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ARISTOTLE'S EARLIEST EXTANT MANUSCRIPTS. NEW DOUBTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

This paper follows up on two previous contributions in *Aristotelica* (3 and 5) that focused on the early transmission of *Phys*. 250b13 as a case study. Here, the discussion broadens to general questions about the scribal hands behind Aristotle's earliest manuscripts J (ms. Vindobonensis Phil. gr. 100) and E (ms. Parisinus gr. 1853), their roles in textual history, and their connections to the earliest reconstructable archetype. Current scholarship holds that while the sources of J and E overlap for the *Metaphysics* (labeled Π by Jaeger's 1957 critical apparatus), they diverge entirely for the other works held by both codices, i.e. *Physics*, *De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Meteorology*. How can this be explained? A major, recent development is Ronconi's (2012) identification of two distinct tenth-century volumes later combined into ms. E. Each has a main early scribe at work. Thereafter, no attempt has been made to differentiate their approaches to the text. In *Aristotelica* 5, E's two early scribes are distinguished and labeled, the one, E^{Met} (responsible for the *Metaphysics*) the other, E^{Phys} (responsible for the Corpus Physicum). The two exhibit differing approaches. Through closer analysis of their methodologies, it is possible to investigate and eventually to detect what I call a "β agenda" in E^{Phys}'s Corpus Physicum, by analogy with the so-called β manuscripts of the *Metaphysics*.

Keywords

Textual Transmission of Aristotle's Works, Ms. Vindobonensis Phil. Gr. 100, Ms. Parisinus Gr. 1853, Maas's Theory

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1. Premise

This paper follows directly from my previous studies published in *Aristotelica* 3 and 5, both of which examined *Phys*. 250b13 as a case study.[1] There, a line of investigation highlighted a previously neglected reading in Aristotle's manuscripts J (ms. Vind. Phil. gr. 100, 9th c.) and E (ms. Paris. gr. 1853, early 10th c.). Here, the discussion broadens to general questions, exploring the transmission of Aristotle's text from the mid-ninth to the early tenth century. During this period, J and E were produced, checked, and revised, each under the supervision of a contemporary corrector (διορθωτής or *vetus corrector*).[2] These correctors are crucial witnesses. For this reason, we focus on J, E^{Met}, E^{Phys}, and their contemporary correctors only. They had access to the same exemplar from which the scribes were copying.[3] This inquiry, involving the role of ms. J, directly pertains to the mission of *Aristotelica*.[4] This focus fulfills a longstanding desideratum. Although J's discovery (Gercke 1892) was initially heralded as significant, it made little impact on critical editions of Aristotle's Corpus Physicum. Since 1936 (Ross 1936, Allan 1936), J's authority has been consistently dismissed in favor of E, the second oldest extant codex

[1] Fazzo (2023) and (2024); less directly, this paper also builds on previous research on the transmission of the *Metaphysics*: see Fazzo (2017, 2022), where I summarize my earlier studies on the *Metaphysics* section of both manuscripts J and E. All new proposals in this paper are hypothetical in nature. My goal is to bring together various possible paths of inquiry to foster a continued and lively debate. This paper is deeply indebted to the same colleagues and friends with whom I discussed Fazzo (2024) (see p. 82 n. 1). I extend my warmest thanks to all of them, while remaining solely responsible for any errors.

[2] The key point (see Fazzo 2012, pp. 143-51) is that J must be treated as a combined witness (J^1: original scribe + J^2: contemporary corrector), as both derive from the same exemplar. J^1's errors have no independent stemmatic value and should not be treated as separate witnesses. In contrast, E must be analyzed without integrating later hands and considering only the contemporary *vetus corrector* for reconstructing the archetype.

[3] For these reasons, I will not address later hands or scholia here, although the outcome of this study might provide insights into their roles as well. Likewise, I will not consider works included in these manuscripts but not by Aristotle (notably Theophrastus's *Metaphysics*). On the most famous of E's scholia, see Laura Folli in the present issue of *Aristotelica*.

