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# Plotinus *Ennead* III, 8 and the Saturnalia

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**Abstract:** Dans l'*Ennéade* III, 8 Plotin invite le lecteur à jouer avant d'aborder les choses sérieuses, à jouer avec l'idée paradoxale que tout, même les plantes et la terre, aspire à la contemplation, le jeu étant lui-même une contemplation. Le thème du jeu se poursuit dans le traité. Un rapprochement de ce thème est proposé dans cet article avec la fête des Saturnales, fête pendant laquelle la vie normale était renversée et les gens jouaient. Je renvoie à des écrits associés aux Saturnales (écrits de Lucien, Julien, Macrobie) qui, tout comme le traité plotinien, commencent avec le thème du jeu. La thèse paradoxale du traité est elle-même un renversement de l'opinion normale. D'autres thèmes pertinents dans le traité sont notés: jouets, figurines, et l'interprétation de Kronos (Saturne) en tant que plénitude de la contemplation (l'Intellect divin). Le traité est la première partie d'un ensemble de traités (III, 8; V, 8; V, 5; II, 9) dirigé contre le Gnosticisme, ensemble dans lequel le mythe Hésiodique d'Ouranos, Kronos et Zeus est interprété, la figure centrale étant Kronos, qui représente l'Intellect divin dont la sagesse s'exprime dans le monde, une sagesse imitée par les «jouets» que sont les produits de l'art humain.

**Keywords:** Plotin, traité III 8, Saturnales, Kronos, contemplation, jeu.

Suppose we say, playing at first before we set out to be serious, that all things aspire to contemplation, and direct their gaze to this end – not only rational but irrational living things and the power of growth in plants, and the earth which brings them forth [...] could anyone endure the paradoxical character of this argument? Well, as this discussion arises among ourselves, there will be no risk in playing with our own ideas.<sup>1</sup>

So Plotinus writes in the first lines of one of his most original and daring treatises, *Ennead* III, 8. The theme of playing and being serious is carried on in the following lines of the first chapter. Even the playing to which Plotinus invites his reader is a form of contemplation and so it is included in the universal aspiration to contemplation affirmed in the initial paradoxical claim. Indeed, all play and all being serious, whether in a child or in an adult, is for the sake of contemplation (θεωρία, 1, 11–15). “But how”, the reader might ask, “can earth contemplate, and trees and plants?” Plotinus attempts, in the following chapters, to show how this could be the case, going up the scale of things, from earth to nature, soul, divine Intellect and ending with the ultimate first principle, the absolute Good (or One).

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<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* III, 8, 1, 1–10 (transl. Armstrong slightly modified): Παίζοντες δὴ τὴν πρώτην πρὶν ἐπιχειρεῖν σπουδάζειν εἰ λέγομεν πάντα θεωρίας ἐφίεσθαι καὶ εἰς τέλος τοῦτο βλέπειν, οὐ μόνον ἔλλαγα ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλογα ζῶα καὶ τὴν ἐν φυτοῖς φύσιν καὶ τὴν ταῦτα γεννώσαν γῆν, [...] ἄρ' ἂν τις ἀνάσχοιτο τὸ παράδοξον τοῦ λόγου; Ἡ πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοῦ γινομένου κινδυνος οὐδεὶς ἐν τῷ παίζειν τὰ αὐτῶν γενήσεται.

The opening of the treatise, in its emphasis on the theme of playing and being serious, is quite exceptional in Plotinus' works and the theme is not forgotten, but recalled in the rest of the treatise, probably at 2, 6–7 and at 5,7,<sup>2</sup> at 6, 16 and again at 8, 4 and 6, where, nearing the end of the discussion, the theme of seriousness prevails. Although exceptional in its emphasis at the beginning of the treatise, as compared with Plotinus' other writings, the theme of playing and being serious, we might suppose, is simply a rhetorical trope (playing/being serious) already found, for example, in Plato, in the *Republic* (536c, 537a1) and in the *Laws* (643bd). In the *Republic* and the *Laws*, Plato speaks of children who learn by playing, but in Plotinus' treatise it is adults, members of Plotinus' circle ("we"), who are invited to play. One might also invoke a passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (X, 6, 1176b32–35), where playing is said to be for the sake of being serious, and not the reverse.<sup>3</sup> However in this paper, I would like to propose another literary background for the opening of Plotinus' treatise which may throw some light also on other parts of the treatise.

