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THE DEMONOLOGY OF MICHAEL PSELLUS: SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND NEOPLATONIC INFLUENCES

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Abstract: The present study aims to explore one of the relatively under-researched aspects of Michael Psellus' philosophical legacy, namely, his demonological treatises. Although extremely brief, these texts establish a new paradigm that shapes the Byzantine intellectual elite's approach to ancient heritage, contemporary folklore, and the vernacular literature of preceding centuries. Our first task in achieving this goal will be to outline the main characteristics of the sociocultural context in which Psellus formed his philosophical worldview. As comparative analysis shows, by the eleventh century, a consolidated demonological system was already taking shape based on official Christian dogma and selectively chosen images from ancient literature. The second task will determine the method by which Psellus constructs his demonology. As we shall see, he withholds his sources and intentionally bases his highly selective notes on the subject primarily on a few late antique authors within the Neoplatonic tradition.

Keywords: Psellus; Neoplatonism; demons; demonology; Byzantium; hagiography

Introduction

This study focuses on the demonology in the work of Michael Psellus (1018 – 1096), where this Byzantine scholar explores the subject across several brief texts published in the *Philosophica Minora* corpus by Dominic O'Meara. Psellus examines the philosophical underpinnings of the ancient concept of demons in two notably different works: *Hellenic Provisions Concerning Demons* (Ἑλληνικαὶ διατάξεις περὶ δαιμόνων) (Psellus 1989b, pp. 123 – 126) and *On Demons* (Περὶ δαιμόνων) (Psellus 1989c, pp. 158 – 159). As indicated by the title, the former addresses the pagan ideas related to "demons," especially as understood by late antique philosophers, while the latter, *On Demons*, includes views from both pagan philosophers and Christian-influenced thinkers (Psellus 1989c, p. 158.10-12 and 159.1). Without explicitly naming his sources, Psellus suggests influence from Origen, known for his controversial views, and others like Pseudo-Dionysius,

who addressed celestial hierarchies. Psellus is careful to distinguish his own novel views from these thinkers, likely aiming to avoid suspicion of excessive alignment with ancient philosophical ideas. He seizes every opportunity to emphasize a difference between what he terms Greek "idle talk" (Ἑλληνικὴ ἀδολεσχία) and its "vain nonsense" (λῆρος) in contrast to Christian truth (Psellus 1989b, p. 126.11-13; Psellus 1989c, p. 159.1-4). Organized around the theme of demons' alleged power to foretell the future, a point also briefly mentioned in *Hellenic Provisions* (Psellus, 1989b, p. 126.9-10), *On Demons* introduces readers to a concept challenging in Christian doctrine: predestination, further explored in his sections on the future (§46) and on death (§47).

The keen reader can also find an indication of Psellus' lasting interest in late-antique mystical beliefs in various texts where he mentions demons in different contexts. For example, in the brief treatise *On Meteorologists*, Psellus challenges certain 'Chaldean' superstitions, suggesting that demons fear objects like iron, fire, a murder weapon, or coral (Psellus 1989d, p. 74.166-180). However, it is notable that the preserved *Chaldean Oracles* (2nd – 3rd centuries CE) do not contain such details (cf. Anonymous 1971, §§88.1, 149.1, 215.1-7, 225.1). Psellus also refers in this text to Proclus Diadochus (412 – 487) and his *Hymn to Artemis*, citing it as a source on the goddess of the hunt, whose character was reinterpreted in a demonic light since Late Antiquity. This reinterpretation is significant as it sheds light on the evolution of mystical beliefs in Psellus' time (Psellus 1989d, p. 75.176-180).

Two shorter texts, *On Bavouzikarios* (Psellus 1989) and *On Gelo* (Psellus 1989a), contrast these theoretical treatises, instead reflecting common demonological beliefs of Psellus' time. Here, Psellus not only showcases his medical knowledge but also demonstrates his intellectual disdain for superstitions. However, this study will not explore these texts in detail since their influences are mythological and folkloric rather than philosophical, requiring specialized analysis.

