

The Enduring Legacy of the Iatrosophist Gessius

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THE IATROSOPHIST GESSIUS offers historians of later Roman intellectual history a peculiar but remarkably durable historical profile. A native of Petra, Gessius made a name for himself by practicing and teaching medicine in Alexandria in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.¹ Both Christian and pagan sources speak highly of his skills as a physician, skills which earned him a rare collection of honors from the Roman state.² Gessius, however, plays an incidental role in the history of the larger Roman world. He never enjoyed the fame of Galen, the political influence of Oribasius,³ the diplomatic prominence of Uranius,⁴ or even the literary

¹ For his origin in Petra, Dam. *Isid.* fr.128 Athanassiadi. The *Suda* places his *floruit* in the reign of Zeno (Γ 207), a date confirmed by (and probably derived from) Damascius' portrait. The recollection of Gessius by Stephanus of Athens suggests that Gessius may have been teaching into the 530s (L. G. Westerink, *Stephanus of Athens: Commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms I* [CMG XI.1.3.1 (Berlin 1985)] 20). On Gessius' dates see also the earlier comments of O. Temkin, "Geschichte des Hippokratismus im ausgehenden Altertum," *Kyklos* 4 (1932) 1–80, at 73–74.

² His teaching earned for him χρημάτων μεγάλων ἐγένετο κύριος καὶ Ῥωμαϊκῶν ἔτυχεν ἀξιωματῶν οὐ τῶν τυχόντων (Dam. *Isid.* fr.128).

³ See B. Baldwin, "The Career of Oribasius," *Acta Classica* 18 (1975) 85–97, and "Beyond the House Call: Doctors in Early Byzantine History and Politics," *DOP* 38 (1984) 15–19, at 17.

⁴ For physicians serving as diplomats during Gessius' lifetime see R. C. Blockley, "Doctors as Diplomats in the Sixth Century A.D.," *Florilegium* 2 (1980) 89–100. On Uranius see Agathias 2.29.1–2.32.2 and the discussion of J. Walker, "The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran," *Ancient World* 33 (2002) 45–69.

success of medical commentators like Stephanus and John of Alexandria.⁵ From all indications, he lived the relatively unremarkable life of a successful and well-known gentleman physician. In one of history's odd quirks, Gessius' name and reputation as a skilled iatrosophist continued to be evoked for nearly a millennium after his death even as those of more skilled and accomplished intellectuals were largely forgotten. During his lifetime, Gessius was described by a pagan philosopher as an exemplar of philosophical behavior and attacked by a Christian for his arrogance and ignorance. Roughly three-quarters of a century after the end of his career, another Christian author could present Gessius as the prototypical representative of a hubristic and misguided Alexandrian medical community. And nearly seven centuries after that, Arabic scholars still counted Gessius as a link in the chain of medical knowledge joining Abbasid Baghdad to Roman Alexandria. For whatever reason, a sense that Gessius could stand as a representative of Alexandrian medical intellectualism endured far longer than his modest achievements seem to merit.

This paper examines how a middling figure like Gessius came to acquire such a potent and enduring historical legacy. Scholars discussing Gessius often try to assess his influence by synthesizing the distinct discussions of him that survive in ancient sources.⁶ Because these often contradictory documents resist simplification into one composite historical profile, this study will instead show how each author's discussion of Gessius reflects his own distinctive view of the man and the intellectual community to which he belonged. It will become clear that

⁵ For Stephanus and John see J. Duffy, "Byzantine Medicine in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: Aspects of Teaching and Practice," *DOP* 38 (1984) 21–27.

⁶ E.g. O. Temkin, "Studies on Late Alexandrian Medicine. 1. Alexandrian Commentaries on Galen's *De Sectis ad Introducendos*," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 3 (1935) 405–430, at 425–426, and *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore 1991) 215; Baldwin, *DOP* 38 (1984) 18; V. Nutton, "From Galen to Alexander, Aspects of Medicine and Medical Practice in Late Antiquity," *DOP* 38 (1984) 1–14, at 6. Note however the more critical discussion of P. Athanassiadi, "Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius," *JHS* 113 (1993) 1–29, at 20 n.142.

Gessius often came to be seen as the best representative of sixth-century Alexandrian pagan intellectuals because he was among the community's most publicly engaged members. His fame and reputation persisted because the influence of Alexandrian medical and philosophical teaching endured for a remarkably long time. Gessius' personal characteristics and the nature of his intellectual community then explain both his surprising prominence and his enduring legacy.

1. The *Letters* of Aeneas and Procopius of Gaza

Gessius' earliest appearances in our surviving sources come in two collections of letters. The older collection was penned by Aeneas of Gaza, the leading Christian intellectual in late fifth century Gaza.⁷ His twenty-five surviving letters engage with correspondents across the religiously-mixed cultural network that joined Christian and pagan intellectuals in Alexandria and Gaza.⁸ Gessius appears in two epistles, the second and third letters of an exchange in which Aeneas asked for medical advice about a kidney problem. Each document tries to shame Gessius into replying with a diagnosis of Aeneas' condition by playing upon his identity as a cultured physician.⁹ This is done with considerable artistry. *Letter* 19, for example, suggests that Gessius' failure to write represented medical malpractice because it compounded Aeneas' existing physical ailment by add-

⁷ For Aeneas' high status among Gazan Christians see Zacharias Scholasticus *V.Isaiae* 8 (ed. Brooks) and *V.Severi* 90 (ed. Kugener).

