scenes. It is Faust's marriage, “der Mensch der Gothik” (Wilhelm BLUM, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Politik, Philosophie und Rhetorik im spätbyzantinischen Reich (1355–1452)*, Stuttgart, 1988, p. 3) to Helena, embodiment of old Hellada. See: Richard HAUSCHILD, *Mistra – Die Faustburg Goethes. Erinnerungen an eine Griechenlandfahrt*, in: *Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse*, Bd. 54, Heft 4, Berlin 1963; Gyula MORAVCSIK, “Zur Quellenfrage der Helenaepisode in Goethes Faust”, in: *Byzantinisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher*, 8 (1929–1930), 41–56 and in: IDEM, *Studia Byzantina*, Amsterdam, 1967, pp. 428–438.

written after 1456.¹¹ Two texts, then, drafted after Plethon's death. It is hard to assess how widely were these letters known, and to which extent their addressees circulated the information regarding Elissaeus, so that some of Plethon's former disciples could hear of what Scholarios had declared, although the lack of reaction on their part may support the hypothesis that it did not happen so.

In an attempt to explain to Theodora Asanina the genesis of Plethon's heretical work *Nomoi* or *The Book of Laws*, which he had received from the addressee of the letter, as well as the causes of the former's apostasy, Georgios Scholarios says that their origin must be found in the period of Plethon's education as a youth, at the barbarian court. His allegations were based, Scholarios said, on the declarations of reliable persons who had met Plethon during that period. Regrettably, Scholarios mentions no name, a fact that arouses further suspicion. The respective persons had allegedly told him that the one responsible for Plethon's apostasy (κεφάλαιον τῆς ἀποστασίας) had been a man of Jewish descent, but in fact a pagan (ἐκείνῳ δὲ τῷ φαινομένῳ μὲν Ἰουδαίῳ ἑλληνιστῇ δὲ ἀκριβῶς), named Elissaeus, who had inspired to him anti-Christian ideas, opposed to the teachings of the Church Fathers.¹² Elissaeus allegedly was an adherent of Averroes' (Ibn Rušd; *1126 – † 1198) method of interpretation of Aristotle and thus, a co-disciple with other Persian and Arabian exegetes of the Stagyrates' writings, whose commentaries "the Jews translated in their mother tongue".¹³ Elissaeus was also believed to be the one to introduce Plethon to the thinking of Zoroaster and others (περὶ Ζωροάστρου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων).¹⁴ On the other hand, Gemistos allegedly sought Elissaeus' company for material reasons as well, because this non-Mosaic Jew was highly influential at the barbarian court (τῶν βαρβάρων ... αὐλή). He had supposedly provided his disciple with financial support. This Elissaeus had laid the foundation of Georgios Gemistos' apostasy, and made Plethon become the man he was. After his return to Constantinople, because of the nonconformity of his conceptions, Plethon entered into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities, which led to his expelling from the empire's capital and his exile to Mystras at the order of Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (*1350 – † 1425; emperor 1391–1425).¹⁵

¹¹ Περὶ τοῦ βιβλίου τοῦ Γεμιστοῦ, καὶ κατὰ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς πολυθείας, in: Gennade SCHOLARIOS, *Œuvres complètes*, edītia: L. Petit – X. A. Sidēritēs – M. Jugie, vol. IV., Paris, 1935, pp. 155–172. Also published in Ch. ALEXANDRE, *Pléthon. Traité de lois*, pp. 412–441. The text of Alexandre's edition was reproduced by Jacques Paul MIGNE, *Patrologiae cursus completus* (MPG), vol. 160, col. 633–648. ZAKYTHINOS, *Le despotat grec de Morée*, vol. II, pp. 365–367; François MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Paris, 1956, p. 393; WOODHOUSE, *George Gemistos Plethon....*, pp. 357–359.

¹² SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153.

¹³ SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153.

¹⁴ SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153; Milton V. Anastos thinks that "The phrase, 'Zoroaster and the others,' is to be understood as 'Zoroaster and the rest of the pagans,' or 'Zoroaster and the Aristotelian commentators"; see: Milton V. ANASTOS, "Pletho's Calendar and Liturgy", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 4 (1948), p. 278.

¹⁵ SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153.

The second letter reiterates some of the assertions concerning the same person, contained in the letter to Theodora Asanina, and completes the information with the matter of Elissaeus' death. He met his end by fire (πυρὶ τὴν τελευτὴν εὔρετο), that is being burnt at stake, the same as had allegedly happened to Zoroaster himself,¹⁶ to whose the mysteries he had introduced Plethon. By this, Scholarios attempts to convince the letter's addressee that Plethon knew nothing about Zoroaster prior to encountering Elissaeus.

Such accounts could hardly suffice to render a person's figure. Therefore, there has been much speculation on this issue, in the attempt to reconstruct the events as closely to reality as possible, to place Plethon's master in a philosophical trend, in order to comprehend the contents of his thinking and to solve the mystery surrounding him.

It has been rightly asked why Georgios Gemistos chose to go to Murād I's court? As for other matters concerning his life, the answer can be provided only intuitively.

Georgios Gemistos, of Constantinopolitan origin¹⁷ was a descendant of Gemistos family, recorded as early as 13th century, thus of illustrious lineage, even more so in the case of the possible confirmation of the hypothesis that Demetrios Gemistos, living in late 14th – early 15th century, a prothonotary of Saint Sophia and author of liturgical texts,¹⁸ was a close relative or even his father. To the astonishment of both his contemporaries, and even today's historians, he decided to complete his philosophical training elsewhere than his hometown, where he had certainly been initiated in this sense. We may safely assume that he undertook all stages of Byzantine education: *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music), where, through the mediation of medieval copyists, he could approach classical Greek literature.¹⁹ We may also assume that he studied theology – the final purpose of any higher education in Byzantium, and the discipline that had outstripped the philosophy of ancient pagan schools. We cannot rule out the hypothesis that no philosopher in Constantinople matched Plethon's expectations; there were, however, great professors of theology and philosophy. One of them was Demetrios Kydones (*ca.

