PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. XXV

APOLOGISTS AND ATHENS
EARLY CHRISTIANITY MEETS ANCIENT GREEK THINKING

Edited by Gunnar af Hällström

HELSINKI 2020

ISSN 1237-2684
ISBN 978-952-68500-5-4

Printed in Greece by K. Pletsas - Z. Kardari O.E., Athens.

Cover: The Areopagus seen from the south in 1898. © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. D-DAI-ATH-Athen-Bauten-0194 (anonymous).

Layout: Vesa Vahtikari

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What has Athenagoras to do with Athens? A Geography of Athenagoras' Life and Thought

Anders-Christian Jacobsen

As the title of my article indicates, I will present some observations about Athenagoras' possible relations with Athens. It also signals that I intend to address this question at two levels: firstly, I will ask and try to answer the question at a concrete personal and geographical level. Did Athenagoras live in Athens? This level I call the 'Geography of Athenagoras' life'. Secondly, I will ask and answer the question at a theological and philosophical level: to what degree did Athenagoras know and reflect on Greek religion and philosophy? I call this level the 'Geography of Athenagoras' thinking'.

A geography of Athenagoras' life

Our historical knowledge of Athenagoras is very limited, because almost no biographical information about him from ancient sources exists. Methodius refers to Athenagoras and to *Legatio* 24.2 in his treatise *De resurrectione* at 1.37.1, but any other references to Athenagoras are more or less absent. Eusebius does not even mention him. Therefore, when working with the geography of Athenagoras' life and thought, only a few hints, and those unclear, in the manuscripts and in his own work are at our disposal.

Geographical indications in the manuscripts

The oldest manuscript containing his treatise *Legatio pro Christianis – Codex Parisinus Graecus 451*, dating from 914 – introduces its author as Athenagoras, an "Athenian, Philosopher, and Christian."[1] As we saw above, the *Legatio* was known to Methodius, and the treatise was at that time connected with the name Athenagoras, but the *Codex* adds more information. We can thus assume that the information given by the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 451* about the title of the treatise and the name of its author is correct, but what about the information that Athenagoras was an Athenian, a philosopher and a Christian? One possible and not far-fetched conclusion is that the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 451* has that piece of information from the same reliable source as the information about Athenagoras' name and the title of his treatise. If we accept this as a point of departure, we can conclude already at this stage that Athenagoras was indeed an Athenian. We could also, more hesitantly, ask if the information that Athenagoras was an Athenian could be an invention of Arethas, the bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia who included Athenagoras'

[1] Scholars agree that Athenagoras is the author of the *Legatio pro Christianis,* but there is no consensus about the authorship of the treatise *De resurrectione*, which the manuscript tradition also ascribes to Athenagoras. I do not consider Athenagoras to be the author of *De resurrectione.* For this reason, I do not include it in this article; see Jacobsen 2014, 83, and, in more detail, my article 'Athenagoras', in *Brill Handbook of Early Christianity* (forthcoming in 2020). See also the recently published book by Kiel 2016, which discusses this question.

treatise in the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 451*. Such reluctance is appropriate, partly because of the limited amount of available information about Athenagoras and partly because a later manuscript, the *Codex Bodleianus Baroccianus* from the fourteenth century, quotes from the historian Philip of Side that Athenagoras was the first leader of the catechetical school in Alexandria.[2] This is the only source we have that claims that he, at some point, lived in Egypt. However, Philip of Side is also often an unreliable source.[3] We must, therefore, ask if there is anything else than the short remark in the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 451* that connects Athenagoras with Athens.

Geographical information drawn from Athenagoras' name

If we assume that Arethas had no other information than Methodius, i.e. the title of the treatise and the name of Athenagoras, how would he then have got the idea that Athenagoras was an Athenian? One suggestion (perhaps rather speculative) is that Arethas took Athenagoras' name to contain in itself valid geographical information by being a composite of Ἀθήν- (from Ἀθῆναι or Ἀθήνη) and ἀγορά or ἀγοράομαι.[4] Thus, the name would indicate that the author of the *Legatio* was a person who spoke at the agora of Athens. If this line of thought is correct, the additional information given in the *Codex Parisinus Graecus 451*, compared to what we know from Methodius, would not be historical data drawn upon by Arethas from sources unknown to us, but the conclusions that Arethas had reached by reading Athenagoras' treatise and by analysing the meaning of his name. In my opinion, this idea is supported by the geographical hints that we find in the treatise itself. I will argue for this below.