⁸ L. M. Positano, *Enea di Gaza, Epistole* (Naples 1961). A number of Christians appear in the letters including Ioannes (*Ep.* 1) and Serapion (16). He also wrote to the *scholastikos* Diodorus (7, 22) as well as the sophists Zonaios (4), Epiphanius (12, 23), Dionysius (17), and Theodoros (18). On this network more generally see G. Ruffini, "Late Antique Pagan Networks from Athens to the Thebaid," in W. V. Harris and G. Ruffini (eds.), *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece* (Leiden 2004) 241–257.

⁹ This rhetorical thrust competes for the reader's attention with the personal content of the letter, suggesting perhaps that these letters (like others in Aeneas' small epistolary corpus) may have been written as or revised into literary exempla. Aeneas' *Ep.* 5, for example, provides a beautiful example of a letter of consolation that draws heavily upon classical literary motifs. The collection as a whole seems not to have been made up wholly of exemplary letters, however: Positano, *Enea di Gaza* 8.

ing to it a betrayal of friendship. *Letter 20* reiterates this point, with the added twist of introducing Nemesion, a lawyer, to suggest the additional injustice of Gessius' failure to pay attention to the pleas of his companions. Each letter then uses Gessius' position as a physician to cast blame memorably upon Gessius' impolite silence. While rather banal texts, these letters still manage to show Gessius' public identity as a doctor as well as his place in Aeneas' broad and diverse social network.

The second letter collection, that of Procopius of Gaza, provides a more intimate and personal view of Gessius. Aeneas, Procopius, and Gessius all belonged to the same Alexandria-centered intellectual network.¹⁰ Like Aeneas, Procopius participated in this pagan-dominated cultural world while remaining a committed and engaged Christian. In addition to conventional rhetorical compositions like his *Declamations* and his *Descriptio imaginis*, Procopius wrote commentaries on the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and the book of Isaiah. Perhaps most controversially, he also wrote a refutation of Proclus' *De aeternitate mundi*, a work that had developed the Aristotelian idea that the cosmos is eternal.¹¹ Despite this anti-Proclan tract, Procopius remained on good terms with pagan intellectuals like Gessius, many of whom shared Proclus' enthusiasm for Aristotle's eternalist teachings.

A collection of 166 of Procopius' letters survives and Gessius appears in five of these.¹² They make clear the strong affection

¹⁰ Although he established a prominent school of rhetoric in Gaza, Procopius worked hard to remain an influential member of the Alexandrian intellectual world of the early sixth century. On his decision to teach in Gaza: Choricus of Gaza *Or. Fun. in Proc.* 12–13 and C. A. M. Glucker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Oxford 1987) 52–53. Procopius' pride at winning a rhetorical crown in Alexandria suggests his attachment to the intellectual culture of the city (Procop. *Ep.* 48, 96); this victory is also described by Choricus (15). For the Gazan scholastic environment in general see C. Saliou (ed.), *Gaza dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Salerno 2005).

¹¹ What remains of Procopius' *Refutatio Procli* is found in *PG* 87.2 2792e–h. On the Proclan text see H. S. Lang and A. D. Macro, *Proclus: On the Eternity of the World* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 2001).

¹² References to the letters of Procopius draw upon the edition of A. Garzya and R.-J. Loenertz, *Procopii Gazaei epistolae et declamations* (Ettal 1963). The letters printed by Migne (*PG* 87.2 2717–2792) are incomplete. To the

and concern that Procopius felt for Gessius. They are filled with Procopius' exaggerated praise of Gessius' prose and, in two cases, his sincere yet understated hope that his friend can respond philosophically to the deaths of much of his family.¹³ They also richly evoke classical authors, with the three longest letters deploying anecdotes and allusions to Socrates, Aristotle, Anaxagoras, and Pythagoras to develop their central themes.¹⁴ None of this is surprising in this sort of text, but these features do reveal some important contextual information about the relationship between Gessius and Procopius. Procopius saw Gessius as both a social and cultural peer whose rhetorical skill and philosophical learning he could (and perhaps should) readily acknowledge. Like the letters of Aeneas, Procopius' correspondence with Gessius places the iatrosophist within the broader cultural network that joined pagan and Christian intellectuals in the southeastern Mediterranean. Neither letter collection, however, suggests that anything particularly distinguished the doctor.

2. Damascius' *Life of Isidore* and Zacharias' *Ammonius*

Two texts written in the 520s offer the first suggestion that Gessius had become one of the more notable members of Alexandria's community of pagan intellectuals. Damascius' *Life of Isidore* was written in the late 520s amidst the mounting political pressure that ultimately led to the closure of the Athenian Neoplatonic school in 529.¹⁵ Although the work sur-

collection of Garzya and Loenertz add the material published by L. G. Westerink, "Ein unbekannter Brief des Prokopios von Gaza," *BZ* 67 (1967) 1–2. Gessius appears in *Epp.* 16, 102, 122, 125, and 164.

¹³ For praise of his prose see, for example, *Ep.* 16.3–7; on the deaths of Gessius' family members, 102, 125.

¹⁴ For Socrates see *Ep.* 164.1. *Ep.* 16.11–12 quotes Aristotle's famous statement that one swallow does not make spring (*Eth.Nic.* 1098a18–9). Pythagoras is mentioned in 164.21–24 and Anaxagoras in 125.9–13. While allusions to these philosophers occur in other letters, they are uncommon. Anaxagoras is mentioned nowhere else in the letters. Pythagoras appears in four other letters (1.1, 5; 2.8; 87.6; 160.8) and Socrates in eight (3.13; 38.22; 42.12; 91.32; 119.5; 126.2; 147.3). Procopius never mentions Aristotle by name throughout the corpus.