Additional pseudonymous texts attributed to Psellus in later centuries can also be reviewed as comparative material. For instance, the lengthy demonological dialogue *Timothy, or On the Influence of Demons* (Τιμόθεος ἢ περὶ ἐνεργείας δαιμόνων) recalls Lucian's satirical *Lover of Lies*. In 1980, P. Gautier showed that this text, published by J. Boissonade in 1830 and included in *Patrologia Graeca* in 1889 under Psellus' name, was, in fact, composed in the mid-13th century, at least two hundred years after Psellus' era (Gautier 1989, p. 131). Another significant work attributed to Psellus, titled *What the Hellenes Believe About Demons* (Τίνα περὶ δαιμόνων δοξάζουσιν Ἕλληνες) (Pseudo-Psellus 1889), closely resembles Psellus' genuine work, *Hellenic Provisions Concerning Demons*, in both style and content.

The study has two main objectives. The first of them is to identify the primary sources Psellus relied upon; as we will see, they primarily belong to the Neoplatonic tradition. In this exploration, we will combine selective close reading, linguistic-philosophical analysis, and reception studies to trace the intellectual preferences

and trends of this complex transitional era, as well as the evolution of its textual traditions. The second objective is to examine the social and cultural context in which Middle Byzantine demonology developed. To address this aim, we will perform a comparative historical-philosophical analysis of Psellus' works alongside hagiographic traditions from the sixth to tenth centuries, highlighting the gradual shifts in demonological thought as Byzantine encyclopedism evolved, especially from the mid-tenth and into the early eleventh century. To meet both objectives, the author approaches the study with the conviction that philosophy, politics, and culture are closely interwoven. Changes in any of these areas signal and drive transformations in the others, forming a symbiotic relationship that shapes the historical landscape.

Psellus and the emerging interest in ancient demonology

Psellus' original demonological texts are concise, highly syncretic works that merge philosophical, theological, and folkloric elements. This fusion contrasts sharply with the rigid, later approaches of figures like Kramer and Sprenger, who, four centuries on, crafted stern guides to witchcraft prosecution, interpreting testimonies through frameworks foreign to the accused. In *Hellenic Prescriptions on Demons* (Psellos 1989b, p. 126.9-10) and *On Demons* (Psellos 1989c, p. 158.10-12 and 159.1), Psellos looks backward, placing the concept of the demon within a traditional paradigm, where "we, Christians of the present," are set against "them, pagans of the past." This approach diverges, for example, from the subtle irony in Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum*, where serious tone and skeptical irony are intertwined.

Despite a shared intellectual and religious framework with the Catholic world—shaped by Roman heritage and Christianity—the Byzantine context differs from the later Western European persecution of "heretics" and witches. Understanding Byzantine demonology within its context is more insightful. Psellus' treatises indeed depart from the religious upheavals of previous eras, such as the Iconoclastic Controversy (726 – 843), during which belief in material demons flourished. In the sixth to tenth centuries, depictions of demons as material beings—appearing as various human, animal, or plant forms – dominated the *Lives* of the Saints, especially in vernacular (volkstümlichen) hagiography (Krumbacher 1897, p. 181) and in iconophile writings rich with polemical rhetoric. These texts, vividly syncretic, presented a mosaic of philosophical and mythological influences without providing theoretical frameworks for the demonic nature or influence (Petrinski 2024, pp. 313 – 320). This tradition provided essential sources for Early and Middle Byzantine folklore, illustrated by texts like *The Life of St. Symeon Stylite the Younger* (sixth century), *The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon* (sixth century), works from the eighth – ninth-century Bithynian hagiographic school (such as the *Lives* of Saints Joannicius, Eustratius, and Peter of Atroa), and *The Life of Nikon Metanoeite*

(tenth century). These writings often portray demons as feeble and pathetic beings, easily subdued by saints through divine intervention.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, when Byzantine classicism was on the rise, the "materialistic" approach to the conception of demons began to show a particular inclination toward theorization. This trend is evident in a conversation between St. Irina, abbess of Chrysobalanton monastery, and a demon who had led a young gardener from the monastery into an impure passion for a young nun. The evil spirit, captured in an invisible circle and guarded by an angel, explains in detail the causes and methods by which demons seek to gather as many followers as possible, who will accompany them in the inevitable torments of hell (Anonymous 1986, §15).