¹⁶ “[...] Τοῦτον ἐγνώρισέ σοι πρόσθεν ἡγνοημένον ὁ τῷ δοκεῖν μὲν Ἰουδαῖος, πολύθεος δὲ Ἐλισσαῖος ᾧ μέγα δυναμένῳ τότε παρὰ τῆ τῶν βαρβάρων ἀυλῆ παρεσιτοῦ τὴν πατρίδα φυγῶν, ἵνα τὰ καλὰ παρ’ ἐκείνου μάθης διδάγματα· τοιοῦτος δὲ ὢν, πυρὶ τὴν τελευτὴν εὔρετο, καθὰ δήπου καὶ ὁ ὑμέτερος Ζωροάστρης;” in: SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 162.

¹⁷ Bessarion (*1403 – †1472), bishop of Nicaea, later cardinal in the Roman-catholic Church after the council of Ferrara-Florence (1438/39), dubb “Constantinopolitanus“ his teacher Gemistos Plethon, in his work *De natura et arte* and in the titles of its manuscripts, as well as in subsequent tradition, he is called “the Byzantine” (Πλήθωνος τοῦ Βυζαντινοῦ), which confirms Bessarion's assertion; Charles ALEXANDRE, *Pléthon. Traité de lois*, p. V, n. 1.

¹⁸ MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, p. 53; Masai provides a list of the persons known by the name of Gemistos, up to the 15th century.

¹⁹ MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, p. 55.

1323 – † ca. 1400), one of the most important translators of Latin writings into Greek, especially Thomas Aquinas,²⁰ who is (yet inconclusively) assumed to have been Plethon's professor.²¹ For this reason, young Georgios left for the court of Murād I, (assumed to be the one in Adrianople), precisely in order to find the master under whose guidance he could perfect his philosophical education.²²

On the other hand, it is common knowledge that Murād I, the actual founder of the Ottoman Empire, was ardently interested in culture, a Maecenas of sciences and arts. This passion for knowledge had lent him great openness towards scholars. More than anywhere else, they enjoyed a great freedom of thought and expression. Very soon, then, his Adrianople court became the meeting point of many scholars coming from every corner of the world, who themselves exerted a powerful attraction on the outer world, an attraction hard to resist by a person like Plethon. It was a world of contrasts, for it brought together Christians, Jews, Muslims, and even pagans. It evinced a tolerance not known even to the Byzantines, for all their proverbial openness to culture. Murād's court reminded of the times of Abbasid caliphs al-Manşūr (754–775) and Hārūn [Aaron] ar-Rašīd (786–805) who promoted the compilation and translation of writings, or the times of caliph al-Ma'mūn (813–833), who, in 832, assisted by Yaḥyā ibn Māsawayh († 857) and then by the Nestorian Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (*809/10 – † 876),²³ transformed his court into a

²⁰ See: Michael RACKL, "Demetrios Kydones als Verteidiger und Übersetzer des Hl. Thomas von Aquin", in: *Der Katholik*, 15 (1915), pp. 21–40; Martin JUGIE, "Démétrios Kydones et la théologie latine à Byzance", in: *Echos d'Orient*, 27 (1928), pp. 385–402; Stylianos G. PAPAPOULOS, "Thomas in Byzanz. Thomas-Rezeption und Thomas-Kritik in Byzanz zwischen 1354 und 1435", in: *Theologie und Philosophie*, 49, Heft 1/3, (1974), pp. 274–304; Vasile Adrian CARABĂ, "Pătrunderea literaturii teologice-filosofice apusene în Bizanțul Paleologilor (1261–1453)", in: *Teologie și Viață*, 11/1–7 (2001), pp.183–201; Judith R. Ryder, *The Career and Writings of Demetrios Kydones. A Study of Fourteenth-Century Byzantine Politics, Religion and Society*, Brill: Leiden-Boston, 2010.

²¹ One of the supporters of this theory is Wilhelm Blum (*Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Politik, Philosophie und Rhetorik im späbyzantinischen Reich (1355–1452)*, Stuttgart, 1988, p. 1), largely based on Franz Tinnefeld's hypothesis in the introduction to the *Letters* of D. Kydones translated by the former in German (Demetrios Kydones, *Briefe*, übersetzt und erläutert von Franz Tinnefeld, Bd. I, 1, (Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur 12), Stuttgart, 1981, p. 46). He identifies the philosopher Georgios, the addressee of the first letter of the afore mentioned edition, with Georgios Gemistos Plethon. While Franz Tinnefeld merely proposes a hypothesis, Wilhelm Blum considers it a fact, without providing, in my opinion, the necessary further arguments (Wilhelm BLUM, "Das Leben und die Schriften Plethons", in: Wilhelm BLUM and Walter SEITZER (ed.), *Georgios Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452). Reformpolitiker. Philosoph, Verehrer der alten Götter*, (TUMULT – Schriften zur Verkehrswissenschaft, 29), pp. 35–43, here p. 37). However, the issue is not a new one; the idea of a period of intellectual formation at the side of Demetrios Kydones is also supported by J. P. MAMALAKIS, *Γεώργιος Γεμιστός-Πλήθων*, Athens, 1939, pp. 43–45. For references on this issue, see: John A. DEMETRACOPOULOS, "Georgios Gennadios II – Scholarios' *Florilegium Thomisticum*. His Early Abridgment of Various Chapters and *Questiones* of Thomas Aquinas' *Summae* and His anti-Plethonism", in: *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales*, 69/1 (2002), p. 168, n. 2.

