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The Debate on Faith and Reason*

In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes (1126–1198) argued that logical analysis is a prerequisite for studying the *Qur'an* and thus contributed to the debate on Faith and Reason.¹ Such a discussion is inherent to the nature of religion and can be found in Byzantine authors, especially in the eleventh century. At the time, the delegates of the Eastern and Western Churches used theological arguments for the separation of the Orthodox and Catholic Establishments (1054).² Two prominent theologians of the time were Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos. While the former focused his writing and religion on the contemplation of the divine, his student strove to spread his views on Orthodoxy among society.³ Niketas Stethatos has a central and constructive role in the debate on Faith and Reason.

It is somewhat unfair to refer to the eleventh century as a time of intellectual crisis.⁴ On the contrary the debate on Faith and Reason was an incentive to develop innovative notions within or against tradition. Nowhere is this clearer than in Stethatos' confrontation with a group of intellectuals who used their speculative powers to introduce alternative interpretations of Christianity. One may term them a sec-

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¹ Ch. E. BUTTERWORTH, *Averroes Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*. Chicago, 2001.

² On the different Byzantine authors who participated see A. MICHEL, *Humbert und Kerullarios*. Paderborn 1930.

³ For Symeon the New Theologian see H. ALFYEYEV, *Symeon the New Theologian and the Orthodox Tradition*. Oxford 2001. There is no monograph dedicated to Niketas Stethatos. However one may turn to the introduction offered by J. DARROUZÈS, *Nicéas Stéthatos, Opuscules et Lettres*. Paris 1961.

⁴ Such is the notion of L. CLUCAS, *The Trial of John Italos and the Crisis of Intellectual values in 11th century Byzantium*. Munich 1976.

ular *intelligentsia*, Stethatos calls them *laikoi*.⁵ Within this group there are a number of his intellectual opponents, to which Stethatos refers as *didaskaloi* and *sophistai*, terms suited to specific positions within education.⁶ Stethatos also identifies some of the teachers by name: Gregory the Sophist and Manuel. Gregory is the recipient of four letters appended to the treatise *On Paradise*.⁷ Manuel is the dedicatee of the treatise *on the Limits of Life*.⁸

Stethatos is clear about their independence of mind and distance from the letter of the Bible:

Τούτου τοίνυν χρεία ἡμῖν πολλή, καθάπερ εἴρηται, βέλτιστε, εἰς τὸ τὰς Γραφὰς συνιέναι ἄνευ γὰρ αὐτοῦ οὔτε νοεῖν ἔστι τὰ τοῦ Πνεύματος οὔτε λέγειν αὐτὰ εἰς τὴν τῶν ἀκουόντων ὀφέλειαν, κἄν εἰ καὶ λίαν ὁ λέγων ἔστιν ἔστομομένος τοῖς ἕξω μαθήμασιν. (Niketas Stethatos, Letter V.3.1–5)

My dearest friend, there is a great need of the Holy Spirit in order to comprehend the Scriptures, as has been said. Without it, it is neither possible to think nor to affirm anything about the Spirit for the audience's benefit, even if the speaker is well versed in the sayings of pagan learning.

The passage describes how knowledge external to the Holy Writ is not sufficient. However at the conclusion of the final letter to Gregory there is an interesting passage which reveals what Stethatos means: literal interpretation is not enough:

Οὕτω τοίνυν καλὸν τὰ τῆς θείας Γραφῆς μὴ κατὰ τὸ ῥητόν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸν ἐγκείμενον ἐν τούτῳ νοῦν ἀνιχνεύοντας θεοπρεπῶς τε καὶ εὐσεβῶς νοεῖν καὶ μὴ ἀβασανίστως καὶ ἀγυμνάτως, ὡς εἰς σκανδάλου πέτραν, προσπταίειν αὐτοῖς τε τοῖς λόγοις τῶν θείων Γραφῶν καὶ τοῖς τῶν λαβόντων ῥῆμα δυνάμει πολλῆ Πνεύματος ἁγίου εἰς τὸ τὴν δικαιοσύνην τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὸ κρῖμα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις εὐαγγελίζεσθαι. (Niketas Stethatos, Letter VIII.7.19–26)

So it is good to consider the Holy Scripture's ideas not literally, but to trace the thought contained within it with respect and reverence for God. It is good not to stumble without firm ground or experience, as if against a "rock of offence", both against the Holy Scripture's very words and the words of those who have received eloquence from the Holy Spirit's great power to announce to mankind God's justice and judgment.