The theme of playing, as opposed to being serious, is announced at the opening of texts which purport to relate to the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, or *Kronia* in Greek (the god Saturn being identified with the Greek god Kronos). So Lucian of Samosata has Kronos say to his priest:

During my week [i.e., the week of festivities of the *Kronia*] the serious is barred; no business is allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games and dice, appointing of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked [...], such are the functions over which I preside.<sup>4</sup>

So too does Julian the Emperor begin his *Caesars* (or *Kronia*) with the words:

Since the god has granted us to play (for it is the feast of the *Kronia*), but I know nothing that is funny or pleasant, it seems I must take care to avoid saying anything ridiculous, my friend.<sup>5</sup>

He comes back again later (ch. 13) to the theme of what is amusing and what is serious. Finally, we might take note of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, where the same contrast reappears in the opening parts of the text.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss these two passages below.

<sup>3</sup> P. Kalligas, *The Enneads of Plotinus. A Commentary*, Volume I (Princeton 2014) 625–626, who also provides other interesting references on the theme, to which might be added Plato, *Phdr.* 276b3–8, c6–e3; *Ti.* 59cd.

<sup>4</sup> Lucian, *Sat.* 2: ἐν αὐταῖς δὲ ταῖς ἑπτὰ σπουδαῖον μὲν οὐδὲν οὐδὲ ἀγοραῖον διοικήσασθαι μοι συγκεχώρηται, πίνειν δὲ καὶ μεθύειν καὶ βοᾶν καὶ παίζειν καὶ κυβεύειν καὶ ἄρχοντας καθισθάναι καὶ τοὺς οἰκέτας εὐωχεῖν καὶ γυμνὸν ᾄδειν [...] ταῦτα ἐφεῖται μοι ποιεῖν.

<sup>5</sup> Julian the Emperor, *Or.* X (*Caesars*) 1, 306 A: Ἐπειδὴ δίδωσιν ὁ θεὸς παίζειν (ἔστι γὰρ Κρόνια), γελοῖον δὲ οὐδὲν οὐδὲ τερπνὸν οἶδα ἐγώ, τὸ μὴ καταγέλαστα φράσαι φροντίδος ἔοικεν εἶναι ἄξιον, ὧ φιλότης.

For the whole period of this festival, they fill the best part of the day with serious discussions and at meal-times hold convivial conversations [...] more joyful talk, as having more pleasure, less seriousness.<sup>6</sup>

The Saturnalia was one of the most popular festivals of the Roman calendar. Beginning on the 17<sup>th</sup> December it could last for as much as seven days.<sup>7</sup> It was a period when official business was suspended, when normal social conditions were abandoned. Informal wear replaced the dress codes which enforced social hierarchy, people played dice, drank and had fun, as we see in the passage from Lucian quoted above. There was banqueting and exchanging of presents of wax candles and little figurines (*sigilla, oscilla*<sup>8</sup>). Slaves were allowed to behave as masters and rule was exercised by a king of fools, a *princeps Saturnalicus* recalling the Narrenkönig of the South German carnival.<sup>9</sup> It was as if a golden age, that of Saturn (whose statue was unbound for the occasion) had returned for some days,<sup>10</sup> suspending the harsh realities of normal life. In short, the structure of normalcy was inverted.<sup>11</sup> So too does Plotinus invite his reader to play at the beginning of his treatise in inverting what is normally thought, playing with the paradoxical idea that all things, including the earth, trees and plants, aspire to contemplate.<sup>12</sup> If we read further in the treatise, I think that we can find more elements of a background relating to the Saturnalia. I mention here the most salient.