[4] Since its inception, the journal has emphasized the importance of ms. Vind. Phil. gr. 100 (J), the earliest extant codex of Aristotle's works. See the first 'Editorial', Fazzo-Kraye (2022) p. 2; Rossetto (2014).

containing most of Aristotle's theoretical works.[5] Both manuscripts were produced in Constantinople and are closer in time to each other than to any other extant Aristotelian manuscript (except for the fragmentary bifolium Y, Paris. Suppl. 687). Evaluating J thus entails evaluating E, and vice versa.

2. Focusing on Aristotle's Vetustissimi, in the Footsteps of Paul Maas

In focusing on J and E, I follow Maas (1957[3]). Maas, in his final Appendix (see Baldissera 2012, p. 8f.) responded to Pasquali (1952[2]). He stressed that the oldest extant manuscript of a work is crucial because it is the only one guaranteed to be uncontaminated by later descendants. As Maas (1957[3]) p. 51 wrote: "The oldest existing witness is always completely 'independent', whereas the independence of later witnesses [...] must first be proved by 'separative errors'."

Here the chronological sequence is: J (ninth century), then E (early tenth century). If E's independence from J requires demonstration, so too does the independence of their exemplars. Before concluding E^{Phys} followed a different branch, we must identify genuine separative errors. Simple differences in wording may be due to editorial activity rather than distinct sources. What is at stake deserves to be clarified: it is nothing less than the reconstructability of Aristotle's lost archetype. This, indeed, does not mean Aristotle's own writings as such. Therefore, the way we conceive of Aristotle's archetype must also be spelled out, as follows.

3. How to Conceive of a Late Ancient Scriptio Continua Archetype: In the Footsteps of Dain and Pasquali

I use Π to denote a possible fourth-century *scriptio continua* parchment exemplar. This has probably been Aristotle's archetype. Following Dain (1949) and Pasquali (1952[2]) p. 477, an archetype might have been a critically constituted edition deposited in a library, possibly serving as a normative

[5] See Fazzo-Ghione (2022) and Fazzo (2012) for initial considerations on the underlying factors.

reference copy. This "edition" would be distinct from the Lachmannian concept of an archetype as "the closest common ancestor."

Pasquali (1952[2]) p. 477 noted that Dain's archetype is often an authoritative edition – like the Alexandrian edition of Homer. Applying this logic to Aristotle, Π could have been a large-scale parchment copy reflecting earlier papyrus rolls produced by Aristotle's school around the second to third centuries AD. If so, the parchment Π might have preserved lineation and structure that mirrored the original papyrus rolls. The main open issue here is: can the archetype be reconstructed for the physical works as well as for the *Metaphysics*, based on J and E chiefly, and to which extent? This is not to deny the contribution of other manuscripts. I investigate here how the common source of J and E can be reconstructed, and leave to elsewhere the issue whether or not other manuscripts can contribute, based on Maas rule as recalled in §2 above.

4. Aristotle's Manuscripts J and E: A Comparison

J and E share Important similarities in content and sequence, and notable differences in the range of their content, their size, and composition.

1. Similarities: Aristotle's works in J are found in E in the same order, although E also includes works not present in J. Their common works are: *Physics*, *De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Meteorology*, and *Metaphysics* (from *Alpha minor* 994a to *Ny* 1089a27).

2. Differences in size:

- J is smaller: ca. 275 x 190 mm, V + 203 ff.

- E is larger: ca. 370 x 265 mm, 453 ff. E also contains more works, including psychological and physio-psychological treatises (*De An.*, *Sens.*, *Mem.*, *Somn. Vig.*, *Div. Somn.* and *Mot. An.*).[6]

3. Differences in composition:

- J is straightforward: one scribe and one corrector throughout the ancient portion.

