

C. Research reports

The views of Gerasimos Vlachos on astral influences: Aristotelic, hermetic, and astrological approaches to the heavenly bodies

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The Greek Orthodox populations of the Ottoman empire have not been the subject of a great deal of historical focus in academia. Being a part of an empire, or to be more precise, an Orthodox minority within a Muslim empire, historians tend to neglect the philosophical and scientific achievements produced by the Greek Orthodox scholars, preferring to delve into the religious aspects of the various Patriarchates. This academic approach has brought to light some impressive results, not only in terms of political studies of the period but also in our understanding of the everyday lives of the Orthodox people. However, this approach seems to generally be focused on specifically Orthodox aspects, neglecting other approaches that were not compatible within the official Or-

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thodox doctrine. To further elaborate, there are countless philosophical currents, like Hermeticism, that resurfaced in the Western Christianities after the 15th century, eventually finding their way to the Greek-speaking philosophers of the Ottoman Empire. Scholars incorporated these philosophical and scientific currents into the Orthodox doctrine, developing them and using them to answer focal questions. However, their scientific contributions seem to be mostly ignored by historians, theologians, and scientists. Especially during the 17th century, the Greek Orthodox scientific communities were quite prolific and eager to accept, study, and modify “foreign” doctrines to offer explanations and philosophical answers to the questions of the time. In recent years, historiography has shifted its attention to the abundance of manuscripts and works produced by the hands of Orthodox philosophers, especially during the proliferation and influx of manuscripts from the West during the mid-17th century and onward. Scholars such as Theophilos Korydalleas,² Leo Allatios,³ and many others, along with their works, have eventually received the attention they deserve from historical academia. Although this recent resurgence of interest in Orthodox scholarly works of the 17th century is noteworthy and essential, there have emerged some problems regarding the framework through which these sources are approached. The aforementioned issues, which will be elaborated on in the following lines, serve as motivation for this discussion of the life of Gerasimos Vlachos and a valuable primary source he produced: an original as-of-yet unstudied manuscript produced in the 17th century that is marked by the abundant Hermetic influences that co-existed with the theological and philosophical status quo of the period.

Gerasimos Vlachos (1605/7–1685) has drawn some minor attention from historians and researchers. One of the first historians to mention Gerasimos Vlachos is Konstantinos Sathas (1842–1914), in his collected works “Biographies of illustrious literary Greeks”.⁴ Sathas provides biographical details on the

2 For more details, see C. P. Marazopoulos, *Θεόφιλος Κορυδαλλέας: Ο Πρωτοφιλόσοφος Τὸν Ἑλληνικὸν Νεοαριστοτελισμὸν* [Theophilos Korydalleas: the First Philosopher of Greek Neo-Aristotelianism] (Athens 2008).

3 For more details, see K. Hartnup, *‘On the Beliefs of the Greeks’: Leo Allatios and Popular Orthodoxy* (Leiden 2004).

4 K. Sathas, *Νεοελληνικὴ φιλολογία: βιογραφίαι τῶν ἐν τοῖς γράμμασι διαλαμπάντων Ἑλλήνων, ἀπὸ τῆς καταλύσεως τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Αυτοκρατορίας μέχρι τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἐθνεγερσίας (1453–1821)* [Neohellenic philology: biographies of the illustrious Greek scholars, from the end of the Byzantine Empire until the Greek Resurrection (1453–1821)] (Athens 1868).

life of Gerasimos Vlachos, alongside some information on his studies and research. The importance afforded to this figure is limited: Sathas' writing on Vlachos is roughly only three pages in length (in contrast to more famous scholars such as Theophilos Korydalleas, whose detailed biographical details fill more than 10 pages). There are very few comments on the manuscripts produced by Vlachos, and although he was listed among the "Illustrious Greeks", his works and achievements are overshadowed by those of his contemporaries. This last statement also seems to be true for modern historiography. Gerasimos Vlachos is perceived as a minor scholar following the Neo-Aristotelian current, writing in the shadow of the scholar who established Neo-Aristotelianism in the Greek Orthodox communities, Theophilos Korydalleas (1570–1646). Even though the scholar following of Gerasimos Vlachos is minor, there are some extensive dissertations produced by historians and scholars like Vasileios Tatakis, Dimitris Paradoulakis, Konstantinos Mertzios and others, who shed light to various topics regarding Vlachos' academic career and biography.⁵

But who was Gerasimos Vlachos? And why should historiography focus more on his scholarly work? To answer this question, some background on his career as a clergyman and scholar is required as these two roles deeply influenced his process of thinking and the works he produced. Gerasimos Vlachos was born on the island of Crete in 1605 or 1607. Details on his early life are scarce and fragmentary, with sources offering conflicting evidence.⁶ This includes his alleged date of birth, with historiographies speculating about his birth date based on his date of death. Sathas does not provide an exact date of birth, but the archive of the Greek community of Venice states that Vlachos' death was

5 K. Mertzios, "Νέαι ειδήσεις περί Κρητών εκ των αρχείων της Βενετίας. Δ' Γεράσιμος Βλάχος" [New information on Cretans from the Venetian archives. IV: Gerasimos Vlachos], *Kritika Chronika*, 2 (1948), 281–297; idem, "Η διαθήκη του Γερασίμου Βλάχου του Κρητός" [The testament of Gerasimos Vlachos the Cretan], *Ο Mikros Hellinonimion*, 2 (1960); V. Tatakis, *Γεράσιμος Βλάχος ο Κρης (1605/7–1685): φιλόσοφος, θεολόγος, φιλόλογος* [Gerasimos Vlachos the Cretan (1605/7–1685): the philosopher, the theologian, the philologist] (Venice 1973); V. Tokmaki, "Η Αρμονία Οριστική του Γεράσιμου Βλάχου και το ζήτημα των πηγών του" [Gerasimos Vlachos' *Armonia Oristikiki* and the problem of his sources], unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Ioannina, 2001; D. Paradoulakis, "Coexistence and Conciliation between Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in Venice: The Case of Gerasimos Vlachos (1607–1685) Cretan Metropolitan of Philadelphia", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Universitat Hamburg, 2021.