The second trend is characteristic of the intellectual elites, who, with arrogance and skepticism, filter the belief in material manifestations of Evil through the lens of their classical worldview. In hagiographic texts such as the Lives of St. Theodore Studite, Empress Theodora, Patriarch Tarasius, and Patriarch Ignatius, demons are perceived as an invisible contagion upon the human soul, manifested in bodily decay and illness. While the person is typically a victim of the materialized demon, the destructive influence of the immaterial evil spirit is seen merely as a consequence of an already-corrupted soul.

The two tendencies appear common to both the Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking worlds. Nevertheless, in Western Europe during the tenth and the eleventh centuries, the attack on still-widespread paganism primarily took the form of an intellectual and rational denial of any material forms of demons or "real" magical practices inspired by them. As the well-known "Canon Episcopi," cited by Regino of Prüm, attests in the late ninth or early tenth century, the Devil's influence on supposed "witches" did not concern any natural powers granted by him, but instead illusions and hallucinations (*daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatibus seductae*) (Wasserschleben 1840, p. 355). A similar approach can be found in Byzantium around the same epoch. In the late eighth century, John of Damascus refers with disdain to uneducated people who believe in the existence of "stringes" (witches) and demonic dragons (Ioannes Damascenus 1964, p. 1604); the father of Patriarch Tarasius, an imperial judge in mid-eighth-century Constantinople, acquitted two women accused of murdering a newborn under the influence of the devilish witch Gello (who Psellus also mentions with similar disdain) (Ignatios the Deacon 2016, §5); and the elderly monk Arsenius, mentor to St. Elias Speleotes, ironically remarked to the superstitious residents in the Patras region – who were frightened by a supposed demonic presence in an abandoned tower – that in his long monastic life, he had never seen a demon with his own eyes (Anonymous 1870, §21).

Despite the effectiveness of the elitist and rationalist disdain for "superstitions" associated with the material form of the evil spirit, the development of intellectual life within the Empire and the transition to classicism in the tenth and eleventh

centuries brought about a new approach to these beliefs. In Late Antiquity, demons—products of a longstanding folk and religious tradition – became a staple in divine hierarchical systems, especially within Neoplatonism. The works of Iamblichus, Porphyry, Julian, and Proclus became an inseparable part of the ancient philosophical heritage, compelling Byzantine encyclopedists to shape the stance of the Christian intellectual elite toward them. Meanwhile, many of the demonic figures familiar to Psellus (particularly the witches Gello and Babo) had origins in Antiquity and thus need to be viewed through the lens of this new classicism. These factors were decisive in shaping the "demonologies" of both the middle and late Byzantine periods, marked by the parodying of an actual branch of philosophy combined with a traditional disdain for popular beliefs.

Psellus's demonological legacy reveals an intriguing paradox. Alongside his shorter treatises on ancient demonological traditions, the Byzantine philosopher has also left us a hagiographical text that profoundly impacted the conceptualization of Evil and the hagiographic genre. His *Life of St. Auxentius the Great* (Psellus 1971) is a crucial source for understanding Orthodox doctrine on the Devil and his followers, as well as popular beliefs and superstitions. Unlike texts such as *The Hellenic Instructions on Demons* and *What the Hellenes Believe About Demons*, this work takes on a serious tone, almost entirely devoid of parody, and accepts the existence of Evil not only as an influence but as a material force. This tone is evident in notable passages on the characteristics and forms of flesh-loving demons (φιλόσαρκοι δαίμονες) (Psellus 1971, §16.42-46), where Psellus's usual inclination for theorizing also reappears (Psellus 1971, §20.31-37). When it comes to the detailed descriptions of "real" material incarnations of demons – a reflection of what editor Pericles-Petros Ioannou refers to as "popular demonology" (*démonologie populaire*) – their inclusion likely stems from the author's intention to make his text more accessible for less educated audiences compared to those of the two demonological treatises.

