NEW PRESOCRATIC STUDIES, TEXTS, AND COLLECTIONS: SOURCES, PAPYRI AND INTERPRETATIONS

CARLIG, Nathan / MARTIN, Alain / PRIMAVESI, Oliver (edd.), *L'Empédocle du Caire: P.Fouad inv. 218. Introduction, texte, commentaire*. (Papyrologica Bruxellensia 44.) Pp. xvi + 189, pls. Brussels: Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2025. Paper, €50. ISBN: 978-90-429-5562-2.

FERELLA, Chiara, *Reconstructing Empedocles' Thought*. Pp. viii + 403. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £100, US$130. ISBN: 978-1-009-39257-0 (978-1-009-39260-0 open access).

GEMELLI-MARCIANO, M. Laura (ed.), *Presocratici. Vol. I: Sentieri di sapienza attraverso la Ionia e oltre da Talete e Eraclito*. Pp. 728. Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla / Mondadori, 2023. Cased, €50. ISBN: 978-88-04-77797-7.

GEMELLI-MARCIANO, M. Laura (ed.), *Presocratici. Vol. II: Sentieri di sapienza da Velia ad Agrigento da Parmenide a Empedocle*. Pp. 568. Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla / Mondadori, 2024. Cased, €50. ISBN: 978-88-04-78281-0.

GEMELLI-MARCIANO, M. Laura (ed.), *Presocratici. Vol. III: Sentieri di sapienza dalla Ionia ad Atene da Anassagora agli atomisti*. Pp. 686. Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla / Mondadori, 2025. Cased, €50. ISBN: 978-88-04-79957-3.

KINGSLEY, K. Scarlett, *Herodotus and the Presocratics. Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE*. Pp. xii + 258. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £85, US$110. ISBN: 978-1-009-33854-7 (978-1-009-33853-0 open access).

PICOT, Jean-Claude, *Empédocle. Sur le chemin des dieux*. (Anagôgê 15.) Pp. 748, ills. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2022. Paper, €75. ISBN: 978-2-251-45257-9.

TSIAMPOKALOS, Theofanis / WÖHRLE, Georg (edd.), *Archelaos von Athen*. Mit Beiträgen von Elvira Wakelnig. (Traditio Praesocratica 5.) Pp. viii + 395. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2025. Cased, £145.50. ISBN: 978-3-11-914788-0.

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The early Greek thinkers constitute a field of inquiry within the study of antiquity that shows no sign of exhausting scholarly interest.[1] The continued vitality of these studies is confirmed by a series of recently published volumes examining the so-called Presocratics from different perspectives. I would like to begin with two works that significantly enrich the classic *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* by H. Diels and W. Kranz (3 vols, 1951–2[6]) and that increasingly bring to light structural flaws and methodological gaps in *Early Greek Philosophy* by A. Laks and G.W. Most (9 vols, Loeb, 2016).

I turn first to the three volumes by Gemelli-Marciano containing her Italian edition of the Presocratics for the Lorenzo Valla Foundation's series of editions of classical texts. The work reproduces – albeit in an updated form – the structure and content of the three German volumes published by the author for the *Sammlung Tusculum* (vol. 1, 2011, from Thales to Heraclitus; vol. 2, 2013, from Parmenides to Empedocles; vol. 3, 2013, from Anaxagoras to the ancient atomists). Gemelli-Marciano, in the wake of W. Burkert, has for many years proposed an innovative approach to the study of the early Greek thinkers, distancing herself from the traditional nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpretation that presented them almost exclusively as precursors of modern philosophy and science. Her edition reflects a hermeneutical effort to move beyond the 'evolutionary' view of the history of ancient philosophy, particularly in its archaic phase, which has its roots in Hegelian idealism and which, through E. Zeller – notably his renowned historical-philosophical work in six volumes, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (1856–68) –, exerted a strong influence on H. Diels. According to Gemelli-Marciano it makes little sense to construct forced interconnections among the various Presocratic philosophers, each of whom articulates principles and doctrines that cannot be assimilated to their predecessors, contemporaries or successors belonging to often very different cities and traditions. It goes without saying that the abandonment of this historiographical paradigm also entails a radical critique of Aristotle's approach to early Greek philosophy. Yet it is well known that, already in the twentieth century, a number of authoritative scholars had called Aristotle's reading into question, among them H. Cherniss with his influential *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (1935).