²² Gennade SCHOLARIOS, *Περὶ τοῦ βιβλίου τοῦ Γεμιστοῦ, καὶ κατὰ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς πολυθεΐας*, p. 162.

²³ Anton BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinischen Texte*, Bonn 1922. (Repr. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin 1968), pp. 227–230; Georg GRAF, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur II*. Die Schriftsteller bis zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts (Studi e

genuine “house of wisdom” (dār al-ḥikma),²⁴ where appeared a theological and philosophical terminology peculiar to Arabian language, and where most of Aristotle’s propaedeutic works as well as the most important commentaries on them, written by Alexander of Aphrodisias (2nd–3rd centuries), Porphyrios (*ca. 234 – † early 4th century), Themistius (*ca. 317 – † after 388), Symplicius (6th century), John Philoponus (*ca. 490 – † ca. 570), were translated into Arabian for the first time.²⁵

Here, in Adrianople, in such an intellectual atmosphere, Plethon met Elissaeus. And, like Plotin when he heard Ammonius Sakkas for the first time, we may imagine Plethon exclaiming: “τοῦτον ἐζήτουν!”²⁶

But which could be Elissaeus’ position among these scholars? To establish it, attempts have been made to identify him in the context of Murād’s epoch. Franz Delitzsch (*1813 – †1890), the well-known Evangelic theologian, an Old Testament expert, assumed that the author of *Codex Marcianus Graecus 7*, also known as *Graecus Venetus* – which had once belonged to Gemistos’ disciple Bessarion – was no other than Plethon’s Jewish master.²⁷ This codex contains Old Testament texts in Neo-Greek translation, Hebraic texts in Attic translations and Aramaic texts in Doric dialect translations. This opinion is not shared by many biblical scholars. The Italian cardinal Giovanni Mercati (*1866 – † 1957) is the most prominent supporter of the theory according to which the translator of the texts in the afore mentioned codex was a bishop of Gerace in Calabria, 1348–66.²⁸

Testi 133) Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana: Città del Vaticano 1947/the same 1960, 1964 and 1975. Repr. Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt: Graz 1960, pp. 122–132.

²⁴ Aziz S[uryal] ΑΠΥΑ, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, Methuen & Co.: London 1968/University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame 1968 (Repr. Kraus Repr. Millwood, N.Y. 2 1980. Repr. eb. 1991), p. 270.

²⁵ On the translation of Greek thinkers’ works into Arabian, see: De Lacy O’LEARY, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*, London, 1949; Moritz STEINSCHNEIDER, *Die Arabischen Übersetzungen aus dem Griechischen*, Graz, 1960; R. WALZER, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962; Abdarrahman BADAWI, *La transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe*, Paris 1968; S. PINES, *Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts*, Jerusalem: Hebrew University and Brill, 1986; Y. SHAYEGAN, “The Transmission of Greek Philosophy into the Islamic World”, in: S.H. NASR und O. LEAMAN (ed.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1996, cap. 6, pp. 98–104. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbāsid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)* Routledge, 1998. A very recent book is Sylvain GOUQUENHEIM, *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel: Les racines grecques de l’Europe chrétienne*, Paris, 2008. The author minimizes the importance of Islamic culture’s influence on Western Europe, but emphasizes the role of mediators of Greek culture within the Islamic area of the Christians in Middle East.

²⁶ PORPHYRIUS, *Vita Plotini*, 3. 13; PORPHYRIOS, *Viața lui Plotin*, Romanian translation by Adelina Piatkowski, Cristian Bădiliță and Cristian Gașpar, Iași, 1998, p. 125. See translator’s note no. 27.

²⁷ *Graecus Venetus*. Pentateuchi, Proverbiorum, Ruth, Cantici, Ecclesiastae, Threnorum, Danielis versio Graeca. Ex unico bibliothecae S. Marci Ventae codice nunc primum uno volumine comprehensam atque apparatu critico et philologico instructam edidit O. G. (O. Gebhardt). Praefatus est Fr. Delitzsch, Leipzig, 1875, X–XV. This hypothesis was adopted by Karl KRUMBACHER, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches*, München, 1897, p. 125. It is known that a great part of the corpus of manuscripts of *Biblioteca Marciana* belonged to cardinal Bessarion, Plethon’s disciple. This manuscript, too, was owned by Bessarion, which could support Delitzsch’s theory; see: Kenneth M. SETTON, “The Byzantine Background to the Italian Renaissance”, in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 100/1 (1956), pp. 1–76, here p. 51.