In conclusion to this part of the study, we can say that Psellus's demonology represents a new phenomenon for the Orthodox world and is a natural expression of the Byzantine humanism and encyclopedism that shaped the Empire's intellectual climate in the tenth and eleventh centuries. These tendencies, a product of a specific social, political, and economic context, gradually marginalized popular culture, as seen in vernacular hagiographies, by depriving it of a legitimate discourse. During the peak phase of the Arab invasions, which posed a severe threat to the Empire's survival (seventh – eighth centuries), the theme system and the institution of the *stratiotai* (soldier-farmers), combined with the relatively non-intellectual iconoclasm promoted high social mobility while allowing a literary tradition somewhat independent of ancient heritage and rhetorical paradigms, where folklore found its place.

From the mid-tenth century onward, the dominance of a socio-economic and political model based on the power of large landowners (*dynatoi*)—and later, the

militarized feudal aristocracy of the Komnenian period – becomes evident. This fundamental shift created the context in which encyclopedism and a complex elite culture rooted in antiquity replaced the diverse and stimulating intellectual landscape of the time of the Heraclian, Syrian, and Phrygian dynasties. In this new environment, Psellus's demonology supplanted the heterogeneous image of the demon from the Middle Byzantine period.

The demonology of Psellus and its Neoplatonic roots

Two interesting questions arise regarding the sources used by the Byzantine philosopher, requiring further explanation. The first relates to Psellus's overall reticence concerning the ancient texts from which he drew his information. Except for the "Middle Platonists" mentioned above, he refrains from flaunting his erudition by referencing other classical authors. This choice was likely due to his reluctance to grant his readers easy access to works that could damage a good Christian's morals. This trait sets Psellus's original works apart, for example, from the treatise *What the Hellenes Think About Demons*, which explicitly dismisses *Porphyrys and Iamblichuses* with scorn (Pseudo-Psellus 1889, p. 877a). We might assume that these two strategies for discrediting ancient demonology – concealment and ridicule – stem from differences in the audiences of Psellus and the anonymous author. By the thirteenth century, works from Late Antiquity, especially within the Neoplatonic tradition, were far more widely known and accessible than two centuries earlier. From this standpoint, it made more sense to mention these authors but to treat them with sarcasm and disdain.

In both *Hellenic Prescriptions* and *On Demons*, the Christian understanding of the demon in Psellus's time was distinctly set apart from the conception of the ancient "Hellenes" (i.e., pagans) (Psellus 1989b, p. 123). It is important to note that, despite his profound knowledge of Plato's works, the Byzantine philosopher never references Plato's own ideas as a source for the concept of the demon in antiquity. In both treatises, we do not encounter the Socratic *daimonion* (cf., e.g., Plato 1967, 31c-d), nor the rich philosophical and mystical tradition surrounding the personal guardian demon, explored in the *Phaedo* (Plato 1967a, 107d-e, 113d; cf. Plato 1967b, 246d – 249d), which later became an integral part of the Late Antiquity and early Christian discourse through the concept of the pact with the Devil (Petrinski 2024, pp. 152 – 180); even the famous passage from the *Symposium*, quoted by Proclus (Proclus Diadochus 1954, §72.12-14), where Diotima refers to Eros as a great demon (δαίμων μέγας) (Plato 1967c, 202d.12), is lacking. It seems that Psellus deliberately chose to limit his discourse to the view of the Neoplatonists, whom early Christianity despised, combining it with some references to the anonymous Chaldean Oracles (c. second century) (cf. Duffy 1995) in order not to associate the highly revered Plato with the vain speculations of "Hellenistic" thought.

Despite Psellus's enigmatic approach to his sources, the philosophical tradition upon which he relies is easily identifiable and relatively consistent. However, the question of which specific texts and "sub-traditions" Psellus favored is not so straightforward. This question is crucial due to the function of his demonological treatises, which aim to establish a standardized conceptual framework for understanding the ancient demon as a counterpoint to Christian ideas. This framework was intended to replace the Late Antiquity philosophical treatises, not promoting them, thereby preventing any potentially impious interest in them from reaching both Psellus's contemporaries and future generations. From this perspective, it is interesting to explore whether the Byzantine philosopher synthesized the diverse information from Neoplatonic texts, presenting his audience with an extract from all of them, or if he preferred to focus on a particular sub-tradition (from Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Julian, Proclus, or Olympiodorus).