In chapter 2 of the treatise, Plotinus argues that nature does not produce in a mechanical way, using hands and tools. He is thinking in the last analysis of literal interpretations of the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* which (mis-)represent the Demiurge as making the world in the way that an artisan makes. Nature does not produce in this way. People may be led to think of nature's productivity in this way through "looking at wax modellers (κηροπλάσται) or figurine-makers (ἡ

6 Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 1, 2: *nam per omne spatium feriarum meliorem diei partem seriis disputationibus occupantes cenae tempore sermones conuiuiales agitant [...] in mensa sermo iucundior, ut habeat uoluptatis amplius, severitatis minus*; see also I, 5, 12; II, 1, 9 (*docta cauillatio*) and J. Flamant, *Macrobe et le néoplatonisme latin à la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Leiden 1977) 183–191 ("Le plaisant et le sérieux").

7 For a more recent account see H. Versnel, *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Leiden 1993) 136–227. Versnel also discusses (89–135) the less important Greek Kronia (which took place in the summer).

8 On these see Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 11, 46–49; Flamant, *op. cit.* (n. 6) 24–25; Versnel, *op. cit.* (n. 7) 148–149.

9 See Lucian as quoted above; Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* VIII, 2. In the part of Lucian's *Saturnalia* entitled *Kronosolon*, Kronos provides the lawgiver Solon with a detailed legislative code to be followed in the Saturnalia.

10 Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 7, 26; Versnel, *op. cit.* (n. 7) 192–210. See Porphyry, *De antr. Nymph.* 23 (printed as part of Numenius fragment 31 by E. Des Places, *Numénus Fragments*, Paris 1973), on how slaves were treated as if free during the Kronia.

11 On inversion see Versnel's account (150–163) and Flamant, *op. cit.* (n. 6) 22–23.

12 Later in the set of four treatises of which III, 8 is the first (on this see below n. 26), Plotinus again invites us to "invert our opinion" (ἀντιστρέπτειν τὴν δόξαν), criticizing people who in their glutinous behaviour misuse festivals for a god (V, 5, 11, 11–18). In an earlier treatise, in *Enn.* IV, 8, 8, 1, Plotinus had already introduced a paradoxical doctrine (παρά δόξαν).

κοροπλάθαι)” (2, 6–7). A wax-modeller is mentioned in Plato’s *Timaeus* (74c6) and so seems appropriate here. The following words, “or figurine-makers”, have been taken by some modern editors to be an explanatory gloss or variant on “wax-modellers” and so they propose to delete them.<sup>13</sup> However, the words are hardly explanatory and seem rather learned, introducing a new image.<sup>14</sup> If we look for “figurine-makers” in Plato we can find them (*Theaetetus* 147b1). But figurines were also part of the festivities of the Saturnalia.<sup>15</sup> Plotinus may be referring to these and thus we should be careful about dismissing the words as a gloss.

Later, in chapter 4, Plotinus argues that making (ποίησις) and acting (πράξις), in humans as well as in nature, either result from a fullness of contemplation or are a substitute for contemplation when it is weak (4, 30–5, 6). As examples of the latter case he mentions duller children, who are weak with respect to learning and contemplation and so move to practicing arts and making things (4, 45–47). Then, going up from the contemplative productivity of nature to that of soul in chapter 5, Plotinus compares the productivity of contemplative soul with that of an art (τέχνη) which, when it is full or complete, “makes so to speak another little art in a child (παιδίω) which has an image of everything”.<sup>16</sup> This phrase has puzzled modern editors. In support of keeping the Greek text here, Plato’s *Laws* (643bd) can be invoked, where children learn by playing with toys which are images of the tools and products of the arts. However, Plotinus speaks of images of *everything*, which seems to indicate something different, and some editors have proposed correcting the Greek text, changing παιδίω to παιγνίω.<sup>17</sup> Strong support for this correction is provided by a passage in a treatise written in about the same period, *Ennead* IV, 3,<sup>18</sup> where the productions of art are described as “toys” (παιγνία), weak imitations of little value in comparison with the productivity of nature which they imitate (10, 17–19).<sup>19</sup> The text of *Enn.* III, 8 as corrected corresponds to this idea and makes better sense: the productions of art are but playthings which imitate the wonderful productions of nature. We have not yet left the atmosphere of playing, of toys. The productions of the arts are little more than toys which imitate something much more powerful (and serious), the contemplative productivity of nature, of soul, and of souls’ origin, divine Intellect.<sup>20</sup>

