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Alexandria: The Nature of the Sea

Chiara Militello

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Chiara Militello

Olympiodorus of Alexandria is receiving more and more attention from scholars. Scholars such as Harold Tarrant, Michael Griffin and François Renaud have written important papers on Olympiodorus.¹ A conference focused on Olympiodorus has been organized in 2017, and the proceedings, published in 2021, show how lively the debate about this author is.² Translations are another sign of the increased interest in Olympiodorus: while 25 years ago just one of Olympiodorus' commentaries was available in translation,³ today all three of his commentaries on Plato are available both in English⁴ and in Italian,⁵ two of them can be read in German,⁶ and parts of his commentaries on Aristotle have been translated as well.⁷

Despite the growing interest in the thought of Olympiodorus, his commentary on *Meteorology* is still under-researched. The commentary on the fourth book has been studied and translated in French by Cristina Viano.⁸ The commentary on the first book is the subject of István Baksa's doctoral dissertation, which also contains a translation of the text in English.⁹ The commentaries on books 2 and 3 were virtually ignored until a few years ago; I have written two papers on this part of Olympiodorus' commentary,¹⁰ which I am translating for *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle*. Apart from said texts, references to Olympiodorus' commentaries can be found in books about Aristotle's *Meteorology* and its fortune, such as Malcolm Wilson's *Structure and*

¹ To mention just some of said papers: Tarrant (1997a), (1997b), (1998), (2007), (2017), (2021a), (2021b), (2023a), (2023b). Griffin (2014), (2021). Renaud (2006), (2007), (2008), (2012), (2014), (2021).

² Joesse (2021b).

³ Westerink (1976).

⁴ Olympiodorus (1998), (2015), (2016). Filippi (2016).

⁵ Olympiodorus (2017).

⁶ Bohle (2020). Umsu-Seifert (2023).

⁷ Baksa (2012). Viano (2006). Elias, David and Olympiodorus (2018).

⁸ Viano (2006).

⁹ Baksa (2012).

¹⁰ Militello (2023a), (2023b).

*Method in Aristotle's Meteorologica*¹¹ and Paul Lettinck's *Aristotle's Meteorology and Its Reception in the Arab World*.¹²

The paucity of research on Olympiodorus' commentary on *Meteorology* is hardly justifiable, as in their commentaries on Aristotle's works, the Neoplatonists often used the page they were commenting on as an occasion to expound their own theories.¹³ On this basis, one should pay attention to Olympiodorus' commentary on *Meteorology*, particularly to the passages where the commentator sets forth a theory that clearly differs from what Aristotle meant, as these passages likely contain Olympiodorus' opinion on the discussed matter.

In this paper, I focus on three cases of Olympiodorus departing from Aristotle's statements about the sea in the commentary on the chapters 2 and 3 of the second book of *Meteorology*. I will first analyze Aristotle's words and Olympiodorus' comment on them, in order to show how far the commentator deviates from the meaning of the commented text. Olympiodorus interprets Aristotle's statements against the thesis that the sea is the main body of water as arguments in favor of said thesis, completely reversing the meaning of Aristotle's words. Moreover, Olympiodorus locates Aristotle's proof that the sea is eternal not in the section that the Stagirite actually devotes to this topic, but in a later passage, where Aristotle rather explains how the sea can maintain its form and quantity despite being made of parts that constantly change. Since in these cases the commentator clearly attributes to Aristotle opinions that the latter did not express, these passages are likely to convey Olympiodorus' own views, and are therefore particularly interesting in order to improve our knowledge of his thought. For this reason, after showing how Olympiodorus strays from the commented text, I will try to explain why he gives an exegesis of Aristotle's statements that is so different from the common one.

I. Three "wrong" interpretations

(1) In order to understand the first case in which Olympiodorus departs from Aristotle's statements, one has to consider that Aristotle confutes the opinion that the sea is the main body of water. In the second chapter

¹¹ Wilson (2013).

¹² Lettinck (1999).

¹³ See Hadot (1968). de Haas (1997) XX–XXI. Sorabji in Philoponus (1987) 1, 10. Sorabji (2004) I 1. Falcon (2005). Hoffmann (2006) 602–603. Tuominen (2009) 3–4, 8–9.

of the second book, Aristotle mentions the view of his predecessors that the sea is the main body of water (σῶμα τοῦ παντός ὕδατος), being to water what the spheres of (respectively) fire, air and earth are to the other elements.¹⁴ Against this view, Aristotle argues that, if the sea were the main body of water, its water should be fresh, as this is the natural state of this element.¹⁵ According to Aristotle, water naturally flows to the deepest place on the earth, and there it would form its main body, just like the other elements do. However, fresh water evaporates, leaving only a residue of salty water there—that is, the sea. Therefore, even though the sea is in the natural place of water, it is not the main body of water, but only a residue of it.¹⁶ Aristotle stresses the difference between the static, salty water of the sea and fresh water, which is water in its natural form and is involved in the rain cycle. According to Wilson, the radical separation between the sea and fresh water is the main point Aristotle makes in this part of the work.¹⁷

Contrary to the explicit claims by Aristotle to this end, Olympiodorus states that the sea being the main body of water is the Stagirite's opinion, i.e.—using Olympiodorus's lexicon— that Aristotle thinks that the sea is the entirety (ὀλότης) of water. Notice how there are actually two differences between Aristotle's text and Olympiodorus' interpretation of it. (1a) The first is just lexical, as in Olympiodorus' wording the question is not whether the sea is the σῶμα of all water, but whether it is its ὀλότης. (1b) The second and substantial difference is that the Aristotelian negative answer to the mentioned question is interpreted as positive by the commentator.