¹⁵ For the historical context that produced the *Life of Isidore* see P. Atha-

vives only in fragments, enough remains to show that it was loosely devoted to a discussion of the life and career of Damascius' friend and teacher Isidore. Damascius takes an extremely digressive path through Isidore's life and, in so doing, ends up treating many of the main personalities active in late fifth and early sixth century pagan intellectual circles.¹⁶ With Isidore as the work's centerpiece, Damascius used these biographical sketches to construct a narrative that highlighted both ideal philosophical behaviors and instances in which philosophers failed to measure up to these ethical standards.¹⁷ Each sketch had a moral and pedagogic purpose and, collectively, they illustrated the values of Damascius' philosophical community.

Damascius carefully crafted his profile of Gessius to highlight both his strength of character and the ethical failings of others (*Isid.* 128). Damascius begins by describing Gessius' medical training under the Jewish doctor Domnus. Gessius ultimately "deposed his own master," took over his school, and "became much admired because of his medical proficiency both in teaching and in practice." Despite coming to public teaching at a more advanced age than was normal, Gessius' ambition and diligence allowed him to gain "a greater degree of precision than any of his contemporary doctors and iatrosophists" in medical theory and practice. His medical success "earned him a great fortune and rare honors in the Roman state," but Damascius felt that Gessius possessed only a "semblance of

nassiadi, *Damascius: The Philosophical History* (Athens 1999) 39–42, 58–60; E. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley 2006) 111–142.

¹⁶ In this context the comments of Photius are particularly useful: Damascius "does not so much write the *Life of Isidore* as that of many other people, both contemporaries and his predecessors; he collects together their activities and also tales about them through a generous and even excessive use of digression" (*Bibl. cod.* 181 [II 189 Henry], transl. Athanassiadi). Note as well Athanassiadi's slightly different take on the text in *Damascius* 39–40.

¹⁷ Note the comments of Athanassiadi (*Damascius* 26–27) about goals of the *Life of Isidore*. These goals are examined in greater detail in E. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Social Memory and Group Dynamics in Pagan and Christian Communities*, ch. 3 (Berkeley forthcoming).

wisdom” (δοξοσοφίαν) because his love of pomp prevented him from making real philosophical progress (πομπικὸς ὢν καὶ ἐπιδεικτικὸς, φιλοσοφίας μὲν ἐπ’ ὀλίγον ἤκων).

Damascius thought that Gessius lacked conventional philosophical virtues, but he “applauded the noble courage of his virtuous soul” for Gessius’ actions when the Alexandrian pagan philosophical community faced a crisis. In 488, imperial authorities launched an investigation into the religious practices of pagan teachers active in Alexandria’s public classrooms.¹⁸ Many of the city’s most accomplished philosophers panicked when summoned before investigators. Gessius, despite his intellectual shortcomings, continued to behave philosophically even in this moment of crisis. “When Heraiscus was wanted by the emperor Zeno, [Gessius] hid him in his own house exposing himself to danger and, as Heraiscus fell ill in his place of refuge and died, Gessius buried him properly, wrapping his body and rendering it the customary rites” (Dam. *Isid.* 128). For Damascius, Gessius’ actions rendered him a hero of philosophical resistance.

Damascius’ portrait of Gessius takes an interesting form, especially when compared to other intellectuals who showed themselves more philosophically inclined in times of peace but less steadfast in the face of political pressure. Indeed, Damascius heaps scorn upon the philosophers Ammonius and Horapollon who, despite their great learning and philosophical accomplishments, compromised with Christian authorities during Zeno’s persecution. Damascius suggests that this pressure caused Ammonius to agree to a most unseemly deal with the Christian patriarch of Alexandria (118B) and induced Horapollon to convert to Christianity (120B). To Damascius, these were most unphilosophical and disgraceful acts. Gessius stands in clear contrast to these two men. Although an indifferent student of philosophy, Gessius’ actions nevertheless showed

¹⁸ This investigation and the events leading to it are described in *Isid.* frs. 106–131. On these events see Watts, *City and School* 220–222; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford 2001) 260–262; C. Haas *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore 1997) 326; Athanassiadi, *JHS* 113 (1993) 19–21 and *Damascius* 29.

him to be an exemplar of true philosophical behavior. Damascius thus relies heavily upon Gessius to develop the crucial theme that philosophical learning need not always correspond to philosophical behavior.

At roughly the same time that Damascius wrote the *Life of Isidore*, Zacharias Scholasticus inserted Gessius into a revision of his *Ammonius*, a fictional dialogue that presented the iatrosophist as an arrogant pagan stooge. When first assembled,¹⁹ the *Ammonius* demonstrated, through a series of imagined conversations, that Ammonius, the most prominent Alexandrian teacher of philosophy in the 490s, incorrectly taught that the cosmos is eternal.²⁰ Instead, Zacharias argued, God created a world that will perish and ultimately be re-assembled. This idea had an important religious implication for anti-Chalcedonian Christian students like Zacharias. These young men belonged to communities that awaited the approaching *eschaton* and could not accept any philosophical teaching that denied this.²¹

¹⁹ The date of composition for the *Ammonius* is difficult to pinpoint (e.g. M. M. Colonna, *Zacharia Scolastico, Ammonio: Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione, commentario* [Naples 1973] 44–45), but it seems certain that the text was first composed not long after Zacharias left Alexandria in the late 480s. For his departure date see H. I. MacAdam, “*Studia et Circenses: Beirut’s Roman Law School in its Colonial, Cultural Context*,” *ARAM* 13–14 (2001–2) 193–226, at 211. As will be discussed below, the Gessius material seems to be a later revision. On Zacharias’ tendencies as an author see E. Watts, “Winning the Intercommunal Dialogues: Zacharias Scholasticus’ *Life of Severus*,” *JECs* 13 (2005) 445–454.