[6] Hence, Hecquet-Devienne (2000) suggest that E may have been planned as a reference copy – an interesting yet controversial view; see Ronconi (2012). Much depends on what we mean by "reference copy." On this point, see also Dain (1949) (quoted below).

-E is complex and uneven in character. It has been originally composed of at least two distinct volumes, where two distinct early tenth-century early scribes are at work.[7] Thereafter, no attempt has been made to differentiate their approaches to the text.

In *Aristotelica* 5 (Fazzo 2024), I referred to those two early scribes as E^{Met} (for the *Metaphysics* section) and E^{Phys} (for the Corpus Physicum).[8] I put those hands into evidence, because they are central to understanding the earliest textual transmission. Other later hands in E are important, but do not concern the current inquiry, and are omitted here. Ronconi spells out exactly their respective contributions.[9]

As a result, we can categorize and compare the texts in each codex.

Works common to J and E (E split into E^{Phys} and E^{Met} sections):

- *Physics*: J ff. 1r-55v; E^{Phys} ff. 3r-67v
- *De caelo*: J 56r-86r; E^{Phys} 69r-106v
- *De generatione et corruptione*: J 86v-102r; E^{Phys} 106v-129r
- *Meteorology*: J 102v-134r; E^{Phys} 129r-175v
- *Metaphysics*: J 138r-201v (missing the initial segment 983a–994a[10]), E^{Met} 225v-306r (ending at 1089a27, completed later by a 10th c. hand at f. 306a6-308a20).

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[7] See Ronconi (2012).

[8] In *Aristotelica* 5, p. 84 and n. 6, I designated this scribe as E^{Met}. It is labeled E III by Moraux (1967); Hecquet-Devienne (2008); Ronconi (2012) (see n. 9 here below).

[9] For the different scribes at work in E, Ronconi (2012) still uses the sigla E I, II, III, IV, since these were introduced by Moraux (1967) and adopted by Hecquet-Devienne (2008). However, the order of the sigla, as emerges in Ronconi's article, does not reflect the copyists' relative chronology. E begins with a very large portion copied by an early 10th-century scribe (E I), followed by a few folios copied by a later hand (E II) that supplied parts from the *De anima*. After that, comes the part of the manuscript that originally belonged to a different volume, in which another early 10th-century hand, E III, copied Aristotle's *Metaphysics* until 1089a2, as well as parts of Aristotle's *Parva naturalia* and *De motu animalium*. Beyond E^{Met}, other sections of E's second volume contain *Metaph*. from 1089a27ff. by E II; *PA*, *GA*, part of *IA*, *EN*, *MM* by E IV. Ronconi (2012) and Hecquet-Devienne (2008), *contra* Moraux (1967), identify this E IV hand with E II. Unlike Hecquet-Devienne, Ronconi does not identify this hand with E's principal annotator, which they call E2 (later in the 10th c.). This is the annotator at work in the *scholium* at f. 234r studied by Folli in the present issue.

[10] A 13th-century bifolium (ff. 137f.) was added to restore both the lost ending of Theophrastus's *Metaphysics* (11a2-12a2) and the lost incipit of *Metaphysics Alpha minor* (993a30-994a6). *Metaphysics Alpha maior* is missing, no doubt lost along with the entire

Additionally, examining the relations between J and E may shed light on works found only in E. For these, E is the earliest extant manuscript.

Works contained only in E^{Phys}:

- *De anima* I and III (ff. 175v-202v).

Works contained only in E^{Met}:

- *De sensu* (203r-210r),
- *De memoria* (210r-212v),
- *De somno et vigilia*,
- *De divinatione per somnum* (212v-221r),
- *De motu animalium* (221r-225v),
- *Metaphysics* A 1.980a21-α 2.994a6 (f. 225v ff.).