Without a doubt, the most detailed of the small treatises that Psellus dedicates to demons is *Hellenic provisions*. It aims to contrast the pagan understanding of demons with the orthodox Christian view. However, the complete dichotomy between Christianity and paganism is only apparent. Right at the beginning of his exposition, Psellus explicitly emphasizes that for the Greeks, demons were not considered evil, indirectly targeting not so much pagan philosophers (for whom such a generalization would be absurd) but rather Origen and, most notably, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius introduced the idea into Christian thought that fallen angels are not inherently evil but lack goodness, supporting this idea with numerous arguments (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita 1990, pp. 170.12 – 172.6; cf. Eustratius Presbyter 2006, v. 1714 – 1715). In contrast to Christian dogma, where fallen angels lose their connection with God and the Good entirely, forming amorphous and irrational legions and phalanxes (cf. Petrinski 2024, p. 309), Greek philosophers did not regard all demons as evil, and they formulated hierarchies (διαιρέσεις) (Psellus 1989c, p. 158.12-13), in which they categorized demons according to their relationship with Divine Intellect (νοῦς) and Divine Reason (λόγος). Based on this criterion, Psellus distinguishes six categories (Psellus 1989b, pp. 123.22 – 124.13, 125.6-23; cf. Pseudo-Psellus 1889, p. 876b-c).

The highest are the divine (θεῖοι) demons, who exist only at the level of pure Divine Intellect, followed by the Intellectual (νοεροί), who participate in both Intellect and Reason. Paradoxically, Psellus notes that divine demons can also inhabit the air, water, and earth (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.24-25). The third and fourth ranks in the hierarchy are the animic (ψυχικοί) and natural (φυσικοί) demons, who participate only in Divine Reason and respectively care for individual souls, the natural elements, and nature as a whole. The fifth type of demons is the corporeal (σωματικοί) demons, who are both rational and irrational; they are strongly related to living nature and are responsible for the bodily organs (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.6-7). Psellus notes that magicians typically perform rituals to summon these demons,

but, unlike the anonymous dialogue *Timotheus*, he carefully avoids any descriptions of such practices. The lowest, sixth category consists of the material (ὑλαῖοι) demons, whose main characteristic is their absolute lack of participation in Reason (ἀλογία)[they govern inanimate nature (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.9-13). These demons deceive people by resembling the forms of divine demons and bring diseases. They are marked by the disorder (ἀταξία) inherent in matter, which gives rise to the processes of birth and decay in material bodies. These demons possess passions (πάθος), but their passions differ from those of humans – while in humans, strong emotions like anger depend on rational judgment (λόγος), the spirits of materiality are driven by natural instincts (φύσις), much like lions. They form the link between the matter of divine bodies (θεῖα σώματα) and the matter from which earthly bodies are made (χθόνια σώματα). They exploit the weaknesses of matter, possess it, and draw it to their side, appearing in forms resembling higher deities. The demons of materiality attack souls and stir up primitive passions within them, gaining control and tormenting the souls after their fall (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.19-23).

To this typology, Psellus also remarks on other classifications and individual types of demons sporadically mentioned in Neoplatonic literature. According to their function, demons that serve as mediators between the human world and the heavens can either reveal divine mysteries to people (γένος ἐκφαντορικόν) or guide human souls toward the immutable and incorruptible divine Good (γένος αναγωγόν) (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.7-11). Based on their association with the elements, Psellus distinguishes air, earth, and water demons, which he includes among the divine demons, as well as climate guardians (κλιματάρχαι) who protect cities and households, attend to individual souls, and are considered a sub-category of the animistic demons (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.13-15). Outside of this categorization are the lion-faced (λεοντοπρόσωποι) demons (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.3-5), made of aerial and fiery substances, the evil (κακοί) demons, and the ominous swarms of demons entirely devoid of any true knowledge (ὄντως γνῶσις) (Psellus 1989b, p. 126.50-11; cf. Pseudo-Psellus 1889, p. 875b).