Geographical indications in Athenagoras' *Legatio*

Athenagoras mentions both many geographical locations and people connected to specific geographical places in his text, but he never directly connects any of these locations with himself. Already in *Legatio* ch. 1 we find a list of people defined by their geographical positioning, namely the citizens of Ilium, the Lacedaemonians, the people from Tenedos, the Athenians (twice) and the Egyptians. These people belonging to specific geographic locations honour different gods: the citizens of Ilium call Hector a god and think that Helen is Adrasteia, the Lacedaemonians honour Agamemnon as Zeus, the men from Tenedos worship Tennes, the Athenians sacrifice to Erechtheus as Poseidon and the Egyptians take cats, crocodiles, serpents and other animals to be gods. Athenagoras uses these geographical places and their gods to demonstrate that all people have their own gods, whom they are free to celebrate as they please. Athenagoras does not define himself as belonging to one of these groups or geographical places. Rather, he belongs to another group of people – the Christians who do not belong to a specific geographical place and are the only ones not allowed to celebrate their god in freedom.

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[2] *Codex Bodleianus Baroccianus* 142, col. 216.
[3] Rankin 2009, 5–6.
[4] The first element could equally well refer to the goddess Athena, but it is quite reasonable to imagine that Arethas would interpret it as Athens.

It is probably Athenagoras' intention in this paragraph to distinguish Christians from non-Christians, not by their belonging (or not) to a particular geographical place, but by their freedom to honour (or not) the god of their own choice. Accordingly, this paragraph does not reveal anything about Athenagoras' geographical belonging. This is also the case in a number of other passages where he includes geographical specifications (for example chs. 4, 14, 17). However, we can get a little further. In *Legatio* chs. 1 and 22, Athenagoras mentions Egypt and Egyptian deities but only in passing. This reveals that he was relatively unfamiliar with Egypt. Thus, in the *Legatio*, we do not find support for Philip of Side's claim that Athenagoras was head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. Moreover, looking closer at the geographical places mentioned in ch. 1 and in other similar passages in the *Legatio*, it becomes clear that Athenagoras most often, but not exclusively, uses geographic locations in Hellas (ancient Greece). This indicates that Athenagoras was mostly familiar with these places and the deities and cults connected to these. Nonetheless, it does not prove that Athenagoras lived in Athens or somewhere else in Hellas – he could simply have taken his examples from contemporary literature, such as commentaries on Homer or handbooks on the Homeric gods.

The addressees of the *Legatio* – another geographical clue?

Another way to approach the question about Athenagoras' geographical assignment is by focusing on the addressees of the *Legatio*.[5] Athenagoras addresses his treatise to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. If he intended to submit his treatise to the emperors in person, this would most likely have taken place when they visited Athens in 176. The first question is, then, whether this address is only a formality or whether Athenagoras intended to meet the emperors and submit his treatise to them. In the title in the *Codex Parisinus 451*, the work is described as a *presbeia* (Latin: *legatio*), which means a prayer or request. Under the Roman administration, there was an institutionalized practice by which one was permitted to submit requests, both major and minor, to the emperor. A major case and fundamental request was called a *presbeia*/*legatio*. These could be conveyed either orally or in writing to the emperor. Athenagoras may have had the opportunity to meet the emperors personally, as Marcus Aurelius and Commodus travelled to Greece and further east in September 176, stopping off at Athens where they were initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries.[6] However, there is an intense debate among scholars as to whether Athenagoras' *Legatio* is a genuine example of a petition and whether it was actually presented to the emperors.[7] Many scholars do believe this to be the case. W.R. Schoedel supports this view in an article from 1989.[8] He finds parallels between Athenagoras' *Legatio* and Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium* and other Jewish petitions, which Josephus recounts (*Antiquitates* 14.301–305).[9] On this basis, Schoedel concludes that Athenagoras' *Legatio* combines two literary genres – petition and apology. Although

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[5] Concerning the question about the addressees of the *Legatio*, see Jacobsen 2014.
[6] T.D. Barnes proposes this theory. See Barnes 1975, 114.
[7] Much of this debate is based on F. Millar's book, *The Emperor in the Roman World 31 BC – AD 337*, published in 1977. Millar discusses Athenagoras' *Legatio* on 564–565.
[8] Schoedel 1989, 55–78.
[9] Cf. Schoedel 1989, 61–69.

the *Legatio* is not 'pure' petition in terms of its genre, Schoedel sees no reason why the work or speech would not have been presented to the emperors.[10] Nevertheless, it is also possible that Athenagoras structured his text in the form of a petition without ever presenting the work to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. P.L. Buck, among others, supports this view in a 1996 article in which he attempts to refute Schoedel's argument point by point.[11] It is difficult to discern which of these two views is correct.