6 Tatakis, *Γεράσιμος Βλάχος*, 3.

1685 at the age of 78 and that he therefore must have been born in 1607. On the other hand, the archives of the Saint Antonios church of Venice informs us that he died at the age of 80, and that consequently, he must have been born in 1605.⁷ His early education was taken care of by the Sinaitic glebe of Saint Aikaterini in Crete.⁸ For his higher studies, Vlachos appears to have moved to either Venice or Padua,⁹ where he completed his studies. At some point, Vlachos must have been anointed as a priest and became active in his home place of Candia. In these prolific years of his life, Vlachos began producing some of his major works on Aristotelian philosophy, combining his career as priest with the responsibilities of a teacher-scholar and philosopher. Tokmaki mentions that this part of Vlachos' life revolved around preaching, teaching, and writing.¹⁰ These were the years where Vlachos gave himself the self-proclaimed titles of “teacher of sciences and erudite theologian”, which he used after his name in the majority of his manuscripts. These two titles, personally selected by Vlachos to describe his spiritual and philosophical erudition, are not a simple choice of words but a mirror that reflects his ways of thinking and approaching his philosophical quest and will be examined in more detail below.

Biography and works of Gerasimos Vlachos

Vlachos' early life coincided with the invasion of the Venetian-ruled Crete by Ottoman forces. During the great siege of Candia (1648–1669), Gerasimos Vlachos took an active role, supporting the Venetian and Cretan resistance and assisting the operations of the besieged. We are informed about his actions against the Ottoman invasion through a letter he sent to the *Serenissima Repubblica* in 1656 requesting financial aid and patronage from the *Serenissimo Principe*. According to this letter, during the early years of the siege Gerasimos Vlachos feverishly preached against the Ottoman invasion to the people of the regions of Pediada and Mirambello, calling for their financial and active assistance. Further on in the letter, Vlachos mentions that he willingly put himself through the dangers of the ravaging plague for the public good and also offered

7 Tokmaki, “Η Αρμονία Οριστική”, 22.

8 Mertzios, “Η διαθήκη του Γερασίμου Βλάχου”, 14.

9 G. K. Spyridakis, “Γεράσιμος Βλάχος (1607;–1685)” [Gerasimos Vlachos (1607?–1685)], *Epetiris tou Mesaionikou Archeiou* 2 (1940), 73.

10 Tokmaki, “Η Αρμονία Οριστική”, 4.

his own residences (which produced 100 ducats per year) as impromptu barracks for the Venetian army. Finally, Vlachos' letter also mentions his donations in material and valuable for the defense of the city.¹¹

During the period of 1649 to 1654, Gerasimos Vlachos decided to flee from his war-ravaged homeland to the safe haven of the Serenissima Republic of Venice. We have gained more details about this period in Vlachos' life through the dissertation of Dimitris Paradoulakis. Paradoulakis uncovered traces of the path Gerasimos Vlachos followed from Crete to the Venetian metropolis. "Already from 10 September 1649 Vlachos authorized someone named Sozon Barbaro as his procurator and commissioner in order to arrange the transfer of his movable property from Candia to Venice. At the same time, he appointed two more commissioners, Marco and Hieronymo Corner on 28 July 1649 and 7 March 1651, respectively, who would be responsible for his personal belongings (clothes, books, icons, silver, tapestries, etc.). During this time the latter would be stored in Venice."¹² Before his departure, Vlachos twice applied for the position of Professor at the School of the Greek Community in Venice (*Scuola di San Nicolo dei Greci, or Scuola dei Greci*), with both applications being rejected.¹³ In October of 1654, Gerasimos Vlachos finally left Candia for Venice, accompanied by his two nephews Arsenios Kaloudis and Grigorios Vlachos, where his third application for the *Scuola di San Nicolo dei Greci* was accepted (in 1655) and he thus acquired the highly sought-after position of professor.¹⁴ The academic and scholarly environment of Venice inspired Vlachos to produce some of his greatest works, all the while fulfilling his duties as a teacher. The Republic of Venice was a thriving metropolis characterized by religious, philosophical, and political tolerance. The Greek community of Venice had already built a Greek Orthodox church (*San Giorgio dei Greci*), a female monastery, and a school. Within this prosperous and academically thriving environment, Gerasimos Vlachos was exposed to various philosophical theories, in a school where many well-known and respected Greek teachers and philosophers left their mark, with Theophilos Korydalleas being among them. However, after facing financial difficulties (his teacher salary was not enough to sustain

11 Mertzios, "Νέαι ειδήσεις περί Κρητών".

12 Paradoulakis, "Coexistence and Conciliation", 36.

13 The exact dates are January 1651 and December 1653. Paradoulakis, "Coexistence and Conciliation", 40.

14 Ibid.

himself and his two nephews), Vlachos appears to have resolved the situation by requesting economic assistance from the *Principe* with the aforementioned letter sent in 1656. He was subsequently awarded with the lifelong monthly financial aid of 10 ducats.¹⁵ Gerasimos Vlachos remained in Venice until 1662. During these years, Vlachos acquired a reputation for his erudition and respect and appreciation as a teacher, as well as a favorable position among Venetian authorities and the Greek community alike. The *Thesaurus of Encyclopedic Basis*,¹⁶ a vocabulary of the vernacular Greek dialect with translations of entries in Ancient Greek, Latin, and Italian, and the *Harmonia*,¹⁷ an encyclopedic collection of various definitions regarding scientific knowledge and the relationship between humans and God, were both produced during Vlachos' stay in Venice and are demonstrative of his prolific academic career.