The first volume of the collection, *Sentieri di sapienza attraverso la Ionia e oltre da Talete e Eraclito*, focuses on the Ionian thinkers and includes key figures such as the Milesians (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes), Xenophanes and Heraclitus. The text presents a critical edition of the fragments and *testimonia*, with parallel translations and an extensive philological and historical commentary. With particular regard to the historical perspective, Gemelli-Marciano presents the Presocratics not as systematisers of abstract doctrines, but as 'seekers of wisdom' (it is no coincidence that the subtitle of this and the other two volumes is *Sentieri di sapienza*, i.e. 'Paths of wisdom'). In this sense they are situated within their broader cultural and religious context, namely that of the ancient Near East (from the mid-seventh century BCE onwards). For this reason the author emphasises the charismatic and performative dimension of these figures, interpreting their texts as expressions of cognitive experiences that are often meta-rational, mystical or shamanic.

The second volume, *Sentieri di sapienza da Velia ad Agrigento da Parmenide a Empedocle*, considers the Presocratics who lived and worked in Magna Graecia, particularly in Campania and Sicily. It presents the fragments and *testimonia* of the following figures:

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(a) Parmenides of Elea, reinterpreted beyond the traditional logical-ontological framework, with emphasis on the dimension of initiation and mystical vision (beginning with the 'journey' described in the proem of his poem); (b) Parmenides' disciple, Zeno of Elea, well known for his paradoxes and for his defence of Parmenidean doctrines – an operation that Gemelli-Marciano, in some respects, compares to certain Eastern practices, particularly those of Zen Buddhism; (c) Empedocles of Agrigentum, presented in his full complexity as a sage, practitioner and charismatic figure, integrating inquiry into nature with religious reflection.

Consistent with the methodology adopted in the first volume of the collection, Gemelli-Marciano likewise describes Western 'wisdom' as an indissoluble interweaving of observation of nature, poetry and practices of salvation. The 'ecstatic' and mystery perspective, according to the author, prompts an exploration of the connection between rational thought and ecstatic-religious experiences; hence Parmenides, Zeno and Empedocles are presented not so much as philosophers and rather as spiritual guides. On the philological level the volume offers a critical edition with parallel translation and a commentary that takes into account the Oriental influences and ritual contexts of the time.

The third and last volume, *Sentieri di sapienza dalla Ionia ad Atene da Anassagora agli atomisti*, completes the survey of archaic wisdom, shifting attention to the science of nature and to the pluralistic physics that anticipates classical thought. For this reason, the volume brings together the fragments and *testimonia* of key figures who sought to reconcile the unity of Parmenidean being with the becoming of the sensible world: (a) Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, the theorist of Mind (*Nous*), which governs all things, and of the seeds (labelled 'homoeomeries' in the Peripatetic tradition) at the origin of reality; (b) Melissus of Samos, whose treatment, in light of the clear historical, cultural and geographical limits methodologically adopted in the collection, leads the author to posit a distance from Eleatism; (c) Diogenes of Apollonia, who returns to a monistic vision grounded in air as an intelligent principle; and (d) the early atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, who reduce reality to atoms and void, marking the culmination of Presocratic reflection on matter.

Following the line adopted in the previous volumes, Gemelli-Marciano avoids reading these authors as 'modern scientists' *ante litteram*. On the one hand, she re-evaluates their cultural context, emphasising how atomism and mechanical philosophy emerge from worldviews imbued with a comprehensive form of wisdom, not yet divided into watertight compartments. On the other hand, she offers a commentary that seeks to reconstruct the ancient debates surrounding the various themes arising from these doctrines, attempting, where possible, to free the texts from Platonic and Aristotelian interpretative superstructures.

