

Photius at Work: Evidence from the Text of the *Bibliotheca*

Tomas Hägg

SEVERAL PROBLEMS are connected with the genesis of Photius' *Bibliotheca*. In particular, the date and place of composition have been much discussed, and the main object of that discussion has been to identify the diplomatic mission to the Arabs in which Photius took part. According to what he himself states in the letter of dedication to his brother Tarasius which precedes the text of the *Bibliotheca*, his setting out on that mission was the chief stimulus for the composition of this huge work. But Photius' own words in the same letter have been the starting point also for the discussion of another question, which will be the subject of the present article: did Photius, as he himself alleges, compose from memory?

In this journal, Nigel G. Wilson recently published a judicious examination of the different theories regarding the external circumstances of composition.¹ When he arrives at the composition proper ("the author's method"), he deliberately takes up a somewhat provocative position: "It is not usual to take seriously his [*scil.* Photius'] assertion that he worked from memory. Instead, the *Bibliotheca* is thought to be the revised and expanded version of notes made during many years of reading. Doubtless he did have notes of this kind, but I think his claim may be substantially true; in other words, I would suppose that his notes were very brief and he relied on his memory for the most part."

In support of this view, Wilson adduces other instances of astonishing feats of memory, from Eustathius to Lord Macaulay.² Now, my intention is neither to discuss whether the alleged analogies are relevant at all to a work of this particular kind (a learned compilation of about 270 different works of literature), nor to give voice only to a

¹ GRBS 9 (1968) 451–55. The standard treatment of the subject is by K. Ziegler in RE 20 (1941) 667–737, esp. 684ff. See also P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris 1971) 37–42 and 189–96. Quotations of the text of the *Bibliotheca* in the present article are from the edition by R. Henry (Paris 1959–).

² Wilson, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 454–55, supplemented in GRBS 12 (1971) 559–60.

general feeling of scepticism, founded on the quantity of the material reproduced, partly literally, in the *Bibliotheca* (the text would amount to about 1,500 printed pages of normal size). This would mean just repeating what has long been a fairly common opinion, and Wilson's remarks should at least make us avoid sweeping statements, implying that our own poorer powers of memory are the standard for all individuals and all times.

To arrive at a more satisfactory answer to the question, I think it is necessary to leave behind the undifferentiated manifestations of disbelief or belief³ in Photius' words in the dedication and instead to turn to the text of the *Bibliotheca* itself. First, there is need for a more concrete confrontation of the proposed ways of composition with the various kinds of material which make up the *Bibliotheca*: what is really to be expected from someone composing from memory or from notes or with the original books before his eyes, and what is it we have? Are not different methods to be assumed for the composition of the different types of sections or 'codices'? Secondly, it should reasonably be possible to detect small traces of the method left in the text, tool marks, so to say, if only we inspect it closely enough. A suitable basis for such an inspection should be the many, often neglected sections dealing with works that have been transmitted to us also in their original versions, where we may compare Photius' product with the raw material.

The present attempt is based on the examination of a very small fraction of the entire text, namely, the two 'codices' 44 and 241, in which Photius treats of Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii*.⁴ The object is not to give an exhaustive documentation of the material but just to point out the different kinds of evidence available, to see what conclusions can be drawn from them and thus to invite further discussion along more specific lines than hitherto.

As is well known, the *Bibliotheca* is not a homogeneous work. For

³ I take Wilson's words about Photius' claim being "substantially" or "largely" true as a concession to the possible existence of brief notes, not as suggesting a differentiation between summaries, excerpts, etc.

⁴ The material made use of in this article was collected during my work on an investigation with a wider scope, concerning Photius' methods of compilation in general and conducted with the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. Fuller documentation—and the justification for some statements made just in passing here (for instance, concerning the nature of the VA manuscript used by Photius)—will be provided in a forthcoming account of this investigation.

some of the books he has read, Photius is content to give just the title and perhaps a short personal opinion of the contents; from others he makes extracts of dozens of pages. The *Vita Apollonii* is first summarized in a couple of pages (cod. 44), and later on nearly 30 pages are extracted from it (cod. 241). The extracts are in two series, the first one consisting of fairly long coherent pieces, obviously quoted because Photius was interested in the subject matter, and the second one consisting of about 120 shorter examples of Philostratus' style. Of primary importance to the present discussion is the *order* of the excerpts. A comparison with the preserved original work shows that nearly all are reproduced exactly in their original sequence within each series. As regards the first series, this is perhaps not so remarkable, since many of the excerpts (though not all) are connected by subject matter. A reader of the biography, equipped with a good memory, might be able to attach most of them to the various stages of Apollonius' long journeys (though it seems odd that he should care to commit to memory also which book contained which material within the continuous story).⁵