13 P. Henry/H.-R. Schwyzer, *Plotini opera*, vol. I (Oxford 1964), *ad loc.*

14 See Kalligas, *op. cit.* (n. 3) 628, who argues for retaining the words.

15 See above n. 8.

16 5, 6–8: ἄλλην οἶαν μικρὰν τέχνην ποιεῖ ἐν παιδίῳ ἵνδαλμα ἔχοντι ἀπάντων. The passage continues: “But, all the same, these visions, these objects of contemplation, are dim sorts of things and not able to help themselves (οὐ δυνάμενα βοηθεῖν ἑαυτοῖς)”. Christoph Riedweg has referred me to a similar phrase in Plato, *Phdr.* 276c8–9 (λόγων ἀδυνάτων μὲν αὐτοῖς λόγῳ βοηθεῖν); Plotinus alludes a little later (5, 34–37) to *Phdr.* 276e5–6.

17 P. Henry/H.-R. Schwyzer, *Plotini opera*, vol. III (Oxford 1982) 320 (*addenda ad textum*).

18 Kalligas, *op. cit.* (n. 3) 633. In the chronological order *Enn.* III, 8 is no. 30 and *Enn.* IV, 3 is no. 27.

19 See also *Enn.* III, 2, 15, 31–33.

20 See also *Enn.* III, 2, 15, 51–62: “For only the serious [higher, inner] part of man can be serious in serious matters; the rest of him [the lower, external part] is a toy. But toys, too, are taken seriously



Finally, I would like to refer to the concluding pages of the treatise. Having described divine Intellect as the highest level of contemplation, where contemplator and the objects contemplated are united in a perfect totality, Plotinus refers to what must be prior to this Intellect, the ultimate first principle, the absolute Good (or the One, as Plotinus also terms it), of which Intellect is the child (11, 38). Plotinus emphasizes the fullness of divine Intellect, describing it as *kópoç* no less than four times in three lines (11, 39–41).<sup>21</sup> The rather religious atmosphere of the chapter and this emphasis on divine Intellect as *kópoç* suggests that Plotinus is speaking of gods, and more particularly alluding to Kronos, whose name had already been linked etymologically to *kópoç* (following Plato's *Cratylus* 396b6–7) in *Ennead* V, 1, 4, 8–10 and 7, 35–36. Indeed chapter 7 of *Ennead* V, 1 is very close to the concluding pages of *Ennead* III, 8 in its description of divine Intellect and its relation to the One/Good, a description given as an interpretation of the myth of Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus.

Although these gods are not named at the end of *Ennead* III, 8, it would be appropriate for a text relating to the Saturnalia to speak of Kronos and to interpret him. Thus Lucian's *Kronia* has the god Kronos indignantly rejecting Hesiod's stories<sup>22</sup> about how he ate Rhea's children, how he was fooled into eating a stone instead of his son Zeus, how Zeus defeated, bound and banished him. Julian's *Caesars* (*Kronia*) also implicitly rejects the Hesiodic and Homeric stories about Kronos by staging a banquet of the gods in which to each god is assigned his or her appropriate couch, that of Kronos preeminent in its dark brilliance, too dazzling, like the sun, to be looked at, that of Zeus being of a lesser (visible) brightness. No parricide or infanticide here, but an august assembly in which prevails the Platonic principle of justice (to each a proper place)<sup>23</sup> and where Silenos plays the court jester. Finally, Macrobius' *Saturnalia* also gives some attention to interpreting the figure of Saturn, with whom Janus, according to legend, shared kingship in Italy,<sup>24</sup> and also provides later a long disquisition on solar theology. So it is appropriate that in Plotinus' treatise, with elements relating to a Saturnalian atmosphere, reference be made to Kronos, by etymology if not by name, as a god who is given a Platonic interpretation in which mythological scandal is replaced by metaphysical serenity, in which the god represents the fullness of perfect

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by those who do not know how to be serious and are toys themselves. But if anyone joins in their play and suffers their sort of sufferings, he must know that he has tumbled into a children's game and put off the play-costume in which he is dressed. But even if Socrates, too, may play sometimes, it is by the outer Socrates that he plays".