²⁰ On Ammonius see Watts, *City and School*, 220–231. For specific discussion of his teaching see, for example, E. Tempelis, *The School of Ammonius, Son of Hermeias, on Knowledge of the Divine* (Athens 1998); K. Verrycken, “The Metaphysics of Ammonius son of Hermeias,” in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed* (London 1990) 199–232.

²¹ For this idea among anti-Chalcedonian thinkers see, for example, the eschatological visions recorded by John Rufus (e.g. *Pleroph.* 7, 12, 13, 19, 26, 36, 45, 88, 89) and the apocalyptic ideas to which Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite reacts at the turn of the sixth century (e.g. Ps.-Joshua 49). For this apocalyptic theme, see F. R. Trombley and J. W. Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (Liverpool 2000) 52 n.253; P. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: the Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Washington 1967) 118–120; W. Brandes, “Anastasius ὁ δίζογος: Endzeiterwartung und Kaiserkritik in Byzanz um 500 n. Chr.,” *BZ* 90 (1997) 24–63, at 39–41, 53; S. Ashbrook

Because the stakes were so high, Zacharias worked aggressively to discredit Ammonius. He sought not just to argue against Ammonius' philosophical ideas (a task that Aeneas of Gaza's *Theophrastus* had already performed in the 480s), but to attack the teacher's character and integrity.²²

Zacharias first introduces Ammonius as "the expounder of Plato and Aristotle, who ... now swaggers about in Alexandria claiming to be wise" (lines 19–24 Colonna). He continues to attack Ammonius personally in three exchanges that form the bulk of the original text. At the end of each discussion, Zacharias emphasizes the humiliation felt by Ammonius following his argumentative defeats (e.g. 1095 ff.). He also underlines the religious implications of these victories. Ammonius is once called a "clever man (who) corrupts the souls of youths and takes them away from God and truth" (31–32). Then, following the conclusion of another exchange with Ammonius, Zacharias writes that "many of those present in the class at that time ... were placed among us and leaned towards our arguments, or more correctly, they leaned towards Christianity out of faith and love of truth" (353–359).

In making such direct and personal attacks on Ammonius, Zacharias sought to reverse the appeal of Alexandrian eternalist ideas by undermining the personal authority of their leading exponent. This approach proved powerful, but it had a distinct chronological limit. Zacharias' text was novel because it assailed Ammonius, a teacher whom Zacharias transformed into a caricature of Alexandria's pagan intellectuals. The death of Ammonius between 517 and 526 greatly diminished the potency of Zacharias' text.²³ This seems to be the reason that

Harvey, "Remembering Pain: Syriac Historiography and the Separation of the Churches," *Byzantion* 58 (1988) 295–308, at 301–302.

²² On the relationship between Aeneas' *Theophrastus* and Zacharias' *Ammonius* see E. Watts, "An Alexandrian Christian Response to Fifth-century Neoplatonic Influence," in Andrew Smith (ed.), *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Brown* (Swansea 2005) 215–229.

²³ The *terminus post quem* for Ammonius' death is his prominence in John Philoponus' *Commentary on the Physics* (a work dated internally to 517), which suggests that he was still alive when the text was written. Note however K. Verrycken, "The Development of Philoponus' Thought and its Chronol-

Zacharias chose to include Gessius in a revised version of the *Ammonius* published sometime in the late 510s or early 520s.²⁴

Rhetorically, the Gessius dialogue works in much the same way as the earlier Ammonian material. It too involves a refutation of eternalist teaching that blends banal philosophical argumentation with attacks on the character and intelligence of a pagan interlocutor. Like his Ammonius, Zacharias' Gessius stands out for his arrogance and intellectual obstinacy. He and Ammonius are described in similarly abusive terms²⁵ and both personify the faults of the same broad group of Alexandrian intellectuals. Like Ammonius, Gessius receives rough treatment at the end of the exchange. When Zacharias finally turns away all of his objections, he comments: "Such was the discussion with the one who boasted of his skill in medicine, who held himself haughtily and gladdened all of those dwelling beside the Nile in his all-encompassing wisdom" (938–940).

This exchange never happened in the fashion that Zacharias describes, but the Gessius section of the *Ammonius* is not without its historical value. Zacharias evidently first chose to focus upon Ammonius because he was Zacharias' own teacher and the Alexandrian pagan intellectual who was best known to Christian students in the 490s.²⁶ In updating his text for the

ogy," in *Aristotle Transformed* 233–274. The philosopher Olympiodorus may have studied under Ammonius around 520.

²⁴ Zacharias' sloppiness clearly marks this revision. The introductory discussion that opens the text states that accounts of three discussions will follow, all of them involving a Christian student and Ammonius. Gessius is not mentioned in this introduction nor does he appear in the text's conclusion—this again focuses only upon Ammonius. Furthermore, while the introductory dialogue suggests that the conversations with Ammonius took place in the past year, a considerable time has passed between the recorded discussion with Gessius (who was one of the students who supposedly listened to Zacharias's first refutation of Ammonius) and the narrative present in which Gessius has become a prominent teacher and physician.

²⁵ Zacharias uses the same word, βρενθύομαι (*Amm.* 22, 939), to describe their arrogance.