²⁸ G. MERCATI, *Se la versione dall’ebraico del codice veneto greco VII sia di Simone Atumano*, Rom 1916, pp. 9–25, especially pp. 16–17; also see: Giorgio FEDALTO, *Simone Atumano*

Another difficulty is related to the philosophical system to which Elissaeus might have belonged. The German Orientalist Franz Taeschner considers that the thought system of Plethon's teacher, the main responsible for the disciple's anti-ecclesiastic and anti-clerical ideas, must to some extent be related to the times' free-thinking trends ("mit den freigeistigen Strömungen"),²⁹ probably, with the Futuwwa brotherhoods³⁰ or the Bektashi – Dervish (Darvish) confraternities.³¹ If Elissaeus indeed belonged to one of the respective groups, Plethon must have known the Islam in a heretical form. Whether heretical or not, Plethon supposedly knew the Islam, and a proof to this would be the interest shown by the Muslim world in Georgios Gemistos' works, some of which were translated into Arabian, shortly after their author's death, thus after the demise of Constantinople and under the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II (*el-Fātiḥ* – the Conqueror – 1451–1481). Taeschner is the first Occidental researcher to draw the attention of the scientific community on the Arabian manuscript containing part of Plethon's masterpiece *Nomoi*, discovered at the dawn of the 20th century by the Egyptian scholar Ahmed Zéki Pacha in the library of *Topkapi Serails* in Istanbul/Constantinople.³²

François Masai deems it much more likely that Elissaeus had introduced Plethon to a type of Judaic philosophy, such as the Cabbalistic one. In his opinion, Franz Taeschner forgets that Elissaeus was not a Muslim, but a Jew.³³ Thus, the

monaco di studio, arcivescovo latino di Tebe, secolo XIV, Brescia 1968; IDEM, "Per una biografia di Simone Atumano", in: *Aevum*, 40 (1966), pp. 445–467; IDEM, "Simone Atumano, ein kaum bekannter Humanist", in: *Der Beitrag der Byzantinischen Gelehrten zur abendländischen Renaissance des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts* published by Evangelos KONSTANTINOU (Philhellenische Studien 12), Frankfurt, 2006, 57–68 especially p. 62 and the next. Simon Atumano was born in 1310 in Constantinople and became a monk in Studios Monastery. He knew Varlaam of Calabria personally and shared his views, as proves his conversion to Catholicism. His name Atumanos or Atumano, as it is more frequently mentioned in the specialized literature, derives from the Greek term "ottoman", which pleads in favor of his Greek-Turkish origin.

²⁹ Franz TAESCHNER, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon, ein Vermittler zwischen Morgenland und Abendland zu Beginn der Renaissance", in: *Byzantinisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher*, 8 (1931), p. 109.

³⁰ Franz TAESCHNER, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Übertragung von islamischem Geistesgut nach dem Abendlande", in: *Der Islam*, 18 (1929) 236–240, especially pp. 236 și 239. By the same author: "Eine Schrift des Šihābaddīn Suhrawardī über die Futūwa", in: *Oriens*, 15, (1962), pp. 277–280.

³¹ TAESCHNER, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon, ein Vermittler... ", p. 106. The Dervish practice Sufism and aspire towards illumination and wisdom by means of temporary withdrawal from the world. On these Muslim confraternities, see: A. Le CHATELIER, *Les confréries musulmanes du Hedjaz*, Paris, 1887; Ignaz GOLDZIEHER, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1910; P. J. ANDRÉ, *Contribution à l'étude des confréries religieuses musulmanes*, Paris, 1956. A. POPOVIC și G. VEINSTEIN (ed.), *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam. Cheminement et situation actuelle*, Paris, 1985.

³² TAESCHNER, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon, ein Vermittler... ", p. 111. For further information, see: Jean NICOLET et Michel TARDIEU, "Pletho Arabicus. Identification et contenu du manuscrit arabe d'Istanbul, Topkapi Serai, Ahmet III 1896", in *Journal asiatique*, 268 (1980), pp. 35–57.

³³ "[M]onsieur Taeschner paraît négliger un peu qu'Élisée n'était pas musulman, mais juif, et qu'il serait donc plus indiqué de se demander s'il n'a pas initié Pléthon à des doctrines professées par ses coreligionnaires, à la Kabbale en particulier, plutôt qu'à celles d'une secte turque", MASAI, *Pléthon*

French scholar excludes the idea of Islamic influence, invoking the hypothesis of the American Greek scholar Milton V. Anastos, who harshly criticizes Taeschener's arguments.³⁴ To support the idea of a Judaic influence through Elissaeus, Solomon Gandz raises the issue of Plethon's knowledge of Judaic astronomy, considering that the Mystras philosopher might have been guided in his studies by the Maimonides' classical treatise "Sanctification of the New Moon", part of the third book of his code *Mishneh Torah*.³⁵

An excerpt in Scholarios' letter to Theodora Asanina: "But [Elissaeus] was fond of Averroes and other Persian and Arabian exegetes of Aristotle's books, which the Jews translated into their mother tongue"³⁶ led Michel Tardieu to another theory, which reinforces the idea of the influence of Islamic thinking on Plethon, this time not from a theological, but from a philosophical perspective. Elissaeus actually was an adherent of *falsafa*.³⁷ Many of the Jews who had come to Murād's court concerned themselves, as once did their co-religionaries such as Moses Maimonides (Mōšē ben Maimōn, in Arabian Mūsā ibn Maimūn, *1138 – † 1204) or Joseph ben Judah ibn 'Aknin (*ca. 1150 – † 1220)³⁸, with the translation of Arabian philosophical texts in Hebrew language – a fact confirmed by Scholarios³⁹ – which they then translated into Latin. The philosophy school to which Elissaeus allegedly belonged was the one founded in the 12th century by Šihāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī (*ca. 1155 – † 1191), and centred on the mystique of light, a school "whose influence in the Orient could be best compared to the philosophy of Ibn Sīnas (Avicennas)".⁴⁰ Suhrawardī, also known in the Iranian tradition as *šayḥ al-Īsrāq* or a doctor of *Īsrāq* (the philosophy of illumination), who, for his philosophical and theological convictions, considered by Sunnite jurists in Aleppo to be a heresy and harmful for the Islam, paid it with his life, being dubbed *al-maqtūl* (the killed one),⁴¹ "revitalisait l'avicennisme par le théologies censées

et le platonisme de Mistra, p. 57. The same opinion has Efraim Wust, "Elisha the Greek-A Physician and Philosopher at the Beginning of the Ottoman Period", in: *Pe'amim*, 41 (1989), 49–57 (in Hebrew).

