

I. ARTICLES AND STUDIES

Question of Authorship of *Corpus Dionysiacum*

Fr. Henryk Paprocki
*Orthodox Theological Seminary in Warsaw,
Poland*

Abstract

This article discusses the state of research on the problem of the authorship of *Corpus Dionysiacum*, with particular emphasis on the findings by Michel van Esbroeck. This outstanding orientalist returned to the thesis of Shalva Nutsubidze and Ernest Honigman after discovering new sources relating to this issue that supported the person of Peter the Iberian. Considering the role of *Corpus Dionysiacum* in the history of Christianity, the question of the authorship of this collection is important.

Keywords: Neoplatonism, theurgy, monophysitism, Peter the Iberian, *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

Who is the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* supposedly compiled in the first century? Despite repeated attempts to determine who was the man calling himself Dionysius the Areopagite, most researchers believe that this issue cannot be resolved¹. According to Dionysius of Corinthus, he was the first bishop of Athens². However, there is no mention of the Areopagite's collection of works before the 6th century, and there are visible connections between the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and the texts of Proclus (412–485), the defender of theurgical rituals.³ Dionysius also quotes

¹ T. Stępień, "Wprowadzenie," in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, transl. M. Dzielska, Warszawa 2021, VI; M. Starowieyski, J.M. Szymusiak, *Nowy słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa*, ed. M. Starowieyski, W. Stawiszyński, Poznań 20182 : 276–280; J. Meyendorff, *Teologia bizantyjska. Historia i doktryna*, transl. J. Prokopiuk, Kraków 20072: 12–14.

² Euzebiusz z Cezarei, *Historia kościelna* (III, 410; IV, 233), transl. A. Lisiecki, Kraków 19932: 95, 181–182.

³ T. Stępień, "Wprowadzenie," in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, XII. Besides, he is famous *List apokryficzny Dionizego Areopagity do biskupa efeskiego Tymoteusza o męczeńskiej śmierci apostołów Piotra i Pawła*, wyd. G. Peradze, *Elpis* 11(1937), fasc. 1–2, 111–142 = *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu. Apostołowie*, ed. M. Starowieyski, Kraków 2007, I: 461–470 = St. Grzegorz Peradze, *Dzieła zebrane*, ed. H. Paprocki, Warszawa 2011, II, 225–234.

Clement and, in this case, it may be St. Clement of Alexandria⁴ because the phrase “the noble philosopher Clement”⁵ refers to him and the treatise *Stromata* rather than to St. Clement of Rome. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the meaning of the name Clement (clemens – *gentle, gracious, calm*),⁶ may refer to Plotinus. The philosopher mentioned by Pseudo-Dionysius supposedly claimed that “patterns are the most primitive thing in beings” and are supposed to lead to the ‘Cause’ of everything. All beings can be attributed to this one unification that is above all things. In particular, the term “offense against simplicity”⁷ clearly points to Plotinus.

Pierre Hadot’s work on Plotinus makes this issue easier to understand. Plotinus “believed in simplicity”,⁸ he also believed that the soul contemplates the world of Forms and that beauty is the beauty of the world of Forms. In the world of Forms, contemplation is direct and Forms contemplate themselves.⁹ One must “become the sight”¹⁰ and make oneself the object of seeing.¹¹ Plotinus used the term ‘One’ to express its absolute simplicity. The first source of spiritual life is the pure, simple and undivided presence.¹² The first ‘Good’ is always *gentle* and blissful.¹³ According to Porphyry of Tyre, Plotinus “radiated sweetness.”¹⁴ This interpretation therefore forces us to think primarily about the meaning of the names Dionysius and Hierotheus and their reference to specific characters.

The works of Pseudo-Dionysius are considered difficult. To understand them one must first learn the works of Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus, and even Damaskios.¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius describes the 5th century Syro-Antioch liturgy in his treatises¹⁶ which, apart from the influence

4 D. Pallas, *Re-Thinking Clement the Philosopher of the Corpus Dionysiacum*, „Academia Letters” 2021, 1–8: <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL4344>.

5 Pseudo-Dionizy Areopagita, *Imiona boskie* (V, 9), in *Corpus Dionysiacum*: 262. Cf. Klemens Aleksandryjski, *Kobierce zapisków filozoficznych* (VIII, IX, 29.1), transl. J. Niemirska-Pliszczyńska, Warszawa 1994, II: 333. Some believe that it may be Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3, whom part of the tradition considers Pope St. Clement I, author of several letters.

6 *Słownik łacińsko-polski*, ed. M. Plezia, Warszawa 1998, I, 539.

7 “Pseudo-Dionizy Areopagita, *Imiona boskie* (V, 9),” in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, 262.

8 P. Hadot, *Plotyn albo prostota spojrzenia*, transl. P. Bobowska, Kęty 2004: 31. Simplicity, as the title of the French researcher’s work indicates, is the interpretive key to Plotinus’ thought.