²⁶ In addition to Zacharias, Ammonius is known to have taught at least two other Christian students—John Philoponus (cf. Verrycken, in *Aristotle Transformed* 233–274) and Sergius of Reshaina (cf. J. Watt, "Commentary and Translation in Syriac Aristotelian Scholarship: Sergius to Baghdad," in

520s, Zacharias used Gessius to represent a new generation of arrogant and intellectually inflexible Alexandrian pagan philosophers. This is, of course, an interesting development given Damascius' comment that Gessius was something of a marginal figure in the community. One must, however, distinguish between the view of Gessius held by members of the community and the way he was perceived by outsiders. Gessius may not have been seen as a core member of these circles by Damascius but, as the only figure mentioned in both the *Life of Isidore* and the letter collections of Aeneas and Procopius of Gaza, he seems to have been the Alexandrian pagan intellectual who enjoyed the closest relationships with Christian intellectuals. Like Ammonius in the 490s, Gessius had become one of the most widely recognized Alexandrian pagan intellectuals in the 520s. This would have made him a natural figure for Zacharias to choose to represent this group before a Christian audience.

3. Gessius in the Seventh Century

Gessius died perhaps a decade or two after the revision of Zacharias' *Ammonius*, but he would appear twice more in texts written in the following century. In the early seventh century, Stephanus in his *Commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms* recounts a short anecdote that Gessius used to tell his students in order to illustrate the Hippocratic idea that great size is attractive in the young but awkward for older people. When explaining this aphorism "the highly revered (τοισευδαίμων) sophist Gessius used to tell his students wittily: 'if you want to know exactly what Hippocrates means, take me as a case in point'. For he was tall and attractive in youth, but in old age his back became bent."²⁷ This anecdote was transmitted orally and, without deliberate reinforcement by teachers, it ordinarily would disappear after a couple of scholarly generations.²⁸ Stephanus probably either attended a lecture in which Gessius made this

Proc. Tenth Intern. Symposium Syriacum [forthcoming]). If Zacharias' characterization of Ammonius is realistic, he may well have taught many more.

²⁷ Stephanus *Com.* 2.53 (transl. Westerink, slightly adapted).

²⁸ Westerink, *Stephanus of Athens* 20. On the durability of oral traditions see the insightful comments of J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison 1985) 99, 117, 187–191.

joke or (more likely) heard it retold by his own teacher.²⁹ Familiarity with Gessius had already begun to wane among younger students, however, because Stephanus also found it necessary to introduce the physician to his students as a “highly revered teacher.” Stephanus’ remark then serves both to explain the Hippocratic aphorism and to teach his students about one of their notable intellectual ancestors. This suggests that Gessius remained known to Alexandrian scholars after his death because of the community’s own efforts to instruct students in its collective history.³⁰

Another work, Sophronius’ *Miracles of Saints Cyrus and John*, suggests that Gessius’ continued fame as a “highly revered sophist” extended from intellectual circles into the general populace.³¹ Sophronius undertook this complicated literary project around 610 in order to thank the saints for curing him of a serious eye condition.³² The composition itself has three parts. It begins with an introductory preamble. This is followed by a longer panegyric explaining the history and significance of the shrine.³³ The last and longest part of Sophronius’ work de-

²⁹ Westerink (*Stephanus of Athens* 20) favors the former option. While it is possible, the dates of Gessius and Stephanus make it unlikely. We know that Olympiodorus’ students would have heard anecdotes about Ammonius: e.g. Olymp. *In Gorgiam* 24.2, 39.2, 40.5, 44.5, 44.6, 48.5. See the comments of R. Jackson, K. Lycos, and H. Tarrant, *Olympiodorus, Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias* (Leiden 1998) 252 n.739.

³⁰ In this context it is interesting to note Vansina’s discussion of private and official traditions (*Oral Tradition as History* 99–109).

³¹ For the fraught question of Sophronius’ identity see C. von Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem, vie monastique et confession dogmatique* (Paris 1972) 239–242.

³² Sophron. *Laudes in SS. Cyrum et Joannem*. 1 (*PG* 87.3 3380); cf. *Miracula* 70 (*PG* 3673). For the date see N. Fernandez Marcos, *Los Thaumata de Sofronio: contribucion al estudio de la incubatio cristana* (Madrid 1975) 169, the most recent edition. Because of its limited availability, I cite the *Miracula* with both miracle numbers and *PG* columns. Note as well the textual emendations proposed by J. Duffy, “Observations on Sophronius’ *Miracles of Cyrus and John*,” *JThS* 35 (1984) 41–60.

³³ *Laud.* (*PG* 3380–3424). The *Preamble* runs from 3380–3388, the *Panegyric* 3388–3424. On these sections of the text one should now also consult the electronic edition of P. Bringel posted at <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00003975>.

scribes seventy miraculous cures performed by Cyrus and John (*PG* 3424–3676), the accounts of which he seems to have collected primarily from the oral testimony of the shrine’s superintendents.

The very politicized nature of the shrine to Cyrus and John further complicated Sophronius’ grandiose composition. The shrine was located in the Alexandrian suburb Menouthis and remained a local center of Chalcedonian Christianity within a largely anti-Chalcedonian region.³⁴ Menouthis had another sort of religious significance as well. Menouthis and neighboring Canopus had served as important pagan religious centers into the late fourth century.³⁵ Canopus was Christianized in the 390s, but Menouthis retained an active cult of Isis frequented by Alexandrian pagan intellectuals into (and perhaps beyond) the 480s.³⁶ As a result, by the early seventh century, Menouthis had long been a sacred space contested over by Christians and pagans.

Sophronius was very much aware of this contest. In his introduction, he links the founding of the Cyrus and John

³⁴ The shrine to Cyrus and John was evidently controlled by the Chalcedonian patriarch, who appointed its overseer: see e.g. *Mir.* 8 (*PG* 3438A–B).