³⁴ ANASTOS, "Pletho's Calendar and Liturgy", p. 279.

³⁵ Solomon GANDZ, "The Calendar-Reform of Pletho (c. 1355 – c. 1450): Its Significance and Its Place in the History of the Calendar", in: *Osiris*, 9 (1950), p. 201.

³⁶ "Ὁ δὲ ἦν Ἀβερόη προσεσηκῶς καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐκ Περσῶν καὶ Ἀράβων ἐξηγηταῖς τῶν Ἀριστοτελικῶν βιβλίων, ἃς Ἰουδαῖοι πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν γλῶτταν μετήγαγον"; SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153.

³⁷ *Falsafa* is the Arabized form of the term *philosophia*; M. TARDIEU, "Pléthon lecteur des Oracles", in *Métis*, 2 (1987), pp. 141–164, here pp. 144–145.

³⁸ S. D. GOITEIN, *Jews and Arabs, their Contacts through the Ages*, Schocken, N. Y. 1955, pp. 178–79; Colette SIRAT, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 207–8.

³⁹ SCHOLARIOS, vol. 4, p. 153.

⁴⁰ Michael STAUSBERG, *Faszination Zarathushtra. Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin-New York, 1998, p. 40.

⁴¹ The ayyubid leader of Aleppo, al-Malik az-Zahir (1186–1216), although he was interested in Sufi theological stream he was convinced in the end by the Islamic judges from Aleppo, supported by his father Saladin (Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn, † 1193), that Suhrawardī would represent a real danger for the Sunnite Islam. For this reason, Suhrawardī was arrested and put in prison, where he died on 29 July

être préplatoniciennes: Hermes et surtout Zoroastre⁴². It is in fact a syncretistic system, integrating elements of Zoroastrian, Hermetist, Pitagoreic and Platonic thought,⁴³ which made the French researcher Henry Corbin assert that Plethon's contact with Zoroastrism occurred at the Turkish sultan's court, during a period when the Suhrawardī school, of the illuminates (*Iṣrāqīyūn*),⁴⁴ was very active, because "la conjonction entre Platon et Zoroastre qui, en Occident, s'établira, à l'aube de la Renaissance, chez le philosophe byzantin Gémiste Pléthon, est ainsi déjà le fait caractéristique de la philosophie iranienne au XII^e siècle".⁴⁵ Hermes is considered to be the founder of this philosophy, while Zoroaster the one to herald "the reign of light" to the world.⁴⁶ This would make Elissaeus a Suhrawardī-an.

To Suhrawardī, the illuminates' teaching is nothing but a nuanced form of the one represented by the old Persian scholars, whom he distinguishes from the fake ones, formally named by the people *magi* (maḡūs) and who are, in fact, the adherents of a radical dualism. The genuine Persian scholars of Suhrawardī (*al-Maḡūs al-aṣḡliya*) do not preach dualism. Zoroaster is one of them; he postulates a sole principle both for darkness and light,⁴⁷ which with Plethon is equated with the *One* in Neo-Platonic philosophy. It was the school of Suhrawardī that reunited the two traditions (Zoroastrian and Chaldaean), considering the Chaldaean Oracles as product of the magi, disciples of Zoroaster. This idea was resumed by Georgios Gemistos Plethon in his commentary to his own edition of these oracles, which he had suggestively entitled: *Μαγικά λόγια τῶν ἀπὸ Ζωρόαστρον μάγων*.⁴⁸ Thus,

1191. See: Wolfgang Günter LERCH, *Denker des Propheten. Die Philosophie des Islam*, Düsseldorf, 2000, pp. 101–102.

⁴² TARDIEU, "Pléthon lecteur des Oracles", p. 145.

⁴³ "Hermès, Zoroastre, Platon, trois grandes figures qui dominent l'horizon des *Iṣrāqīyūn*, les « platoniciens des Perse » issus de Suhrawardī" – Henry CORBIN, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Tome II, *Sohrawardī les Platoniciens de Perse*, Éditions Gallimard, 1971, p. 25; see IDEM, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Édition Gallimard, 1986, 2002, pp. 285–290; also the chapter on Islamic philosophy written by Henry CORBIN in: Brice PARAIN (ed.), *Histoire de la philosophie I*, vol. 2, Édition Gallimard, 1969/2001 (reprint), pp. 1048–1197, here pp. 1168–1170. Henri Corbin is also the translator in French of Suhrawardī's main work, entitled: *Kitāb Hikmat al-Iṣrāq – Le livre de la sagesse orientale*, Gallimard. Édition Verdier, Paris, 1986.

⁴⁴ "L'adjectif *ishrāqī* qualifie l'auroreal, l'oriental, ce qui revêt la splendeur du matin, l'astre à son lever. *Ishrāqī*-namāz, c'est la prière du matin, « l'heure de Prime » parmi nos heures canoniales. La doctrine *ishrāqī*, c'est *theosophia matutina*. Les *Iṣrāqīyūn*, ce sont tous les penseurs et spirituels qui professent cette doctrine" – CORBIN, *En Islam iranien...*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ CORBIN, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, pp. 285–286 and 346.

⁴⁶ TARDIEU, "Pléthon lecteur des Oracles", pp. 147–148.

⁴⁷ CORBIN, *En Islam iranien*, pp. 30–31.

