

Fiorella Magnano (ed.), Boethius. On Topical Differences. A Commentary, Turnhout (Brepols), Rome, Barcelona (Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales) 2017, 400 p., 67 tabl. (Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales. Textes et Études du Moyen Âge, 89), ISBN 978-2-503-57931-3, EUR 59,00.

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The »De topicis differentiis« of Boethius (c. 480–524) was this author's last work on dialectic. It was written before 522, in four books, just before he was incarcerated and wrote his best work, »De consolatione philosophiae«. The »De topicis differentiis« has been edited by D. Z. Nikitas in 1990¹. By the time this edition came out, there was already in existence an English translation by E. Stump (Ithaca, London 1978, 2nd edn. 1989), which was based on the old edition in the »Patrologia Latina«. In 2014, the Italian version of the present monograph appeared². The English translation has an Introduction on pages IX–XCIV, which is followed by a Commentary of Boethius' work of 324 pages, plus an Appendix of 67 diagrams (p. 325–364), a Bibliography and Indices. Different from the Italian original, the English translation has as a subtitle »A Commentary«, and indeed the commentary makes up most of the translation.

The Introduction starts with the aim of the work: to provide a method for arriving at answers to all questions by using *tópoi*. Boethius can be shown to have looked for a way of reconciling Aristotle's point of view on *tópoi* with that of Cicero. Boethius had dealt with this topic of dialectics before, having written a commentary on Cicero's »Topica«. He came back to it with »De topicis differentiis«. In Book I, he starts with providing »a compendium of basic knowledge a student must possess in order to embark on the study of this discipline« (p. XVI). Book II introduces the subject of argumentation, using Themistios (c. 317–388), the author of a commentary on Aristotle; Book III introduces Cicero's division of *loci*; and Book IV deals with the place of *loci* in rhetoric. The rest of Magnano's Introduction deals mainly with Boethius' sources for the ideas he took from Themistios and Cicero.

In the Commentary on Boethius' »De topicis differentiis«, the author puts Nikitas' edition to its full use. She quotes the text in

¹ Dimitrios Z. Nikitas, *Boethius. De Topicis differentiis und die byzantinische Rezeption dieses Werkes*, Athens, Paris, Brussels 1990 (Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi. Philosophi Byzantini, 5).

² Fiorella Magnano (ed.), *Il »De topicis differentiis« di Severino Boezio*, Palermo 2014 (Machina Philosophorum, 41).



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extenso, most often without giving a translation, and if Stump's translation is used, it is accompanied by a reference to the edition in the »Patrologia Latina«, without any comparison being made of that edition with Nikitas' critical edition. The commentary is more often than not reduced to a very short summary of Boethius' text, which is interrupted by lengthy quotations, either in the text or in the footnotes. The commentary of Cicero's »Topica« is similarly used in the original. Greek texts, however, are quoted solely in English translation. This begs the question for which audience this book has been written. Clearly, without a solid knowledge of Latin it is impossible to follow the argument. The English translation of Boethius' text is made after an outdated text. It would seem that, provided one's Latin is up to it, simply using Nikitas' edition might be preferable to using the Commentary provided by Magnano. And if one's Greek is up to it, using an edition of the Greek text of Aristotle or Themistios might lead to a better understanding of Boethius as well.

The Introduction pays some attention to the reception of Boethius' text. This is limited, however, to the »literary success« of the text, i. e. the list of later authors who refer to »De topicis differentiis« or who actually used the text. Also, the editio princeps (of 1491 or 1492) is mentioned (p. XCIV), and there are also, for the (early) modern age, the references by Pater Ramus, Leibniz and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). Not a single mention, however, is made of the medieval manuscripts of the text which must have circulated so that those medieval authors who are mentioned were able to read it. This is a curious omission, as in Medieval Studies generally the value of the manuscript transmission of texts is by now acknowledged, if one is to evaluate the impact of a text, to be at least as important as the list of authors who knew a particular text. In this book, manuscripts are not mentioned. There is not even an acknowledgement of the manuscripts that must have formed the basis of Nikitas' critical edition. It is as if the author is merely interested in the text that resulted from the study of the manuscripts, almost as if the individual manuscripts' usefulness ended with the role they played in the reconstruction of Boethius' text. In other branches of Medieval Studies this would no longer be accepted.

This monograph was published originally in Italian. In the translation some traces of the original language have been left, such as the use of Italian »Ivi« where English usage would have suggested »Ibid.«. On occasion, quotations from Italian scholars are left without English translation as well. This leaves one again with the question, who could benefit from a monograph such as this. Knowledge of Latin (and preferably of Greek as well) is a prerequisite for understanding the Commentary. And a grounding in dialectic will not come amiss either. We have to remember that the aim of Boethius' work was, according to Fiorella Magnano, to explain how the use of *tópoi* could provide answers to all kinds of questions, and that Boethius started Book I with an explanation of the fundamental elements of logic. For modern readers, help might have been provided by translations of all quotations (with



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the originals being given in the footnotes), and by providing translations also of all technical terms. As an alternative, an edition with facing English translation might have been useful, with the actual commentary referring to the translation. That would obviously have meant much extra work for the author; but it would have rendered this monograph much more useful to the average medievalist interested in the history of dialectic and rhetoric.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

DOI:
[10.11588/frrec.2022.4.92116](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.4.92116)

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