⁵ References to *Laikoi*: DARROUZÈS 53, 276–280, 282, 284, 322, 324, 326, 328, 352, 396, 490, 492.

⁶ For education in Byzantium see P. LEMERLE, *Le premier humanisme byzantin*. Paris 1976 and P. LEMERLE, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin*. Paris 1979. For the teacher in particular see the article "teacher" in the ODB.

⁷ DARROUZÈS 246–291.

⁸ DARROUZÈS 366–411.

Thus one has to follow the Bible but not absolutely literally. Stethatos has made clear that it must be interpreted, but that there is only one correct way to do so. Such a correct way is available to those within the Orthodox tradition.⁹ He seems to imply that the studies which Gregory has undertaken and is teaching weaken his ability to interpret Christianity correctly. In the treatise, *On the Limits of Life*, addressed to Manuel, Stethatos is even more direct. A whole chapter is dedicated to the importance of tradition and how it defines the correct interpretation to be adopted when thinking religiously.¹⁰ Stethatos' doubt about a secular approach is mentioned at the beginning of the chapter:

Ἀλλὰ χαλεπὸν ὄντως κενεμβατεῖν εἰς οὐδὲν χρήσιμον καὶ κριμάτα Θεοῦ ἐρευνᾶν καὶ νεανιεύεσθαι ἀπαιτεῖν τὸν Ἀκατάληπτον καταλήπτου γενέσθαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἡμῖν, εἰδένα τε πῶς ὄρους ἔπηξε τῷ παντὶ καὶ πῶς τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαῖνον ὑπερβαίνειν ἑαυτῷ ποιεῖ καὶ κατὰ τίνα τρόπον ἠρίθμηνται αὐτῷ καὶ αἱ τρίχες ἡμῶν. (Niketas Stethatos, *On the Limits of Life*, 26.1–6)

However it is truly difficult to walk aimlessly for nothing, to investigate God's judgments, to claim childishly that the Unreachable becomes reachable by us men and to know how he established the limits of everything and how he goes beyond what is confined and in which way he has even counted our hair.

Further on he clearly defines his opposition to the laity's teaching of Christianity in philosophical terms:

Τούτων οὕτω τοιγαροῦν περὶ ὄρων θείῳ ἀποφαινόμενον Πνεύματι καὶ τὴν καθολικὴν τῶν πιστῶν Ἐκκλησίαν μυσταγογούντων ἐν σοφίᾳ Θεοῦ, πῶς οὐκ ἐρυθιώσι καὶ τῶν οἰκείων ἐπιγνώμονες γίνονται μέτρων οἱ ἀνθιστάμενοι τούτοις καὶ ἄλλο τι, παρ' ὃ διδάσκουσιν οἱ θεοφόροι πατέρες, οὗτοι διδάσκειν ἀποτομῶσιν ἀθθαδεῖα καὶ ἀνασχυντῖα ψυχῆς, ἡγνοηκότες ὡσπερ δὴ ἑαυτοὺς καὶ κεκανονισμένον ἐν τῇ ζ' τῶν πατέρων συνόδῳ ὅτι οὐ χρὴ ἄλλως τὰ τῆς θείας Γραφῆς τοὺς διδασκάλους ἐκλαμβάνεσθαι ἢ ὡς οἱ θεοὶ πατέρες διὰ τῆς διδασκαλίας αὐτῶν τῇ τοῦ Θεοῦ Ἐκκλησίᾳ παρέθεντο. (Niketas Stethatos, *On the Limits of Life*, 32.1–11)

Since the fathers reveal the limits with the Holy Spirit, and initiate the universal church of the faithful in the wisdom of God, therefore how can those not feel shame and not become aware of their limits, they who oppose them and with their arrogance and shamelessness dare to teach matters different from what the divinely inspired fathers teach, as if they did not know that it was established in the sixth ecumenical council that one must not interpret the Holy Scripture in a manner other than that which the holy fathers offered to God's church through their teaching.

