

The Chronology of Plotinus' Life

T. D. Barnes

THE PRECISE CHRONOLOGY of the life of Plotinus is known only from a single ancient source, the *Vita Plotini*, which Porphyry wrote more than thirty years after his master's death and which dates several important events to specific years of Roman emperors. Plotinus was born in the thirteenth year of Septimius Severus and died at the age of sixty-five towards the end of the second year of Claudius (*Vita* 2.29–37)¹; Amelius came to Rome during the third year of Plotinus' residence there in the third year of Philip and stayed for twenty-four years until the first year of Claudius (3.38–42). Porphyry himself came to Rome shortly before the end of Gallienus' tenth year, when Plotinus was in his fifty-ninth year, and stayed until approximately the end of Gallienus' fifteenth year, when he went to Sicily (4.1–8, 4.67–68; 5.1–5, 6.1–3). After ten years in Rome during which he wrote nothing (3.31–35), Plotinus began to write in the first year of Gallienus (4.9–11). Moreover, Porphyry lists separately the twenty-one treatises which Plotinus wrote before his own arrival in the tenth year of Gallienus (4.11–68), the twenty-four which he wrote while Porphyry was in Rome (5.1–64), and the nine which he wrote after Porphyry had departed for Sicily, divided into the five treatises which Plotinus sent him during Claudius' first year (6.1–16) and the four sent at the beginning of Claudius' second (6.16–25).

The problem at once arises, how should these dates be translated into Julian calendar years? Serious discussion began when Hermann Dessau suggested (privately to F. Heinemann) that Porphyry was using either Egyptian regnal years or the Syro-Macedonian year,² and there have been three substantial and detailed treatments of the problem in the last fifty years—by H. Oppermann in 1929, by M. J. Boyd in 1937, and by J. Igal in 1972.³ Unfortunately, however, it was

¹ *Vita* 2.29–30: ἔτη γεγονώς, ὡς ὁ Εὐστόχιος ἔλεγεν, ἐξ τε καὶ ἐξήκοντα. Porphyry consistently uses inclusive reckoning (cf. *Vita* 3.20, 3.23–24, 3.38–42, 4.6–8 + 4.67–68, where ἦν . . . ἀμφὶ τὰ πενήκοντα ἔτη καὶ ἑνέα means the same as πενητηκοστὸν καὶ ἑνατον ἔτος ἦγε τότε).

² F. Heinemann, *Plotin* (Leipzig 1921) 240.

³ H. Oppermann *Plotins Leben: Untersuchungen zur Biographie Plotins* (*Orient und Antike* 7, Heidelberg 1929) 29–57; M. J. Boyd, "The Chronology in Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*," *CP* 32

not until 1972 that the publication of a group of papyri from Oxyrhynchus finally put the chronology of the reign of Claudius on a firm and indisputable basis.⁴ Since Roman imperial chronology in the middle of the third century has long been a matter of dispute among ancient historians and papyrologists,⁵ Boyd and Igal have some excuse for deducing the wrong date for Plotinus' death from a chronology of Claudius' reign which has now been disproved. It was widely believed that Gallienus died *ca* March 268, and that Claudius became emperor *ca* March 268 and died *ca* March 270:⁶ accordingly both Boyd and Igal argued that Plotinus' death, towards the end of Claudius' second year, occurred *ca* February 270.⁷ It is now established that Claudius came to the throne *ca* September 268 and died *ca* August 270—which entails that Plotinus died in summer 270. That date, to be sure, was advocated by Oppermann but only by means of illegitimate arguments.⁸ Both clarity and correct method, therefore, demand that the dates of the *Vita Plotini* be deduced afresh from the correct imperial chronology—and without assuming *a priori* that Porphyry used one system of reckoning rather than another.

Egyptian regnal years ran from 29 August (30 August in the Julian year preceding a leap year) to 28 August, and an emperor's first regnal year was the period between his *dies imperii* and the immediately following 1 Thoth (=29 [or 30] August), however short that period might be. For the Egyptian regnal years of Gallienus and Claudius, the contemporary papyri present the following picture:

15	Gallienus=	267/8
16	Gallienus=	268/9 = 1 Claudius
		269/70=2 Claudius
1	Aurelian (4) Vaballathus=	270/1 = 3 Claudius

(1937) 241–57; J. Igal, *La cronología de la Vida de Plotino de Porfirio* (Publ. Univ. Deusto I, Bilbao 1972).