I am personally inclined to believe that the *Legatio*'s frequent and very explicit supplications to the emperors make it unlikely that Athenagoras had never any intention of presenting his demands to them, either in oral or written form. If it is true that Athenagoras addressed his *Legatio* to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus and presented it to them in Athens in 176, we have a strong indication that he had close relations to Athens, perhaps even resided there in 176. The evidence is, however, not very strong, as it is based on a number of assumptions that cannot be proved. Thus, there are left but a few and very weak indications that Athenagoras was an Athenian, in the geographical sense that he was either born in or lived in Athens.

A geography of Athenagoras' thinking

As I suggested above, we should also look at the geographical clues in Athenagoras' thinking: to what extent was Athenagoras' thinking related to Athenian or broader Greek philosophical and cultural traditions? This question is difficult to answer because, in Athenagoras' time, at least the eastern parts of the Roman Empire were Hellenized and had been so for a long time. This means that wherever you lived in the eastern part of the Roman Empire in the second century AD, you would have access to more or less the same Greek philosophical, religious and, in the broadest sense, cultural traditions. However, in the following section, I will try to tease out any clues in Athenagoras' thinking that connect him in a more specific way to Athens.

Athenagoras and Greek philosophy

The *Legatio* shows signs of the author's relatively high level of education and reveals his knowledge of classical philosophy, especially the Middle Platonic tradition. Thus, the manuscript's (*Codex Parisinus Graecus 451)* remark that Athenagoras was a philosopher is probably based on the scribe's assessment of the philosophical content of his work, which does indeed indicate that Athenagoras had a philosophical training. Scholarly assessment of his philosophical ability ranges from the view that he was simply familiar with a few philosophical compendia to the view that he followed a systematic curriculum and had independent philosophical thought. L. W. Barnard believes that Athenagoras is very familiar with the philosophical tradition – especially Middle Platonism – and that he is able to exploit his philosophical skills in his apologetic project. In the article 'The Philosophical and Biblical Background of Athenagoras', Barnard thus states:

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[10] See Schoedel 1989, 70–78. Schoedel's view is shared by Barnes 1975, 111; cf. Grant 1988, 100.
[11] Buck 1996, 209–226.

> The earliest tradition concerning Athenagoras […] states that he was a philosopher who, at some stage in his career, had embraced Christianity. It is then no surprise that he adapted current philosophical ideas, in particular those of Plato as understood by contemporary philosophers, to serve the aims of Christian apologetic. This he accomplished in a subtle and convincing manner which did not compromise his integrity as a Christian thinker.[12]

I agree and believe that Athenagoras had first-hand knowledge of (at least parts of) Plato's philosophy and that he was well grounded in the Middle Platonic tradition of his age.[13] This view is based on my overall impression of the way he applies Platonic philosophy in the *Legatio*. I would particularly like to highlight the role Plato's *Timaeus* plays in Athenagoras' argument. In *Legatio* 4.2, where he introduces his argument for monotheism, Athenagoras refers to the Christian belief in an uncreated creator who stands above everything created. This uncreated creator created everything by his Word – Logos – which proceeds from him. This is a reference to early Christian theology of creation by Logos. It is remarkable that we find this theology so clearly expressed by Athenagoras. However, what is most important here is that Athenagoras supports this with the remark "it is not that which exists which comes into being, but that which does not exist", which is a direct reference to *Timaeus* 27. It is obvious that Athenagoras here uses the reference to *Timaeus* to underscore some very crucial elements in Christian theology. Athenagoras also refers to the same passage in *Timaeus* in *Legatio* 15.1–4 and 19.2. In itself, this does not prove that Athenagoras had a deep knowledge of Platonic philosophy. However, if we take a closer look at the passage in Athenagoras' *Legatio*, it is apparent that this is not an isolated quote from *Timaeus*. A little earlier in the same paragraph (*Legatio* 4.1), Athenagoras also writes with a clear reference to *Timaeus* 27: "[W]ould it make sense to have us banished because we have a doctrine which distinguishes God and matter and their respective substances?" In this sentence, Athenagoras follows the argument in *Timaeus* very closely by claiming that Christians distinguish between the Creator and that which is created.