According to Olympiodorus, Aristotle argues that the sea is the entirety of water both by proving this statement and by confuting statements that are incompatible with it.¹⁸ Olympiodorus spots four proofs of the sea being the entirety of water in Aristotle's text; basically, he does not interpret Aristotle's statement that the sea is just the residue of evaporation as a reason to strip the sea of the title of entirety of water.¹⁹

¹⁴ Arist. *Mete.* 2.2.354b,2–18 (ed. Fobes).

¹⁵ Arist. *Mete.* 2.2.354b,18–23.

¹⁶ Arist. *Mete.* 2.2.354b,23–33, 355a, 32–355b,20.

¹⁷ Wilson (2013) 186–191.

¹⁸ Olymp. *in Mete.* 150,17–18 (ed. Stüve).

¹⁹ Olympiodorus discusses the objection that the sea cannot be the entirety of water because its water, being salty, is not in its natural state (Olymp. *in Mete.* 134,32–135,4). This objection is seemingly the same one Aristotle raises against the theory that the water is the main body of water. However, Olympiodorus thinks that

Therefore, every time Aristotle says that the sea would be the main body of water if it were not salty, Olympiodorus thinks that Aristotle is arguing that the sea is the entirety of water.²⁰ The two statements that are incompatible with the sea being the entirety of water are that the Tartarus is such an entirety (as Plato says) and that the sea is composite. As a matter of fact, entireties are simple,²¹ so if the sea were composed, it could not be a *ὅλότης*.²²

Lettinck has already noted the difference between Aristotle's theory and Olympiodorus' interpretation of it, stressing that the commentator can hold that the sea is the main body of water only because he thinks that saltiness of the sea is not relevant to the question at issue. Lettinck does not mention the fact that Olympiodorus changes Aristotle's wording, referring no more to the "main body" of water, but rather to its "entirety".²³ Lettinck generally attributes Olympiodorus' departures from Aristotle's actual idea to the commentator's systematic approach.²⁴ If this explanation also applies to the issue of the sea as the main body of water, Lettinck would probably argue that Olympiodorus starts from the Aristotelian definition of water as the cold and moist element; since this definition does not include freshness, Aristotle could not use the fact that the water of the sea is not fresh against the theory that the sea is the main body of water; therefore, the Stagirite mentioned some arguments in support of this theory and did not confute them—that is to say, he supported them. In this interpretation, Olympiodorus would reach the conclusion that for Aristotle the sea is the main body of water by reading

Aristotle ignored such an objection (*ibid.* 134,33, 135,15). I have tried to explain how Olympiodorus can argue this in Militello (2023a), where I propose the hypothesis that, in the commentator's eyes, Aristotle is just wondering how can the sea's salty water be the origin of all waters (*ibid.* 138, 7–18). Olympiodorus' reply to the objection that sea water is against nature is that this objection implies that the nature of water is to be sweet; but such an assumption is wrong, as the nature of water only includes coldness and wetness.

²⁰ Olymp. *in Mete.* 133,16–134,32, 137,19–138,7, 140,15–141,4, 149,16–19, 150,18–24.

²¹ See Olymp. *in Mete.* 133,15–16, 135,16–17, 137,17–18.

²² Olympiodorus cites the two proofs by confutation at Olymp. *in Mete.* 150,24–26. Aristotle confutes Plato's account of the system of waters at Arist. *Mete.* 2.2.355b,32–356a,33. Olympiodorus comments on this page at Olymp. *in Mete.* 141,21–143,7, 144,8–145,5, 145,16–149,15. It is not clear where, according to Olympiodorus, Aristotle confutes the idea that the sea is composite.

²³ Lettinck (1999) 130–131.

²⁴ Lettinck (1999) 133.

Aristotle's works as a consistent whole, and specifically by linking the pages about the sea to the definition of water. Wilson, for his part, thinks that Olympiodorus bases his opinion that the sea is an entirety on Aristotle's idea that the sea is a static mass of water enclosed in a limited space.²⁵ In fact, the commentator stresses that entireties are still²⁶ and continuous.²⁷ It is not clear to me whether this is, according to Wilson, the reason why Olympiodorus reaches the conclusion that the sea is the entirety of water, rather than just an argument the commentator uses to justify an interpretation he holds true for other reasons.

(2) The second question on which Olympiodorus' opinion looks odd is where Aristotle proves the eternity of the sea. Such proof can be found at 356b,4–357a,3, and also at 357a,4–b,21. In the former text, Aristotle argues that, given that the universe is eternal, the sea must be eternal, too.²⁸ He also confutes Democritus' idea that the sea can totally dry up, on the basis that the motion of the sun, which causes the sea water to evaporate, also causes the same water to fall back into the sea.²⁹ In the passage starting at 357a,4, Aristotle discusses the theories about the sea's saltiness, but he also indirectly proves that the sea has not been generated, as he argues that one cannot explain why the sea is salty, if they suppose that it came into being. Aristotle says that it is impossible to explain the sea's saltiness “for those who think that it came into being ἅπαξ and for those who think that it came into being ὅλως”.³⁰ This is usually interpreted as a reference to two theories, the second being a generalization of the first: some philosophers stated that the sea was generated “once for all”, and they are part of a larger group of thinkers who had it generated “at all”. For example, Webster translates these words as “those who create the sea once for all, or indeed generate it at all”.³¹ Lee has “[t]hose who make it come into existence all at once, or for a matter of that those who make it come into existence at all”.³²

²⁵ Wilson (2013) 190 n. 32.