⁹ For a discussion on the notion of orthodox tradition at the time see ALFYEYEV.

¹⁰ *On The Limits of Life*, chapter III.26 in DARROUZÈS 391.

Therefore both Gregory the Sophist and Manuel presented alternative views about Christianity based on their capacity to reason philosophically. Stethatos considers them antagonists to the church. Both teachers seem to be kindred spirits to their contemporaries such as Italos' disciples, mentioned by Anna Comnena:

Οὗτος τοίνυν προκαθήμενος φιλοσοφίας ἀπάσης καὶ συρροεύσης εἰς αὐτὸν τῆς νεότητος (καὶ γὰρ τὰ τε Πρόκλου καὶ Πλάτωνος καὶ τὰ φιλοσόφων ἀμφοῖν Πορφυρίου τε καὶ Ἰαμβλίχου ἀνεκάλυπτε τούτοις δόγματα καὶ μάλιστα τὰς Ἀριστοτέλους τέχναις καὶ τὴν ὡς ὄργανον παρεχομένην χρεῖαν ὑψηγεῖτο τοῖς ἐθέλουσι πραγματεῖαν καὶ ταύτη μᾶλλον ἐνηβρύνετο καὶ ἐνησχόλητο) οὐδὲ πᾶν τι τοὺς μανθάνοντας ὠφελῆσαι ἐνίσχυσε τὸν θυμὸν καὶ τὴν ἄλλην τοῦ ἥθους ἀκαταστασίαν κωλύμην ἔχων. Καὶ ὄρα μοι τοὺς τούτου μαθητάς, τὸν Σολομῶντα Ἰωάννην καὶ τινὰς Ἰασίτας καὶ Σερβλίας καὶ ἄλλους τάχα περὶ τὴν μάθησιν ἐσπουδακότας· ὧν τοὺς πλείους θαμὰ φοιτῶντας πρὸς τὰ βασιλεῖα καὶ αὐτὴ ἐθεασάμην ὑστερον τεχνικὸν μηδὲν τι κατὰ ἀκριβείαν εἰδότας, σχηματίζομένους δὲ τὸν διαλεκτικὸν κινήσειν ἀτάκτοις καὶ μορίων παραφόροις τισὶ μεταφοραῖς, ὑγιᾶς δὲ οὐδὲν ἐπισταμένους, προβαλλομένους τὰς ἰδέας, ἤδη δὲ καὶ τὰς μετεμνησώσεως συνεσκιασμένους πως καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ὁμοιώτροπα καὶ παραπλησίως τούτοις ἀλλόκοτα. (Anna Comnena, Alexias, 5.9.1.1–2.11)

Subsequently, Italos presided over all philosophy and the young used to flock to him. He revealed to them Proclus' and Plato's doctrines as well as those of both the philosophers Porphyry and Iamblichus and especially Aristotle's treatises. He used to explain to those interested in the subject the use it offered as if it were an instrument and he used to pride himself in this and dedicate his time. However he did not ensure some sort of benefit to those he taught since his anger and instability of character were an obstacle. Look at his students, Solomon John and Iasitas and Servlias and the others who may have been eager to learn. I saw many of them when they used to visit the palace. Subsequently, I noticed that they knew nothing precisely, but pretended to be logicians by disorganized arguments and by incorrect transpositions of parts. However they knew nothing sound. They argued in rather veiled terms for [Plato's] ideas and the transmigration of souls and for some other such similar and unusual points as these.

Gregory and Manuel fit with Italos' approach on account of their philosophical interests but also for their attempt to argue Christian points from a philosophical view which differed from that of the established Church.¹¹ This was the incentive for Stethatos to write two of his major treatises: *The Contemplation of Paradise* and *On the Soul*.¹² Indeed the debate between these two factions was clear to a reader of his work *On the Soul* who wrote a scholion which refers directly to Italos in negative terms:

¹¹ For a discussion of such a debate concerning Italos see CLUCAS.

¹² Edited in DARROUZES 154–227 and 56–153.