³⁵ For Canopus see, for example, Rufin. *HE* 11.26; Eunap. *VS* 471–473; and the Coptic narrative published by T. Orlandi, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria* II (Milan 1970) 12.12–24. On the Canopic shrines in general, F. Kayser, “Oreilles et couronnes: à propos des cultes de Canope,” *BIFAO* 91 (1991) 207–217. The Isis shrine in Menouthis: Vidman, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionis Isiacae et Sarapiacae* 403, 406, 556a (for third-century mentions) and Zacharias Scholasticus *V.Sev.* 17–30 (for its continued activity in the late fifth century). See too the discussion of F. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization* II (Leiden 1995) 5–9.

³⁶ See Zacharias *V.Sev.* 17–30. Cf. D. Frankfurter, “The Consequences of Hellenism in Late Antique Egypt: Religious Worlds and Actors,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2 (2000) 184–189. J. Gascou, “Les origines du culte des saints Cyr et Jean,” *AnalBoll* 125 (2007) 1–35, at 33–35, has recently raised questions about the reliability of Zacharias’ eyewitness account of the Menouthis shrine. This part of the text seems to have been penned in the 490s, not the 510s as Gascou proposes (for this dating see Watts, *JECs* 13 [2005] 454–459). Because it addressed an audience aware of these recent events, it could serve its proper polemical purpose only if its narrative remained close to the details that people remembered.

shrine to a desire by the patriarch Cyril to fight against pagan influence in Menouthis. The Isis of Menouthis, Sophronius writes, had “swept away many with its false images” and “it called not only unbelievers ... but even the faithful and those who bore the signs of Christ” (*Laud.* 25 [PG 3409–3411]). Cyril founded the shrine, Sophronius records, so that “the evil [would] cease ... and the perfect knowledge of truth [would] be provided to the people as well as the love of the divine God” (26 [3412–3413]). The remains of the martyrs Cyrus and John were placed in Menouthis and “led to the spring of life” those whom the demon had “deceived by vain hope and deluded by *phantasia*” (29 [3416]). These conversions, Sophronius concludes, demonstrate the power of the relics of Cyrus and John.

In the same way that Sophronius claims that the deeds of Cyrus and John thrust back the deceit of pagans in the time of Cyril, so too does he feel that a narrative of the saints’ miracles will “confound” the lies of his pagan contemporaries. Through his narrative, Sophronius writes, “the lying Hellenes will not be able to refute us; they are refuted by the things which the saints always do ... for these establish the truth of what we say” (32 [3420B–C]). Rhetorically, Sophronius positions the *Miracles* as a proof text illustrating the shrine’s power to doubting pagans. It is in this context that we must understand the appearance of Gessius in *Miracle* 30. As the only pagan who is explicitly identified among those who were converted by the shrine, Gessius plays a vital role in allowing Sophronius to achieve his rhetorical aims. More than any other miracle, Cyrus and John’s cure of Gessius proves Sophronius’ contention that the deeds of the saints could silence pagan critics. Sophronius describes Gessius as a sophist, though a sophist of the sort that gave medical and not rhetorical lectures.³⁷ He suggests (somewhat implausibly) that imperial pressure had once forced Gessius to accept baptism but, despite this, he continued to live as a

³⁷ Gessius as *sophistes*: *Mir.* 30 (PG 3513D). It is not coincidental to see Sophronius and Stephanus using this word. On the fluidity of the term *sophistes* see R. Cribiore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch* (Princeton 2007) 37–38; B. Puech, *Orateurs et sophistes grecs dans les inscriptions d’époque impériale* (Paris 2002) 10–15.

pagan.³⁸ Sophronius, like Zacharias, thought Gessius to be extremely haughty³⁹ because, in his arrogance, Gessius claimed that all of the cures prescribed by Cyrus and John derived from the writings of Hippocrates, Galen, and other doctors (*PG* 3516D). The saints afflicted Gessius with paralysis as a punishment. The physician first tried to treat himself with conventional medicine and then consulted with other doctors. When they too could not cure him, his colleagues suggested that he visit the shrine of Cyrus and John. While there, Gessius received a sequence of visions from the saints, each prescribing treatments for his paralysis. Each of these Gessius dismissed as mere apparitions. Finally, the saints appeared again and emphasized that, for their medicine to take effect, Gessius would have to make a public statement in which he acknowledged both the power of the saints and the failure of his own methods (3517–3520).

This story primarily illustrates how the power of the saints exceeds that of conventional medicine, an idea enhanced by the fact that *Miracle* 29 has a similar theme, but Gessius' presence gives it additional force. Sophronius makes it clear that Gessius was a member of the pagan intelligentsia and his eventual recourse to Cyrus and John for healing illustrates in the clearest terms the degree to which the saints replaced the “demonic” healing power of Isis. Indeed, Gessius' healing is perhaps the best example of the saints showing their power in a way that “Hellenes would not be able to refute.” It seems that the literary character Gessius (for, in this context, one should not think of him as anything more) here displays two overlapping identities: he represents both rational medical doctors and the Alexandrian pagan intellectual community that had

³⁸ *PG* 3513D–3516A. This is a peculiar idea not repeated in any other source. If true, the supposed conversion would have to have occurred after the composition of both Zacharias' *Ammonius* and Damascius' *Life of Isidore*. The profile of Gessius in each of these texts depends upon him being an unrepentant pagan. In light of this, it seems best to consider mistaken Sophronius' claim that Gessius had once superficially converted.

³⁹ Like Zacharias, Sophronius too uses βρενθύομαι to describe Gessius (*PG* 3513C).

once dominated the sacred space of Menouthis. His cure and supposed religious conversion are then doubly revealing of the shrine's power.

The age of this anecdote is perhaps its most notable feature. Though most of the seventy stores collected by Sophronius date to the late sixth or early seventh centuries, the tradition on which this miracle is based may be as much as a century old. Indeed, it is much closer to the fifth century anti-pagan ideas expressed in Cyril's two orations about the shrine than it is to the anti-heretical miracles that Sophronius describes.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Sophronius seems to have heard it told at the shrine in a way that suggested that its teller knew who Gessius was and why he was an important figure.⁴¹ This indicates that Gessius remained a well-known representative of both Alexandrian pagan intellectuals and rational doctors long after his death.