Overall, although the edition is extensive and up-to-date, and the translations are precise, the work does not represent a substantial advance in the field. Above all, it offers little that the author had not already presented in earlier publications, following certain 'ideological' criteria that I have already queried with regard to another publication (*Philosophie Antique* 15 [2015], 255–8). More fundamentally, the claim that reason can be used to grasp the irrational background of the material under study is a rather absurd claim when it presents itself as the sole criterion of truth. The method is comparable to that adopted by P. Kingsley in his interpretations of Parmenides and Empedocles and has led to results, at the very least, open to question. Finally, the relative neglect – if not outright rejection – of the 'evolutionary' dimension of the Presocratic tradition, motivated (especially in Gemelli-Marciano's case) by a desire to avoid a return to Zeller's approach, entails disadvantages that are not always offset by the expected gains. Moreover, this approach introduces presuppositions that risk impoverishing research. For example, in many cases Gemelli-Marciano appears to highlight too superficially the merely Theophrastean roots of Hellenistic doxography on the Presocratics. In light of recent studies

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on Aëtius and new research on the Herculaneum papyri (of which she is certainly aware), it would have been advisable to revise, or at least to qualify, this perspective. This limitation is one of the reasons why the collection is unlikely to replace the classic Diels–Kranz or even the Laks–Most collection.

Of a completely different tenor is the long-awaited fifth volume of the prestigious series *Traditio Praesocratica* (*TP*), *Archelaos von Athen*, which presents a valuable new edition of Archelaus of Athens, edited by Tsiampokalos and Wöhrle, in collaboration with Wakelnig, who is responsible for the Arabic testimonies. Archelaus of Athens (or, according to other sources, of Miletus) was an important Greek philosopher of the fifth century BCE, best known as a pupil of Anaxagoras and the teacher of Socrates. He is often regarded as the last of the natural philosophers (within the Aristotelian framework) and as the figure who brought philosophy from Ionia to Athens. His thought is characterised by two main aspects: cosmology and reflection on ethics and law. On the cosmological level, like his teacher Anaxagoras, Archelaus posited Mind (*Nous*) as the ordering principle, but also introduced the concept of air and the opposition between hot and cold as the driving forces behind the differentiation of matter. On the ethical and legal level, Archelaus is considered a precursor of the ethical and political concerns of later Greek philosophy: he maintained that the concepts of the just and the unjust do not exist by nature (*physis*), but are determined by human laws and conventions (*nomos*).

Like the other volumes in the *TP* series, this book has the great merit of providing the most complete and up-to-date collection of *testimonia* concerning the Presocratic thinker under examination. All the evidence relating to Archelaus is carefully organised in chronological order, and its context is thoroughly elucidated. As is customary in the *TP* series, the focus is not on reconstructing Archelaus' thought, but rather on tracing the transmission of his figure and doctrines across a wide range of intellectual contexts in which he is cited, employed or criticised – from classical Greek literature (the tragic poets, Plato and Aristotle) to late antiquity, the Middle Ages and Arabic literature. The index apparatus is particularly impressive and will facilitate new and innovative thematic research on Archelaus. Compared to other *TP* volumes, there is a significant increase in commentary notes, further enhancing a work that is both methodologically rigorous and of great value for future studies on early Greek philosophy and its reception in antiquity.

From an interpretative perspective, the modern debate on the Presocratics is significantly enriched by a recent volume by Kingsley, *Herodotus and the Presocratics*, which offers, for the first time in such a systematic way, an analysis of the relationship between Herodotus and the Presocratics. Indeed, the historical and cultural context in which Herodotus worked and wrote is shared with many exponents of early Greek philosophy. For this reason the *Histories* cannot be regarded merely as a narrative of events; rather, they constitute a text in which contemporary philosophical theories exert a significant influence and find opportunities to engage with one another within the dynamics of historical narrative.