²⁶ Olymp. in *Mete.* 133,33–34.

²⁷ Olymp. in *Mete.* 133, 21.

²⁸ Arist. *Mete.* 2.3.356b, 6–9.

²⁹ Arist. *Mete.* 2.3.356b,9–357a,3. Wilson does not mention the eternity of the sea when he discusses this passage (Wilson [2013] 28, 33, 180, 188).

³⁰ τοῖς μὲν ἅπαξ γεννήσασι καὶ ὅλως αὐτὴν γεννώσιν ἀδύνατόν ἐστιν ἄλμυρὰν ποιεῖν. Arist. *Mete.* 2.3.357a,5–6.

³¹ Aristotle (1931).

³² Aristotle (1952) 147.

Lettinck sums up the position of the philosophers criticized by Aristotle as “[i]f one thinks that the sea has been generated”.³³

Olympiodorus, apparently ignoring the mentioned passages, states that Aristotle does not discuss the eternity of the sea before 357b,26. Introducing the passage starting at this line, Olympiodorus says in the *theôria* that “the philosopher has sufficiently pondered the question whether the saltiness of the sea is originated or unoriginated and has proven that it is originated; finally, he also investigates whether water, as the substance of the sea, is originated or unoriginated.”³⁴

Indeed, the previous passages are not interpreted by Olympiodorus as proofs of the eternity of the sea. He considers the passage starting at 356b,4 just as a confutation of Democritus’ view that, even though the universe is eternal, the sea is not.³⁵ In Olympiodorus’ view, Aristotle mentions the argument that the eternity of the universe implies the eternity of the sea just as a backdrop for the confutation of Democritus’ theory. Everyone thinks that the temporal nature of the sea is linked to that of the universe: if the universe will always be, the sea will as well; and, of course, if the universe will come to an end, the sea cannot be incorruptible. Democritus is the only philosopher who disagrees, as he considers the cosmos eternal but the sea corruptible.³⁶ Olympiodorus does not think that here Aristotle is arguing that, given that the universe is eternal, the sea is eternal as well. That the universe and the sea are both eternal and that they are both generated are apparently considered as two possible realities.

Actually, Olympiodorus interprets one of Aristotle’s arguments against Democritus as a proof that the sea is eternal no matter whether the universe (or more precisely, any part of the universe which is not the sea) is bound to perish. In fact, the third argument against Democritus that Olympiodorus finds in Aristotle’s text is the following. If the sun will cease to exist, there will be no more evaporation, so nothing will corrupt the sea, which will therefore keep existing. If, on the other hand,

³³ Lettinck (1999) 125. Discussing this passage, Wilson does not refer to the link between the predecessor’s opinions about the generation of the sea and their theories about the cause of the sea’s saltiness (Wilson [2013] 33, 192–193).

³⁴ ἐπειδὴ περὶ τῆς ἀλμυρότητος τῆς θαλάττης ἰκανῶς διελέχθη ὁ φιλόσοφος, εἴτε γενητὴ ἐστὶν εἴτε ἀγενητος, καὶ δεῖξας, ὅτι γενητὴ, τελευταῖον ζητεῖ καὶ περὶ αὐτῆς τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς ὡς ὕδατος, εἴτε γενητὴ ἐστὶν εἴτε ἀγενητος. Olymp. in Mete. 153,12–15.

³⁵ Olymp. in Mete. 143,7–11, 149,20–23.

³⁶ Olymp. in Mete. 143,11–19.

the sun is eternal, so is the rain cycle, and every drop of the sea that evaporates will be replaced by another drop falling from the clouds.³⁷ Therefore, one should not think that, for Olympiodorus, this passage is agnostic about the eternity of the sea. Olympiodorus thinks that Aristotle is not just showing the inconsistency of stating that the sea is corruptible even though the universe is not. According to the commentator, Aristotle is confuting the idea that the sea will die out, whatever the temporal nature of the other parts of the cosmos is, and of course this means indirectly proving that the sea is incorruptible. However, Olympiodorus does not interpret Aristotle's direct proof of the eternity of the sea as such (I mean the one linking the eternity of the sea to that of the universe), and we know that later the commentator will state that no passage before 357b,26 should be considered a discussion of the eternity of the sea.

As for the passage starting at 357a,4, Olympiodorus does not think that there Aristotle is targeting the philosophers who thought that the sea was generated. Indeed, here we can find another peculiar interpretation by Olympiodorus. Contrary to the common current interpretation of the passage about thinkers arguing that the sea coming into being ἄπαξ or ὅλως, Olympiodorus thinks that the two opinions Aristotle is referring to are that the sea had been generated under one respect only (ἄπαξ) and that it is generated under all respects (ὅλως). The former theory has the saltiness of the sea generated but its substance ungenerated, whereas the latter has both the saltiness and the substance generated.³⁸ That is to say, Olympiodorus does not think that Aristotle here refers exclusively to philosophers who think that the sea is generated. According to Olympiodorus, Aristotle is not stating that, if one believes that the sea is generated, they cannot explain the sea's saltiness. Rather, the Stagirite is saying that it is impossible to prove that the sea was not originally salty, whether one starts from the assumption that the sea is generated or not.³⁹

(3) The third case in which Olympiodorus' interpretation clearly deviates from Aristotle's statements is the exegesis of 357b,26–358a,3. Here, Aristotle, who at this point has determined that the sea will exist forever and will always maintain the same volume, wonders how this

³⁷ Olymp. *in Mete.* 143,39–144,7, 150,11–13.