Unfortunately for Gerasimos Vlachos, his failure to be re-elected as a teacher in the *Scuola di San Nicolo dei Greci* and his pre-existing financial issues forced him to appeal once again to the Venetian Senate in February 1662, requesting a position in the first vacant Orthodox monastery that would arise on the island of Corfu. In his work, Mertzios informs us of the positive reply of the Venetian Senate to this request on the 8th of February 1661 (1662),¹⁸ through which Gerasimos Vlachos was offered the position of abbot in the monastery of the Virgin Mary of Paleopolis. Legal frictions between the Venetian Senate and the council of the monastery, which preferred a locally elected abbot, delayed his appointment, however, and Vlachos was only able to accept his new position in 1665.

He remained in this Corfu monastery for almost 15 years. During this period, Vlachos was forced to deal with local issues and power struggles between the Corfiot authorities and the Venetian Senate, which even threatened his position as an abbot. He also endured a destructive outbreak of the plague on

15 Mertzios, “Νέαι ειδήσεις”.

16 The full title in Latin is *Thesaurus encyclopaedicae basis quadrilinguis. Cum Epithetorum delectu ac duplici Latinarum, ac Italicarum dictionum Indice. De pluribus antiquis ac Recentioribus Dictionariis colectus a P. Gerasimo Vlacho Cretensi, Abbate D. Georgii Scalotae, Sacri Evangelii concionatore, ac scientiarum in utroque idiomate*.

17 The full title in Latin is *Harmonia definitiva entium, de mente Graecorum Doctorum, auctore Gerasimo Vlacho Cretensi, Abbate D. Georgii Scalotae, Sacri Evangelii concionatori, ac scientiarum Magistro*.

18 Mertzios, “Νέαι ειδήσεις”, 12.

the island during the summer of 1673,¹⁹ as well as spiritual and social unrest originating from the Jewish messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi.²⁰ Sabbatai Zevi's foretelling that the end of the world would come in the year 1666 motivated many Jewish groups scattered across Europe and the Ottoman Empire to sell their property and move to Istanbul to seek the guidance of the prophet, further troubling the respective authorities with mass migration flows. With panic spreading even to the non-Jewish population, many Christian and Muslim preachers reacted by spreading anti-Jewish sermons, and Vlachos was no exception. In defense of the validity of the Orthodox faith against this newfound Jewish threat, Vlachos composed his treatise *Against the Jews*.²¹ By structuring his main argument around the different interpretations of the Bible by the Jewish and Christian traditions, he aimed to present the fundamental differences between Christianity and Judaism and endorse the superiority of the first over the latter with theological arguments.²² *Against the Jews* was not the only treatise that Vlachos wrote on Corfu. He wrote two more dissertations: *On Muhammad's Religion and Against the Turks*,²³ a theological dissertation of a similar tone to the aforementioned one, and *Teaching on the Pure Way to Teach the Divine and Holy Gospel*, a manual of methods to teach the Orthodox gospel. It is important to highlight that despite the spiritual and administrative challenges he faced, Vlachos never interrupted his career as a scholar. Even with the ever-increasing responsibilities of being an abbot, Gerasimos Vlachos continued his attempts to renovate the monastery of the Virgin Mary of Paleopolis, all the while producing his manuscripts.

The last chapter of Vlachos' prolific life finds him elected as Archbishop of Philadelphia, back in Venice. In these last four years of his life, between 1681 and 1685, the frail archbishop occupied himself with ecclesiastical, religious confes-

19 For the plague that struck Corfu in 1673, see the reports of the then Proveditore Generale da Màr Andrea Valier in K. M. Setton, *Venice, Austria, and the Turks in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia 1991), 253–255.

20 For more details, see G. Koutzakiotis, *Attendre la fin du monde au XVII^e siècle - le messie juif et le grand drogman*, trans. D. Morichon (Paris 2014).

21 For additional details, see M. Manousakas, “Δύο άγνωστα έργα του Γερασίμου Βλάχου εις Αθιορειτικόν κώδικα” [Two unknown works by Gerasimos Vlachos in an Athonite codex], *Kritika Chronika*, 8 (1954), 55–60.

22 Paradoulakis, “Coexistence and Conciliation”, 61.

23 *Περί της του Μωάμεθ θρησκείας και κατά Τούρκων*, Xenophontos Monastery of Mount Athos library, no. 213.