⁴ *P.Oxy.* XL 2892–2940, ed. J. R. Rea (1972).

⁵ See A. Stein, *ArchPap* 7 (1924) 30–51; H. Mattingly, *NC*⁵⁴ (1924) 119; P. Schnabel, *Klio* 20 (1926) 363–68; A. Stein, *Klio* 21 (1927) 78–82; A. Stein, *ArchPap* 8 (1927) 11–13; H. Mattingly, *JEA* 13 (1927) 14–18; A. Stein, H. Mattingly and J. G. Milne, *JEA* 14 (1928) 16–21; G. Walser and T. Pekáry, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches: Bericht über die Forschung zur Geschichte des 3. Jahrhunderts (193–284 n. Chr.) von 1939 bis 1959* (Berlin 1962) 28–54.

⁶ *e.g.*, recently, *PLRE* 1.384, 209. That volume gives the span of Plotinus' life as “203/4—269/270” (707).

⁷ Boyd, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 251; Igal, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 126.

⁸ Oppermann, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 34ff, assumed that Claudius became emperor *ca* March 268, but argued that 1 Claudius was the Egyptian regnal year 29 August 268–28 August 269—a manifestly impossible combination.

$$2 \text{ Aurelian } 5 \text{ Vaballathus} = 271/2 = 3 \text{ Aurelian}$$

$$272/3 = 4 \text{ Aurelian}^9$$

From these dates, all attested by several contemporary documents, a series of deductions can be drawn. First, the *dies imperii* of Claudius falls after 28 August 268. Second, news of Claudius' death had not reached Egypt before 28 August 270: besides papyri, there are Alexandrian coins of his third year.¹⁰ Third, the *dies imperii* of Aurelian was redated in 272 from a date on or after 29 August 270 to a date on or before 28 August 270, and this redating implies three historical consequences: that Claudius died on or shortly before 28 August 270, that Aurelian was proclaimed emperor on or shortly after 29 August 270, and that Aurelian later claimed to have been emperor from the moment of Claudius' death.¹¹

The dates in the *Vita Plotini* can now be considered. Tabulated below are the Julian equivalents of the years in the *Vita Plotini* on four methods of conversion:

- (A) if the year is always reckoned from the *dies imperii*;
- (B) Egyptian regnal years, which begin on 29 August;
- (C) Seleucid regnal years beginning 1 October;¹²
- (D) regnal years beginning 1 January.

	A	B	C	D
13 Severus	9 Apr. 205– 8 Apr. 206 ¹³	29 Aug. 204– 28 Aug. 205	1 Oct. 204– 30 Sept. 205	205
3 Philip	Feb./Mar. 246– Feb./Mar. 247 ¹⁴	29 Aug. 245– 28 Aug. 246	1 Oct. 245– 30 Sept. 246	246
10 Gallienus	Sept. 262– Sept. 263 ¹⁵	29 Aug. 262– 29 Aug. 263	1 Oct. 261– 30 Sept. 262	262

⁹ Rea, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 24. The equation 1 Gallienus=253/4 is rendered certain by P.Oxy. IX 1201; XII 1476, 1563 (three horoscopes with dates by Egyptian regnal years); XLI 2951 (which has both regnal year and consular date); the equation 7 Aurelian=275/6 by P.Oxy. XXXI 2557; PSI VII 764 (two horoscopes with dates by regnal years).

¹⁰ J. Vogt, *Die alexandrinischen Münzen* II (Stuttgart 1924) 159–60.

¹¹ Rea, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 23–25; T. D. Barnes, *Phoenix* 26 (1972) 179–81.

¹² On the Seleucid era and new year, see E. J. Bickermann, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (London 1968) 70ff; A. E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology* (Munich 1972) 139ff.

¹³ The *dies imperii* of Septimius Severus was 9 April 193, cf. P. Dur. 54 (*Feriale Duranum*) col. ii line 3.

¹⁴ The accession of Philip can be dated only approximately, cf. PIR² J 461.

¹⁵ The accession of Valerian and Gallienus cannot fall long after 29 August 253, cf. ILS 531 (21 October 253: Gemellae, in southern Numidia).