⁴⁸ Plethon has three writings of [pseudo]Zoroastrian character: the afore mentioned edition of Chaldaean oracles (*Μαγικά λόγια τῶν ἀπὸ Ζωρόαστρον μάγων*), taken from Mihail Psellos (Konstantinos Psellos, *ca. 1018 – † 1078/1081 or 1096/7; MPG, 122, 1115 a-1122 b; Greek text and French translation by Édouard Des PLACES, S. J., *Oracles Chaldaïques. Avec un choix de commentaires anciennes*, Paris, ³1991, pp. 162–186) and altered by Plethon according to his own convictions, a commentary, an exegesis on them (*Πλήθωνος Ἐξηγησις εἰς τὰ ἀντὰ Λόγια*) and a brief explanation of the

to Plethon *Magica Logia* “ne sont pas des oracles «Magiques» au sens ordinaire du mot, mais des oracles «dans la tradition des mages», c’est-à-dire des oracles zoroastriens”.⁴⁹

This view on magi with Suhrawardī could explain the reason why Plethon considers the Chaldaean oracles as belonging to the Zoroastrian tradition. In this sense, Georgios Scholarios is partially right in asserting that Plethon had learned much about this “Zoroastrian” tradition at the barbarian court, from Elissaeus. Partially, because Scholarios was certainly familiar with this oracular tradition, much too popular in Byzantium due to Psellos’ edition and commentary.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it is not known to which extent this confusion between Zoroastrianism and the Chaldaean oracles, persisting with Plethon and considered by Michel Tardieu to be of suhrawardīan origin, was known prior to 14th century to the Byzantine world, or to which extent Byzantium related the Chaldaean oracles to the tradition of the (pseudo)magi, disciples of Zoroaster. So far, there is no proof to this. However, Plethon is faithful to the ancient tradition that considered as real the connection between Platon and Zoroaster, which the same tradition saw as very close.⁵¹

unclear assertions of these oracles (*Βραχεία τις διασάφησις τῶν ἐν τοῖς λογίοις τούτοις ἀσαφεστέρως λεγομένων*). Plethon’s commentary on the oracles can be found in J. OPSOPOEUS, *Oracula magica Zoroastris cum scholiis Plethonis et Pselli nunc primum editi, with Sibyllina Oracula*, Paris, 1599, pp. 16–51. On the manuscripts of Plethon’s edition of Chaldaean Oracles, as well as his commentary, accompanied by his brief explanation – Greek text and French translation, see: *Oracles chaldaïques. Recension de Georges Gémiste Pléthon*. Edition critique avec introduction, traduction et commentaire par Brigitte TAMBRUN-KRASKER. *La recension arabe des Magika logia* par Michel TARDIEU (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi, Philosophi Byzantini 7), The Academy of Athens: Athens / Librairie J. Vrin: Paris/ Éditions Ousia: Bruxelles, 1995, xxxi-lxxviii. This work of Mrs. Brigitte Tambrun-Krasker is the most exhaustive research so far in this matter. She dwells further on Plethon’s pseudo-Zoroastrianism in her recent work: *Pléthon. Le retour de Platon*, Paris, 2006. There is an old German translation of Plethon’s edition of the oracles, as well as his commentary, provided by SCHEIBLE, *Das Kloster III/9–12*, pp. 386–394, in: Christoph WAGNER, *Faust’s Famulus; Don Juan Tenorie von Sevilla; die Schwarzkünstler verschiedener Nationen und die Beschwörer von Hölle und Himmel und Reichthum, Macht, Weisheit und des Leibes Lust*. A new translation into German of these three works by Plethon appears in my Ph.D. thesis defended on 11 July 2008 at Orientalisches Institut of Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg and entitled: *Die Ablehnung des Christentum durch Georgios Gemistos Plethon und dessen Konversion zur griechischen Religion*, pp. 128–135. The translation was proofread by Prof. Hermann Goltz within the Ph.D. students seminar of Konfessionskunde der Orthodoxen Kirchen, the Faculty of Evangelic Theology of the afore mentioned University. For the brief explanation (*Βραχεία ...*) in *Vaticanus Graecus*, there is an edition of Bohdan KIESZKOWSKI, *Studi sul platonismo del Rinascimento in Italia*, Florence, 1936, pp. 161–163. Kieszowski also provides a Latin translation by Francesco Patriz(z)ì da Cherso (Franciscus Patricius/Francesco Petris, 1529–1597).

⁴⁹ TARDIEU, “Pléthon lecteur des Oracles”, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Τοῦ [...] Ψελλοῦ ἔκθεσις κεφαλαίωδης καὶ σύντομος τῶν παρὰ Χαλδαίους δογμάτων, in: MPG, 122, 1149 C-1153 B and Édouard Des PLACES, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, Paris, (1971, 1989) 1996, pp. 189–191.

⁵¹ On this ancient tradition, see: Werner JAEGER, *Aristoteles. Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung*, Berlin, 1923, pp. 134–137 and in the English translation, *Aristotle. Fundamentals of the History of his Development*, Oxford, 1934, pp. 132–133; Karl H. DANNENFELDT, “The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles in the Renaissance”, in: *Studies in the Renaissance*, 4 (1957), p. 7.