9 Ibid. 32–33.

10 Plotyn, *Enneady* (I VI.9), transl. A. Krokiewicz, Warszawa 20002: 140.

11 Ibid. (IV VII.15): 766.

12 P. Hadot, *Plotyn albo prostota spojrzenia*, 49.

13 Plotyn, *Enneady* (V VI.12): 559.

14 Porfiriusz z Tyru, *O życiu Plotyna oraz o układzie jego ksiąg* (13), in Plotyn, *Enneady*, 74.

15 T. Stępień, *Wprowadzenie*, in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, XXV.

16 A. Hänggi, I. Pahl, *Prex Eucharistica. Textus e variis liturgiis antiquioribus selecti*, Fribourg 1968, 210–213; H. Paprocki, *Le Mystere de l’Eucharistie. Genese et interpretation de la Liturgie*

of Proclus,¹⁷ is clear evidence that they could not have been written in the 1st century. The first citation of these works in 533 was by Monophysites, from the circle of Severus of Antioch, which immediately raises doubts as to their origin.

In the Eastern Church, the first known commentary on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius was written by John of Scythopolis before 532. His works were continued by St. Maximus the Confessor in the *Scholia*, and it was he who saved these writings for orthodoxy and included them in the philosophical, theological and liturgical tradition of the East.¹⁸ The treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius were considered important thanks to the commentaries of John of Scythopolis,¹⁹ Maximus the Confessor²⁰ and Thomas Aquinas.²¹ Through these commentaries the Treatises influenced the entire Middle Ages.²² That period's understanding of the world order was based on these works, especially the Celestial Hierarchy and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy.²³ They were also an inspiration to both theologians and mystics, to name just the famous *Cloud of Unknowing*.²⁴

The widely attributed authorship of *Corpus Dionysiacum* gave his writings an extraordinary position in the Middle Ages. The respect for his writings in the West was almost as great as for the Holy Scriptures and,

eucharistique byzantine, transl. F. Hoest, Paris 20092, 143–144. Dionysius mentions the Creed (τῆς θρησκείας τὸ σύμβολον, literally: *symbol of religion*, cf. *Słownik grecko-polski*, II: 471) in the Mass, introduced by Piotr Folusznik around 480, cf. *Hierarchia kościelna* (III. III, 7), in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, 116 = PG 3, col. 436C.

¹⁷ Which was proven by Henri-Dominique Saffrey in a series of articles.

¹⁸ S. S wie ż a w s k i, *Dzieje europejskiej filozofii klasycznej*, Warszawa 2000: 362.

¹⁹ M. Starowieyski, J.M. Szymusiak, *Nowy słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa*, 539.

²⁰ St. Maximus the Confessor, "Scholia in eos beati Dionysii libros qui exstant," PG 4, col. 15–432; 527–576. These scholia are mixed with those of John of Scythopolis, cf. M. Starowieyski, J.M. Szymusiak, *Nowy słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa*: 675–679. St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguorum liber sive de variis difficilibus locis sanctorum Dionysii Areopagitae et Gregorii Theologi ad Thomam sanctum*, PG 91, col. 1031–1418.

²¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. C. Pera, Torino 1950.

²² V. L o s s k i, *Teologia mistyczna Kościoła wschodniego*, transl. M. Szczaniecka, Warszawa 1989, 20; J. M e y e n d o r f f, *Teologia bizantyjska. Historia i doktryna*, 12–14, 22–23.

²³ C.S. Lewis, *Odrzucony obraz. Wprowadzenie do literatury średniowiecznej i renesansowej*, transl. W. Ostrowski, Warszawa 1986, 55–59.

²⁴ *Obłok niewiedzy i inne dzieła*, transl. W. Ostrowski, Warszawa 1988: 37–121. The works of Pseudo-Dionysius were translated into Georgian in the second half of the 11th century by Efreim Mcire, cf. St. Grzegorz Peradze, *Die altchristliche Literatur in der georgischen Überlieferung*, ed. B. Outier, H. Paprocki, Warszawa 2015: 27–29.

after the writings of St. Augustine and Aristotle,²⁵ were the most often quoted.

The authenticity of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was questioned during the Renaissance. The first exposure of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as a forgery occurred in Lorenzo Valii's *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* in 1457.²⁶ Later in the 18th century, and finally in the 20th century, their inauthenticity was proven when the problem of evil in Pseudo-Dionysius's Divine Names was shown to be dependent on Proclus' work *De malorum subsistentia*.²⁷ Quotations from Proclus could not have appeared in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* until after 462.²⁸ However, despite many hypotheses, the author of the 'Corpus' has still not been identified.²⁹

There were attempts to establish the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as consisting of fourteen works (10 letters and 4 treatises). They would then be similar to those of apostolic times in that they would have the same number of texts as the letters of St. Paul. This attempt is evidence of the late creation of *Corpus Dionysiacum*, and also of the existence of serious doubts as to the authorship of the collection.