<sup>21</sup> See also *κεκορέσθαι* at 11, 41.

<sup>22</sup> See Lucian, *Sat.* 5; Hesiod, *Th.* 459–491, 718–720.

<sup>23</sup> Julian, *Or.* X, 2–3, 307C–308D; see Plato, *R.* 443b1–2.

<sup>24</sup> *Sat.* I, 7–9.

contemplation, a contemplation arising from an ultimate divine principle which is beyond all knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Plotinus' treatise is the first part of a four-part set of works (*Enneads* III, 8; V, 8; V, 5; II, 9) whose overall objective is the criticism of Gnosticism.<sup>26</sup> We can suppose then that the Platonic interpretation of the story of Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus has implications with respect to the argument with Gnosticism. This becomes evident in the second treatise of the set, *Ennead* V, 8, where Plotinus takes up again the story of the three gods (this time Zeus is named, at 12, 9).<sup>27</sup> More details of the mythological story are introduced and interpreted. Zeus' father kept all his offspring within himself (the mythological swallowing)<sup>28</sup>, apart from Zeus who appeared outside (12, 3–9). Metaphysically this indicates the unity of contemplation and the objects contemplated in divine Intellect, a unity in multiplicity expressed also in the "binding" of Kronos. Zeus appears outside as the natural expression of the power of Intellect which is Soul, Soul which produces a beautiful world as the true image of Intellect. Intellect is cut off (ἀποτομή) – the mythological castration of Ouranos by Kronos – in the sense of Intellect's ontological difference from the

<sup>25</sup> A very interesting passage in Augustine's *De consensu evangelistarum* (I, 23, 35) refers to some more recent Platonists who interpreted Saturn in terms of a Greco-Latin etymology as *satur* and *nus* (νοῦς), *satur* relating to *satietas*, i.e., κόπος. The source is likely to be Porphyry, who is named slightly earlier (23). Earlier in treatise III, 8 (9, 31), Plotinus refers to divine Intellect as ἀμφίστομος (facing in both directions). Scholars have found in this adjective a term associated with Hecate in reports relating to the *Chaldaean Oracles*. On this see L. Soares, "L'emploi du terme 'ἀμφίστομος' dans le grand traité antignostique de Plotin et dans les *Oracles Chaldaïques*", in M. Tardieu/H. Seng (eds.), *Die Chaldaeischen Orakel. Kontext–Interpretation–Rezeption* (Heidelberg 2010) 163–178. But the word is not exclusively Chaldaean (see for example its Latinization in Hyginus, *Fab.* 30, 2) and Plotinus may be using the word more broadly. Janus (*bifrons*) is associated in legend with Saturn as sharing kingship in Italy (see above at n. 24).

<sup>26</sup> In "Did Plotinus write a Grossschrift against the Gnostics?" (forthcoming), I respond to some recent attempts to dismiss Richard Harder's classic thesis concerning the literary unity of the four treatises and I describe the polemical anti-Gnostic strategy of these works. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I, 6, 3 refers to Gnostics joining in pagan feasts and manifesting licentious behaviour. It is possible that they joined in the Roman Saturnalia and that Plotinus also has their participation in these feasts in mind (see above, n. 12). The rejection of ancestral cults of which Plotinus accuses the Gnostics (II, 9, 9, 58) may not have meant that some of them did not manifest licentious behaviour at pagan feasts.

<sup>27</sup> On Plotinus' interpretation of the three gods, see J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris 1958) 203–209; P. Hadot, "Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus in Plotinus' Treatise against the Gnostics", in H. J. Blumenthal/R.A. Markus (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought. Essays in Honour of A.H. Armstrong* (London 1981) 124–137; I. Jurasz, "L'intellect-Kronos chez Plotin. La place du mythe dans la noétique plotinienne", *Methodos. Savoirs et textes* 2016 (open source online); A.-L. Darras-Worms, *Plotin traité 31 Sur la beauté intelligible* (Paris 2018) 246–256. Hadot points out (124) that the concern with the interpretation of the three gods in the set of four anti-Gnostic treatises, a leitmotif, is exceptional in Plotinus' works, otherwise found only in V, 1. L. Soares Santoprete emphasizes the anti-gnostic character of Plotinus' interpretation of the three gods in "Le mythe d'Ouranos, Kronos et Zeus comme argument antignostique chez Plotin", in A. Van den Kerchove/L. Soares Santoprete (eds.), *Gnose et Manichéisme. Entre les oasis d'Égypte et la route de la soie. Hommage à Jean-Daniel Dubois* (Turnhout 2017) 829–858.