In his philosophical argument in favour of monotheism in *Legatio* chs. 5 and 6, Athenagoras quotes from *Timaeus* again – this time from ch. 28. Although Athenagoras explicitly states in the latter case that he is using a philosophical compendium, his widespread use of *Timaeus* demonstrates, in my opinion, that he had first-hand knowledge of this work. His use of *Timaeus* also reveals that he is well immersed in the Middle Platonic tradition, in which *Timaeus* had great significance.[14] However, this does not rule out the possibility that Athenagoras, like his contemporaries, also made widespread use of philosophical compendia and handbooks. The familiarity of many Christian authors with quotations from the philosophers is based on such collections. What is unusual about Athenagoras is that he explicitly states that this is so. In *Legatio* 6.2, where he quotes Plato, Athenagoras makes the following comment:

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[12] Barnard 1972, 3. Concerning Athenagoras' relation to the Platonic milieu in Athens, see further Rankin 2009, 6–10.

[13] Throughout the first section of his article, Barnard 1972 convincingly argues that Athenagoras' philosophical background is Middle Platonism. Similarly, Malherbe 1969 demonstrates that Athenagoras' *Legatio* has the same three-part structure as the Middle Platonic philosopher Albinus' work *Didaskalikos*, which is the best preserved Middle Platonic philosophical handbook.

[14] See Malherbe 1969, 6–12, regarding Athenagoras' use of *Timaeus*.

> Plato and Aristotle – and note that it is not as one who intends to give an exact account of the doctrines of the philosophers that I run through what they say concerning God; for I know that you are as much superior to all men in an exact understanding of the whole range of learning, as you exceed them in the wisdom and power of your rule, and that you can boast of having accomplished in every branch of learning what not even those who have specialized in one can lay claim to; but since it is impossible to show without mentioning names that we are not alone in insisting on the oneness of God, we have turned to the Opinions (δόξας) – so then Plato says […].

The "opinions" that Athenagoras is referring to are philosophical compendia – doxographies. This is also the case in *Legatio* 23.4 where he refers to Thales' understanding of the divine by pointing not to Thales' writings themselves, but to such doxographies: "Thales, as those who know his doctrines well record […]." Athenagoras was thus well aware that his readers – be they emperors or other addressees – would know that he had not consulted all the mentioned philosophers' original works. This is why he makes this explanatory comment. This common practice of using philosophical compendia makes it more difficult for modern readers to get an accurate impression of how familiar a given author was with classical philosophy.[15]

Later on in the *Legatio*, Athenagoras makes another reference to Plato. In ch. 23, a long quote from *Timaeus* 40d–e is found in a passage where Athenagoras discusses the nature of images of deities. Athenagoras intends to demonstrate that material images cannot be divine, which he finds to be a difficult task. However, as he points out, Plato also struggled to explain the nature of demons to ordinary people. Athenagoras then recounts Plato's theory of the status of God versus the lower-ranking demons followed by the long passage from *Timaeus* 40d–e, where Plato describes his difficulties with explaining the nature of demons.[16] Hence, in this passage, we find another example of Athenagoras' intensive use of *Timaeus*, which supports the view that Athenagoras had personally read and was indeed quite familiar with *Timaeus*.

Athenagoras also mentions other philosophers. In *Legatio* 6.3–4, he briefly refers to Aristotle and his followers and to the Stoics when describing their opinions about the divine. According to Athenagoras, Aristotle claims the divine to be a god composed of soul and body. The body is the ethereal space, the planets and the fixed stars. The soul of this deity is the reason, which decides the orderly motions of the body. For this reason, Athenagoras counts Aristotle and his followers among the supporters of the idea of monotheism. The Stoics think that all elements of matter are permeated by seminal principles, which decide their nature and motion. The divine is the fire that embraces all these seminal principles. This leads Athenagoras to the conclusion that also the Stoics are monotheistic. These references to the thoughts of Aristotle and the Stoics about the divine are, however, so brief that they do not provide any basis for claiming that Athenagoras had a direct knowledge of their philosophies. Rather, his references to these branches of Greek philosophy probably rely on the compendia that he used as references in the

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[15] With regard to Athenagoras' use of philosophical compendia versus the original works of Plato and other classical philosophers, Barnard says: "The above examples will have shown that Athenagoras drew on collections of texts from classical writers and philosophers, which were used as source material in the Hellenistic schools of philosophy. However, it is also possible that he used the works of the classical authors directly", (Barnard 1972, 6).

[16] *Legatio* 23.5–10.

beginning of the paragraph. This also seems to be the case when he refers to Aristotle and the Stoics elsewhere in the *Legatio* (16, 19, 22).