4. Gessius' Long Legacy

Gessius would remain a shadowy emblem of sixth-century Alexandrian intellectual culture for centuries. As late as the thirteenth century, he merited mention as a leader of an Alexandrian medical college in the *History of the Philosophers* of Ibn-al-Qiftī.⁴² Ibn-al-Qiftī knew nothing more of Gessius; he refers to him simply as a member of a scholarly tradition described in the *History of the Physicians* written by the Arab physician Hunain Ibn-Ishāq (A.D. 809–877).⁴³ This *History* organized doctors chronologically from their earliest origins until Ishāq's

⁴⁰ E.g. *Mir.* 28, 29, 37, 38.

⁴¹ Sophronius claims that his material derived largely from "certain things that we observed ourselves and certain things that were reported by others who observed them" (31 [3420A]). Gessius is the most obvious exception to this.

⁴² *Ta'riḥ al-hukamā'* p.71.15–20, quoted and discussed by D. Gutas, "The 'Alexandria to Baghdad' Complex of Narratives: A Contribution to the Study of Philosophical and Medical Historiography among the Arabs," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 10 (1999) 155–194, at 170–171.

⁴³ For biography see M. Meyerhof, "New Light on Hunain Ibn-Ishāq and his Period," *Isis* 8 (1926) 685–724; and the earlier study of G. Bergsträsser, *Hunain Ibn Ishāq und seine Schule* (Leiden 1913).

own day.⁴⁴ The work begins (p.75) by paraphrasing an earlier chronology that traced medical history from Asclepius to Galen. For the period after Galen, Ishâq evidently relied upon information handed down by others who taught him.⁴⁵ On this basis, he commented (p.79):

The noteworthy physicians between the days of Galen and this year are Stephanos al-Iskandarânî, Gessios al-Iskandarânî, Aquilas al-Iskandarânî, and Marinos al-Iskandarânî. Those four Alexandrians were the ones who commented on the books of Galen, made synopses of them, abridged them, and gave brief résumés of some books and discussed others at length.

Ishâq then briefly listed eight other physicians (Oribasius made the list twice, in two different guises) before concluding that there were others “whose names would require a long discussion” (pp.79–80). Even allowing for the two mentions of Oribasius, more than half of the men on the list are described as Alexandrian.

This Alexandrian prominence is easily explained. Medieval Arab scholars and physicians took a keen interest in notions of scholarly continuity. This resulted most famously in the Arabic tradition that knowledge of philosophy and medicine migrated from Alexandria to Antioch and eventually Baghdad in the late antique period.⁴⁶ This narrative evolved slowly over time and would eventually take a number of different forms,⁴⁷ but each version constructed a scholarly genealogy that joined Arab intellectuals to late antique Alexandrian medical schools. Perhaps even more interesting for understanding the continued prominence of Gessius, the last unequivocally pagan doctor

⁴⁴ For the text and translation of this work see F. Rosenthal, “Ishâq b. Hunain’s *Ta’rîḥ al-Atibbâ’*,” *Oriens* 7 (1954) 55–80. All subsequent mentions of this work refer to this translation.

⁴⁵ This is suggested obliquely by his comments at pp.72–73.

⁴⁶ Variants of this tradition are found in al-Fārābî, al-Mas’ūdî, the Muslim physician Ibn-Riḍwān of Cairo, and the Jewish physician Ibn-Ġumay’. On this see M. Meyerhof, “Von Alexandrien nach Bagdad. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des philosophischen und medizinischen Unterrichts bei den Arabern,” *SBBerl* 1930, 389–429; and Gutas, *Documenti* 10 (1999) 157–168.

⁴⁷ Gutas, *Documenti* 10 (1999) 155–194.

known to teach in Alexandria, is the fact that three versions of this tradition attribute the decline of Alexandrian medicine to the rising influence of Christians.⁴⁸ Ibn-Ġumay', for example, comments that "Christians considered it a fault to study intellectual subjects and their kings repudiated their cultivation and paid no heed to supporting those who sought them."⁴⁹ The result, he and others suggest, was a consolidation of the curriculum and a need to compose synoptic versions of key texts.

Ishâq does not speak directly of the tradition of scholastic transfer, but he does indicate that Gessius participated in a process of curricular and textual abridgement like that which the Alexandria-to-Baghdad narrative complex describes. Ishâq knew more about Gessius than this implies (he claims elsewhere to know of a commentary that Gessius wrote on the second section of Galen's *On the Anatomical Knowledge of Hippocrates*),⁵⁰ but he seems content to insert Gessius into his chronology as a figure whose name can readily be affixed to the intellectual projects undertaken by Alexandrian physicians. In Arabic as in Greek, Gessius then remained a representative of the larger community of late antique Alexandrian scholars. Like their Christian predecessors, Arab authors' view of Gessius reflected their attitude towards the scholarly tradition to which Gessius belonged. In their view, however, Gessius' paganism no longer merited attack (or even any mention). In Arabic tradition, late antique Alexandrian cultural life had become associated with intellectualism not paganism. As late antique perceptions of this culture changed, so too did the portrayal of its representatives.

5. Conclusion

The sources describing Gessius offer scholars two very different types of pictures of the man. One profile, constructed of the plausible details these texts provide, reveals a handsome and successful doctor from Petra. Born probably in the 450s, Ges-

⁴⁸ For discussion see Gutas, *Documenti* 10 (1999) 175–178.