But what about the 120 stylistic samples? Some of them consist of just a word or two, others of half a sentence torn from its context, yet others of several sentences belonging together. What are we to think of a man who, in giving *from memory* a fair number of examples of an author's phraseology, produces the samples *in their original order* and with a tolerably even distribution all through the work in question (in this case, a text of about 350 pages)? The only possibility, as far as I can see, is that he revived in his memory the text of the *whole* work once more, only to stop at every third 'page' (on the average) to dictate (or write down) a quotation. This is, of course, absurd; the order of the samples, if taken from memory, would be mainly associative, and since the associations would be based on elements of vocabulary and phraseology, not subject matter, in the case of these small scraps, the resulting sequence could never be identical with the original one. No doubt the arrangement which we find in cod. 241 is the typical result of someone turning over once more from the beginning the leaves of a book which he has just read, his eyes falling on a peculiar word or phrase here and there. This picture is not contradicted—it is rather confirmed—by the four excerpts out of 120 that are 'mis-

⁵ Cf. *Bibl.* 328a18–20 and 331a11–24.

placed':⁶ none of these has been 'moved' more than *one* step, each being so near to the excerpt which has usurped its place in the sequence that the *same* page in the manuscript which Photius was reading could very well have contained them both.

Now if Photius had the original in front of him when he was supplementing his main series of excerpts with these stylistic samples, what would make us think that he had a moment earlier drawn *from memory* those extensive *verbatim* extracts from the very same work? We may also note in passing that there is no fundamental difference between the two series of excerpts as regards their literalness. It is true that the number of summarizing transitional passages is much greater in the first series than in the second. But also among the stylistic excerpts we find whole sentences of Photius' own making, numerous explanatory additions⁷ and so on, and when it comes to the pure extracts, the instances of omission or substitution of separate words or variations in word order are largely of the same character in both series. A good illustration of the fact that a stylistic excerpt need not be truer to the original than one in which the emphasis is on the subject matter is provided when Photius happens to quote the same passage from VA 2.6 in *both* series: in the stylistic sample (*Bibl.* 332a22), he substitutes *ἀνθρώποις* for Philostratus' *ἀνδράσιν*, whereas his earlier quotation of the phrase (*Bibl.* 324b23) exactly reproduces the original wording. In other cases, the relationship is the reverse. Evidently, the method of reproduction was the same in both kinds of excerpts.

The next type of argument has to do precisely with the phenomenon of *literal* quotation. It is more ambiguous than the argument from order. As the alleged analogies adduced by Wilson show, literalness in itself is not decisive, nor, for that matter, are occasional deviations from literalness into freer paraphrase. Both phenomena can be used to support composition from memory as well as dictation directly from the manuscript of the original. But I should like to call attention to a special feature of Photius' literal quotation which I think largely escapes this ambiguity.

It is possible to demonstrate from a number of common readings that Photius must have used a manuscript of the *Vita Apollonii* which

⁶ *Bibl.* 331b6–7, 331b28–29, 332a36–b2 and 334b23–24.

⁷ *Cf. Bibl.* 332a28–29, 332a36–b2 and 331b11, 20, 29, etc. Instances like these disprove the suggestion of Lemerle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 193, that the second series could be "la transcription, faite par un secrétaire, de passages remarquables notés par Photius au cours de sa lecture."

belonged to the branch nowadays labelled the *deterior familia*.⁸ Most variants taken over by Photius from this source are unobtrusive and are of no interest in the present context. But the special feature referred to above is the occasional transmission of *textual errors* from the copy of the *Vita Apollonii* which Photius happened to read into the text of the *Bibliotheca*.