³⁸ Olymp. *in Mete.* 153 29–37.

³⁹ Neither Lettinck nor Wilson referenced the fact that Olympiodorus does not interpret these passages as being about the eternity of the sea (Lettinck [1999] 131–132. Wilson [2013] 28, 33, 180, 188, 192).

happens: are the parts of the sea always the same, or does the sea remain the same only τῷ εἶδει καὶ τῷ ποσῷ, while its parts continually change? In the latter case, the sea would be similar to air, fresh water and fire, which are subject to constant alteration, but not in their form and quantity. “For each of them always becomes something and then something else, but the form (τὸ δ' εἶδος) of the aggregate (τοῦ πλήθους) of each of them remains the same (μένει), just as (καθάπερ) the stream of running waters and of the flame.”⁴⁰ According to Aristotle, this is also the condition of the sea. As in the case of the mentioned elements, the parts of the sea are generated and corrupted, but, since this process is regular, the sea continues to exist; indeed, it continues to exist in the same quantity. It is clear that here Aristotle takes the eternity of the sea as granted. The question he tackles is *how* the sea will continue to exist forever, not *if* it will. One of the examples chosen by Aristotle makes this clear. Aristotle wants to show that in some cases the form of the thing remains the same even though its parts are continually corrupted. One of such thing is a flame, which is not eternal. The mention of something that is not eternal shows that Aristotle wants to explain the process through which something survives the corruption of its parts, no matter if this survival is everlasting like in the case of the sea or not. As Richard Sorabji has stressed, the process by which something can outlast its parts had been introduced by Plato in the *Symposium*.⁴¹

Even though in the passage starting at 357b,26 Aristotle takes the eternity of the sea as granted, Olympiodorus states that this passage is actually Aristotle’s proof that the sea is everlasting. Olympiodorus is very clear about the fact that in this passage Aristotle tackles the question whether the sea is originated or not. In the *theōria*, as we have already seen, Olympiodorus declares that here Aristotle “investigates whether water, as the substance of the sea, is originated or unoriginated”.⁴² Similarly, in the *lexis*, he states that the Stagirite “pursued the other investigation, whether the sea is unoriginated or originated with respect to substance”.⁴³

⁴⁰ ἀεὶ γὰρ ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο γίγνεται τούτων ἕκαστον, τὸ δ' εἶδος τοῦ πλήθους ἐκάστου τούτων μένει, καθάπερ τὸ τῶν ρεόντων ὑδάτων καὶ τὸ τῆς φλογὸς ῥεῦμα. Arist. *Mete.* 2.3.357b,30–32.

⁴¹ *Smp.* 207c9–208b6 (ed. Burnet). Sorabji (2004) III 186–187, (2006) 64.

⁴² ζητεῖ [...] περὶ αὐτῆς τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς ὡς ὕδατος, εἴτε γενητή ἐστὶν εἴτε ἀγένητος. Olymp. *in Mete.* 153,13–15.

⁴³ Μετήλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν ἐτέραν ζήτησιν, πότερον ἀγένητός ἐστὶν ἢ θάλασσα ἢ γενητή κατ' οὐσίαν. Olymp. *in Mete.* 156,15–16.

Olympiodorus seems to report just Aristotle's answer to the question "is the sea eternal?", rather than the reasoning through which this answer was reached. In the *theōria*, the commentator says that "Aristotle says that the sea is unoriginated and incorruptible with respect to the form, as also are all sublunary <elements>, but originated and corruptible numerically. For the whole of it, as a whole, will never die, but is everlasting, whereas with respect to the parts, it dies. [...] [T]he sea is everlasting with respect to the entirety but corruptible with respect to the parts, as are all sublunary <elements>."⁴⁴ In the *lexis*, Olympiodorus states that "Aristotle says that [...] with respect to the form, the sea is unoriginated and incorruptible, as are all sublunary <elements>."⁴⁵

Nonetheless, in these statements Olympiodorus is also conveying the proof that, according to him, Aristotle sets out. This is clear when one considers what Olympiodorus says in the first lecture on the second book of *Meteorology*. There, he explains why, when, at the beginning of the book, Aristotle refers to the question whether the sea is originated, one should interpret "originated" as referred to the saltiness of the sea only. As a matter of fact—says Olympiodorus—"Aristotle took it for granted that the sea is unoriginated and everlasting, as it is the entirety of water, if really every entirety is everlasting."⁴⁶ This is clearly what, according to Olympiodorus, Aristotle says at 357b,26, as in both cases there are references to the sea being unoriginated, to it being an entirety, and to the elements. However, the argument is clearer in the introduction to the second book. There, Olympiodorus basically introduces a syllogism: the sea is the entirety of water; all entireties of an element are everlasting; therefore, the sea is everlasting.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ φησιν, ὅτι κατὰ μὲν τὸ εἶδος ἀγένητος καὶ ἄφθαρτος, ὥσπερ καὶ πάντα τὰ ὑπὸ σελήνην, κατὰ δὲ τὸν ἀριθμὸν γενητὴ καὶ φθαρτὴ. ὅλη γὰρ ὡς ὅλη οὐδέποτε ἐκλείψει, ἀλλ' αἰδιός ἐστι, κατὰ δὲ τὰ μέρη ἐκλιμπάνει. [...] κατὰ τὴν ὁλότητα αἰδιός ἐστι ἢ θάλασσα, κατὰ δὲ τὰ μέρη φθαρτὴ, ὥσπερ καὶ πάντα τὰ ὑπὸ σελήνην. ταῦτα παραδίδωσιν ἢ μετὰ χεῖρα λέξις. Olymp. in *Mete.* 153,15–21.