sional, educational, and social-philanthropic goals, until his timely death from apoplexy in either 1685 or 1687.²⁴ His prolific writing career comprised 12 treatises on rhetoric, philosophy, natural philosophy, and theology, with all of his books finding wide circulation in Ottoman and Christian regions alike. During his life, the Cretan archbishop enjoyed great admiration for his scholarly work, appreciation for his teaching activities, and respect for his scientific work. An extensive circle of scholars, academics, and theologians—both Greek and Italian—mourned his death. His close friend and then Chaplain of San Giorgio, the poet and painter of icons, Emmanuel Zane Bounialis (1610–1690), dedicated his religious book, a hymn in verses to Virgin Mary written in vernacular Greek, to Vlachos.²⁵ Gerasimos Vlachos was among the first theologians who did not remain within the narrow borders of theology. Instead, he attempted to combine the theological and scholarly status quo with research in other philosophical and scientific currents, in an attempt to broaden the limits of Orthodox understanding while reshaping the acceptance of ancient “heretical” knowledge in the Orthodox dogma of the time. His combination of scholastic Neo-Aristotelianism and Orthodox theology is indicated by the titles he introduced himself with at the beginning of most of his manuscripts: “priest-monk” (*ιερομόναχος*) and “preacher of the holy scripts” (*κήρυκος του Ιερού Ευαγγελίου*), alongside “teacher of sciences” *των επιστημών διδάσκαλος*). It is important to note here that the valuable contribution of Vlachos to the renovation and reshaping of philosophical studies in the Orthodox Greek-speaking communities surpasses the borders of Neo-Aristotelianism and is often underestimated, if not entirely ignored, by the majority of modern Greek historians and philosophers. In fact, in most historical accounts he is portrayed as a representative of Neo-Aristotelianism, a figure without further interest in terms of the history of modernity. However, some of his achievements have led historians to scour Greek and Venetian primary sources for details regarding his life. Scholars such as Tokmaki and Paradoulakis have collected and compiled rich knowledge about Vlachos’ life. Furthermore, Tatakis, Psimenos, Tokmaki, and Karras²⁶ have delved into his academic output, and even though his works are currently

24 Paradoulakis, “Coexistence and Conciliation”, 70.

25 Paradoulakis, “Coexistence and Conciliation”, 71.

26 Tatakis, *Γεράσιμος Βλάχος*; Tokmaki, “*Η Αρμονία Οριστική*”; I. Karras, *Οι επιστήμες στην Τουρκοκρατία* [Sciences under Turkish rule], vol. II (Athens 1980); N. Psimenos, *Μελετήματα νεοελληνικής φιλοσοφίας* [Studies on modern Greek philosophy], vol. III: *Κορυθαλική*

perceived as products of the Neo-Aristotelian wave of the 17th century, at least they are included in the scientific and cultural heritage of Greek Orthodoxy.

Despite the aforementioned investigations into this figure, the work of Gerasimos Vlachos—or to be more specific, a certain aspect of it—continues to be generally overlooked by the historical community. Gerasimos Vlachos, a preacher, teacher, and archbishop, was among the scholars of the 17th century who effectively combined the Orthodox doctrine with various resurging esoteric movements that do not easily fit under the umbrella term of “Aristotelianism”. Esoteric movements and their respective philosophies were generally not the focus of much study in Greek Orthodox communities during the 15th–18th century, despite various well-respected scholars and teachers accepting the knowledge they acquired from esoteric philosophies and incorporating it in their workbooks and manuscripts. Vlachos is, of course, not the sole “culprit” who studied and practiced esotericism. Athanasios Rhetor.²⁷ For example, another high-ranking clergyman and scholar, feverishly studied the art of alchemy, alongside theology and philosophy. Even Theophilos Korydalleas,²⁸ an esteemed scholar of the 17th century, did not shy away from using astrological predictions based on the Ptolemaic charts in his works. Transmutation and astrological predictions coexisted in the philosophical way of thinking of the 17th century, with philosophical works adapting and incorporating esoteric philosophies. In contrast to magical practices and rituals, which were considered by Orthodox scholars to be unscientific and full of superstition, astrology and alchemy were considered to be scientifically valid fields of knowledge.



Περίοδος: Οι πρώτοι φιλοσοφήσαντες [Korydalleas’ period: the first philosophers] (Ioannina 2008).

27 R. Franckowiak, “Athanasios Rhetor and the Greek Chemistry in the 17th Century Ottoman Empire”, in E. Nikolaidis (ed.), *Greek Alchemy from Late Antiquity to Early Modernity* (Brepols 2014), 131–47.

28 V. Tsiotras, “Κλαύδιος Πτολεμαίος και Θεόφιλος Κορυδαλλεύς: τα αστρολογικά κείμενα” [Claudius Ptolemy and Theophilos Korydalleus: the astrological texts], *Σιναϊτικά Ανάλεκτα Α’* [Miscellanea sinaïtica I] (Athens 2002), 171–208.

The manuscript “*Comments on Aristotle’s Meteorologica*”

In Gerasimos Vlachos’ commentary on *Meteorologica* by Aristotle, he offers a coherent guide to understanding the universe. By closely examining this unpublished manuscript we can say that Vlachos indeed adopts the Aristotelic methodology and method of philosophical exposition. However, as is revealed in his writings, he appears to be far more flexible and lenient toward non-Aristotelian alternatives and especially Hermeticism than would be expected for a mainstream scholastic figure. Thirteen copies of the original manuscript have survived until today. The dates of the copies vary from the mid-17th century to the 18th century. From the number of surviving copies, we can safely assume that *Comments on Aristotle’s Meteorologica* were moderately widespread and would have been available to the academic community of the period. The copy presented here is listed as the second most important copy in Karras’ compilation on the Greek sciences under Ottoman rule.²⁹ The authentic copy resides in the Library of the Hellenic Parliament, with code B.T.B. MS 49. The title of the manuscript, as presented on the 5th recto page, is *Εἰς το α β^{ον} καὶ γ^{ον} βιβλίον τῶν μετεωρολογικῶν τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους σχολαστικά ζητήματα ἐκδοθέντα παρὰ Γερασίου Ἱερομονάχου Βλάχου τοῦ Κρητός, κήρυκος τοῦ Ἱεροῦ Εὐαγγελίου, καὶ κοινού κατ’ ἀμφοτέρας τὰς διαλέκτους τῶν ἐπιστημῶν διδασκάλου* [Scholastic chapters upon the 1st, 2nd and 3rd book of Aristotle’s *Meteorologica*, issued by Gerasimos Vlachos the Cretan, the priest-monk, preacher of the holy scripts, and teacher of the sciences in both dialects].³⁰ The copy was part of Spyridon Miliás’ collection, as we can see from a marginal note on the same page, which provides an approximate date of 1728. The manuscript is divided into three parts. Each part is further subdivided into chapters or «ζητήματα». There are a total of forty-eight chapters divided in the three parts of the manuscript. Vlachos follows the peripatetic Aristotelian form of posing a question with *δόξα ἐστὶ*” or “*δόξα κατὰ τὸν φιλόσοφον*” which translates as “the common belief is” or “the belief of the philosopher is”. Regarding the answer provided, Vlachos often starts with “*ἡ ἡμετέρα δέσις*” (“our opinion”), and in many cases he also provides the answers of other scholars, either from the philosophical movements of the West of the time or presenting philosophies originating from the ancient corpus of knowledge. Vlachos’ commentary does not cover Aristotle’s full work, as his disser-