On a lexical level, two recurring terms in the *Histories* evoke the Presocratic background: *historiē*, which encompasses the principle of the primacy of rational inquiry into causes over mythological modes of explanation; and *physis*, which for Herodotus denotes the domain of historical facts (just as for the Presocratics it denotes that of physical phenomena) to be investigated in a scientific way. This inquiry led Herodotus to examine human nature in depth, engaging with central themes of some of the most important Presocratic doctrines, such as the limits of knowledge and cultural relativism. According to Kingsley, these and other elements justify viewing Herodotus as an intellectual fully aligned with the culture of the Presocratic philosophers, and indeed as a 'Presocratic' himself, insofar as the *Histories* were composed before historiography emerged as a literary genre separate from philosophy.

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No less interesting, and in many respects thought-provoking, is Ferella's volume on the thought of Empedocles, *Reconstructing Empedocles' Thought*, in which she seeks to emphasise its unitary and systematic character. The study thus attempts to overcome the traditional separation between a physical and a religious work by this Presocratic. The main topic of the volume is the substantial unity of the two poems, *Purifications* and *On Nature*. In particular, Ferella draws on the famous Strasbourg Papyrus (*PStrasb. gr.* inv. 1665–1666 = MP^3 356.11) in support of this thesis.

This assumption entails a series of consequences. (a) First, fr. 115 DK, traditionally attributed to the *Purifications* on account of its religious content, should instead be assigned to the proem of the physical work *On Nature*. (b) This proem should be understood as a true *katabasis*, that is, a first-person account of a visionary descent into Hades; therefore, the divine authority claimed by Empedocles would allow his figure to be compared to that of the Goddess in Parmenides' poem. (c) Within this perspective, the doctrine of rebirth – which Ferella prefers to describe as metamorphosis rather than, in a Platonic sense, as soul-journey or metempsychosis – should not be reduced to merely a religious thesis, but rather regarded as a cornerstone of Empedocles' physics, based on the close relationship between knowledge and salvation: understanding the cosmos constitutes the primary path to escaping the cycle of rebirth, making purification essential both for scientific comprehension and for spiritual transformation. (d) Last but not least, the volume proposes an ethical reading of the controversial cosmic cycle of Love and Strife, which cannot be separated from the doctrine of the soul's rebirth: in this sense there would be a close synergy between macrocosm (i.e. cosmic phases) and microcosm (i.e. human life). Obviously, not all of these conclusions can be endorsed, and some of them, although well argued, raise non-negligible problems and at times appear to be advanced too categorically. Moreover, as has been noted by other reviewers (see, in particular, T. Mackenzie, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2024.11.04), Ferella occasionally presents as entirely innovative theories that have been advanced by other authoritative scholars. On the whole, the epistemological implications of the proposed interpretation – especially the idea that true knowledge of nature is to be identified with knowledge as a god – must duly be taken into account in future studies of Empedocles.

In this regard, the recent work by Picot, *Empédocle. Sur le chemin des dieux*, devoted to the complex relationship between Empedocles and the divine, represents a decisive step forward in the history of scholarship, advancing innovative theses that are less speculative and more firmly grounded in philology. Picot's monumental volume (approximately 750 pages), which brings together fifteen studies – ten previously published between 1998 and 2018 and five unpublished, the latter constituting roughly half of the book – may be regarded as an essential point of reference for understanding the theological aspects of the thought of the philosopher from Agrigentum.

