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A Pagan Theology from a Neoplatonic Philosophy and a Tale of Two Cities

The Emperor Julian's appropriation of Neo-Platonist philosophy and Chaldean/Mitraic religious practices to embellish his political aims crystallized a syncretic ideology for the pagan cause. While there is debate in the literature as to whether Julian was an initiate of Mithra or a devotee of the Chaldaean system, the fusion of Oriental theologies and Neoplatonic philosophy became the official Pagan Neo-Platonist doctrine. Years later, when the Athenian School with Proclus at its head reworked its identity it was along these lines. Hellenic academies of late antiquity were the last stronghold of the pagan cause after overt rebellions against the Christians failed. The Athenian school, promoting anti Christian aims, was largely attended by the Senatorial class and upheld Hellenism and pagan religion even in the face of violent persecution of pagan shrines and rituals. Proclus had a political side to his role as *diadochos* of the Academy of Athens and had written an attack on Christianity. Antichristian sentiment was even more overt around 515 when Damascius became head. When Justinian banned all public teaching by pagans by imperial edict, Damascius, Simplicius and five other Scholarchs left the Roman Empire altogether and continued teaching at the court of the Persian Empire. The Alexandrian school, on the other hand, had a different history. Olympiodorus, a pagan philosopher and teacher survived both the law of 529 and subsequent persecutions. According to Damascius's account in *Life of Isidore*, Ammonius the head of the Alexandrian school had sold out and made a deal with the Christians after severe persecution of Horapollo and other Alexandrian teachers in the 480's. Ammonius went on to teach Philopenus and other Christian philosophers. The ban on teaching occurred, then, not because Neoplatonic doctrine per se was anathema to the Christian emperor but because of a long standing political conflict that centered on the Athenian *diodochoi*.

There are documented political links that connect the Athenian school to Julian's intellectual followers. Maximus and Chrysantius, high priest of Lydia, taught Julian the fundamentals of philosophy and theory and then sent him to Nesotrius the hierophant of Eleusis for initiation into the Mysteries of the great Mother. This Nestorius is Plutarch's father (founder of the Athenian School,) and Asclepigenia's grandfather. It was she that indoctrinated Proclus into the Orphic mysteries. One can assume, then, that an active pedagogical community survived Julian's reign with important links to the Athenian school. Some of the facts lend support to the thesis that it was Proclus and his successors and their political "incorrectness" that may have led to their condemnation and ultimately, their self imposed exile.