



## The exegetical fortune of Hermogenes' *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου*: a new critical edition of John of Sicily's commentary

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### Abstract

The project offers a systematic study of the exegetical tradition of *Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγου*, the two-book rhetorical treatise by Hermogenes of Tarsus, a 2nd-century AD author and a key figure in late antique and medieval rhetoric education. Hermogenes' work generated a multitude of commentaries that not only ensured its transmission but also progressively shaped its interpretation, adapting it to the cultural and pedagogical needs of different historical contexts. The treatise was reinterpreted within Christian educational environments, a process that played a crucial role in its preservation and transmission.

Within this complex tradition, the project aims to produce a new and complete critical edition of the commentary by John of Sicily, an 11th-century rhetorician. Hunger's *Handbuch*<sup>1</sup> provides only scant information about this figure, who remains little studied today, drawing on the author's own work and placing him chronologically about a generation earlier than Dossopatre, with whom he was sometimes confused in the manuscript tradition and by earlier scholars. However, John of Sicily's intellectual profile remains largely elusive: apart from the fact that he delivered a welcome speech for Emperor Basil II (976-1025)<sup>2</sup>, there is little other evidence that allows us to outline a biographical profile.

From a stylistic and methodological perspective, modern critics have at times been severe in their assessment of John of Sicily. Rabe<sup>3</sup> has emphasised the highly refined and occasionally deliberately allusive nature of John of Sicily's prose, as well as his tendency to avoid explicit citation of his sources, preferring implicit and often difficult-to-trace references.

Yet it is precisely these characteristics that make his commentary a particularly stimulating field of research, especially for reconstructing the didactic mechanisms underlying Hermogenes' thought.

Through a detailed analysis of John of Sicily's text and, possibly, a systematic comparison with other commentators (such as Nilus, John Dossopatre), the project aims not only to highlight the ways in which Hermogenes' theory of *Περὶ ἰδεῶν* was interpreted, transmitted and transformed in late antique and

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<sup>1</sup> Hunger 1978 p. 82

<sup>2</sup> Walz VI 447 24-26

<sup>3</sup> Rabe 1995 p. XCIII



Byzantine scholastic contexts, but also to identify more precisely the intertextual relationships and sources used by the commentator.

The critical edition will be accompanied by an introductory study which aims to reconstruct the manuscript tradition of the commentary and clarify its role in Byzantine rhetoric. The project thus pursues a twofold objective: to provide the scholarly community with an updated philological tool and to contribute to the study of how ancient rhetoric was received in the Byzantine era, shedding light on a field that remains underexplored.

### State of Art

Hermogenes of Tarsus, a rhetorician and sophist born in Tarsus in the second half of the 2nd century AD, was regarded as a child prodigy. According to the Suda<sup>4</sup>, he had Emperor Marcus Aurelius as a listener to one of his declamations at the age of fifteen. As he grew older, he lost his rhetorical skills and in his later years probably devoted himself to teaching. His work enjoyed long-lasting success in the Byzantine tradition, becoming one of the fundamental texts of rhetorical teaching between late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In *Περὶ ἰδεῶν*, his most mature work, Hermogenes, drawing on Demosthenes' prose, devotes himself mainly to identifying a variety of figures or qualities of style (*Ἰδέαι*). The *Περὶ ἰδεῶν* is one of the pillars of Hermogenes' corpus, but its exegetical reception, compared to his other writings such as the *Περὶ στάσεων*, is still relatively little studied. E. C. Walz's nineteenth-century collection (*Rhetores Graeci*), published between 1832 and 1836, despite its well-known limitations, remains the main source of access to many of the commentaries on Hermogenes. Walz consulted only three manuscripts for his edition of John of Sicily: Plut. 57.5, Par. Suppl. gr. 589 and Phil. Gr. 15. In his introduction, he states that he did not consult Phil. Gr. 26. Furthermore, he seems completely unaware of the existence of the two Vatican manuscripts, which provide many valuable variants.

Rabe's edition represents a major step forward in terms of critical analysis and text quality, but it is far from containing all the material published by Walz. Rabe focuses more on the edition of Hermogenes' texts, without providing a systematic edition of the commentaries. In the case of John of Sicily, Rabe deals only with the introductory part of the commentary, omitting the edition of the scholia. Among modern scholars, Kennedy and, in France, Patillon, who contributed to the rediscovery of Hermogenes' works in the context of late antique education, deserve particular mention.