⁴⁵ φησιν, ὅτι [...] κατὰ [...] τὸ εἶδος ἀγένητος καὶ ἄφθαρτος, ὡς πάντα τὰ ὑπὸ σελήνην. Olymp. in *Mete.* 156,16–18.

⁴⁶ ὁμολόγηται [...] τοῦτο παρὰ Ἀριστοτέλει, ὅτι ἀγένητός ἐστι καὶ αἰδιός ἢ θάλασσα ὡς ὁλότης οὕσα τοῦ ὕδατος, εἴ γε καὶ πᾶσα ὁλότης αἰδιός ἐστιν. Olymp. in *Mete.* 126,6–8.

⁴⁷ Lettinck seems to interpret Olympiodorus' point differently, as he paraphrases it in the following way: "Aristotle does not raise this question [whether the sea is generated or not] in relation to its existence—for his doctrine is that the sea is ungenerated and eternal, *together with the whole cosmos* [...]". (Lettinck [1999] 128, emphasis mine).

Knowing that this is what Olympiodorus means, one can see a similar syllogism in his summary of 357b,26: water is the substance of the sea; all elements are everlasting; therefore, the sea is everlasting. More correctly: the substance of the sea is water; water is an element; therefore, the substance of the sea is an element; all elements are everlasting; therefore, the substance of the sea is everlasting. Olympiodorus also stresses that, when one says that the sea is unoriginated, the reference is to the form of the sea and to the sea as an entirety, not to its parts.

Summing up, Aristotle says that the sea is like air, fresh water and fire; the form of the aggregate of these things remains the same, even though the parts always change; therefore, the form of the sea remains the same. Olympiodorus paraphrases this by saying that the substance of the sea is like the other elements; the form of the entirety of an element is everlasting, even though the parts are not; therefore, the form of the sea is everlasting. Olympiodorus changes Aristotle's statements in three important ways. (3a) First, Aristotle is showing the similarities between the salt water of the sea and air, fresh water and fire. While the latter three are elements, salt water is not, or at least is not the natural form of an element. On the contrary, Olympiodorus asserts that the substance of the sea is the element water. (3b) Second, Aristotle talks about the aggregates of the mentioned things, but Olympiodorus changes it into their entireties. This move may be justified by the fact that Aristotle uses the word *πλήθος*, which even elsewhere in the *Meteorology* is used in the sense as main body.⁴⁸ However, it is clear that for Aristotle fresh water has no main body, so this cannot be the sense of *πλήθος* in the passage under review. When Aristotle refers to the *πλήθος* of fresh water, he probably means the stream of running waters he cites as an example. (3c) Third, for Aristotle the subject of the argument is the form remaining the same even though the parts constantly change. For Olympiodorus, it becomes the form being everlasting. We have seen that, while Aristotle applies the argument to explain how the sea is eternal, the eternity of the sea is a given for him here, and the process that maintains the form despite the replacement of the parts can be found even in things that are ultimately corruptible.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For example, Arist. *Mete.* 2.2.354b,8.

⁴⁹ Neither Wilson nor Lettinck mention Olympiodorus' interpretation of this passage (nor they cite Aristotle's passage itself, for that matter).

II. An attempt to explain Olympiodorus' odd interpretations

So far, I have described three cases in which Olympiodorus gives an interpretation that is clearly not based on a straight reading of the commented passage. One of them has already been noticed by literature—namely by Lettinck, who stressed how Olympiodorus attributes to Aristotle the opposite opinion to the one the Stagirite actually had on the sea being the main body of water. I will now try to explain why Olympiodorus gives these three interpretations.⁵⁰ My explanation of the interpretation that has already been discussed in the literature will be original.

(1) The first issue was: why does Olympiodorus think that for Aristotle the sea is the entirety of water? I think that the answer to this question lies in the importance that the concept of entirety (ὀλότης) has in Olympiodorus' view of the sublunary world. As Baksa has shown, for Olympiodorus an entirety is “the more or less complete mass of a given element, at its proper place”.⁵¹ Olympiodorus—like his fellow pupils of Ammonius Philoponus and Simplicius—thinks that there is an entirety of each of the four terrestrial elements. This is, for Olympiodorus, the basic structure of the sublunary world.⁵² The Alexandrian

⁵⁰ One may wonder whether the oddities in Olympiodorus' interpretation can be explained as errors in the student recorder's notes. As a matter of fact, Olympiodorus' commentary on *Meteorology*, like his other works, derives from transcripts of his lectures taken from a student. This is probably the cause of several mistaken statements and unclear arguments that can be found in Olympiodorus' commentaries. See Dodds (1957). Olympiodorus (1982) viii-ix, (2015) 47. Tarrant (1997b). For the commentary on *Meteorology* specifically, see Olympiodorus (1900) vii-viii. However, this does not seem to be the case here, for two main reasons. First, in all three the examined cases the 'error' in Olympiodorus' interpretation is neither a single word that makes little sense or an unclear argument (i.e., the kinds of oddities that could be due to a recording mistake), but rather a *clear* argument that, despite having little to no basis in Aristotle's text, logically advocates a given thesis. Second, as I am about to show, the three apparently odd interpretations are motivated by a single strong belief—that each element must have an eternal entirety. This belief is also expressed by Olympiodorus in other parts of the commentary. In other words, Olympiodorus is entirely consistent about the opinion he expresses in the passages under analysis; just, this opinion does not agree with Aristotle's views. Therefore, it cannot be the case that the student taking notes misinterpreted or noted wrongly the words of the master.

