

# The Composition of Photius' *Bibliotheca*

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THE CIRCUMSTANCES in which Photius wrote the *Bibliotheca* have been a topic for speculation and argument for a very long time. Photius' own letter of dedication to his brother Tarasius at the beginning of the book explains at first sight how he came to compile this vast storehouse of learning; but on closer inspection his words have been found obscure or incredible, and so scholars have devoted much ingenuity to fresh interpretations of the letter. The problems have been fully treated by Ziegler,<sup>1</sup> and on the whole I agree with his solutions; but since he wrote, several more suggestions have been made. I should like to discuss some of these and add one or two considerations that seem to have been overlooked.

There are two main questions. Did Photius write in Constantinople or during a diplomatic mission to the Arab government? And when composing did he rely entirely or very largely on his own memory of the books he was summarising? The two vital phrases in his letter were noted by Gibbon: "*Eis 'Assurίους* can only mean Bagdad, the seat of the caliph; and the relation of his embassy might have been curious and instructive. But how did he procure his books? A library so numerous could neither be found at Bagdad, nor transported with his baggage, nor preserved in his memory. Yet the last, however incredible, seems to be affirmed by Photius himself, *ὅσας αὐτῶν ἡ μνήμη διέσωζε.*"<sup>2</sup>

The first difficulty is to know what status we should assign to Photius' letter. In common with most other scholars I incline to think that it should be taken at its face value as a record of fact. But it is only fair to say that distinguished authorities have cast doubt on it.<sup>3</sup> The chief reason for scepticism is a discrepancy with the postscript, where Photius refers to the summarised texts no longer as those he had read

<sup>1</sup> K. Ziegler, in *RE* 20 (1941) s.v. PHOTIOS 13, esp. cols. 687ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, VI (London 1898) 105 n.114.

<sup>3</sup> F. Halkin, *AnalBoll* 81 (1963) 416 following K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1897) 519.

during the absence of Tarasius, but as the larger category of those he had read since his critical faculty had developed.

This discrepancy is perhaps unreal. One interpretation of the letter is that the books in question had been read at the meetings of some club, and Tarasius for some reason had not been able to come to the meetings; perhaps business had taken him too away from the capital, but since we know next to nothing about Tarasius the idea is no more than guesswork. Difficulties do arise, however, from a comparison with the postscript, where Photius says nothing of the club and speaks of his own reading since his faculties matured; hence modern scepticism. But there is another way of taking the words in the dedication. The books summarised are to be understood as Photius' private reading. We can understand a contrast between them and books read at meetings of a club which Tarasius attended regularly. To say "books read when you were not present" is an oblique but appropriate way of describing Photius' private reading, given that Tarasius was a member of the club and the addressee of the letter. Even if there is no positive evidence for the existence of this club elsewhere, the notion is very plausible.

So much for the dedication. The postscript appears to speak of private reading undertaken over a period of years. The only complication lies in the precise meaning of the first clause: *ἃ μὲν οὖν φιλολογουμένοις ἡμῖν καθ' ἑαυτοὺς εἰς ἀνάμνησιν ἐλθεῖν συνηνέχθη*. At first sight this means "The books which I chanced to recall during private study," and so refers to the process of composition of the *Bibliotheca*. That leaves the syntactical connection of the third clause, "from the time when my critical faculties developed up to the present," utterly obscure. So perhaps we should render (more or less as Ziegler appears to do), "the books which I chanced to commit to memory (record in my memory)." Although the use of *εἰς ἀνάμνησιν ἐλθεῖν* seems rather strained, at least the third clause then follows naturally.

That Photius wrote in the capital seems almost certain. His purpose was to console Tarasius for his departure abroad on a dangerous mission. To postpone composition until the journey had begun would have been to endanger the undertaking, and the gift could not properly serve as a consolation unless it was presented before his departure. Photius' words *διαζεύξεως ἢν βαρέως φέρεις παραμύθιον* are clear, and they are supported by the postscript, where he hints at the notion of writing more books of the same kind if providence brings him home

safe and sound. The words *ἐκεῖθεν ἡμᾶς ἀνασωσάμενον* show that he did not write in Bagdad or whatever the destination of his mission was.

But there is a phrase in the letter which has been taken to prove that Photius was not in the capital when he wrote. Mme Ahrweiler<sup>4</sup> has drawn attention to his remark that he had to wait a little while before he found a scribe to copy his work, claiming that such delays would be inconceivable in the capital. I doubt myself if this argument is more than specious. We know nothing of supply and demand in the book trade at this time, but we can easily imagine that the demand for books occasionally outran the capacity of high-class calligraphers (or indeed the supply of parchment, though Photius does not seem to be referring to that difficulty). It makes little difference whether Photius wanted a competent amanuensis to take down from dictation the master copy of the work or a calligrapher to prepare a presentation copy for his brother.

