



Summary :

A scholar, a teacher and a monk. He was born in Constantinople in 1197 and died near Ephesus circa 1272. Official teacher at the imperial school of Nicaea, he was also the teacher of Theodore II Laskaris and George Akropolites. Circa 1248 he founded his own school at the monastery of Lord Christ-Who-Is in Ematha, near Ephesus, where he taught until his death. His work was very influential until the 19th century.

Other Names

Nikephoros Blemmides

Date and Place of Birth

1197, Constantinople

Date and Place of Death

1272, Ephesus

Main Role

Scholar, writer

1. Biography

Nikephoros Blemmydes was born in 1197. After the Fall of Constantinople to the Latins (1204), he settled in [Prousa](#) with his parents. He received a religious education by his teacher, Monastiriotēs, the subsequent metropolitan of Ephesus, and completed his general education in [Nicaea](#) at the age of sixteen. In the following four years, apart from his studies, he practised medicine, thus following his father's profession. He also wrote a discourse on blood and urine. At the age of twenty, he was member of a group of young offsprings of notable families ('*archontopouloi kai paidopoula*' - young masters and youngsters, according to him), who spent a long time in the court and the fields of military practice of Emperor [Theodore I Laskaris](#), aiming to train in the domain of public affairs, since, as a rule, they would become the future officials of the [imperial](#) administration. In the same period, he had an unhappy affair with an offspring of a distinguished family, the only affair reported in his autobiography. It was during the same time that he attended courses of logic by [Demetrios Karykes](#), without being particularly satisfied though.

However, at the age of twenty-three, he decided that he did not aspire to become an official. He chose to travel through [Bithynia](#) and arrive in the area of the Scamander River, in order to continue his studies under the supervision of the famous teacher and hermit [Prodromos](#); it was a risky task because Bithynia was still under Latin occupation. During his three-year stay there, Blemmydes was taught arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, logic and elementary physics.¹ He then visited [Nymphaion](#), where he studied theology for some time, before he settled again in Nicaea at the age of twenty-six.

While in Nicaea, Blemmydes was once examined by the then [hypatos ton philosophon](#) (chief of the philosophers), Demetrios Karykes. His performance impressed the emperor [John III Vatatzes](#), who invited him to join the court as an official (c. 1223).² However, Blemmydes, influenced by his teacher, Prodromos, turned down the emperor's offer and chose to live as a monk. After that, [Patriarch Germanos II](#), an old friend of his, consecrated him [anagnostes](#), deacon and, finally, [logothetes](#) of the Patriarchate. At almost the same period, Blemmydes taught at the monastery of St. Gregory near [Ephesus](#), where he settled as head of the school of higher education that had been founded there, in the beginning probably thanks to Patriarch Germanos' II support. Among his students was [George Akropolites](#), who was



sent to the school along with a group of other young people by the emperor himself.

During his stay at the monastery of St. Gregory, Blemmydes travelled a lot to various places of the Latin Empire and Epirus in order to discover new books. He visited Lesbos in 1227, [Rhodes](#) in 1233 and [Samos](#) in 1238 or shortly later, while in 1239 he visited Mt. Athos, Thessaloniki and Larissa. Those travels are probably connected with the attempt of Emperor John III Vatatzes to provide the schools and the public library with books, in the framework of his policy on promoting letters and science. The works of Blemmydes were based on these books. However, a groundless accusation against Blemmydes led him to decide to stop teaching the students sent by John III Vatatzes to the monastery of St. Gregory.³ Yet, in 1240 he undertook to train the heir to the imperial throne, [Theodore II Laskaris](#). Shortly later, the emperor suggested that Blemmydes should establish a school of higher education under the imperial auspices. Although he was strongly pressed to accept –patriarch Manuel II even threatened to excommunicate him–, Blemmydes refused, claiming that the school should be directed by secular teachers and not by monks. In a letter he sent to the patriarch, he explained that his negative response was due to the experience he had gained as a teacher under the emperor. Despite the repeated attempts by both John III Vatatzes and Theodore II later, Blemmydes insisted on his refusal until 1247.