A section not contained in E^{Met} or in E^{Phys} but in J:

- *Metaphysics* N 2.1089a27-3.1093b29.[11]

5. The Two Main Hands of Ms. Parisinus Gr. 1853 as Textual Witnesses: E^{Met} vs. E^{Phys}

Unlike J, E has been extensively studied and has become something of a research field in itself.[12] Ronconi (2012), building on Hecquet-Devienne (2008) and Moraux (1967), clarified that E as we have it results from the later assembling of two separate volumes. The order of texts in E is determined by the canonical sequence established as early as the first century BC by Andronicus of Rhodes, accomplished and solidified by Alexander of Aphrodisias ca. 200 AD, rather than by the relative chronology of the copyists. One volume (ff. 3-202) contains the Corpus Physicum, transcribed mainly by E^{Phys}; the other volume (ff. 203-344) includes the *Metaphysics* and related

quaternion containing the end of Theophrastus's *Metaphysics* (from 11a2) and the beginning of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (up to 984a6).

[11] E^{Met} does not include the end of the *Metaphysics*, i.e. N 2.1089a27-3.1093b29. So, this final section is preserved only in J and not in the ancient part of E. J and E differ here more than in the common part of J and E^{Met}; see Marco Ghione's collations in Fazzo-Ghione (2022). Later in the tenth century, E's hand E II integrates the missing part at ff. 306r-308r.

[12] After the comprehensive review of Ronconi (2012), see Gyburg Uhlmann's ongoing (since 2019) DFG 418455551 research project "The Exclusive Corpus of Scholia on Aristotle in the Codex Parisinus graecus 1853 (E): First Critical Complete Edition"; see also Folli in the present issue.

texts, transcribed by E^{Met}. These two copyists thus could have worked independently and possibly at different times. Since Ronconi (2012), no attempt has been made to differentiate their approaches to the text. Do E^{Met} and E^{Phys} reflect distinct editorial agendas? If so, this distinction matters greatly. E^{Phys}, or its model, represents an important branch of the Aristotelian tradition. Identifying a distinct methodology in E^{Phys}'s approach to the text may help us understand the complex stemma of Aristotle's works.

6. Volumes and Scribes in Ms. E: E^{Met} at Work

Where E^{Met} worked (notably in the *Metaphysics*), the text is nearly identical to that of J. Marco Ghione's collations indicate, as an average, fewer than three differences per Bekker page between E^{Met} and J in the Metaphysics.[13] We can thus share the common view, that such slight differences do not constitute evidence of a different source. As a result, Jaeger (1957) as a critical editor has grouped E^{Met} and J under the same siglum Π, thus implying that E^{Met} and J derive from a common exemplar.

More exactly, the closeness of E^{Met} and J suggests that the scribe E^{Met} carefully followed its exemplar J, moreover, he probably checked in some special cases J's source (Π) as well. In practical terms, E^{Met}'s fidelity allows editors to treat E^{Met} as a reliable witness aligned with J, which faithfully transmits the text. This gives us a stable textual base for the *Metaphysics*.

7. Volumes and Scribes in Ms. E: E^{Phys} at Work

The situation differs significantly for E^{Phys}. Unlike E^{Met}, E^{Phys} diverges from J in numerous places. Since Allan (1936) on the *Meteorologica* and Moraux (1965) on *De caelo*, the consensus has been that E^{Phys} and J represent very different sources. Only recently has this assumption been questioned, by Ronconi (2012) p. 217 n. 80. For instance, in *De generatione et corruptione*,

[13] According to Ghione's collations (in Fazzo-Ghione 2022), there are about 290 differences in roughly 100 pages covering books α-N of the *Metaphysics* as extant in J, starting at 994a6. This figure is both reliable and approximate. In covering the entire *Metaphysics*, we did not record extremely minor differences that do not affect the purpose of verifying J and E's stemmatic relationship.

about 25 Bekker pages, Rashed (2005) counts approximately 400 differences between E^{Phys} and J (and J's related group Ω^2), that is, 16 differences per Bekker page. These differences include omissions, additions, rearrangements, and substitutions. As an average, they are five times more numerous than E^{Met}'s differences with J.