In a nutshell, the aim of the work – successfully achieved – is to explore, in an original and exhaustive way, Empedocles' position – often highly critical, as in the case of other Presocratics (e.g. Xenophanes) – towards the traditional gods of ancient Greece as well as his attempt to establish a pantheon grounded in the principles of his own philosophical doctrine. Among the various issues addressed, particular attention is devoted to Empedocles' relationship with the religious tradition, especially through an analysis of how he distances himself from the Homeric and Hesiodic division of the world in order to propose a cosmology in which the divinities coincide with the roots of reality (see, e.g., the sixth essay of the volume, dedicated to Empedocles' treatment of the gods in fr. 128 DK and his engagement with the Hesiodic myth of the races). More specifically, Picot examines the interpretation of the well-known 'divine tetrad' (Zeus, Hera, Aidoneus or Hades, and Nestis), which Empedocles identifies with the four physical elements (fire, air, earth and

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water), as well as the enigmatic divine figures that play a fundamental role in Empedoclean physics, such as Cupid (*Philotes*), Discord (*Neikos*), the Sphere (*Sphairos*) and Apollo.

We conclude our survey of recent scholarship on Empedocles with a long-awaited volume that adds an important new chapter to the long and often heated debate on the Strasbourg Empedocles and, more generally, on Empedoclean physics. That is the excellent edition of *PFouad* inv. 218, *L'Empédocle du Caire: P.Fouad inv. 218. Introduction, texte, commentaire*, by Carlig, Martin and Primavesi. This papyrus fragment, datable on palaeographical grounds to the first century CE, measures approximately 10.9 × 13.2 cm. Identified by Carlig, it preserves portions of 30 previously unknown verses from Empedocles' *Physika*. Although damaged in several places, the papyrus – undoubtedly part of a luxury roll – bears traces of a text written in capital letters, probably in charcoal-based ink and possibly by the same hand as the Strasbourg Papyrus.

The restored text (two columns, with 13 lines in the left column and 17 in the right) constitutes a significant contribution to our understanding of several controversial aspects of Empedocles' physics. In particular, it deepens the Empedoclean theory of pores, which allow the flow and absorption of the elements (roots or *rhizomata*), thereby providing direct evidence of the mechanism of sensory perception posited by Empedocles and complementing the doxographical tradition on this point. The first column of the papyrus deals specifically with the theory of effluvia, while the second focuses on their application to sensory perception through pores, with particular emphasis on the sense of sight. The close interconnection – clearly brought out in the outstanding and extensive commentary – between epistemological theory and the broader Empedoclean cosmology, based on the mixture and separation governed by Love and Strife, underscores the relevance of this *editio princeps* for scholarship and reopens the debate on the Strasbourg Empedocles.

To sum up, all the works presented here, the considerable quantity of which has limited the reviewer to a more general discussion, demonstrate the great vitality of Presocratic philosophy in modern scholarship. In particular, the growing interest in the study of the Presocratic tradition, in its most varied aspects, is confirmed. The indirect tradition is leading more and more scholars to delve more deeply into the question of the reception of early Greek philosophy. These attempts go hand in hand with the revival of research on ancient doxography, which has had a strong impetus in recent decades with the work on and the new edition of Aëtius by J. Mansfeld and D.T. Runia (2020), and the consequent profound updating of Diels's pioneering *Doxographi Graeci* (1879). In this field it has been shown that papyrus sources, in particular those from Herculaneum, have a lot to say, but, unfortunately, even in the significant sample of volumes discussed here not all scholars seem to have fully realised this. This is to the detriment of the numerous attempts to create a credible alternative to the Diels–Kranz edition, a goal that, despite efforts, remains far from being accomplished. In the direct tradition, however, papyri still hold pleasant surprises. The Cairo Empedocles is an example, to which could be added the debate over an alleged new fragment of Antiphon recently identified in *POxy.* LXXXVII 5583. Based on statistics and the large amount of still unpublished material, papyri will have new features in store. It is to be hoped that these new fragments can provide an opportunity for fruitful cooperation between scholars of various backgrounds, rather than a destructive rivalry between specialists, which in some cases, as in that of the Derveni Papyrus, has disoriented historians of ancient philosophy by distancing them from the appropriate use of this material, also in view of more systematic work, which should bring together philological accuracy and hermeneutical ability in the best possible way.

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