⁵¹ Baksa (2012) 61.

⁵² Baksa (2012) 61–67. Of Olympiodorus' statements I have discussed, Baksa mentions the ones about entireties being simple and still.

Neoplatonists, who stressed that each element is structured in an entirety, may have been influenced by the passage of Plato's *Timaeus* where the universe is defined as "a single entirety made of all the entiresities" (ἓνα ὅλον ὄλων ἐξ ἀπάντων),⁵³ i.e., of the entiresities of the four elements.

The existence of entiresities of each of the four elements is probably too central to Olympiodorus' view of the sublunary world for him to admit that Aristotle was wrong about this. Generally, Olympiodorus is not afraid to state that on some particular issue Aristotle is wrong. Despite thinking that most of Aristotle's views agreed with Plato's, he sometimes stresses the differences between the theories of the two great philosophers, and in these cases, he usually thinks that Aristotle is wrong.⁵⁴ More broadly, one sees that Olympiodorus ranks the conclusion of a reasoning above the authority of any philosopher of the past.⁵⁵ Such attitude can be also found in the commentary on *Meteorology*, where Olympiodorus criticizes several statements made by Aristotle.⁵⁶ However, the existence of the entirety of water seems to be such an important doctrine for Olympiodorus that it would be hard for him to admit that Aristotle denies it. Each element forming an entirety is not a secondary theory, Aristotle's error about which would be easy to accept. Rather, it is a necessary premise to build an orderly picture of the sublunary world. So, for Olympiodorus, admitting that Aristotle denied that water had an entirety would probably be the same as stating that one of the great philosophers was wrong about the nature itself of the physical world—something that should be avoided, if possible. Surely Olympiodorus looks for reasons in the text of *Meteorology* to attribute to Aristotle the theory that there is an entirety of water.

As Olympiodorus himself states in the commentary on the first book, there are at least two candidates for the title of "entirety of water": the sea and the rain cycle. Olympiodorus actually thinks that it is more appropriate to say that it is the rain cycle that is the *όλότης* of water.⁵⁷ However, the commentator can probably find more pretexts in

⁵³ *Ti.* 33a7 (ed. Burnet).

⁵⁴ See Opsomer (2010) 707. Griffin (2016) 408. Joosse (2021a) 3–4.

⁵⁵ See Joosse (2021a) 4.

⁵⁶ See Lettinck (1999) 7. Viano (2006) 64–65, 197. Opsomer (2010) 707. I have treated Olympiodorus' approach to Aristotle's theories in a little more detail in Militello (2023a) 152–159.

⁵⁷ *Olymp. in Mete.* 85,25–27.

Aristotle's assertions about the sea to ascribe to the Stagirite the doctrine that water has an entirety. (1a) First of all, the concept of the $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ τοῦ παντὸς ὕδατος is very close to the concept of ὁλότης as conceived by Olympiodorus, so the commentator can easily interpret the former in terms of the latter. (1b) Then, Aristotle provides some arguments in favour of the thesis that the sea is the main body/entirety of water, if only to confute them. Therefore, Olympiodorus can gloss over the confutation and focus on the positive arguments. Specifically, as we have seen, Wilson has noted that Olympiodorus can read in Aristotle's statements that the sea is static and sits all in one place two of the main attributes of entireties, which are still⁵⁸ and continuous.⁵⁹ Aristotle mentions the opinion that the sea is the main body of water to criticize it, but it is possible for Olympiodorus to ignore the criticism and focus on the arguments in favour of this opinion that are mentioned by Aristotle, as they refer to fundamental features of entireties. Read in this way, the section of *Meteorology* on the sea offers to Olympiodorus more ground than the one on the rain cycle to ascribe to Aristotle the idea that the water has an entirety. The result is that Olympiodorus thinks that Aristotle gives a positive answer to the question whether the sea is the main body (or entirety) of water.

It looks like Olympiodorus thought that the entirety of water must exist; this was an opinion of his so strong that it made him look for pretexts in the text of *Meteorology* to attribute it to Aristotle. Olympiodorus argued that the entirety of water is the rain cycle, but it seemed to him that Aristotle stated that this title belongs to the sea. Therefore, one can state that the existence of the entirety of the element water is a thesis of Olympiodorus, whereas the sea being such entirety is an interpretation of Aristotle's statements that Olympiodorus gave on the basis of his own worldview.

This explanation of Olympiodorus' statement that for Aristotle, the sea is the entirety of water is different from the ones that have been given so far in literature. Lettinck did not refer to the concept of entirety at all. Wilson noticed that Olympiodorus focuses on the features of the sea as described by Aristotle that fit the definition of the entirety, but did not

⁵⁸ More precisely, an entirety must either be still or have an eternal circular motion (Olymp. *in Mete.* 134,10–11). Therefore, the "circle" of the rain cycle could be the entirety of water (*ibid.* 85,25–26).