29 Karras, *Οἱ ἐπιστῆμες στὴν Τουργοκρατία*.

30 Library of the Hellenic Parliament, Ms 49.

tation seems to focus on the first three tomes of the original work. In addition, Vlachos does not adhere to a specific flow based on the structure of Aristotle's work. Instead, Vlachos focuses his attention on specific questions. In the first section, Vlachos provides an explanation regarding the "astral influences", with his comments showing evidence of having been heavily inspired by the Hermetic world vision of a microcosm being closely tied to the astral macrocosm. The second chapter provides explanations for natural phenomena, following the Aristotelian philosophies of "exhalations", with the last chapter focusing on the alchemical theories of metallogenesis. In this chapter, Vlachos provides his opinion on the topic of metals. His opinion seems to be composed of three different theories: the theory of astral influences, the Aristotelian theory of exhalations, and the sulfur-mercury theory of the "chymists".

Esoteric approaches in Vlachos' philosophy

This work by Vlachos is extensive, filling more than 200 pages. The author dedicates extensive paragraphs to explaining the technical details of astral influences before analyzing these influences themselves and how they affect life in the sublunar world. The current paper examines some of the chapters addressed, or "ζητήματα" as they are referred to by Gerasimos Vlachos. After the analysis, we will take a brief look at the primary sources and the philosophical works selected by the Cretan scholar to support his arguments, as a way of delving into the knowledge that shaped his philosophical way of thinking and led to the writing of the manuscript. In these first three chapters that are presented in the first part of the manuscript, we focus mainly on the beliefs regarding astral influences held by Gerasimos Vlachos. The Aristotelian theory of exhalations and the sulfur-mercury theory are described in the second and third parts of the manuscript, respectively and they are going to be briefly examined.

The first chapter tackled by Gerasimos Vlachos focuses on whether celestial bodies influence the sublunar bodies. From the very beginning, Gerasimos Vlachos introduces the reader to the theories of astral influences and discusses whether they are true or not. He elaborates on the above question by stating that "The general belief is that the world is comprised of different parts and so the celestial bodies (*υπέρτατον μέρος του κόσμου*) influence the sublunar bodies (*κατώτατα μέρη του κόσμου*)."³¹ He concludes by stating that the common belief

31 Library of the Hellenic Parliament, Ms 49, 5r.

is that the macrocosm influences the microcosm.³² From even the first few sentences, Gerasimos Vlachos reveals his inclination towards hermetic cosmology. For Vlachos, understanding that the world is partitioned into an upper (celestial bodies such as comets, planets) and the lower realm (earth, humans, and the natural world), with the upper world greatly influencing the events of the lower (sublunar) world. The first chapter is essentially the cornerstone of hermetic philosophy (“as above, so below”).

Moving to the answer provided to the first question, Gerasimos Vlachos states that the celestial bodies greatly influence the sublunar world. This belief is held by both philosophers and theologians alike (*Τα ουράνια σώματα εν τοίς υπό την σελήνην σώμασι ενεργούσιν. Η θέσις εστί κοινή των φιλοσόφων και θεολόγων*). He then proceeds by stating that the human being, representative of the microcosm, communicates with the macrocosm. The energy and influence of the macrocosm for Vlachos derives from the Christian God, and the human body is able to perceive this influence through his intellect. God controls the harmonious celestial bodies, and humans have imagination (*φαντασία*) in order to perceive the influence.³³ Vlachos concludes that such astral influences affect the imagination (which according to the author is the essential lens through which we perceive the world around us), and this is the way the macrocosm affects the microcosm.

Finally, in his conclusions Gerasimos Vlachos provides the reader with some astrological insights that stride further away both from Aristotelianism and Hermeticism alike.

According to astronomers, the seven planets influence the stages of pregnancy, with each planet influencing each month as the embryo is being shaped. The first month is influenced by Saturn, the second by Jupiter, the third by Mars, the fourth by Mercury, the fifth by the Sun, the sixth by Venus, and the seventh by the Moon; the eighth is also influenced by Saturn, who is considered to be deadly to the embryo, and the ninth is again ruled by Jupiter, who is considered to be life bringing.³⁴

The Cretan philosopher continues his examination on the issue by providing

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 5r–5v.

34 Ibid., 6r–7v.

another analogy, this time connecting the planets with human parts and the stages of life. The human parts of the body correspond to a planet that protects them, and the five stages of life (infant, child, adolescent, adult, elder, senior) are assigned to planets accordingly. Vlachos concludes this last part with a quick glimpse into mercury-sulfur theory, which is discussed later in the manuscript and connects the seven planets with metals as well. It is important to highlight that these beliefs are put under the “Our beliefs” (*ημετέρα άποψεις*) part of the chapter. By placing the beliefs perpetuated by astronomers here, we can safely assume that these astrological views were an integral part of Gerasimos Vlachos’ philosophy, and possibly of the academic circles of Venice more generally. The writer seems to be well versed in astrological theories, further integrating them into his philosophical arsenal. Saturn is described as a deadly planet for the embryo, increasing the chances of a child being stillborn. On the other hand, Jupiter is described as life giving, protecting the ninth month of pregnancy. Furthermore, iatrosophical theories are imbued with astrological elements in the correlation of the planets with the human parts.