When, for instance, Photius makes an extract from VA 5.5, he passes on to his readers, among other things, the following description of objects which Apollonius and his followers saw in the Herakleion of Gadeira (*Bibl.* 328b37–40): ἡ Πυγμαλίωνος δὲ ἐλαία ἢ χρυσῆ . . . ἀξία μὲν, ὡς φασι, καὶ τοῦ θαλλοῦ θαυμάζειν ᾧ εἴκασται, θαυμάζεσθαι δ' ἂν ἐπὶ τῷ καρπῷ μᾶλλον· βρύει γὰρ αὐτὸνυμαράγδου λίθου. This is exactly the text which most manuscripts of the *Vita Apollonii* offer. But the best one, π, reads βρύειν, which is clearly required by grammar: αὐτόν, referring to “the fruit” (which “teemed with emeralds”), is left in the air without the infinitive βρύειν, the accusative-and-infinitive construction being due to the implied report by Apollonius and his followers. That Photius himself was acquainted with the verb and its construction is shown, by the way, in *Bibl.* 9b23, where he uses it to characterize Philostratus’ style: βρύων γλυκύτητος.

For the proper evaluation of such a feature it is necessary to recall briefly Photius’ special qualifications and the character of his work. He was well educated, and he was widely read in Greek literature of all periods. There can be no doubt that he could produce a grammatically correct text in Greek (I leave apart Atticist peculiarities and the like).⁹ Both the *Bibliotheca* and his *Lexicon* testify to his philological interests. As regards the *Bibliotheca*, he chose for reproduction passages which particularly attracted his attention because of their contents or style, and the literal quotations are freely mixed with sentences of more or less his own making, serving as connecting links. The omissions he makes generally do not seriously disturb the coherence of the extract—they would mostly pass unnoticed by a reader who had no access to the original. There is, as a rule, nothing mechanical about his

⁸ Cf. *supra* n.4. For the classification of the mss of the *Vita Apollonii*, see the editions by C. L. Kayser (Zürich 1844 and Leipzig 1870).

⁹ In his review of Henry’s edition (*supra* n.1), vol.5, in *JHS* 90 (1970) 227, K. Tsantsanoglou expresses some doubts concerning Photius’ “grammatical efficiency,” as it is reflected in his *Lexicon*. But the main charge seems to be that Photius took over errors from his predecessors; the one example given of Photius’ “own” mistakes (from the *Amphilochia*) has nothing to do with grammar.

work; it is not the work of a scribe who copies mechanically from the text in front of him.

How, then, should we explain an occasional slip like *βρῦει*, instead of *βρῦειν*? If the mistake appeared for the first time in the text of the *Bibliotheca*, it would be no problem: it would be a *lapsus calami* or *linguae*, possibly committed by Photius himself, or perhaps rather to be dismissed as a later error of transcription due to some scribe. But now we have to do with the mechanical transmission of an elementary blunder from the original. As far as I can see, this could hardly have happened if Photius had been reviving from memory a text which he had read on some earlier occasion, a text, *nota bene*, in his own language, a text which he understood and in which he now and then made skilful manipulations in order to choose the essential and skip the padding. The obvious explanation is that he had, in fact, the original text before him at the moment of dictation; only under such circumstances would it be psychologically understandable that his attention could slacken for a moment, so that his *verbatim* reproduction came to include also the obvious mistakes in the original. The one conceivable alternative, however improbable, would be that he was endowed with a very special kind of eidetic memory, which permitted him to 'read' anew from memory with no greater mental effort than if he were reading from a book. We shall presently see whether there are any traces of such a capacity elsewhere in the *Bibliotheca*.

It is time to turn to a fundamentally distinct kind of reproduction, namely, the résumé, as exemplified by cod. 44. Here, too, the whole of the *Vita Apollonii* is covered, but now the arrangement is not chronological but thematic. Within one of the thematic groups, the separate episodes referred to are given, at least partly, in the same order as in the original work,¹⁰ but generally the subjects follow each other quite freely, apparently just as they presented themselves to the mind of Photius after he had read the book. No one would deny that *this* is a summary made from memory (with or without the help of notes made during the reading). We may even, by a closer examination of the summary, get some hints as to the qualities of the memory at work in this process.

The circumstance that the original sequence of the events is generally not adhered to is, of course, not an indication of a specially bad

¹⁰ *Bibl.* 10a5–18.

memory; the summarizer simply had no intention of being true to the original in this respect. The factual information given in the summary is, on the whole, quite accurate. There are, however, one or two misrepresentations of the facts. The most obvious one concerns Philostratus' story of Apollonius meeting a tame lion in Egypt (VA 5.42). As Photius correctly observes (*Bibl.* 10a6–9), Apollonius discerns the soul of King Amasis in the lion, but the explanation added—that this is the penalty for the king's deeds during his lifetime—has no foundation in Philostratus' account (where the point is that a lion is a most appropriate place for a *king's* soul). There is nothing in the formulation itself or in the context to indicate that Photius was aware of his addition. To all appearances, we have to do with a slip of the memory: Photius recalled the main facts of the incident, but he did not have a clear enough remembrance of the details to prevent a confusion with similar episodes which he had read or heard elsewhere.