Κατὰ θνητοψυχητῶν αίρετικῶν λεγόντων συνκαθεύδειν τρόπον τινά μετὰ θάνατον τῷ σώματι τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ μηδὲ τῶν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς γινομένων ἐνταῦθα τῶν ἐκείθεν ἀνιαρῶν καὶ ἄλλως ἐχόντων αἰσθάνεσθαι ὡς ὁ νέος ἀπομάντης καὶ σαγοπῶλός φησι, ὁ καλούμενος ψευδονύμως φιλόσοφος. (scholion to *Treatise on the Soul* 74. Codex Angelicus 30 fol. 249)

[This passage is] against the thnetopsychite heretics who claim that the soul somehow rests together with the body after death and that at that point it does not feel what is in its favour or what is troublesome and different, as the new sorcerer and sack seller says, that so called philosopher.

The date of the scholion is not relevant to the present argument.¹³ Even if it is of a much later date than the *Treatise on the Soul*, nevertheless it is indicative that the reader thought that Stethatos' work and his discussion of the soul was directed against those who held ideas similar to Italos about the soul. It reveals that Byzantine readers thought that Italos taught subjects in a philosophical manner which were of religious competence. Moreover this is confirmed by the acts of the trial against Italos:¹⁴

Ἡ βασιλικὴ σημείωσις· Τοῦ Ἰταλοῦ Ἰωάννου μαθητὰς κτησαμένους πολλοὺς καὶ τούτους τὰς οἰκείας μεταδόντος διδασκαλίας, φήμη τις ἐντεῦθεν εἰς πάντας διέδραμεν οὐ καλή, ὡς δόγματα πάλα τῇ ἀγίᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ καθολικῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἀποδοκιμασθέντα καὶ ἀναθέματι καθυπαχθέντα τούτου τοὺς οἰκείους ἐκδιδάσκοντος φοιτητὰς καὶ διὰ τούτων πρὸς ἀπώλειαν τοὺς ἀπλουστέρους ἐφέλκοντος (ed. GOUILLARD, 107–112)

The imperial notice: Since John Italos gathered many students and he offered them his own teachings, therefore a negative rumour spread to everyone that he was teaching his own students the doctrines anciently rejected by God's Holy and Universal church and which had been subject to anathema and through these doctrines he led the simpler minds to destruction.

This imperial notice is important since it defines the role of the students who were lead to criticize accepted dogmas of the church. What seems to be implied is that the whole question developed since the more simple minds were converted to the new fashionable thought of Italos, and by implication they did not know their theology well enough. The antagonism between education and the church is not only apparent with the figure of Italos but also in that of the school master (πρόξιμος) Eustratios of the school of Sphorakios who was a key witness in Italos' trial.¹⁵

¹³ See discussion in DARROUZÈS 21.

¹⁴ J. GOUILLARD, Le procès officiel de Jean l'italien. *TM* 9 (1985) 133–174. Previously it was edited by F. USPENSKIJ, *Deloproizvodstvo po obvinsniju Ioanna Itala v eresi. IRAIK* 2 (1897) 1–66, 36, line 7–12.

¹⁵ The proximos appears in the acts of the trial at USPENSKIJ 65 line 5.

Therefore Stethatos wrote the treatises *On the Soul*, *On the Limits of Life* and the *Contemplation of Paradise* in order to argue with teachers on their level and to present what he believes is the correct view of the topics discussed. In this debate there are two different sides, one represented by Stethatos and the other by Manuel Gregory, Italos, Iasites and Solomon. The existence of a group with such common interests is confirmed if one turns to the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*. Cyril Mango has pointed out how one of the most surprising facts about the anathemas raised against Italos and his students in 1082 is that it was the first addition to the *Synodikon* since the defeat of Iconoclasm in 843.¹⁶ Thus he implicitly points out that the debate on Faith and Reason truly shook the establishment into condemning these new ideas. One point in particular represents the same debate as that of Gregory and Niketas Stethatos:

5) Τοῖς λέγουσιν ὅτι οἱ τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφοὶ καὶ πρότεροι τῶν αίρεισάρχων, οἱ παρὰ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἁγίων καὶ καθολικῶν συνόδων καὶ παρὰ πάντων τῶν ὀρθοδοξία λαμπράτων πατέρων ἀναθέματι καθυποβληθέντες ὡς ἄλλότριοι τῆς καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας, διὰ τὴν ἐν λόγοις αὐτῶν κίβδηλον καὶ μισαρὰν περιουσίαν κρείττονες εἰσὶ κατὰ πολὺ καὶ ἐνταῦθα καὶ ἐν τῇ μελλούσῃ κρίσει τῶν εὐσεβῶν μὲν καὶ ὀρθοδόξων ἀνδρῶν, ἄλλως δὲ κατὰ πάθος ἀνθρώπινον ἢ ἀγνώμημα πλημμελησάντων, ἀνάθεμα. (*Synodikon*, ed. GOUILLARD 59, 203–208)

5) Let there be anathema to those who say that the wise pagans and the leading heretics, who were condemned by anathema as alien to the universal church by the seven holy and ecumenical councils and by all the fathers who shone by their orthodoxy, are far better because of the support of arguments and abominable ability both now and in the forthcoming judgment both of the faithful and orthodox and of those in discord by human failure or mistake.

This seems to reflect the point raised by Stethatos in his answer to Gregory's theological question in letter VII.5. He formulated a question which revealed his interest to alter tradition in order to apply new logical arguments to biblical events. This meant he wanted to use the logical arguments devised by the ancients in order to clarify Christian mysteries. Stethatos' answer is clear:

Οὐ πολλάκις εἶπόν σοι; Φέισαι σαυτοῦ, μὴ διδάσκειν φίλει, λαϊκὸς ὢν, τοῦ ἀποστόλου λέγοντος: «Λαϊκὸν δὲ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπομεν διδάσκειν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ»—οὕτω γὰρ ἔλαβες τὸ τῆς διδασκαλίας ἀξίωμα—, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς Συνόδου θεσπισζούσης ἐπὶ λέξεως οὕτω, ὅτι «Οὐ χρὴ δημοσία λαϊκὸν δογματικὸν λόγον κινεῖν ἢ διδάσκειν, ἀξίωμα ἑαυτῷ διδασκαλικὸν ἐντεῦθεν περιτιπούμενον, ἀλλ' εἴκειν τῇ παραδοθείῃ παρὰ τοῦ Κυρίου τάξει καὶ τὸ οὖς τοῖς τὴν χάριν τοῦ διδασκαλικοῦ λαβοῦσι λόγου διανοίγειν καὶ τὰ θεῖα παρ' αὐτῶν ἐκδιδάσκεισθαι»; Τί μὴ οἰωπὴν ἄγεις, λαϊκὸς ὢν, ὥσπερ εἴρηται; Τί μὴ τὰ οἰκεῖα μέτρα

¹⁶ C. MANGO, *Byzantium: the Empire of New Rome*. New York 1980, 102.

γινώσκεις καὶ τοὺς οἰκείους ὄρους τηρεῖς, ἐντὸς τούτων ἱστάμενος, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ τὰ ἔσοχαμμένα, ὃ δὴ λέγεται, τολμᾷς ἄπειν, ἠπτόμενος ἐν τούτῳ τῶν τε ἀλόγων ζώων καὶ τῶν ἀψύχων κτισμάτων; (Niketas Stethatos, Letter VII. 5)

Did I not tell you often? Keep yourself, do not be eager to teach, since you are a layman. As the apostle says: “we do not allow the layman to teach in the church”. For you have not yet received the honour of teacher, but as the council establishes literally that: “the layman must not propose or teach a dogmatic argument, since he is arrogating his teaching position at that point. He must give way to the class given by the Lord. He must open his ear to those who received the grace of the teacher’s argument and to receive from them the divine words.” Why don’t you stay silent, since you are a layman, as has been said? Why do you not recognize your own measure and observe your own limits and remain within these but you dare to shoot beyond the mark, as one says, though you are inferior both to irrational animals and lifeless creatures in such a matter?