In the second chapter, Gerasimos Vlachos focuses on the details of astral influence. He shifts his attention to the movement of the celestial bodies and the light that spreads through this movement as the main reason for the astral influence. After examining the theories provided by Avicenna and Aristotle, Gerasimos Vlachos concludes that both the movement of the stars and the spread of light are responsible for astral influences on the sublunar world. In the third chapter, Vlachos mentions a methodological problem that needs to be addressed, however. “In the earth, there are a multitude of material entities, like some metals, for example, which may be influenced by the celestial bodies even though neither movement nor light can reach them.” The writer provides the example of the “magnetic” stone that magnetizes metals (the author considers this a perfect example of astral influence) even though it is buried deep in the core of the earth where the light cannot penetrate and the influence of planetary movement cannot reach. To tackle this problem, Gerasimos Vlachos claims that aside from the movement and light of the planets (which, of course, exert an influence), there is a third “apocryphal” mystical power that is named “*επιρροή*” (the literal translation would be “influence”). This “*επιρροή*” is not a result of light nor movement and can penetrate each and every body of the sublunar world.

Thus, the first three chapters of the manuscript *Εις το α βον και γον βιβλιον*

των μετεωρολογικῶν του αριστοτέλους σχολαστικά ζητήματα put the question of astral influences at the center. Gerasimos Vlachos does not deny their existence, and this fact should not surprise us as this was not an uncommon theory during the 17th century. Similar views can be found in the works of Theophilos Korydalleas, in which he also accepts the astral influences over the terrestrial. It is the dedication and determination of Gerasimos Vlachos to provide a coherent and scientific manual on understanding these heavenly powers that makes the manuscript so unique in Greek historical sources. By delving deep into Aristotelian, Platonic, Hermetic, and modern sources, Gerasimos Vlachos tries to find a balance between theology and philosophy in his tackling of the concept of the astral influences. This does not mean that Gerasimos Vlachos accepts every astrological or Aristotelian theory without question. Although the author accepted some iatrosophical and astrological theories without further explanation, he does not shy away from rejecting the theories of Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistus, Pico della Mirandola, and Albertus Magnus wherever they do not adhere to the general structure of his own theories³⁵. Moreover, with a true scholastic methodology, he dedicates full paragraphs to opposing philosophies before deconstructing them. In order to remain concise, the full extent of the primary sources used by Gerasimos Vlachos will not be analyzed here; however, his erudition is certainly noteworthy and includes many theological works as well as a good number of other sources that can be characterized as esoteric such as “Asclepius” attributed to Hermes Trismegistus³⁶, the *Disputations Against Astrology* by Pico della Mirandola,³⁷ the theories of the Chaldean Oracles³⁸ and of the “astrologers”³⁹ etc.



35 For example, Vlachos rejects the theory of Albertus Magnus who claims that there are four exhalations (Library of the Hellenic Parliament, Ms 49, 17r–20v). The same happens with the opinions of Pico della Mirandola (ibid., 10v–13r). On the other hand, the author seems to agree with the theories attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and never challenges them directly.

36 Library of the Hellenic Parliament, Ms 49, 4v.

37 Ibid., 10v.

38 Ibid., 13r–15v.

39 Ibid., 4v–7v.

Influential burning spheres and comets

To gain a better understanding of the astral influences and the esoteric connotations of the philosophy of Gerasimos Vlachos, we must investigate two specific chapters addressed in the manuscript: the 11th chapter and the 16th chapter. In the eleventh chapter, entitled “What is the movement and the prediction of the flaming meteors”,⁴⁰ the Cretan scholar narrows down his research to a study of meteors and how their influence on the world can be used to predict the future. According to Vlachos, there are three results that we can expect when a flaming comet is observed in the night sky. First and foremost, we should expect pestilence. Due to the burning nature of the comet and the supposedly sulfurous surface, the comet’s fumes contaminate the air around the path of the celestial body, resulting in infections and death. Second, great waves shall rise from the sea below the path while winds rise, bringing storms. Third and finally, if a fiery comet is observed, the death of a king should be expected. He bases this claim on a passage by Albertus Magnus, which reports that a fiery sphere appearing in the night sky predicted Caesar’s death. In this passage, Gerasimos Vlachos does not follow his usual scientific way of providing sources and explaining the exact reasons for the comet’s influence. Apart from the explanation provided for the first result expected from the observance of a comet (pestilence due to sulfurous fumes and great heat), there is no explanation for the other events to be expected. However, these are just statements of some negative results originating from the influence of a comet. In the sixteenth chapter,⁴¹ Vlachos further describes the positive and negative effects of comets on human life and provides a more scientific approach in order to offer greater understanding for the reader:

According to the worldview in question, comets may foretell various positive and negative events. The mechanisms via which these events unfold originate from the planets, which have a direct bearing on comets. Depending on such planetary influence, the colors and outcomes of a comet’s appearance may vary. If the comet glows in multiple colors, this portends that it is under the influence of the planet Mercury, and that eloquence and ingenuity will be observed in humanity. If the comet is influenced by Venus, this can only mean lust and lechery. In this specific sentence, Vlachos does not mention anything about the color. If the comet has a fiery glow, this indicates that it is influenced

40 Ibid., 51r–52r.

41 Ibid.

by Mars and that war and destruction will follow in its wake. If a golden color is observed, then the comet is influenced by Jupiter and worthy kings will ascend the throne. Finally, the planet Saturn is commanding the comet if it features darker colors, and only ills and bad omens are foretold when this is observed.