On another occasion, Photius picks out, in order to illustrate the superstition conveyed by Philostratus in the biography, the description of some Indian means of influencing the weather (*Bibl.* 10a26–29): *πίθους γὰρ αὐτοῖς πλήρεις ὄμβρων καὶ ἀνέμων δούς ὕειν τὴν χώραν ἀνομβρίας ἐπεχούσης ἐξικμάζειν τε αὐτὰ καταρρηγνυμένων ὄμβρων ταῖς ἐκ πίθων ἀνὰ μέρος χορηγίαις κυρίου ἐκάθισε . . .* As regards the factual information, this summary is quite true to the original (VA 3.14), but the wording is to a large extent new. This is not to be explained, as in many other cases, as the natural consequence of the compression of a detailed episode into a short summary nor as a simplification of a complicated text. Of course more details are given in the original, but several words or phrases could have been taken over directly by Photius without making his version longer than it is. Compare, for instance, the following counterparts to Photius' formulations: *καὶ διττῷ ἑωρακέναι φασι πίθῳ λίθου μέλανος ὄμβρων τε καὶ ἀνέμων ὄντε. ὁ μὲν δὴ τῶν ὄμβρων, εἰ αὐχμῶ ἢ Ἰνδικῇ πιέζοιτο, ἀνοιχθεὶς νεφέλας ἀναπέμπει καὶ ὑγραίνει τὴν γῆν πάσαν, εἰ δὲ ὄμβροι πλεονεκτοῖεν, ἴσχει αὐτοὺς ξυγκλειόμενος . . .* The words for 'jar', 'rain' and 'wind' are identical, but that is all: *ἀνομβρία* is used by Photius instead of *αὐχμός*, *ὑειν* instead of *ὑγραίνειν*, *χώρα* instead of *γῆ*, and so on.

Two possible explanations present themselves. Either Photius made a point of *not* reproducing the original wording, *i.e.* he sought *variatio*, or he remembered the *facts* quite well but did not have the actual *wording* ringing in his ears (or lingering before his eyes). My

reasons for preferring the latter explanation are the following. First, *variatio* would be quite pointless in this connection, since the reader of the *Bibliotheca* is not supposed to have read the original nor to have a copy of it at hand. Secondly, Photius both in cod. 44 and in cod. 241 expresses his high opinion of Philostratus' style and in giving examples of the work in cod. 241 he never hesitates at complicated syntactic structures or obsolete words. Why should he deliberately avoid Philostratus' phraseology here? Thirdly, and most important, we have in cod. 241, interspersed among the literal excerpts, some sections of summary which show Photius' method when he really remembered the wording of the original or even had the text before his eyes when summarizing. For instance, he describes the habitation of the naked sages in Ethiopia in the following way (*Bibl.* 330a14–17): οἰκεῖν δὲ τοὺς Γυμνοὺς ὑπαιθρίους φησὶ καὶ ὑπὸ τῷ οὐρανῷ αὐτῷ, ἐπὶ τινος δὲ γηλόφου ξυμμέτρου, μικρὸν ἀπὸ τῆς ὄχθης τοῦ Νείλου. The constituent parts of this description are fetched from different parts of *VA* 6.6: τοὺς δὲ Γυμνοὺς τούτους οἰκεῖν μὲν ἐπὶ τινος λόφου, φασί, ξυμμέτρου μικρὸν ἀπὸ τῆς ὄχθης τοῦ Νείλου, and, ten lines further on: . . . ζῶντες ὑπαιθριοὶ καὶ ὑπὸ τῷ οὐρανῷ αὐτῷ. The compound γήλοφος, finally, is used by Philostratus in another sentence between the two passages just quoted. No striving for *variatio* can be discerned.

The faculty of memory displayed by Photius in cod. 44 is, then, of an ordinary and far from superhuman kind. Having read a book, he was able to give a fairly accurate account of the things in it that interested him, but he does not seem to have remembered the exact words of the author. The special kind of memory needed for the literal reproduction of large quantities of text, as in cod. 241, he shows no signs of possessing.