Mme Ahrweiler holds that Photius wrote on campaign in Asia Minor, just before setting out on a mission further east on behalf of the emperor Theophilus in 838.<sup>5</sup> She might perhaps have adduced in favor of her case a passage of Anna Comnena (prooemium 3.4), who speaks of her husband drafting a history while on campaign in the eastern provinces. But I doubt whether even this parallel is convincing. Byzantine princes travelled abroad in comfort and for obvious reasons were accompanied by secretarial staff; but members of that staff such as Photius may not have had either the leisure or the copious supply of precious writing material which would have been necessary if they were to indulge their literary tastes. Furthermore, those who think that Photius needed a large library at hand for consultation while he wrote have to explain how he succeeded in transporting the books. One might suppose that if Photius travelled by sea he had the chance to take some books with him and spend part of the day writing; but there are objections to this hypothesis as well, and it cannot be used in relation to the journey to Amorion.

Another objection to the traditional view is the knowledge of

<sup>4</sup> H. Ahrweiler, *BZ* 58 (1965) 360.

<sup>5</sup> I do not wish to take sides in discussion of the date. While Mme Ahrweiler's reconstruction of Photius' early career is most acute and plausible, her early dating of the *Bibliotheca* is not equally convincing. So little is known of IX-century history that the embassy on which Photius served is not easy to identify with certainty. But in favour of the usual identification one may at least say that an embassy mentioned only in the Arabic and not in the Greek sources is not for that reason a fiction.

heretical theology that Photius displays in the *Bibliotheca*. One might expect him to have no opportunity of reading Nestorian or Monophysite tracts until diplomatic business took him abroad.<sup>6</sup> Certainly the Greek church suppressed heretical literature; at any rate we hear of two occasions much later in the twelfth century when the patriarch ordered the burning of such books.<sup>7</sup> But censorship in Byzantium may not have been as effective as it would be in a modern state, and perhaps the authorities did not always succeed in destroying every copy of a book. Photius might have read these works in the capital, perhaps finding in neglected monastic libraries copies made in the fifth and sixth centuries, when these doctrines still enjoyed a certain vogue. Alternatively, if one believes that all copies in the capital and neighbouring provinces were destroyed by patriarchal authority or fanatical monks, so that they survived only in the heretical communities of the east, it does not follow that Photius had to go to the east himself in order to read them. There must have been other travellers, and a keen scholar as well placed in Byzantine society as Photius no doubt had opportunity to drop hints about rare books that he would like to read. It has even been maintained recently that Photius did his reading in the patriarchal library; but this is unlikely unless one supposes that heretical tracts were kept in a special reserve, to be consulted by select readers whose orthodoxy was above suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

More interesting than the place of composition is the author's method. It is not usual to take seriously his assertion that he worked from memory. Instead, the *Bibliotheca* is thought to be the revised and expanded version of notes made during many years of reading.<sup>9</sup> Doubtless he did have notes of this kind, but I think his claim may be substantially true; in other words, I would suppose that his notes were very brief and he relied on his memory for the most part.

The idea can be supported by an analogy from more recent times. We know that the English historian and essayist Lord Macaulay (1800–59) had a phenomenal memory, described by his biographer as follows:<sup>10</sup> “During the first part of his life he remembered whatever

<sup>6</sup> B. Hemmerdinger, *REG* 69 (1956) 101–03, an idea favourably received by H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der Textüberlieferung I* (Zurich 1961) 429.

<sup>7</sup> F. Dölger, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reichs*, no.1273; V. Grumel, *Regestes des actes du patriarcat de Constantinople*, no.1007.

<sup>8</sup> K. Tsantsanoglou, *Tò λεξικὸ τοῦ Φωτίου* (Thessalonike 1967) 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ziegler, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) col.690.38ff.

<sup>10</sup> Sir G. O. Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay I* (London 1932) 48–49 and 123.

caught his fancy without going through the process of consciously getting it by heart. . . . At one period of his life he was known to say that, if by some miracle of vandalism all copies of *Paradise Lost* and the *Pilgrim's Progress* were destroyed off the face of the earth, he would undertake to reproduce them both from his recollection whenever a revival of learning came. In 1813, while waiting in a Cambridge coffee-room for a post-chaise which was to take him to his school, he picked up a county newspaper containing two such specimens of provincial poetical talent as in those days might be read in the corner of any weekly journal. One piece was entitled "Reflections of an exile"; while the other was a trumpery parody on the Welsh ballad "Ar hyd y nos," referring to some local anecdote of an ostler whose nose had been bitten off by a filly. He looked them once through, and never gave them a thought for forty years, at the end of which time he repeated them both without missing,—or, as far as he knew, changing,—a single word." Elsewhere in the biography it is stated, "Macaulay thought it probable that he could rewrite *Sir Charles Grandison* from memory."

Before convicting Photius of falsehood or exaggeration we should ask ourselves whether he too was blessed with this astonishing faculty.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I am much indebted to Professor R. Browning for offering his observations on a draft of this essay. Subsequently, Mr D. A. Russell has drawn my attention to a Roman writer of prodigious memory—the elder Seneca.