But Blemmydes did not abandon his career as a teacher. Circa 1248 he established the monastery of Lord Christ-Who-Is in Ematha, near Ephesus. It included a [school](#) for hermits organised according to his pedagogical principles. Blemmydes lived and taught at the monastery until his death, in 1272, without returning to Constantinople after its [recapture](#) (1261). Blemmydes was offered several other key posts. In 1234, during the council of Nymphaion for the union of the Churches, he replaced Karykes in the official debate with the papal representatives and demonstrated a conciliatory spirit. In 1240, he was offered the office of the metropolitan of Ephesus, while in 1255, he was unanimously elected patriarch by the council, following a suggestion of Theodore II, though he never accepted any of the above posts. Despite his refusal to hold public posts and his insistence on monastic life, Blemmydes participated actively in the political affairs. He did not hesitate to oppose Emperor Theodore II Laskaris and Patriarch [Arsenius](#), when they decided to excommunicate the inhabitants of the State of Epirus for political reasons. This attitude may be explained by the fact that his priority, as he used to say, was the education and the formation of kind people rather than the tenure of offices and the direct involvement in administration.

2. Work

The scientific work of Blemmydes covers a wide range of matters. He wrote textbooks on the basic sectors of secular knowledge (logic, physics, astronomy and geography), as well as educational and theological works. His scientific views were obviously influenced by Aristotle's principles, which he tried to incorporate into the intellectual context of his times. His works influenced strongly both his contemporaries and future generations, which is proven by the fact that his textbooks were still in use until the 19th century.

2.1. Scientific Work

Among the most important scientific works of Blemmydes are the *Epitome Logica*, *Epitome Physica*, *Historia Terrae*, *Conspectus geographiae* or *Synopsis geographica*, and the two discourses "On soul" and "On body". All these works were intended to be used as textbooks at the school of Ematha.



The *Epitome Logica* was written circa 1260. It is divided into 40 chapters and is actually based on Aristotle's *Organon*,⁴ without impetuously repeating Aristotle's views. On the contrary, his analysis aims to bring out the basic principles of Aristotle's logic in a simple and practical way so that it could be easily understood by the students.⁵ This work, as the large number of manuscripts preserved in Eastern and Western libraries indicates, was strongly influential and was in use until the 18th century. In this work Blemmydes must have been also influenced by Porphyrios and David Armenios.

The content and the structure of the *Epitome Physica*, written in the same period (1260) and including 32 chapters, is reminiscent of the Aristotelian physics ('Physics', 'On Generation and Corruption', 'On Heavens', 'Meteorology'). A part of this work is consumed with the question of whether the world is eternal –a theory Blemmydes contradicts, unlike Aristotle–, while another part is dedicated to astronomy, which Blemmydes thinks of highly, unlike astrology, which he rejects. In this work he must have been influenced by Olympiodorus, [Simplikios](#) and John Philoponus (John the Grammarian). Blemmydes describes and explains a solar eclipse that occurred in 1258, which proves that the writer had a deep knowledge of specific scientific issues and employed scientific methods in his interpretation of natural phenomena.

The *Historia Terrae*, which was also intended for meeting educational needs, provides elementary geography, that is, arguments about the roundness of the Earth, references to the dimensions of the world, the eclipses and the types of climate.

The *Conspectus geographiae* is actually a paraphrase of the work of Dionysius Periegetes. Finally, the discourse "On body", written shortly after 1263, is a work of physiology referring to the characteristics and operations of the human body, while the discourse "On soul", written in 1263, describes the characteristics and operations of the soul.

The scientific works of Blemmydes prove the extent and depth of his scientific knowledge, which he masters more than his contemporaries, thus justifying the wide spread and use of his books until the 19th century.

2.2. Pedagogical Work

The works presenting the pedagogical and moral views of Blemmydes could include *Regia Statua* and "On virtue and ascesis". *Regia Statua* is a [katoptron hegemonos](#) (mirror of a sovereign) and is dedicated to his old student and subsequent emperor, Theodore II Laskaris. The work aims to teach the emperor, guide him and give him practical advice. In other words, to train the ideal monarch who plays a predominant role in the rebirth of the Byzantine world. For Blemmydes, the ideal monarch should be a philosopher as well, because his knowledge may arouse his interest in his subjects. He should basically aim at the truth, which makes the subjects trust him. Finally, it is necessary that the monarch should not possess any property, so that he is not selfishly engrossed in his personal economic interests. This work was later paraphrased by George Galesiotes and George Oinaiotes.