John of Sicily's commentary is therefore a valuable source for understanding not only the didactic use of Hermogenes' work but also for clarifying its relationship with other commentators such as John Dossopatre. The Laurentian codex Plut. 57.5 is the main witness to the textual tradition of John of Sicily's commentary on *Περὶ ἰδεῶν*. Alongside it, other manuscripts (Vat. Gr. 901, Vat. Gr. 105, Par. Suppl. gr. 589, Phil. gr. 15, Phil. gr. 26) transmit the commentator's text in a more or less complete form.

Interest in Byzantine commentaries has grown in recent years, thanks in part to the attention paid to the history of the transmission of rhetorical knowledge and its connections with Christian culture. There are

<sup>4</sup> Adler: ε 3046.1



interesting contributions on the role of these commentaries in teaching (Pepe 2018, Kennedy 1999), but there is still no complete mapping of the exegetical tradition on Περὶ ἰδεῶν and, above all, there is no specific study on the commentary by John of Sicily, which, despite the edition by Walz and the partial edition by Rabe, awaits a critical edition and an in-depth contextual analysis. The research thus fits into a field that intersects philology, the history of education, and rhetoric, offering an original contribution to the knowledge of a crucial phase of Byzantine culture and the reception of classical rhetoric. The main objective of the project, therefore, is the philological analysis of the commentary attributed to John of Sicily, with the aim of reconstructing its content, didactic function, cultural value within the Byzantine tradition, and the possible sources to which the author refers.

### Methodology

Methodologically, the project will proceed in several stages. The first phase will involve a comprehensive survey of the various manuscripts transmitting John of Sicily's commentary, followed by transcription and collation for comparative analysis and reconstruction of the exegetical tradition. Particular attention will be paid to identifying the specific passages of Hermogenes' Περὶ ἰδεῶν commented upon by John of Sicily and comparing them with the base text and with evidence from the indirect tradition. The second phase will consist of a systematic comparison between John of Sicily's commentary and other commentators (such as Nilus, Dossopatre). This comparative analysis will focus on points of convergence and divergence, interpretative differences, specificities in vocabulary and argumentative structure, and possible common sources. From a philological perspective, the criteria of traditional critical editing will be followed with the support of digital tools for textual analysis.

The exegetical dimension of the research will be approached from a rhetorical and historical-pedagogical perspective, with the aim of reconstructing the ways in which Hermogenes was received in the context of late antique and Byzantine culture. The project also includes an analysis of how the stylistic categories of Περὶ ἰδεῶν (gravity, grace, vehemence, etc.) were interpreted by the commentator, depending on the school audience they were aimed at. In addition, the value of this type of commentary as a tool for cultural mediation between classical rhetoric and the Byzantine-Christian world will be reflected upon.

The project is planned over a three-year period. During the first year, activities will focus mainly on the preparatory and reconnaissance phase, to lay solid foundations for the subsequent work. This phase will mainly involve the collection and accurate description of manuscripts containing the commentary on Περὶ ἰδεῶν, with particular attention to Plut. 57.5. This phase will include the identification and analysis of the various manuscripts with the aid of digital databases and digitised catalogues from various libraries. At the same time, the passages commented on in Hermogenes' text will be identified.

This activity will be accompanied by an initial historical-critical overview of the exegetical tradition on Hermogenes, through the study and reading of the main scientific contributions on the subject, which will provide the theoretical and methodological framework. During the second year, once the transcription and analysis of the various codices have been completed, a comparative analysis will be carried out, aimed at



comparing the commentary by John of Sicily with other commentaries on the *Περὶ ἰδεῶν*, such as those by John Dossopatre, Nilus, etc.

This comparison will be based on lexical, thematic, structural and functional analysis to identify any dependencies, exegetical divergences and sources. Special emphasis will be paid to the discussion of Hermogenes' stylistic categories to observe how they are reformulated in the scholastic and cultural contexts of the Byzantine world. This phase will be fundamental for understanding not only the internal functioning of the individual commentaries, but also the way in which ancient rhetorical knowledge was filtered, reorganised and reinterpreted in the medieval Christian context. Finally, the third year will be devoted to summarising the results achieved and analysing the contribution that John of Sicily's commentary made to the tradition of Hermogenes in the Byzantine era.

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