Plethon never calls these oracles Chaldaean, although he had been introduced to them through Psellos' edition and commentary which name them so; he simply attributes them to Zoroaster or his disciples, the magi. Thus, in his view, Plethon does not address the Chaldaean oracles, but the oracles (*Logia*) of the magi, Zoroaster's disciples. Although he was not the first to speak of Zoroaster's Oracles – it had been Nicholas of Damascus, in 1st century A.D.⁵² – Plethon was the first to strongly claim that these (Chaldaean) oracles were Zoroastrian.⁵³ But the Oracles commented upon by Plethon were ascribed to Julian the Theurgist, who lived in the 2nd century A.D.; consequently, what the tradition recorded by Nicholas of Damascus knew as Zoroaster's oracles, had nothing to do with what Plethon considered to be the oracles of the magi, Zoroaster's disciples. Anyway, these oracles are neither Chaldaean nor Zoroastrian, but rather medio-Platonic. Thus, Corbin-Tardieu's theory on Elissaeus' belonging to the suhrawardīan philosophical trend, called by John Walbridge "Platonic Orientalism",⁵⁴ may provide the answer to the issue of Elissaeus' philosophical orientation. In any case, Plethon could not have really known the Zoroastrian thinking, either in Byzantium or at Murād I's Adrianople court, since he represented the "pseudo-Zoroastrian" trend of his times, as the commentator of "The Chaldaean Oracles of Zoroaster".⁵⁵

Whether Elissaeus was one of the translators of Averroes' works into Hebrew, as Scholarios suggests, is a mere assumption. An analysis of Georgios Gemistos Plethon's works reveal that he only mentions Averroes four times, which cannot testify to his thorough knowledge of the Arabian philosopher's thinking, despite the fact that, in the introduction to his work *De Differentiis*, he even seems willing, like an expert, to engage in polemics over his teachings on the soul.⁵⁶ Plethon knows the Jewish scholars' tradition of translating Averroes, as demonstrate his statements in the letter to his opponent Scholarios, who had reproached him precisely his criticizing of the Arabian philosopher. It is the Jews who "introduced us to

⁵² Bio-bibliographical references on Nicholas of Damascus, see Adolf LUMPE, "Nikolaos von Damaskus (Nicolaus Damascenus)", in: *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. VI, Herzberg, 1993, col. 845–847.

⁵³ Felix JACOBY, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, Berlin, 1926, 2A, 372.32; 2C, 252; Joseph BIDEZ and Franz CUMONT, *Les Mages Hellénisés: Zoroastre Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*, Paris, 1938, vol. II, pp. 81–82; apud DANNENFELDT, "The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles", p. 9, n. 16. The oracles commented upon by Plethon were written during the 2nd century A.D. by a certain Julian the Theurgist. Three works are attributed to this Julian: *Θεουργικά, Τελεστικά, Λόγια δι' ἐπῶν*. See: Henri-Dominique SAFFREY, "Les Néoplatoniciens et les Oracles Chaldaïques", in: *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 26 (1981), p. 225; Pierre HADOT, "Bilan et perspectives sur les Oracles Chaldaïques", in: H. LEWY, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, Paris² 1978, p. 705.

⁵⁴ John WALBRIDGE, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism*, State University of New York Press: Albany, 2001.

⁵⁵ Dylan BURNS, "The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster, Hekate's Couch, and Platonic Orientalism in Psellos and Plethon", in: *Aries*, 6/2 (2006), pp. 158–179.

⁵⁶ MPG, 160, 890A; also the edition of researcher Bemadette LAGARDE, "Le "De differentiis" de Pléthon d'après l'autographe de la Marcienne", in: *Byzantion*, 43 (1973, 1974), pp. 321–343 (Greek-only text), here p. 321, 10–11.

Averroes' [conception] on the human soul",⁵⁷ Plethon reminds Scholarios in response to the latter's polemical work against the afore-mentioned treatise *De Differentiis*.⁵⁸ Might Plethon have included his master Elissaeus among these Jewish scholars? Most likely. However, Plethon's references to Averroes suggest that he did not learn much about the Arabian thinker from his Jewish teacher, and that his information on this topic was more likely acquired in Italy, while he was taking part in the unionist council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1439),⁵⁹ an occasion to contact many of the times' Occidental intellectuals. A further argument in support of this assertion is the fact that Plethon never demonstrates any knowledge of Hebrew or Arabian language, and Latin language was not one of his work tools, which is confirmed even by certain researchers favourable to the idea that Plethon had been the disciple of the latinophorous theologian Demetrius Kydones.⁶⁰

A final controversial issue concerning Elissaeus is his death. Perhaps the most controversial, since the manner of his death, which was obviously an execution, was not a practice in compliance with the moral-religious precepts of Islamic Oriental world nor with those of the Christian-Byzantine Orient. To certain questions that still remain open, one could only attempt to provide an assumptive answer. When did Elissaeus die? Why, and who ordered his execution by stake burning?

Based on an account in the first volume of the *History of the Ottoman Empire in Europe* by Johann Wilhelm Zinkeisen,⁶¹ according to which sultan Bayezid I the Thunderbolt (*1389 – 1402/ † 1403) ordered the burning at stake of corrupt officials (eighty of them) as well as the burning of the house where they had been arrested, Fritz Schultze believes that Elissaeus could have been among these unfortunates,⁶² a hypothesis subsequently resumed by Mamalakis.⁶³ Scholarios asserts that Elissaeus was burned at stake precisely because his heretical ideas. As those officials were punished for different reasons, it is unlikely that Elissaeus was among them. On the other hand, the burning of the eighty persons was not a sentence passed by a law court, but simply the consequence of the sultan's moment of anger.

Although uncommon, even forbidden by the Islam, the burning at stake, when exceptionally resorted to, does not seem to have been the punishment for corruption, but for religious matters, such as dangerous heresy.⁶⁴ Although the

⁵⁷ MPG,160, 982C (bis), 982D, 983A; Bemadette LAGARDE, "Georges Gémiste Pléthon: Contre les objections de Scholarios en faveur d'Aristote", in *Byzantion*, 59 (1989), 368–507, here p. 375.