At first glance, the modern researcher has the same dizzying sensation of confusion and chaos that the inquisitive Byzantine reader likely experienced when encountering the above description. Psellus combines at least three classifications of demons, all of them backed by a thousand-year-old philosophical and mystical tradition – according to their participation in the world of ideas and divine reason, their functions, their connection to the elements (air, fire, earth), and (only sporadically) their association with planetary spheres. Despite sporadic heterogeneous philosophical (and folkloric) influences, however, the primary direct source synthesized and compressed by the Byzantine philosopher is relatively clearly identifiable. As we shall see, it is undoubtedly the late-antique Neoplatonist Proclus Diadochus, particularly his commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades*.

Psellus builds his demonic hierarchy primarily based on the classical division

between the incorporeal and invisible Intelligible gods (νοητοὶ, ἀφανεῖς θεοί), the intellectual gods (νοεροὶ θεοί), who are accessible through reason, and the sensory or visible gods (ὁρατοί, ἐμφανεῖς θεοί), who govern the human world. While Plato presents a fundamental distinction between the intelligible (τὸ νοητόν) and the visible (τὸ ὁρατόν), the threefold classification of the Higher Ones appears in Iamblichus (Iamblichus 1966, §55.10–62.4) and is further developed, e.g., by Emperor Julian (Julianus 1964, §§15 – 16). Moreover, Julian articulates the view that the evil nature of some demons is due to their lack of true knowledge (Julianus, 1932, §30.35-37). However, for both Iamblichus and Julian, the terms νοητός, νοερός, and αἰσθητός refer mainly to the gods, beneath which are levels encompassing archangels, angels, demons, demonic souls, and heroes (Iamblichus 1966, §62.15ff, §63.10-12, §§67.1 – 68.7, §71.10). Specifically, Iamblichus includes in his treatise *De mysteriis* a classification of demons. Still, it differs in both content and terminology from Psellus's description: Iamblichus describes good (ἀγαθοί), vengeful, and evil (πονηροί) demons, with the latter compared to harmful and bloodthirsty animals (Iamblichus 1966, §§83.16 – 84.6). This terminology contrasts with *Hellenic Provisions*, where Psellus uses the adjective κακός for them.

It is also relevant to note Psellus's deliberate avoidance of Christian terminology: terms such as *πονηρός* and *νοητός* are central to Christian doctrine, which may be why Psellus avoids them in the pagan demon context, replacing them with κακός and θεῖος instead. This substitution serves to heighten the contrast between the two doctrines further.

Demonic hierarchies (δαιμονίαι τάξεις) based on association with the intelligible, intellectual, and sensory realms appear in a considerably more developed form in Proclus Diadochus's commentaries on Plato's dialogues. In nearly three chapters of his commentary on *Alcibiades*, the Athenian philosopher thoroughly outlines the intermediary status of demons between gods and mortals, along with six categories of demons that are identical to those described by Psellus (Proclus Diadochus 1954, §§71.1 – 72.14). However, there are notable differences in Proclus's preference for genitive descriptive phrases rather than adjectives: rather than *Intellectual demons*, we find demons partaking in the intellectual essence; instead of *animistic demons*, demons of divine souls; instead of *demons of nature*, demons conveying the creative powers of all natures to beings subject to birth and death; and instead of *demons of matter*, *demons revolving around matter* (Proclus Diadochus 1954, §§71.9 – 72.11). Naturally, Psellus strips Proclus's typology of any philosophical-religious context.