In the discussion of this chapter, Vlachos utilizes the Aristotelian qualities of matter alongside the theory of exhalations to provide a “scientific” guideline for what to expect when a comet (with dark colors) appears in the sky:

First, we have to expect great famine due to the heat of the comet, which parches the earth. Second, winds and storms will follow, with an overflow of the seas. Additionally, earthquakes will destroy cities and mountains. Due to the great energy the comet has, the exhalations residing in the earth are violently pushed out, causing this mayhem. Pestilence comes next due to the dry, thick, and warm exhalation of the comet, which corrupts the air close to its path. If animals breathe this air they shall become ill, causing famine.⁴²

Humans are not immune to the influence of comets, with Gerasimos Vlachos stating that

The great temperature of the comet intrigues the vital organs of the human, especially the gallbladder. Since rage originates from the gallbladder, this irritation transforms to rage and rage to thirst for vengeance. Thus, wars shall fall upon humanity.⁴³

Furthermore, the death of a king should be expected when a black comet appears. Vlachos explains that this death will come either naturally or violently: natural death due the extreme heat that the comet brings—the bodies of kings being more sensitive and thus more susceptible—and violent death due to wars kings will wage against each other.

Concluding his thoughts on comet prophesying, Gerasimos Vlachos offers important advice to the observer of comets to not always trust the signs of the sky but analyze them and wait before reaching any conclusions.

Just as the advisor does not rush to conclusions when he instructs the king, so the sight of a comet does not necessarily mean bad omens since it is possible that

42 Ibid., 34r–35v, 51v–52r.

43 Ibid.

the counterforce of earth will disperse the exhalations, preventing the negative events.⁴⁴

The sections of Gerasimos Vlachos' work focusing on comets offers a great opportunity to observe the dual nature of his approach. On the one hand, Gerasimos Vlachos adheres to the Aristotelian approach of the exhalations and qualities of matter and tries to approach the topic in an academic way. Despite the fact that he did not offer any comment on the reasons why comets affect humanity in the first part, he compensates in the second part, using the Aristotelian approach to provide the reader with logical answers derived from the theories accepted by academia. On the other hand, he does fall into astrological paths despite his attempt to find scientific reasoning behind the comet sightings. However, his attempts to offer a rational explanation for the astral influences is noteworthy. The comets may bring war and destruction, but this happens due to the "natural" reaction of the irritation of the gallbladder by the warm exhalation of the comet. Kings may die, but this happens due to their non-resilient bodies, which are prone to the heat of the comet. There is always a logical explanation (at least in the eyes of Vlachos) based on evidence derived from the academic Aristotelian achievements of the period and not in some supernatural or divine power that dictates the lives of humans. Nevertheless, Vlachos does not avoid esoteric beliefs in his manuscript. His approach and core beliefs are based both in Aristotelianism and Hermeticism alike, with Aristotelianism representing the more "scientific" part and Hermeticism the esoteric one. He is a firm supporter of the macrocosm/microcosm theory and an adamant believer in astral influences. He continuously supports the theories of cometology, to the extent that comets can even cause death and destruction, and as we will see in the next paragraph, he additionally supports alchemical sulfur-mercury theories as well. In the next paragraph, we will delve deeper into the chapter where Gerasimos Vlachos reveals his knowledge of the theories regarding the genesis of metals and we will put his personal opinion on the subject under the microscope.



⁴⁴ Ibid.

Alchemical theories in the manuscript

In a less extensive part of the manuscript, Vlachos offers his views on metallogenesis and astral influences on the properties of metals. Gerasimos Vlachos dedicates only two chapters to the metals, along with some other brief mentions throughout the dissertation, in contrast to astral influences which occupy almost the full length of the first part and appear again in the third. Despite the cursory appearance of these ideas in the manuscript, it is more than enough to give us an indication of the wide range of sources Gerasimos Vlachos was familiar with regarding the topic of metallogenesis and alchemy, as well as his own opinions on these subjects.

The first appearance of metals in the theories of Gerasimos Vlachos is in the first chapter of the manuscript, where he connects the metals and their attributes with the seven planets.⁴⁵ Further down in the same paragraph, he attributes some properties of the “magnetic” stone to astral influences, in order to support his argument of the apocryphal “επιρροή”. Of course, the focus of this paragraph is not metals, and this is the main reason there is no other detail or comments regarding the origins of metals. However, in the eleventh chapter of the third part, Vlachos decided to dedicate an entire chapter to metallogenesis, which is entitled “What is the reason for the genesis of metals?”.⁴⁶ He begins the paragraph by stating that the common knowledge regarding metallogenesis is that metals originate from the two different exhalations of the earth. Putting forward the theories of Aristotle, of Plinius, and of Albertus Magnus, he claims that the “πνευματωδεστέρα” or “dry exhalation” creates certain metals, including sulfur, while the other exhalation, “ατμιδωδεστέρα” or “moist exhalation” is responsible for the creation of the rest of the metals, including gold, silver, etc.

The subsequent section is of great importance. Gerasimos Vlachos mentions some well-known theories regarding the creation of metals. An interesting thing to note is that among the six sources cited by the author, he mentions the theories of the “chymists” (and later, he agrees with them) and of the “astrologers”. According to Vlachos, the chymists claim that sulfur and mercury are created from the ατμιδωδεστέρα exhalation and the rest of the metals are created by the combination of mercury and sulfur. The theory of the astrologers’ claims that

45 Ibid., 4v–6v.

46 Ibid., 177r–180v.

metals are created by the seven planets, with planetary influences determining their attributes and shapes.