⁵⁹ I will add one more reason for Olympiodorus to think that Aristotle has the sea, rather than the rain cycle, as the totality of water when I will discuss the third odd interpretation.

explain why Olympiodorus focuses on the concept of ὁλότης to begin with. Vice versa, Baksa showed the significance of entireties in Olympiodorus' commentary on *Meteorology*, but did not mention the issue of the status of the sea. Of course, none of them had the primary aim to explain why Olympiodorus ascribed to Aristotle the opinion that the sea is the entirety of water, as Lettinck mentioned Olympiodorus only as a source of the Arab commentators on *Meteorology*, Wilson focused on Aristotle's text, and Baksa studied the first book of Olympiodorus' commentary.

(3) It may be useful to tackle the third case of odd interpretation by Olympiodorus before the second. The third case of wrong exegesis was the thesis that (3c) at 357b,26 Aristotle is proving that the sea is eternal. I think that the Olympiodorus interprets this passage as a proof of eternity because he reads it in light of a Neoplatonic proof of eternity. Aristotle states that τὸ εἶδος τοῦ πλήθους of things like air and fire μένει (and the sea is one of these πλήθη). From the same premise, some Neoplatonists concluded that the entireties of the elements are everlasting. They stated that, since the form of the entireties of the elements remains the same, such entireties never get destroyed. This argument is mentioned by Philoponus, who rejects it in a passage of his work *Against Proclus On the Eternity of the World*. The context is Philoponus' criticism of Proclus' reasoning that the eternity of the entireties of the elements implies the eternity of the world.⁶⁰ In order to confute such reasoning, Philoponus denies that the entireties of the elements are eternal.⁶¹ He defends his position by confuting an argument for the eternity of the entireties:

Phlp. *De aeternitate mundi* 13.503,7–10

[N]ot even the fact that the elements taken as wholes (καθ' ὅλα αὐτὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα) presently do not perish all at once but remain (μένειν) the same in form (κατ' εἶδος), is proof that the wholes of the elements (τὰ ὅλα στοιχεῖα) will absolutely never be destroyed.⁶² (tr. Wilberding)

⁶⁰ Proclus' argument: Phlp. *De aeternitate mundi* 13.478,11–16; 497,20–25 (ed. Rabe).

⁶¹ Phlp. *De aeternitate mundi* 13.480,24–27, 13.502,6–505,10.

⁶² οὐδὲ τὸ νῦν ἀθρόον καθ' ὅλα αὐτὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα μὴ φθίρεισθαι ἀλλὰ κατ' εἶδος τὰ αὐτὰ μένειν ἀπόδειξις ἐστὶν τοῦ καὶ παντελῶς μηδέποτε τὰ ὅλα στοιχεῖα φθαρῆσεσθαι.

Philoponus is confuting an argument that he has heard or read. Someone (maybe Proclus himself) has stated that, since the form of the entireties of the elements remain the same, such entireties are eternal. This argument is probably influenced by the mentioned section of the *Timaeus* about the entireties of the four primary bodies, as there Plato states not only that the universe is made up of these entireties, but also that it never ages or gets sick⁶³—i.e., that is eternal. Also, of course the idea that the whole can persist despite the corruption of the parts goes back to the passage of the *Symposium* I have mentioned when I described Aristotle's argument at 357b,26.

In my opinion, Olympiodorus, reading in Aristotle the same words as in the Neoplatonic argument for the eternity of the entireties, thought that Aristotle was implying the same conclusion of said argument. Aristotle referred, like the Neoplatonists later did, to aggregates that remained the same in form; therefore—Olympiodorus opined—he had to hold the same opinion about such aggregates that the Neoplatonists held, that is to say, that such aggregates are eternal.⁶⁴

As I have already explained, in order to hold such an interpretation of Aristotle's statements, Olympiodorus has to transform Aristotle's statement about the nature of the sea as (3b) the aggregate (3a) of salt water into an assertion on (3b) the entirety (3a) of the element water. Only after such a rephrasing he can see the parallel between what Aristotle says and the Neoplatonic argument for the eternity of entireties. Of course, this rephrasing is influenced by Olympiodorus' aforementioned opinion that for Aristotle, the sea is the entirety of water. Olympiodorus reads the passage starting at 357b,26 on the basis of the idea that Aristotle has the sea as ἡ ὁλότης τοῦ ὕδατος. On the other hand, however, this idea is reinforced by this passage. In fact, here Aristotle states that the sea is a πλῆθος, just like there is the πλῆθος of air and the one of fire. Therefore, this is the passage which was easier for Olympiodorus to read as a statement that the sea is the entirety of the element water (certainly easier than in the passage examined earlier as issue #1, as there Aristotle *denies* that the sea is the main body of water). This is even more true if one considers the parallel with the Neoplatonic argument: if, on one hand, Aristotle states that the form of the aggregate of air and fire remains the same and, on the other, the Neoplatonists state

⁶³ *Ti.* 32c5–33b1.

⁶⁴ Aristotle would have rather agreed with Philoponus than with the philosophers the latter criticizes. As we have seen, Aristotle thought that a whole can remain the same in form when its parts change, and still be ultimately corruptible.

that the form of the entirety of the elements remains the same, this is a good reason to think that, in this Aristotelian passage, *πλήθος* means the entirety of an element, and that, as a consequence, he is talking about the sea as the entirety of the element water. This passage, therefore, is another reason for Olympiodorus to think that Aristotle had the sea (rather than the rain cycle) as the entirety of water.