<sup>28</sup> The κόπος theme of III, 8 appears again here (13, 4).

ultimate principle, the Good (13, 1–11). In this context Plotinus refers very probably to the Gnostics<sup>29</sup> who refuse to understand that the universe is an eternal expression of the light of divine Intellect.<sup>30</sup> In chapter 3 of next treatise of the set, *Ennead* V, 5, Plotinus comes back again to his three metaphysical gods, the One, Intellect and Soul, here again naming only Zeus, who is described as subordinate to a higher god, “king of truth” (3, 18), himself subordinate to the highest principle. Here the Hesiodic imagery of dynastic crimes is replaced by a grandiose *mise en scène* of a royal procession of first principles (3, 8–24).<sup>31</sup> In the last treatise of the set, *Ennead* II, 9, where the polemic with Gnosticism becomes explicit, the stately royal procession of metaphysical principles is recalled (9, 31–42), in opposition to the mythological constructs of the Gnostics.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the four treatises of the set, Plotinus emphasizes the point that the Gnostics do not understand intelligible being, i.e. divine Intellect, and it is because they do not understand it that they think that the universe is the product of an evil and ignorant god.<sup>33</sup> Understanding what divine Intellect is, as perfect knowledge, as primary beauty, as truth, as the expression of the Good, is to understand the world. Kronos, as representing divine Intellect, thus corresponds to a theme fundamental to the set of four treatises as a whole.

In editing Plotinus’ treatises along numerological and thematic lines, Porphyry detached them from time and place, a detachment which is strong already in Plotinus’ own philosophizing. Yet the treatises were written in time and place, relating on occasion, it seems, to particular discussions which took place in Plotinus’ school in Rome.<sup>34</sup> We also know that specific celebrations were held there on the birthdays of Socrates and of Plato<sup>35</sup> and that formal speeches were given by Plotinus’ pupils. I think that sufficient elements have been found to permit us to relate the composition of *Ennead* III, 8 to the festival of the Saturnalia. On that occasion, when the conditions of normal life were inverted and people spent days in foolish playing, Plotinus proposed a novel way of playing to his entourage: rather than tossing dice, singing, and so on, they could play in a fashion more worthy of a festival in honour of Saturn/Kronos by inverting normal ways of thinking, by exploring in conversation a paradoxical idea, the idea that everything, including the earth, aspires to contemplation. In playing with this theme, they are exemplifying it, reaching higher levels of contemplation leading to proximity with divine Intellect, Kronos as king of truth, as the perfection of knowl-

29 See Darras-Worms, *op. cit.* (n. 27) 251–252.

30 12, 22–25. On the Gnostics’ refusal to understand see II, 9, 10, 6–7 and 9.

31 See also V, 5, 7, 31 where Intellect covers itself (καλύψας): a reference to Saturn’s *uelatum caput*?

32 In this passage the great king recalls Intellect, interpreted as Kronos, in V, 5.

33 See my article above n. 26.

34 Porphyry, *Plot.* 13.

35 Porphyry, *Plot.* 2, 38–43 and 15.



edge and contemplation. In the course of their philosophical progress, they would find the deeper meaning of Greek myths and escape the spell of the phantasmagorical myths of Gnosticism. Playing a little ourselves, we might suppose that this conversation took place in December of 264 or 265<sup>36</sup> and that the other three treatises of the set (*Enneads* V, 8; V, 5; II, 9) may also relate to discussions which took place during the same festive days.

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<sup>36</sup> Porphyry arrived in Plotinus' school in Rome in the summer of 263, when Plotinus had already composed 21 treatises, and left it in 268. During this six-year period Plotinus composed 24 treatises, some of them very extensive.