Some intricate problems, however, remain unsolved. There are other codices in which the intermingling of summary and word-for-word quotation is more complicated than in those treated here. Only a minute analysis and comparison with the originals, if preserved, could trace the rôle of memory in their composition. Furthermore, the important question is left, whether those summaries which are wholly—or largely (the notes!)—the products of memory, like cod. 44, were written down or dictated *separately*, only a comparatively short time after the reading, or *all at the same time*, when Photius was about to set out on his mission. If the latter was the case, the composition was, after all, a remarkable feat of memory, measured by our

standards, in spite of the exception we have to make as regards the great mass of literal excerpts.

Perhaps the answer to this question might be given by a stylistic analysis of the summaries. If, as has sometimes been argued,¹¹ Photius unconsciously adopted certain traits of the style of the original work also in summarizing its contents in his own words, this is hardly explicable in any other way—provided that the above characterization of his memory holds good also when confronted with materials from other codices—than as the result of an immediate writing down of his summary when the text was still fresh in his memory and the impression of the style not muddled by the reading of other works. There is a long way to go, however, before the characteristics of Photius' own style or styles are so distinctly worked out that they may be profitably contrasted with the small modifications in style that were possibly due to his momentary reading.

Let us, finally, return to Photius' own words in the dedication and the postscript of the *Bibliotheca*¹² and compare them with the outcome of the present examination. First, we may note that in referring to the constituents of his own work Photius only uses the term *ὑποθέσεις*. It seems reasonable to believe that in doing so he was thinking, in the first place, of the *summaries* proper (even though he makes no explicit exception of the codices consisting of excerpts). As we have seen, for *their* composition he undeniably had to rely on his memory. Only his claim to have made several of the summaries on a single occasion, after the lapse of some time, is perhaps open to doubt. Secondly, and regardless of the proposed restrictive sense of the term *ὑπόθεσις*, we have to consider the *function* of Photius' references to his memory. They are not, as seems to be taken for granted in much of the discussion of the problem, to be regarded as a boast, empty or not, of his enormous powers of memory (nor, of course, as a scholarly declaration of all the stages of his work). The insistence on composi-

¹¹ See, for instance, Philostorgius, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez (Leipzig 1913) xv f, R. Henry in *RBPhil* 13 (1934) 615–27, and Lemerle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 193 (“par un curieux mimétisme . . .”).

¹² Letter to Tarasius, line 2 Bekker . . . τὰς ὑποθέσεις ἐκείνων τῶν βιβλίων, οἷς μὴ παρέτυχες ἀναγινωσκομένοις, line 7 ὅσας αὐτῶν ἢ μνήμη διέσωζε, and esp. lines 12–16 *Εἰ δέ σοι ποτε κατ' αὐτὰ γενομένῳ τὰ τεύχη καὶ φιλοπονουμένῳ τινὰ ὑποθέσεων ἔλλιπῶς ἢ οὐκ εἰς τὸ ἀκριβὲς δόξουσιν ἀπομενημονεῦσθαι, μηδὲν θανμάσης. Μίαν μὲν γὰρ ἐκάστην βίβλον ἀναλεγομένῳ τὴν ὑπόθεσιν συλλαβεῖν καὶ μνήμη καὶ γραφῇ παραδοῦναι ἀξιόλογον ἔργον ἐστὶ τῷ βουλομένῳ· ὁμοῦ δὲ πλειόνων, καὶ τότε χρόνου μεταξὺ διαρρύνετο, εἰς ἀνάμνησιν μετὰ τοῦ ἀκριβοῦς ἐφικέσθαι οὐκ οἶμαι ῥάδιον εἶναι. The postscript, p.545,13 Bekker, see Wilson, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 452.*

tion from memory is no more than a formula expressing modesty and intended to forestall possible criticism for mistakes or superficiality¹³—a criticism which could, of course, be directed primarily at the summaries, where Photius' personal contribution was more important than in the case of the excerpts. Considered in this light, Photius' words are not incompatible with a more differentiated view of the composition, which attributes to his memory a restricted but not unimportant rôle in the heterogeneous working process behind the *Bibliotheca*.

UPPSALA UNIVERSITY
February, 1973

¹³ See O. Immisch in *RhM* 78 (1929) 113–23.