(2) It is now possible to explain the second blatantly wrong interpretation given by Olympiodorus, i.e., that the eternity of the sea is not discussed before 357b,26. The reason why Olympiodorus gives this interpretation is that, as we have seen, he thinks that at 357b,26 Aristotle gives the following proof of the eternity of the sea: the sea is the entirety of water; every entirety of an element is everlasting; therefore, the sea is everlasting. For Olympiodorus, this was the argument par excellence to prove the eternity of the sea. He states this clearly in a passage I have already cited. In the first lecture on book 2, the commentator states that “Aristotle *took it for granted* that the sea is unoriginated and everlasting, as it is the entirety of water, if really every entirety is everlasting.”⁶⁵ In Olympiodorus’ eyes, this was *the* argument for the eternity of the sea, and Aristotle did not need to add any other. Therefore, the passages where Aristotle actually proves the eternity of the sea are interpreted by Olympiodorus as having a different subject.

Indeed, for Olympiodorus, it is important not just that the sea is eternal, but specifically that it is eternal *because it is a totality*. As Baksa notes:

Baksa (2012) 67

What is the philosophical benefit for Olympiodorus of using the concept of *holotēs* instead of proper place or natural directions? The answer may be that since the *holotētes* are eternal, Olympiodorus, as well as other commentators who use this concept, can build the sublunary world from everlasting building blocks, thus making it eternal not only in its material (for the elements are constant factors in the sublunary world) but also in its structure, like the celestial domain.

The sea is not just an eternal entity, but one of the four eternal totalities that assure that the structure of the sublunary world will last forever. This point would be made less clear if one provided proofs of the

⁶⁵ ὁμολόγηται [...] τοῦτο παρὰ Ἀριστοτέλει, ὅτι ἀγένητός ἐστι καὶ αἰδίος ἡ θάλασσα ὡς ὀλότης οὐσα τοῦ ὕδατος, εἴ γε καὶ πᾶσα ὀλότης αἰδιός ἐστιν. Olymp. in *Mete.* 126,6–8. Emphasis mine.

eternity of the sea that were *not* based on its nature of entirety. Therefore, Olympiodorus is led to interpret the passages where Aristotle provides this kind of proofs as being about a topic other than eternity.

I have tried to show how three cases in which Olympiodorus interprets Aristotle's statements on the sea in a counter-intuitive way can be explained by taking into account the commentator's own theories. Olympiodorus' view of the sublunary world is based on the fact that this section of the universe is made up of the entirety of the four elements that are subject to change. Starting from this assumption, he has to find in the text of *Meteorology* references to the entirety of all elements, including water. Since the statements about the sea are the ones that give Olympiodorus more leverage to this end, he claims that for Aristotle, the sea is the entirety of water, even though the Stagirite himself confutes this thesis (or more precisely, the thesis that the sea is the main body of the element water). Among Aristotle's claims about the sea, the one that is closer to Olympiodorus' view of the entirety is the statement that the form of the sea as an aggregate remains the same, even though its parts change, just like in the case of the aggregate of air, or fire. Olympiodorus reads this statement on the basis of a similar assertion, which is the premise of a Neoplatonic argument for the eternity of the entirety of the elements. As a result, Olympiodorus thinks that in this passage Aristotle, too, is proving the eternity of the sea. Again, this is not the case, as here Aristotle is rather explaining how both eternal and long-lasting (but ultimately corruptible) wholes can outlast their parts. Aristotle's arguments for the eternity of the sea can be found in other passages. However, acknowledging this would oppose Olympiodorus' point that the sea is eternal because it is the entirety of water, so he also provides a creative interpretation of the pages of *Meteorology* about the eternity of the sea.

The result reached in this paper can hopefully contribute to a more complete assessment of the late Alexandrian Neoplatonists' interest in natural philosophy. We know that this field of study was particularly significant for Ammonius, Olympiodorus' teacher. For example, Damascius states that Ammonius was well versed in astronomy,⁶⁶ and Philoponus mentions a work of his on the astrolabe.⁶⁷ Moreover, we have a commentary by Ammonius on Aristotle's *On Generation and*

⁶⁶ Dam. *Isid.* 79,2–5 (ed. Zintzen).

⁶⁷ Phlp. De usu astrolabii eiusque constructione 129,5–11 (ed. Hase).

Corruption edited by Philoponus, whose commentaries on two other physical works by Aristotle (*Physics* and *Meteorology*) have also reached us. Olympiodorus' commentary on *Meteorology*, where Ammonius' opinion is often cited as the correct way to understand both Aristotle's text and the natural world, is a later example of this interest in the philosophy of nature at the school of Alexandria.⁶⁸ Lately, the attention of the Alexandrians and, generally, of many Neoplatonic philosophers towards nature has been the subject of a renewed interest by scholars, who have noticed how the metaphysical views of the Neoplatonists imbue their theories about nature.⁶⁹ In the passages I have investigated in this paper, it is specifically the tenet that every element must have an eternal entirety that leads Olympiodorus' analysis of the sea and of Aristotle's statements on it.

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⁶⁸ On natural philosophy at the school of Alexandria, see Praechter (1910). Verrycken (1990) 200. Griffin (2016) 402–404.

⁶⁹ See Chiaradonna and Trabattoni (2009). Wilberding and Horn (2012).

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