The work "On virtue and ascesis" refers to the moral principles the people should stick to. Virtue is the result of morality. At this point, Blemmydes adopts the Aristotelian view on virtue and believes it results from knowledge and judgment. Discipline aims to help the people, through continuous exercise, dominate over irrational desire and replace it with rational will.



2.3. Autobiography

At an advanced age, Blemmydes wrote his autobiography under the title *Autobiographia sive Curriculum Vitae* (1264-1265). This autobiography follows the principles of an encomium, which was used when the life of an important figure was to be narrated. He briefly mentions his childhood and uses rhetorical patterns. However, the events are given in chronological order, while those he thinks of as the most important are emphasised. The work is one of the main historiographic sources providing information about the writer and the Empire of Nicaea.

1. In his autobiography, Blemmydes says that Prodromos, among other things, taught him the arithmetic of Nicomachus of Gerasa and Diophantus, the *Elements*, *Optics* and *Catoptrics* by Euclid, as well as physics based on Aristotle's *Organon*. See Του αυτού Νικηφόρου μοναστού και πρεσβυτέρου, του κτήτορος, περί των κατ' αυτόν διήγησις μερική, Heisenberg, A. (ed.), in *Nicephori Blemmydae Curriculum Vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896), pp. 5, l. 1-26.
2. This 'examination' is rather part of the public discussions about scientific and philosophical matters organised by the emperors of Nicaea.
3. Two of the students sent by emperor, Krateros and Romanos, accused Blemmydes of swindling money belonging to Constantine Manassis, metropolitan of Ephesus. At the same time, he was accused of altering the Christian doctrine. However, Blemmydes was cleared by both the imperial and the ecclesiastical court. In his poem addressing John IV Doukas Vatatzes, where he denounces his accusers, Blemmydes refers to this case. See Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Nicephori Blemmydae Curriculum Vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896), p. 29, l. 26-29, p. 31, l. 22-26, pp. 100-109.
4. The following works by Aristotle were collected under the title *Organon: Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, On Sophistical Refutations*. See During, I., *Ο Αριστοτέλης. Παρουσίαση και ερμηνεία της σκέψης του*, trn. Π. Κοτζιά-Παντελή, Α. (Athens 1994), from p. 115 onwards.
5. According to Tatakis, Blemmydes could be described as 'Neoplatonist', because his work aims at a synthetic attitude towards both Plato and Aristotle, in the framework of the Christian thought of his time. See Τατάκης, Β.Ν., *Η βυζαντινή φιλοσοφία* (Athens 1977), from p. 217 onwards.

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	Angold M. , <i>A Byzantine Government in Exile. Government and Society under the Lascarids of Nicaea (1204-1261)</i> , Oxford 1975
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	Le théologien Nicéphore Blemmydès (1197-1272), figure de contradiction entre Orthodoxes et Latinophrones http://www.wralth.plus.com/byzcong/comms/Stavrou_paper.pdf
	New works of Nicephorus BLEMMYDES (TLG) http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/canon/wsearch?wtile=3092&nperpage=all&uid=0&GreekFont=Beta&mode=c_search
	Νικηφόρος Βλεμμύδης http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/n/nikephorus_blemmydes.shtml
	Τυπικόν της μονής του Θεού Όντος http://www.doaks.org/publications/doaks_online_publications/typikaPDF/typ048.pdf

Glossary :

	anagnostes Reader, a member of the minor clergy who read from the ambo texts from the Old Testament and the Epistles during the Liturgy.
	hypatos ton philosophon (consul of the philosophers) Byzantine official and scholar responsible for the public schools of philosophy. The first one was Michael Psellos (11th C.), whose successors were John Italos and Theodore of Smyrna etc.
	katoptron hegemonos (literally: mirror of a sovereign) A work dedicated to an emperor, which included advice as well as an outline of the emperor's character and achievements.
	logothetes A title designating high-rank officials, both administrative and ecclesiastical. Their responsibilities were mainly in the economic domain. The office of the logothetes of the Patriarchate gradually gained in importance after the 12th century. As for the logothetes of the metropolises, they seem to have assumed judicial jurisdiction.