E^{Phys}, unlike E^{Met}, is neither a copy of J nor, probably, of another minuscule exemplar. It seems to have been derived directly from a late ancient codex in *scriptio continua*. Modern editors have often favored E^{Phys} and this makes research on this manuscript especially relevant. While Allan (1936) considered many at least of its omissions "misguided corrections", Rashed (2005) doubts that a scribe would arbitrarily remove "insignificant" words and, hence, tends to trust E^{Phys}'s brevity. Both views, however, assume that E^{Phys}'s changes are accidental or misguided. This may be too simplistic. E^{Phys}'s approach might instead reflect a deliberate "agenda" to refine or standardize the text. Moreover, it is possible that, as well as deliberate stylistic alignment (and obvious oversights), dictation practices or other intermediary steps were involved.

8. A "β Agenda" in E^{Phys}?

I propose the hypothesis that E^{Phys}'s differences with J followed an editorial "β agenda," analogous to that detected in the β-manuscripts of the *Metaphysics* (e.g. Laur. 87.12 (Ab), see Fazzo-Folli-Ghione (2023-2024) pp. 539ff., 548-51). A "β agenda" would involve semi-systematic, semantically neutral revisions intended to clarify or improve the text for contemporary readers, without altering Aristotle's meaning.[14] This hypothesis might explain the pattern of differences between E^{Phys} and J noted by various editors. Rather than accidental or "misguided" changes, these alterations could possibly reflect, at least in part, an editorial program to produce a smoother, more accessible Aristotelian text for a tenth-century scholarly readership.

[14] See, for example, the use of *scriptio plena* in both Laur. 87.12 and E^{Phys}. This must have been the basis for the phenomenon detected by Hasper and Arnzen (2024) p. 64 in *Aristotelica* 5, as interpreted there by Fazzo (2024) p. 88.

This could be established if all of them, or representative samples, could be collected, analyzed, and classified to verify this hypothesis. The key question to keep in mind is: can E^{Phys}' wording originate from J's? While doing so, one could compile a list of readings that cannot be reduced to *variae lectiones* stemming from J. Based on that list, E^{Phys} could contribute more effectively to the reconstruction of the late ancient archetype – if such an archetype existed – of Aristotle's tradition. This brings us back to the question of whether or not this archetype can be reconstructed. Let us use the siglum Π as a reference for both the Corpus Physicum and the *Metaphysics*.

9. Can the Late Ancient Tradition of Aristotle's Corpus Be Reconstructed?

Editors often assume that reconstructing Π (or at least π, see n. 17 here below) is not feasible. I would suggest this may be too pessimistic. If J directly descends from Π, and Π potentially includes the entire Corpus Theoreticum, then Π would be a large fourth-century reference exemplar.[15]

By comparing J and E – and distinguishing between E^{Met}'s faithful reproduction and E^{Phys}'s editorial interventions – it is possible to assess different levels of reconstructability for Π:

(a) Texts in both J and E^{Met} (i.e. *Metaph.* α 2.994a6-N 2.1089a27)

(b) Texts in both J and E^{Phys} (i.e. *Physics*, *De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Meteorologica*)

(c) A textual section only in J (i.e., the end of *Metaph.* N 2.1089a27-3.1093b29)[16]

(d) Texts only in E^{Met} (i.e. *De memoria*, *De somno et vigilia*, *De divinatione per somnum*, *De motu animalium*)

(e) Texts only in E^{Phys} (e.g., *De anima*, *De sensu*, the initial *Metaphysics* section 980a-994a)

(f) Texts absent in both J and E, known only from later manuscripts.

On this scale, (a) the *Metaphysics* is the most reconstructable treatise, given the role of J and E, especially E^{Met}. It makes sense that the *Metaphysics*

[15] On the date and shape of the *scriptio continua* exemplar, see Fazzo (2024), p. 83; Ead., in Fazzo-Folli-Ghione (2023-2024) p. 543.