The second classification that Psellus alludes to in his short work is functional; it is also taken from Proclus, albeit with severe abridgments and inaccuracies. In his commentaries on *The Republic*, especially on Cratylus, the Neoplatonic philosopher states that some higher beings reveal the mysteries of birth (ἐκφαντορικὰ τῆς γεννήσεως). In contrast, others act as conveyors of union (διαπορθμευτικὰ τῆς

ἑνώσεως). In contrast, others transmit the power (διαπορθμευτικὰ τῆς δυνάμεως) and knowledge of the gods (τῆς γνώσεως τῶν θεῶν) (Proclus Diadochus 1908, §128.1-6; cf. Proclus Diadochus 1901, pp. 118, 124, 153, 254-5, 270). Psellus has significantly simplified – and likely deliberately – this complex material, which is based on the Neoplatonic philosophical and mystical system of opposing the world of ideas, which exists eternally and unchangeably (εἶναι) and is populated by noetic deities, to the sublunar world, subject to constant becoming (γίγνεσθαι), birth and death. According to the concept developed by Proclus in the passage cited above, the lower deities, archangels, angels, and demons are responsible for conveying divine power and knowledge to "unify" the cosmos so that it does not disintegrate due to its mortality. We have no reason to doubt that the highly erudite Psellus was well acquainted with these concepts; from this perspective, we can only admire his exceptional ability to "filter" the information and present an exposition almost entirely stripped of its original philosophical content to his audience.

The third classification of demons, which we also find reflected in *Hellenic Provisions* and *On Demons*, pertains to their "habitat"—whether in the air, water or on earth. The Byzantine philosopher touches upon this ancient concept only sporadically, weaving it into his discussion in a way that leaves the reader with a sense of ambiguity. Despite his earlier assertion that divine demons are an emanation of the immaterial Divine Intellect (νοῦς), he concludes his treatise by noting that these demons can inhabit the earthly realm as terrestrial (χθόνοι), aerial (ἀέριοι), and aquatic (ἔνυδροι) demons. The association of demons with the elements of earth, air, and fire is characteristic of Neoplatonism, dating back to its earliest stages. Plotinus, for example, states that demons have airy or fiery bodies (Plotinus 1951, III.5.6.40-42) – a notion that Psellus reiterates almost verbatim concerning leonine demons (Psellus 1989b, p. 125.5). The classification of higher beings (gods, archangels, angels, demons) based on the element they inhabit also appears in Iamblichus, who, in his *On the Mysteries*, describes the aerial demons inhabiting the aerial fire (ἀέριον πῦρ), black and dark terrestrial demons, and the bright celestial demons (Iamblichus 1966, §II.7.30-50). However, several centuries later, the Alexandrian philosopher Olympiodorus the Younger provided the most thorough development of this classification. In his commentaries on Plato's *Alcibiades*, he links demons to the "elements" (στοιχεῖα) and distinguishes between celestial (οὐράνιοι), fiery (πύριοι), aerial (ἀέριοι), aquatic (ἐνύδριοι), and terrestrial (χθόνιοι) demons (Olympiodorus 1982, §§19.11 – 20.2).

Paradoxically, the limited attention Psellus gives to demons of different elements is likely due to their popularity. Early and middle Byzantine literature is relatively rich in references to such evil spirits, mainly aerial demons. It suffices to mention the tradition surrounding the afterlife journey of the soul, which must pass through the dangerous aerial realms of evil spirits who oversee the terrifying "tollhouses" (τελώνια) (Petrinski, 2024, pp. 392 – 418, or the tragicomic story of the "devil-lord

of the air," who makes a pact with the magician Heliodorus of Catania, according to the *Life* of St. Leo, Bishop of Catania (Anonymous, 2011, §11.4-5). The popularity of a dogmatically problematic concept should have motivated Psellus to neglige it in his discourse in order to preserve his audience's piety. Two centuries later, Pseudo-Psellus provides a much more detailed account and, evidently, is more inclined to give insights into the folk beliefs surrounding the ominous demons of the elements. For instance, he claims that terrestrial demons usually appear as men, while aquatic demons appear as women (Pseudo-Psellus, 1980, ll. 543 – 545).