Sources

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Quotations

Letter of Blemmydes to John III Vatatzes:

ἄς [συκοφαντία] ἄνθρωπος ἐλάλησεν, ἀλλ' ὁ διδάξας ὄφισ
ὄφισ ὁ παναρχέκακος, ὄφισ ὁ βροστοκτόνος
ὄφισ τῆς ἔχθρας ὁ πατήρ, τοῦ ψεύδους, τῆς ἀπάτης,
ἐξ ὧν λαμβάνει τὴν ἀρχὴν πᾶσα συκοφαντία



λαμβάνει μέντοι τήν ἰσχύν εἰς ἀνίσχυρον γνῶσιν.
ὅπου δέ γνῶσις ἰσχυρά, κρατίστη, στεροτάτη,
ἐκεῖθεν ψεύδος τρέπεται, φεύγει μακράν ἀπάτη.
ἔχθρα προκύψαι δέ ποσῶς μὴ παραχωρουμένη
ἐκδαπανᾷ τόν ἔχοντα, συντήκει, κατεσθίει,
καί θριαμβεύει τήν ἐντός μανίαν ἐκ τῶν ἔξω
λέγουσιν ὡς Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ μέγας, ὁ Φιλίππου,
ἀκούσας ὡς ὑβρίζει τίς αὐτόν, ἀνταπεκρίθη.
«ἀπόντα καί τυπτέτω με», μνήμης ἄξιον φήσας.
ἀλλ' ὄντως ἀξιώτερον καί θαύματος καί μνήμης
ὁ λόγος, ὃν ὁ μέγιστος εἰρηκεν αὐτοκράτωρ
ὡς γάρ ἐγώ ταις ὑλακαῖς ὡς δῆγμασιν ἐπλήγη
τοῦ λυσοκαρχαρόδοντος κερβέρου ταρταρίου
καί τόν ὑπερουράνιον θεόν ἐπεβοώμην
τόν τῆ χειρὶ κατέχοντα καρδίαν βασιλέως
τῆς ἀληθείας μάρτυρα γενόμενον ἐλέγξαι
τάς παμψευδεῖς διαβολάς τῆς παμβασκάνου γλώσσης
τῆς τελχινοτιτανικῆς ἐρινυώδους κάρας
τῆς τυφωνοκορυβαντοχιμαιοῦδρογοργόνης
πολυφυοῦς, πολυμιγοῦς, θηρός παναλλοκότου
ποικιλομόρφου τέρατος, κακοῦ πολυσυνθέτου'

from l.92 onwards:

ᾧ φρόνησις βασιλική, φρόνησις ὑπερτάτη
φρόνησις ὑπερβάλλουσα, φρόνησις ἀκροτάτη.
ὡ γνῶσις ἀπαράμιλλε, γνῶσις ἀρχικωτάτη,
γνῶσις ὑπερασύγκριτε, γνῶσις ἐξηρημένη.
ὡ σύνεσις ὑπερφυῆς, σύνεσις θαυμασία
σύνεσις ὑπερέξοχε, σύνεσις οὐρανία.
σύνεσις, γνῶσις, φρόνησις, αἱ τρεῖς ἐκ τῆς τριάδος
τῆς πρώτης κυριότητος, τῆς πρώτης κραταρχίας'.

*Τοῦ ὀσιωτάτου ἐν μοναχοῖς, ἱερωτάτου καί φιλοσοφωτάτου κυροῦ Νικηφόρου τοῦ Βλεμμύδου πρὸς τόν ἀοίδιμον βασιλέα κυρόν Ἰωάννην τόν Δούκαν, Heisenberg, A. (ed.), in *Nicephori Blemmydae Curriculum vitae et Carmina* (Leipzig 1896).*

Chronological Table

1197: Birth of Nikephoros Blemmydes

1204: Settlement in Prousa, after the Fall of Constantinople to the Latins

1213: Completion of general education

1213-1217: Practises medicine

1217: Admission to the court of Theodore I Laskaris

1220: Movement to the area of the River Scamander to continue his studies near the hermit Prodomos



1223: Return to Nicaea, integration into the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a logothetes of the Patriarchate. He starts teaching at the school of St. Gregory in Ephesus

1227-1239: Travels in search of manuscripts

1234: Participation in the Council of Nymphaion concerning the union of the Churches

1240: Teacher of the heir to the throne, Theodore II Laskaris

1248: Foundation of the monastery of Lord Christ-Who-Is in Ematha, near Ephesus. He teaches at the school, which he successfully maintains until his death

1255: Election to the patriarchal throne, which he does not accept

c. 1260-c. 1266: Writes his major works

1272: Death in Ematha

Auxiliary Catalogs

List of works

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