⁴⁹ Ibn-Ġumay', *Al-Maqāla aṣ-Ṣalāhiyya*, transl. Gutas, *Documenti* 10 (1999) 161.

⁵⁰ Cf. Meyerhof, *Isis* 8 (1926) 699.

sius married and had a number of children. He studied medicine under the Jewish physician Domnus before wresting control of the school from his mentor at a relatively advanced age. His great skill in medicine became well known throughout the East and earned him a set of exceptional imperial honors. Gessius also studied philosophy in Alexandria, probably under Ammonius, and interacted socially with the philosophers, rhetoricians, and grammarians with whom he shared a public teaching space. A pagan, Gessius reacted against an imperial investigation of his colleagues in 488 and helped one of them escape an arrest warrant. Despite his close relationships with Alexandrian pagan intellectuals, Gessius also maintained friendships with prominent Christian teachers. He may have continued to teach into the 530s or early 540s and presumably died not long after explaining to his class how age had transformed him from a comely youth into a stooped elder.

Another Gessius emerges from the scraps discarded when crafting the above portrait. This Gessius first appears in the 520s, near the end of his life. He is a literary character endowed with the ignorance, arrogance, and disdain for Christianity that some Christians thought pervaded Alexandrian pagan intellectual life at the turn of the sixth century. This Gessius serves a simple textual purpose: he exists to be attacked, embarrassed, and (perhaps ultimately) converted. Zacharias Scholasticus led this Gessius into the portico adjoining the Alexandrian lecture halls for a verbal lashing that revealed both his foolishness and the folly of pagan eternalist thinking. Sophronius brought him into the healing shrine of Cyrus and John so that the saints could prove themselves stronger than the healing traditions of Hippocrates and Galen by defeating and converting their most learned contemporary heir. In the hands of these Christian authors, Gessius displayed the objectionable attitudes of a community of intellectuals whose ideas they found disagreeable and whose silence they craved. Interestingly enough, Gessius continues to be remembered as a member of this intellectual community long after the conflict between Alexandrian intellectualism and Christianity died down. Arabic sources remembered this conflict only as a causal event that led to the decline of traditional learning in the later Roman world. To these authors, the champions of this learning

like Gessius stand out as exemplary figures and distant intellectual ancestors whose legacy should be claimed not attacked.

Despite the remarkable disconnect between Gessius the man and Gessius the literary character, the plausible information about Gessius that we can recover does a great deal to explain why he was long remembered as a notable physician and philosopher. While neither the best doctor of his age nor its most prominent intellectual, Gessius enjoyed friendships with leaders of the Alexandrian pagan intellectual community celebrated by Damascius and Christian intellectuals like Procopius and Aeneas of Gaza. In addition, he evidently styled himself an iatrosophist, a particular breed of public intellectual whose literary talents were joined to practical skill in medicine.⁵¹ These men looked for acceptance as full-fledged members of important intellectual circles in order to distinguish themselves from the humble technical practitioners of medicine.⁵² At the same time, their medical interests and responsibilities ensured that they never socially isolated themselves in the way that some later Neoplatonic philosophers did.⁵³ Gessius' medical practice then ensured that he remained among the most visible members of the Alexandrian pagan intellectual community, especially to those groups who resolutely (and often violently) opposed pagan interests.

If Gessius' large and diverse social networks amplified his prestige during his lifetime, his fame endured because of the long-term success of the intellectual community in which he was active. His successors in the medical schools of Alexandria

⁵¹ On the problematic nature of this term see Baldwin, *DOP* 38 (1984) 16. Note as well, for an earlier period, the comments about the connection of rhetoric and medicine made by G. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1969) 59–75; P. A. Brunt, "The Bubble of the Second Sophistic," *BICS* 39 (1994) 25–52, at 43–45.

⁵² Blockley, *Florilegium* 2 (1980) 89; cf. J. Scarborough, *Roman Medicine* (Ithaca 1969) 112–113; and, in a Hippocratic context, H. Chang, *Testing the Serpent of Asclepius: The Social Mobility of Greek Physicians* (diss. Indiana Univ. 2003).

⁵³ For this tendency, note Themist. *Or.* 28.341d as well as the helpful correctives of G. Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society," *JHS* 102 (1982) 33–59, at 54–57.

kept his reputation alive in their classrooms and among rhetorically and medically trained Christians for three and possibly more generations after his death. Late antique intellectual communities often paid homage to their intellectual ancestors in this way,⁵⁴ and Gessius had the good fortune to belong to the most enduring of these communities. The communal history handed down by the Alexandrian faculty to which he once belonged passed, probably via Syriac scholarship, into the Arabic world and became the foundation of Abbasid medical culture.⁵⁵ This success meant that physicians like Hunain ibn-Ishâq continued to see Gessius as an intellectual ancestor. By the thirteenth century, little of substance was known of Gessius the man. Gessius, however, lived on as a late antique link in the chain joining the still-vibrant tradition of Arabic medicine and philosophy to its Greek origins. One imagines that this would have puzzled, but not particularly displeased the old Petran physician.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴ This seems to have been the primary purpose of late antique philosophical biographies like Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists and Philosophers*, Marinus' *Life of Proclus*, and, in an idiosyncratic way, Damascius' *Life of Isidore*.

⁵⁵ For the role of Syriac scholars in this process of transmission see A. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia 2006) 94–95; Gutas, *Documenti* 10 (1999) 181–187.

⁵⁶ Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at Indiana University and at the conference Late Antiquity in Illinois. I thank these audiences as well as the editor and an anonymous reader for their comments. Particular gratitude is owed to John Scarborough for his bibliographic assistance and to Eric Robinson for his suggested improvements to the manuscript.