Therefore both Stethatos and the *Synodikon* are fighting against a similar use of pagan methods to achieve solutions to Christian questions. However Stethatos’ answer seems to imply that the *Synodikon* had not been altered yet to include such an argument. In other words one can add further chronological details to the debate. At the beginning of letter V it is stated that the treatises *On the Soul* and the *Contemplation of Paradise* had been already written. In the first paragraph of *Contemplation of Paradise* it is clear that it was written after the treatise *on the Soul*. Thus a chronological framework can be established for the works: they were written before 1077. Moreover, since the crisis between secular and religious interpretations seems directly connected with the figure of Italos, one may mark its official beginning with Psellos’ retirement to Bithynia and Italos’ preeminent role as a teacher after the year 1054. Thus the treatises and letters were written between 1054–1077 and therefore one obtains also a time frame for Gregory and Manuel. Both seem to be contemporary with the disciples mentioned by Anna Comnena. Since they held similar ideas it seems inevitable to consider that a “secularist” group was constituted by Manuel, Gregory, Iasitas, Servlias, Solomon, Ioannes and that they were all under the spell of John Italos. However one must be careful not to simplify the nature of the debate. There were not simply two groups: one religious and the other secular. Stethatos found a novel way to express the theology of his time which made him stand out as exceptional even among contemporary theologians, even in relation to his master Symeon the New Theologian. Italos also seems to have had a certain following though his ideas were novel for the time and noticeably different from those of Psellos, his teacher.

Thus the division into two distinct groups leaves out two important figures: Symeon the New Theologian and Michael Psellos. Both are clearly distinct either from Niketas Stethatos or John Italos. It is not enough to claim that they may have belonged to the mentality of a previous generation. In fact Stethatos' high point may have been his role as chief defender of orthodoxy against Cardinal Humbert in 1054, while Psellos' high point may have been his appointment as head of the philosophy school in 1047, making them near contemporaries.¹⁷ Indeed Stethatos also uses logical arguments to explain his point of view, demonstrating his interest in discussion. On the other side however there seems to be an interest in logical debate for its own sake deriving from the new impetus in the study of logic. Both Psellos and Italos were responsible for such a development, though the latter had an outspoken interest in logical analysis and argument and it is in this way that he is remembered by Anna Comnena. Even the *Synodikon* was clear that faith was a matter of simplicity and trust rather than intellectual analysis:

6) Τοῖς μὴ πίστει καθαρῇ καὶ ἀπλῇ καὶ ὀλοφύχῳ καρδίᾳ τὰ τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἡμῶν καὶ Θεοῦ καὶ τῆς ἀχράντου αὐτὸν τεκούσης δεσποίνης ἡμῶν καὶ θεοτόκου καὶ τῶν (210) λοιπῶν ἁγίων ἑξαίτια θαύματα δεχομένοις, ἀλλὰ πειρωμένοις ἀποδείξει καὶ λόγοις σοφιστικοῖς ὡς ἀδύνατα διαβάλλειν, ἢ κατὰ τὸ δοκοῦν αὐτοῖς παρερμηνεύειν καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν γνώμην συνιστᾶν, ἀνάθεμα (*Synodikon*, ed. GOUILLARD, 59, 209–213)

6) Let there be anathema to those who do not accept with pure and simple faith and with full hearted spirit the extraordinary miracles of our Saviour God and of our Lady, Mother of God, who bore him without blemish and of the other saints, but attempt to denounce them as impossible by demonstrations and sophistic arguments or to misinterpret them according to what seems to themselves and to establish them according to their own opinion.

Simplicity is considered a key element of faith. For Italos it was logic that gave validity and probably interest to arguments. However he was capable to divide form from content: to consider the connection between propositions without being too concerned by the content. His mistake was to think he could take propositions from the Bible and to assemble them logically and to do this without any religious consequence. Therefore, Italos' logical analysis weakened the primacy of content and in this he shared a common fate with the philosopher Averroes who was to be condemned only a hundred years later within another setting and religion but for similar reasons.

¹⁷ For Stethatos and 1054 see MICHEL. For Psellos and 1047 see J. LEFORT, *Rhétorique et politique: trois discours de Jean Mauropous en 1047*. *TM* 6 (1976) 265–303.