15 Gallienus	Sept. 267– Sept. 268	30 Aug. 267– 28 Aug. 268	1 Oct. 266– 30 Sept. 267	267
1 Claudius	Sept. 268– Sept. 269	Sept. 268– 28 Aug. 269	Sept. 268	268
2 Claudius	Sept. 269– Aug. 270	29 Aug. 269– Aug. 270	1 Oct. 268– 30 Sept. 269	269

The last two computations can be rejected outright: (C), which should be what Dessau meant by the Syro-Macedonian year, is clearly incompatible with Porphyry's assumption that 1 Claudius followed immediately after 15 Gallienus (6.1ff), while (D) fails to allow "sixty-six years" for Plotinus' life (2.29–30) on any method of reckoning.¹⁶ A decision between (A) and (B) is more difficult since they yield virtually identical results for all events in Plotinus' life after his departure from Alexandria in 243. The correct chronology for the reign of Claudius seems to allow (A) without necessitating the desperate expedient of rejecting Porphyry's statement that Plotinus was born in the thirteenth year of Severus as a sheer error.¹⁷ Nevertheless, (B) is a neater, more elegant and less arbitrary computation than (A), and it should probably be inferred that Porphyry used Egyptian regnal years, or at least regnal years calculated from *ca* 1 September (which will differ from those of computation (B) by only a few days in each case). Hence the following chronology for the *Vita Plotini* can be deduced:

Plotinus born in 13 Severus (2.37).	September 204–August 205
He begins to study philosophy in his 28th year (3.6ff).	September 231–August 232
He becomes a pupil of Ammonius.	September 232–August 233
He joins Gordian's expedition in his 39th year (3.18ff). (3.20: ἔνδεκα ὄλων ἐτῶν=10 years)	?Spring 243
He comes to Rome (3.22ff). (3.23–24: τεσσαράκοντα γεγονώς ἔτη=39)	Summer 244
He spends ὄλων δέκα ἐτῶν, <i>i.e.</i> nine years, in Rome without writing (3.34–35).	Summer 244–late summer 253

¹⁶ The year of the emperors' *tribunicia potestas* (10 December–9 December) would give the same inadmissible result.

¹⁷ So Igal, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 124: "Plotino nace (últimos meses de 203—primeros de 204), dentro del año 11.º de reinado de Severo."

Amelius comes when Plotinus is in his third year at Rome, in 3 Philip (3.38ff). Amelius stays ἔτη ὄλα . . . εἴκοσι καὶ τέσσαρα until 1 Claudius, i.e. (with allowance made for Porphyry's use of inclusive reckoning) for 23 years until summer 269.	Summer 246
Plotinus begins writing from 1 Gallienus (4.9ff).	ca September 253
Porphyry comes to Rome in 10 Gallienus (4.1ff) shortly before the emperor's tenth anniversary (5.1ff). ¹⁸	July or August 263
Porphyry in Rome with Plotinus for the rest of 10 Gallienus and 11–15 Gallienus (5.1ff; 5.59ff).	July or August 263–August 268
Porphyry goes to Sicily at the end of 15 Gallienus (6.1ff).	August 268
Plotinus dies towards the end of 2 Claudius (2.29ff).	July or August 270

The chronology which the *Vita Plotini* predicates for its hero is wholly consistent with itself. But does Porphyry give—and did he know—the correct date for Plotinus' birth? Plotinus refused to talk about his family, parents or home-town (*Vita* 1.2–4), and he kept secret the day and month of his birth, revealing his age only as he lay dying, to the doctor who attended him (2.29ff). Hence Porphyry's only evidence was the doctor's report (he, the doctor and two others then calculated the year of Plotinus' birth); and if Plotinus never celebrated his birthday, he may have been mistaken in his belief about his own age. Scepticism is therefore in place: if Porphyry's date for his birth is deduced solely from Plotinus' own words as he lay dying, it would be imprudent to accept it with confidence.¹⁹ Matters are fortunately different with Plotinus' later career. Porphyry's dates are precise and credible: they come from his own recollection, from

¹⁸ The word *δεκαετία* does not signify Gallienus' *decennalia*—which should have been celebrated at both the beginning and the end of his tenth year.

¹⁹ Oppermann, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 55–56; J. M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge 1967) 3.

Amelius, who came to Rome in 246, from the pagan Origen, who was a student with Plotinus in Alexandria—and from Plotinus himself.²⁰

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
August, 1975

²⁰ Porphyry explicitly cites Plotinus as his authority for his subject's life as far as 243 (*Vita* 3.1–17).

I am grateful to Professor John Rist for drawing my attention to the problem discussed here and for scrutinising the solution offered.