[16] See n. 9 above.

enjoyed a "religiously careful" transmission. In fact, recent debates on the stemma of the *Metaphysics* have confirmed J's key role. J directly descends from Π; E^{Met} likely copies J and, when needed, refers back to Π.[17] Thus, J remains primary. Likewise, it does so in the (c) final section of the *Metaphysics* as well, 1089a27-1093b, where E^{Met} does not help, because it stops at 1089a27. For the reconstruction of (b) the Corpus Physicum, the same logic may apply. If Π encompassed the entire Corpus Theoreticum – that is, the *Metaphysics* and the physical works – then J, as a direct descendant, would be key to reconstructing Π not only for the *Metaphysics*, but also for the *Physics* and other physical treatises: once we identify and filter out "β agenda" readings, we may closely approximate Π's text. This principle should also apply in cases where (d) E^{Met} remains the earliest witness: in such instances, E^{Met} would deserve the highest credit, following Maas' methodology (see §2 above), unless it can be shown to contain separative errors. In this latter case – as in cases (e) and (f), where neither J nor E^{Met} is preserved – the entire manuscript tradition can contribute, including those rare *recentiores* manuscripts that can be demonstrated to be *non deteriores*, following Giorgio Pasquali's celebrated dictum.

[17] Fazzo (2022) p. 84, with bibliography. While I have so far adhered to a principle of economy, there is no obstacle to imagining that additional *scriptio continu*a codices might have been in use as exemplars between the 9th and 10th centuries. Let us call these, for example, π^{J} and π^{E} or even, π^{EMet} and π^{EPhys}. This would mean that more reference copies of Aristotle's works were available. This is not unlikely: 50 parchment exemplars of the Bible were prepared by Eusebius of Caesarea under Emperor Constantinus (Eusebius, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, Book 4, chap. 36). Constantius II, the son of Constantinus, to whom Themistius, *Oratio* IV 60 a-b, adresses his thanks in this regard, may have been following his father's example (see Fazzo 2024, p. 83 n. 4). This could explain why the exemplar of the Arabic version of the Metaphysics was in bad condition (Rashed 2019), whereas the exemplar of E^{Met}, which was prepared later, was in good condition. These copies, however, must have been intended to be as identical to one another as possible. This hypothesis is not meant to justify large numbers of discrepancies between copies stemming from two exemplars of the same reference text. Deciding this is perhaps not crucial with regard to the text of the *Metaphysics* in J and E^{Met}, which are, in any case, very close. It can, however, be relevant with regard to the physical treatises in J and E^{Phys}.

Conclusion

This study suggests that J and E, produced in ninth-and early tenth-century Constantinople, are derived from a late ancient *scriptio continua* archetype (Π), which may have encompassed the entire Corpus Theoreticum. The two main hands of E – E^{Met} and E^{Phys} – approach the text in markedly different ways. While E^{Met}'s faithful copying closely mirrors J, E^{Phys}'s editorial approach may reflect a deliberate effort, possibly to make Aristotle's text more accessible, stylistically plain, or easier and faster to transcribe. This cannot be assessed yet and would deserve a dedicated project. Recognizing and accounting for this "β agenda" could provide, either in itself or by contrast – depending on the research outcome – a foundation for a more nuanced understanding of Aristotle's early textual tradition. Such work might help approximate the original fourth-century parchment reference copy, likely identical to Aristotle's archetype.

If so, as we have argued so far, Aristotle's archetype is not merely a "closest common ancestor." It must have closely reflected the canonical edition of the Aristotelian corpus, as attested in the 3rd century AD, following the work of Alexander of Aphrodisias and his school. Indeed, the version transmitted and commented upon by the school during Roman times effectively erased almost all traces of the texts' earlier circulation.

For all these reasons, despite the constraints, we can now, at the start of this new scholarly millennium, assert that Aristotle's works are indeed more reconstructible than was believed during the 20th century, provided that the readings of the oldest manuscripts are carefully recorded and, where necessary, held in the highest regard.

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