In the first century there was no established canon of biblical books! Such a list first appeared in Muratori's canon from around 180. A complete list of Paul's letters appears in the 2nd century Syriac Peshitta Bible. We also have the 85th Apostolic Canon dating from the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century.³⁰ Around 323, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History*: "As for the fourteen Pauline Epistles, it is clear and certain. However, it should be known that some have rejected the Letter to the Jews, citing the Roman Church, which does not recognize it as coming from Paul."³¹ In addition to biblical codes, such as *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus* from the 4th century, we have the decisions of the synod of Laodicea from 364 (canon 59 and 60) and the

²⁵ S. Swieżawski, *Dzieje europejskiej filozofii klasycznej*, 362. An important factor in the Western reception of Pseudo-Dionysius's works was his role as a supposed apostle of Gaul.

²⁶ W. Beierwaltes, *Platonizm w chrześcijaństwie*, transl. P. Domański, Kęty 2003: 38.

²⁷ Proklos, "De malorum subsistentia," in *Tria opuscula*, ed. M. von Moerbeke, Berlin 2014: 689–798. On the problem of evil from the perspective of Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius, see: M. Edwards, J. Dillon, *God in Dionysius and the late Neoplatonists*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. M. Edwards, D. Pallis, G. Steiris, Oxford 2022: 142–145.

²⁸ M. van Esbroeck, Петр Ивер и Дионисий Ареопагит: возвращаясь к тезису Хонигмана, transl. S. Khoruzyj, „Символ” 39(2007), fasc. 52, 375.

²⁹ R. Roques, *Denys l'Aréopagite*, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Paris 1957, III, 249–257.

³⁰ *Kanony apostołskie*, in *Konstytucje apostołskie*, transl. S. Kalinkowski, A. Caba, ed. A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2007: 292–293.

³¹ Eusebiusz z Cezarei, *Historia kościelna* (III, 35), 93, cf. III, 252, 123.

synod of Carthage from 397 (canon 33), as well as the statements of three Fathers of the Church: St. Athanasius the Great,³² St. Gregory the Theologian³³ and St. Amphilochus, Bishop of Iconium.³⁴ Therefore, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* could not have been created before the canon of the New Testament books was established, i.e. not earlier than in the 4th century.

In 1942, the Georgian philosopher Shalva Nutsubidze put forward a rather intuitive thesis that the author of the works known under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite is Peter the Iberian (პეტრე იბერი), bishop of Majuma,³⁵ who was at one time venerated in Georgia as a saint.³⁶ Independently of Nutsubidze, such a hypothesis was formulated by the Belgian scientist Ernst Honigmann.³⁷ Honigmann's hypothesis was based on two arguments:

The first argument is based on the vision of John the Eunuch (a close friend and spiritual companion of Peter the Iberian).

The *Euthymiac History*, quoted by St. John of Damascus in one of his homilies, states that the participants of the funeral of the Theotokos were "caught up into the air" and "had an angelic vision and heard the divine melody of the upper Powers. [...] the angels did not stop singing for three whole days". When it was decided to celebrate God's infinite goodness in hymns Hieroteus, "all moved," surpassed all others³⁸. There is a similar description in the Life of Peter the Iberian. He describes how John the Eunuch had a vision of the Last Judgment lasting three days and three nights, when around the judge's throne "there stood an innumerable multitude of angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim"

³² St. Atanazy Wielki, 39 *List paschalny*, in *Kanony Ojców Greckich (tekst grecki i polski)*, transl. S. Kalinkowski, ed. A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2009, 292–293.

³³ St. Grzegorz Teolog, *Wierszowany katalog ksiąg Starego i Nowego Testamentu*, in *Kanony Ojców Greckich*, 87.

³⁴ St. Amfiloch z Ikonium, *Jamby dedykowane Seleukosowi*, in *Kanony Ojców Greckich*, 89.

³⁵ Majuma is an ancient city near Gaza, on the site of today's upscale Gaza neighborhood called Rimal, 3 km from the city center.

³⁶ Sh. Nutsubidze, *Тайна Псевдо-Дионисия Ареопагита*, Tbilisi 1942; idem, *История грузинской философии*, Tbilisi 1960: 84–107.

³⁷ E. Honigmann, *Pierre l'Ibérien et les écrits du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite*, Bruxelles 1952.

³⁸ *Historia Eutymiacka* (III, 40), in *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu. Ewangelie apokryficzne*, ed. M. Starowieyski, Kraków 2003, II, 834; St. Jan z Damaszku, 2 *Homilia na święto Zaśnięcia NMP* (18), in *Ojcowie Kościoła greccy i syryjscy. Teksty o Matce Bożej*, transl. W. Kania, Niepokalanów 1981, 256–257.