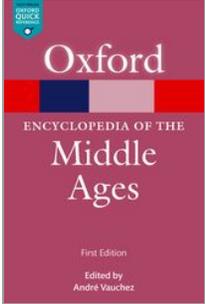


## Oxford Reference

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## Dionysius the Areopagite, Pseudo-

The author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* presents himself as St Paul's disciple, converted by his preaching on the Areopagus (Acts 17, 16-34). This false identity was generally admitted and gave him great authority all through the Middle Ages until, at the Renaissance, the objections of Lorenzo Valla were taken up by Erasmus. However Thomas Aquinas pointed out the similarity between various passages in the *Liber de causis* and the *De divinis nominibus*. At the end of the 19th c., the work of H. Koch and J. Stiglmayr showed the dependence of Dionysius's thought on that of Proclus and established that he was a Christian contemporary of the last philosophers of the school of Athens.

The *Corpus* was cited for the first time in a letter of Severus of Antioch in c.510 and then at the synod of Constantinople of 533, where Orthodox and monophysites opposed each other. Attempts to identify this mysterious author have been numerous (Synesius, Dionysius of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch, Peter the Fuller, Peter the Iberian, Sergius of Resaina [the first Syriac translator, d. 536]), but none of them backed up by evidence.

The authentic Areopagitic writings that form the *Corpus* are *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Mystical Theology* and the *Letters*.

The *Corpus Dionysiacum* came to the West in the 8th century. In 758, Pope Paul I sent Pippin the Short the whole of Dionysius's writings. In 827, at Compiègne, Louis the Pious received from the emperor of Constantinople, Michael the Stammerer, a complete Greek codex of Dionysius's writings (MS. 437 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France). In c.832 he asked the abbot of Saint-Denis, Hilduin, for a translation of it. Then, Charles the Bald asked John Scotus Eriugena to make a clearer translation of Dionysius's writings. The work was finished in 862. In c.1140, the monk John Sarrazin

and Hugh of Saint-Victor studied Scot's translation of the *Celestial Hierarchy* with the marginal and interlinear notes of the scholiasts John of Scythopolis, Maximus Confessor, Anastasius the Librarian and some others. Hugh wrote two commentaries on the *Celestial Hierarchy*. In 1167, at the request of John of Salisbury, John Sarrazin made a new translation of the whole *Corpus*. In 1238, Thomas Gallus, abbot of Vercelli, published an *Extractio* of the *Corpus* and, in 1241-1244, *Explanationes* on Sarrazin's version. In 1239-1243 came a new translation by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln. The two great Renaissance translators were the Camaldolese friar Ambrogio Traversari (1436) and Marsilio Ficino (1492).

The *Corpus Dionysiacum* was commented on throughout the Middle Ages, and it is through the different religious orders that we can follow Dionysius's influence in the West.

For the Victorines, Hugh of Saint-Victor, who commented twice on the *Celestial Hierarchy*, was interested mainly in Dionysius's symbolic theology, while the *Mystical Theology* was at the centre of Richard of Saint-Victor's interests.

Among the Dominicans, Albert the Great began his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in 1246-1248 at Paris. He used the *vetus translatio* of the *Corpus* by John Scotus. Later, he discovered the *nova translatio* by Sarrazin and used that.

Thomas Aquinas began his *Commentary on the Divine Names* in 1260-1261 (according to Walz) or 1265-1266 (according to Pera) (S. Thomae Aquinatis, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus Expositio*, cura et studio Ceslas Pera, O.P., Rome, 1950). "Saint Thomas here sets himself in the tradition inaugurated by Maximus Confessor, which tried to make Dionysius intelligible to the Western world", says Father M.-D. Chenu. Thomas's is the last of the great Western commentaries on the *Divine Names*. He returned to the "question of the divine names" in the *Summa theologiae* (I<sup>a</sup>, q. 13), dealing also with the question of the Good (Ia, q. 5), that of the three movements of the Soul: circular, straight and spiral (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 180, a. 6) and that of love as unitive power (I<sup>a</sup>, q. 20, a. 1).

The influence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* made itself felt in Rhineland mysticism. Meister Eckhart was inspired by Dionysius to speak of the "superessential Deity" who transcends every "name" and every "property" and offers himself to the purified soul only as "darkness" and "ignorance", and to describe this interior "unification" and interior "simplification" that lead to *exstasis amoris*, apropos of which he refers his readers to the *Divine Names* (712 A).

After him, Tauler speaks of the superessential Deity (*überweselichen über alle ding*), of the nameless (*ungenante, namlos*) God, of the "superformation" of the soul in the "divine Darkness", the "loss of self" in a nothingness by which the creature is united to that "which one can neither seize nor comprehend".

We may say that a change took place between the 13th and 14th cc.: from John Scotus Eriugena to Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval commentaries were on the *Hierarchies* and the *Divine Names*; from the 14th to the 17th c., from Gerson through Denis the Carthusian to Bérulle, it was the *Mystical Theology* that was, as we shall see, at the heart of the Dionysian current.

If in the 13th c. this Dionysian current was Dominican, in the 14th and 15th cc. it was mainly Carthusian. Hugh of Balma wrote a *Mystica theologia* and Denis the Carthusian composed

*Commentaria in libros S. Dionysii Areopagitae* from 1465 (vol. 15 and 16 of the *Opera omnia*). In *De contemplatione*, he made a synthesis of the Areopagite's mystical doctrine and the Thomist doctrine of the gift of wisdom.

Finally, in the late 14th c. the anonymous English author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, who may have been a Carthusian priest, translated Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*.

Dionysius's influence has been more important in the West than in the East. The Dionysian conception of hierarchy marked medieval thought, both theological and political. On God and the angels Dionysius's contribution has been considerable. As for the *Mystical Theology*, it was the origin of the debate on learned ignorance between Gerson and the Carthusians. Finally, by the great images of darkness and the superessential ray or ray of darkness that won over Carmelite mysticism in 16th-c. Spain and 17th-c. France, from the Victorines to the Carmelites, passing through the Franciscans, Dominicans and Carthusians, Dionysius the Areopagite has influenced the whole of Western mysticism.

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