⁵⁸ It is a quite lengthy polemical writing of Scholarios, against Plethon's work *De Differentiis*, which was published in vol. IV of Scholarios' works, and became known by the title: *Contre les difficultés de Pléthon au sujet d'Aristote*, pp. 1–116.

⁵⁹ More on this issue, see Fr. MASAI, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, pp. 346–362.

⁶⁰ John A. DEMETRACOPOULOS, "Georgios Gemistos-Plethon's Dependence on Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*", in: *Archiv für mittelalterliche Philosophie und Kultur*, 12 (2006), p. 278 and n. 7.

⁶¹ J. W. ZINKEISEN, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches in Europa*, 7 vol., Hamburg-Gotha, 1840–1863; here vol. I, pp. 381–382.

⁶² SCHULTZE, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon...*, p. 29

⁶³ J. P. MAMALAKIS, 'Ο Γεώργιος Γεμιστός Πλήθων, p. 47.

⁶⁴ See the exceptions provided by Franz Taeschner concerning the burning at stake in the Islamic world: "Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Ein Beitrag ...", p. 241.

Koran mentions the punishment by the fire of hell, the Islam prohibits killing by fire or burning alive any person, by a clear interdiction, based on an alleged commandment of prophet Mohamed which can be found with Abū Dā'ūd and which states: "No one is allowed to punish by fire [a human being] unless the Lord of fire, that is God" (*Ġihād*, bāb 112).⁶⁵ Given this explicit interdiction, Christopher Montague Woodhouse believes that "Elissaeus' death by fire was purely accidental. But if it was a judicial execution, it seems more likely that he was the victim of Byzantine then of Ottoman justice".⁶⁶

Admittedly, the burning at stake is more frequent in Occidental Christian world, but there is no conclusive proof that it was common practice in the Byzantine world, as well. It is also true that starting with the 11th century, Occidental practices (such as the tournaments) appeared in Byzantium, but this punishment was not usual. It was uncommon and recorded only in the cases of *crimen laesae majestatis* or great heresy, but also rejected and condemned by the Church. This condemnation is expressed by the Byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon (*ca. 1140 – † after 1195) who mentions the burning at stake of the Bogomil leader Basil, at the order of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118).⁶⁷ Thus, the opinion of C. M. Woodhouse that Elissaeus was the victim of Byzantine, rather than Ottoman justice, has neither an ecclesiastic, nor a political support. Besides, we cannot believe that Byzantine justice could sentence to death a person who was not a resident of the Byzantine Empire, or whose deeds had not prejudiced the Byzantine imperial order.

The Jews could be included among the potential perpetrators. This hypothesis, however, is even less plausible, as they did not rule over Adrianople and thus could not order any execution. Some of the Jews could have sought revenge against Elissaeus for his conceptions alien to Judaism, but this would have been murder, and not an execution.

The most plausible hypothesis, finally, if the respective sentence actually existed,⁶⁸ is that the Ottoman justice decided Elissaeus' execution.⁶⁹ Many scholars interested in Elissaeus' death would accept an execution, but could we understand the words "πυρὶ τὴν τελευτὴν εὔρετο" only as an execution?

It is surprising, however, that Plethon does not seem affected by his teacher's death, as he explicitly agreed with such a punishment. In the chapter *Περὶ δικῶν* of his *Treatise on Laws* he proposes this penalty for all those guilty of rape, the homosexuals, paedophiles or zoophiles, thus reminding of the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19).⁷⁰

⁶⁵ TAESCHNER, "Georgios Gemistos Plethon. Ein Beitrag ...", p. 241.

⁶⁶ WOODHOUSE, 1986, 28.

⁶⁷ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, B. Leib (ed.), Paris, 1945, vol. III, pp. 218–219 and pp. 226–227.

⁶⁸ Theodor Nikolaou believes that Elissaeus' burning at stake is a mere invention of Scholarios, intended to denigrate Plethon; Theodor St. NIKOLAOU, "Ω Ζωροάστρης εις τὸ φιλοσοφικὸν σύστημα τοῦ Γ. Γεμιστοῦ Πλήθωνος", in: *ΕΕΒΣ*, 38 (1971) pp. 297–341, here pp. 335–337.

⁶⁹ Thus I agree with Schultze, Mamalakis and Taeschner. See notes 62, 63 and 65.

⁷⁰ Ch. ALEXANDRE, *Pléthon. Traité de lois*, pp. XXXIII, LXXI, and p. 126.

If Elissaeus actually existed, which is very likely since Plethon went to Adrianople in order to find a master, then all our arguments render the figure of the one who exerted overwhelming influence on “the most original” of the Byzantine philosophers, imitative and lacking originality⁷¹, the man who left his imprint on his times. Elissaeus probably was a personality of the Ottoman court of Adrianople, a master above masters, many of whom have remained unknown to Byzantine scholars. Although a Jew, he was a *Hellenes* in spirit, as philosopher a Suhrawardīan, but not a Muslim. Elissaeus’ death showed that there are limits even in spite of an amazing cultural openness, going far beyond mere tolerance. Whether these limits were imposed to him by the Ottoman authorities (execution), or simply by some of his former coreligionaries (punishment), disturbed by his estrangement from the synagogue, is still an open question, possibly answered in the future if new documents are discovered.

⁷¹ Constantin NOICA, “Introducere la exegeza europeană prin Coridaleu” [“Introduction to the European Exegesis through Korydalleus”], in: IDEM, *Simple introduceri la bunătatea timpului nostru* [Simple Introductions to the Kindness of Our Times], Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, pp. 82–83.