It is difficult to reach a safe conclusion about the extent of Athenagoras' knowledge of Greek philosophy. It is evident that he has at least a basic knowledge of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy. This knowledge might stem, at least partly, from philosophical compendia. But as argued above he seems to have a quite deep knowledge of Platonism, and even if his general knowledge is basic and derived from secondary sources, he uses Greek philosophy very actively in his arguments. This is most obvious when he argues for the claim that only one god exists. In this case, he uses Greek philosophers as allies who can support his own point of view, even if he also makes critical remarks against them. This demonstrates that Athenagoras has much to do with Athens. At this point in time, Athens was literally the Greek centre of philosophy,[17] and Athenagoras might well have received his philosophical education here; but even if we do not accept Athens as his geographical location it was indeed the cultural epicentre of Hellas, and as such it was certainly an 'Athenian' mannerism to engage in and use the philosophical tradition and way of thinking as actively as Athenagoras does.

Athenagoras and Greek poetry and religion

The *Legatio* also reveals that Athenagoras was familiar with Greek literature and poetry, and the mythology expressed therein.[18] This is evident, for example, in the way he refers to Greek literature and mythology in connection with his argument for monotheism. In *Legatio* 17, Athenagoras claims that the Greek pantheon had been only recently invented by Orpheus, Homer and Hesiod. He supports this claim by a reference to Herodotus (2.53), who stated that Hesiod and Homer lived only 400 years before himself and that they created the Greek pantheon. Athenagoras uses the – at the time powerful – argument of tradition and age: the older is the better.[19] Employing this approach, he can argue that a pantheon constructed in historical times is not a solid basis for worshipping many gods. Similarly, images and statues of the Greek gods are of recent date, which according to Athenagoras can be proved by the fact that the invention of these kinds of handcrafts is also of recent date.[20] Further, Athenagoras' acquaintance with Greek mythology as represented by the Greek poets can be deduced from the references and quotes he provides in *Legatio* 18 and 21. Most of the quotes are from Homer, but Euripides and Aeschylus are also mentioned. This familiarity with Greek literature, poetry and mythology is undoubtedly a result of the normal schooling and education processes Athenagoras had undergone, since literature and poetry were taught in the schools. Familiarity with the classical literature was, therefore, an inevitable experience for people who, like Athenagoras, had undergone contemporary schooling.[21] Such acquaintance with Greek mythology could be obtained anywhere in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and as such, it does not reveal anything about Athenagoras' concrete geographical relations with Athens. However, it indirectly

[17] See e.g. Dillon 1996, 184-192.
[18] *Legatio* chs. 17–22.
[19] For this, see Pilhofer 1990.
[20] *Leg. pro Christ.* 17.
[21] Concerning the schooling and educational system at Athenagoras' time, see Sandnes 2009.

supports the conclusion that Athenagoras in his thinking is an Athenian, in his drawing upon traditions that are so deeply immersed in and connected with the cultural sphere of Athens.

What has Athenagoras to do with Athens? A geography of Athenagoras' life and thought

As has been shown above, we can reasonably argue that Athenagoras was familiar with, well trained in and firmly grounded in Athenian traditions. Consequently, there is some basis for assuming that he lived in Athens when he studied philosophy and when he wrote and delivered his *Legatio* to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. But the evidence is far from conclusive, and Athenagoras' geographical relations to Athens remain uncertain. The geography of his thoughts, on the other hand, is indeed related to Athens. This can be concluded from his deep familiarity with Greek culture and philosophy. He has an excellent knowledge of Greek religion and mythology as they are presented in the Homeric traditions. He is strongly critical of these traditions, and he knows how to use them in his apology for Christianity by comparing the immorality and irrationality of the Greek gods with the claimed morality and rationality of Christian belief, worship and life. Similarly, Athenagoras has an extensive knowledge of Greek philosophy – in some cases from philosophical compendia and handbooks, but undoubtedly also, as in the case of Plato, from having read and studied (some of) Plato's treatises, especially *Timaeus*. Athenagoras also uses his knowledge of Greek philosophy in his apology for Christianity. This is most apparent when he creates an alliance with Greek philosophy arguing for monotheism. What distinguishes Athenagoras from other early Christian theologians is not his knowledge of Greek philosophy. Rather, it is his very active use of Greek philosophy as well as religious poetry and mythology – cultural traditions that were often perceived as Athenian not because they necessarily originated here, but because Athens was the cultural epicentre of Hellas. That shows that even if Athenagoras was not Athenian in the geographical sense, he was certainly a cultural Athenian.

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