After Gerasimos Vlachos cites eight different sources from philosophers who focused on the creation of metals, he offers his own opinion on the matter. Gerasimos seems to accept the Aristotelian theory of metallogenesis, which claims that metals are created by the cooling of the *ατμιδωδεστέρα* exhalation. Furthermore, he also agrees with the theories of the chemists in that the first metals created by this process are sulfur and mercury, with the rest of the metals being a mixture of the two prime metals. He does not seem to disagree with the theories of the astrologers, however, stating that the ultimate agent or “*ποιητικό αίτιο*” for the creation of metals would be the astral influence of the planets. He continues by claiming that metals cannot be found across the entire Earth, but only in places like forests and deep caverns where the sulfurous and mercurial exhalations are abundant and the *ατμιδωδεστέρα* exhalation can cool enough to form them. After offering some details on the structure and creation of metals and analyzing their inherent qualities, Gerasimos Vlachos ends this part by commenting on how the exhalation, in combination with the cold quality of the Earth, contributes to the creation of valuable gems.

Gerasimos Vlachos’s treatment of this topic is invaluable for the researcher of esotericism in Greek Orthodox communities. Although it lacks direct esoteric philosophies (for example, Western alchemy or Christian Kabbalah) or even alchemical recipes for the creation or transmutation of metals, it reveals the erudition and the flexibility in Gerasimos Vlachos’ philosophical approach to metals. We must also bear in mind that unlike the Western historiography where astrological, alchemical, and esoteric manuscripts are abundant, this is one of the very few dissertations in which a scholar (especially a clergyman scholar) focuses on astral influences, alchemical theories, and Aristotelianism, even providing source-based annotations for a better understanding of celestial influences and the qualities of metals. The sulfur-mercury theory had its roots in the work of Aristotle. “Meteorology” was adopted and became widespread through the works of Jabir ibn Hayyan, an Arab scholar of the ninth century, and became the basis of all theories of metallic composition until the 18th century.⁴⁷ Gerasimos Vlachos seems to be quite adept with this theory, to the

47 J. A. Norris, “The Mineral Exhalation Theory of Metallogenesis in Pre-Modern Mineral Science”, *Ambix*, 53/1 (2006), 43–65.

point that he accepts it as the correct way of understanding the composition of metals. This fact is not remarkable when compared to the Western products of philosophy. In the Greek Orthodox context, however, there is a dearth of academic discussions regarding topics like the astral influences and alchemy in the early modern period. With the exceptions of Athanasios Rhetor, who wrote an extensive dissertation on alchemy, and Theophilos Korydalleas, who simply mentions and accepts the possibility of foretelling the future through the stars, and countless, nameless, low-quality grimoires meant for the laity, Gerasimos Vlachos' interest in these topics stands out for the scientific scholastic views he espouses regarding Aristotelian issues of celestial influence in his quest to acquire a better understanding of the sky and the surrounding world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the manuscript *Εἰς τὸ α β γ βιβλίον τῶν μετεωρολογικῶν τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους σχολαστικὰ ζητήματα* produced by Gerasimos Vlachos is not esoteric or apocryphal per se. It lacks the philosophical mysticism and complexity that can be observed in the Gnostic or Neoplatonic texts, and it does not elevate the celestial bodies to supernatural actors who influence the human world entirely based on their own will, as often observed in Hermetic works. However, the manuscript tackles the issues of the astral influences and alchemy through a strict Aristotelian approach, following the scholastic methodologies in order to provide answers. After all, Aristotelianism greatly influenced the course of both astrology and alchemy, and since the original *Meteorology* by Aristotle tackles these issues, Vlachos' commentary on *Meteorology* must tackle them as well. Vlachos is quite well versed in esoteric philosophies, however, and this seems to have exerted a great influence on his philosophical framework. Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Hermes Trismegistus, Psellos, Albertus Magnus, Marsilio Ficino Pico della Mirandola, and Francesco Piccolomino, scholars with a well-known interest in esoteric sciences (either in terms of Neoplatonic aspects, alchemical philosophies, or astrological/Hermetic approaches) are often cited and called to support Vlachos' claims. Even when Vlachos mentions their theories in order to deconstruct them, he seems to be quite adept with their philosophical views and the finer details of their frameworks. The focus on the esoteric aspects of the manuscript may thus be a little unfair towards Vlachos. In many instances, Vlachos seems to accept old astrological beliefs without much re-

search, but it seems that he tried his best to follow the scientific scholastic approach and avoid superstitions and doctrines that were considered unscientific. In doing so, he spent countless pages attempting to systemize and understand all aspects of the astral influences and basing his claims on the Aristotelian approach before proceeding to these astrological additions. In certain pages, the content of the text leads us to assume that it was mainly Hermeticism and Neoplatonism that influenced Vlachos' philosophy, to the point that he accepts some structures (such as the microcosm/macrocosm dichotomy or the linking of the planets with childbirth, etc.) as a priori true and thus decided to add them to his manuscript without further research. The outcome of this is one of the very few Greek manuscripts produced by a high clergyman, acclaimed scholar, and teacher of sciences to tackle these matters. As the historiography of early modern Greek esotericism continues to develop, manuscripts such as the one presented here are invaluable in that they demonstrate that the esotericism was destined not only for the laity (through magic rituals and talismans) but troubled and occupied the minds of even some of the best scholars Orthodoxy produced. One of the hopes for this paper is that it will increase interest in the topic of early modern Greek esotericism, as there is much more to be uncovered. Investing time and effort into further examination of this topic of study will certainly lead to the disclosure of manuscripts that can provide further insights into Orthodox esotericism.

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