We find a slightly more developed version of the same classification based on the demons' dwelling places in *On Demons*. According to Psellus, the vaguely portrayed philosophers, influenced by both paganism and Christianity, distinguish four main categories of demons, using their fall (πτῶσις) from the heavens and the ranks of the Higher Ones as the primary criterion (Psellus 1989c, p. 158.12-15). The highest demons are those that hover *near the revolving celestial dome* (ἐγγύς που περιπολοῦντας τῆς οὐρανίου περιφορᾶς), followed by those scattered on the earth and those associated with matter and its passions. The lowest demons are those that dwell in the depths of the earth and Tartarus, which is considered the very bottom of materiality (αὐτῆς τῆς ὕλης τὸν πυθμένα), characterized by their complete absence of reason (ἀλόγώτεροι πάντη). The primary difference between the celestial demons and the fallen ones is their ability to prophesy (Psellus 1989c, p. 158.15-26). The celestial ones, being close to the heavenly sphere, offer truthful prophecies due to their proximity to the higher good (τὰ κρείττω). The demons linked to matter always give false predictions, thus confusing human souls, while the prophecies of demons hovering between the heavens and the material world are unclear, creating uncertainty and open to various interpretations. Psellus provides a "rational" explanation for the Neoplatonic view on the ability of demons to prophesy, offering a way for his readers to interpret ancient literature filled with prophecies that shape historical events. Since this is not possible in the literal sense due to the prevalent Christian Orthodox view that there is no predestination, the Byzantine philosopher argues that these beings do not know the future. Instead, they receive information about what is happening more quickly than humans due to their proximity to the heavens and can, if they choose, pass this information on to people (Psellus 1989c, p. 159.1-4).

Conclusion

The three treatises of Psellus have a distinctly eclectic character. Evidently, the author did not aim for his writing to be a clear, easily understood, and well-structured exposition of specific texts. Instead, Psellus mechanically layers diverse texts and traditions together, creating contradictions within the information presented. In his categorization of demons, he initially introduces the terms "νοῦς" ("reason"), "λόγος" ("intellect"), and "αἴσθησις" ("sense") as criteria. Based on these terms, the categories of "divine" demons (known only by pure reason), "intellectual" demons (known

through the rational intellect), and "bodily/material" demons (known through the senses) are outlined. For the animistic demons and the demons of nature, it is evident that the Byzantine philosopher uses other criteria – namely, their spheres of influence (respectively, care for souls and dominion over natural elements). The concept of "demonic souls," which need food and can possess humans, stands apart entirely – one can only speculate whether they fall under the category of "material demons" or not. The image of "demons with lion faces" intertwines entirely different traditions (likely of Persian and Biblical origin), which were alive in Byzantium from the eighth to the thirteenth century, including the aerial and fiery demons that appear both in hagiography and in the dialogue *Timotheus*. The dualistic division into "good" (καλοί) and "evil" (κακοί) demons also follows other criteria.

Among the rich Neoplatonic tradition, however, we can highlight one specific primary source (at least for the more extended treatise *Hellenic Provisions*). Although other authors also influenced the Byzantine philosopher, it is undeniably Proclus whose commentaries on the Platonic dialogues provide the foundation for at least two of the classifications of the demonic realm. The influence of Olympiodorus also appears substantial in relation to the celestial, aerial, fiery, watery, and earthly demons; however, such classifications based on the elements that comprise the world were widespread throughout Late Antiquity, making it difficult to determine the extent of this influence with certainty.

Ambiguity is the key characteristic of the entire "philosophical" demonology in Psellus' works. It serves two primary purposes. The first is quite pious and altruistic: the Byzantine philosopher does not wish to supply his readers with references to the sources on a religiously controversial and rather ticklish subject. Instead, he aims to construct a brief, distorted version, which he deemed sufficient for his pious contemporaries. The second function, however, seems much more self-interested; we might even call it "promotional." Ambiguity becomes a tool through which the philosopher, with his strong tendencies towards mysticism, builds his own reputation and the reputation of his "secret wisdom," which he understands only. The numerous remarks against the pagan and heretical beliefs described in his works, coupled with the omission of the main object of Psellus' interest – Plato's philosophy – form the "protective mechanisms" that the Byzantine philosopher carefully establishes around the dangerous ancient demonological ideas that could potentially discredit both him and the new spirit of classicism, which shapes his philosophical legacy.

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