

James of Venice and the *Posterior Analytics*¹

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About thirty years ago, Sten Ebbesen published an article entitled “Jacobus Veneticus on the *Posterior Analytics* and Some Early 13th Century Oxford Masters on the *Elenchi*”, in the first part of which he argued forcefully that James of Venice wrote a commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* to go with his translation of the text itself.² The existence of such a commentary would be very important as regards our conception of the early reception of this Aristotelian treatise; for if James did write a commentary designed especially for his translation, then the Latin West would presumably have possessed a solid foundation for the study of the work. And *a priori* this makes it rather strange that the *Posterior Analytics* had such a slow start in the Middle Ages. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that Ebbesen’s argument has not, to the best of my knowledge, been answered.³ In this article, I shall try to do so by arguing in favour of the opposite case, namely that no such commentary ever existed.

The first commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* that was generally known to the Latin medievals was that of Robert Grosseteste, probably

¹ In the present article texts are cited from both printed editions and mss. I have sometimes made minor changes in orthography and/or punctuation. I am grateful to Sten Ebbesen, Karin Margareta Fredborg and Niels Jørgen Green-Pedersen for comments on a draft of this article.

² Ebbesen (1977), pp. 1-3 in particular.

³ In recent literature, I note, for instance, that Longeway (2005) does not even mention the possibility of such a commentary in the part on Latin work on the *Posterior Analytics* before Grosseteste. Similarly, no mention of James is made by Hackett (2004) 165-6 in his discussion of early Latin commentaries on the treatise.

written around 1230, and in any case not earlier than 1220.⁴ Thus, for approximately a century⁵ anyone interested in the Aristotelian text would have to turn elsewhere in search for expert help with this work which is one of the Philosopher's most difficult treatises. Such help certainly did exist, but the precise nature of it is not easy to establish. According to the preface in the translation attributed to a certain "John", James of Venice had not only translated the *Posterior Analytics* but also *commentarii* — which may mean "commentary", not "commentaries"; or it may mean "commentaries" in the sense that commentaries on book I and II respectively were taken from different sources; or, as a third possibility, it may mean "comments" in the sense that what James translated was not complete commentaries but a string of comments on the text.⁶ Still in the mid 12th century, the chronicler Robert of Torigny further informs us that James of Venice both translated and commented on (*commentatus est*) the *Posterior Analytics*.⁷

⁴ For the date of Grosseteste's commentary, cf. Dales (1961) 395-6; McEvoy (1983) 636-43; Southern (1992²) 131-3. The older view, found in e.g. Callus (1955b) 12-14, that the commentary was produced in the early years of the 13th century is now generally rejected, I believe.

⁵ The precise date of the first post-Boethian Latin translation of the *Posterior Analytics* is unknown, but, as I argue in Bloch (forthcoming 1), a date around 1130 is most likely. The general scholarly view seems to be that the translation began to circulate around 1150, cf. e.g. Minio-Paluello (1952) 269-70n13; Burnett (1988) 24, 27; Tweedale (1988) 196. For the present article, this problem is not important.

⁶ Minio-Paluello & Dod (1968) XLIV: *Nam translatio Boethii apud nos integra non invenitur, et id ipsum quod de ea reperitur vitio corruptionis obfuscatur. Translationem vero Iacobi obscuritatis tenebris involvi silentio suo per<h>ibent Franciae magistri, qui, quamvis illam translationem et commentarios ab eodem Iacobo translatos habeant, tamen notitiam illius libri non audent profiteri.* Translations of the preface are found in Dod (1982) 56-7 and (partially) in Ebbesen (2004) 71. See also Bloch (forthcoming 1).

⁷ *Chronique de Robert de Torigny, Abbé du Mont-Saint-Michel, Tome I* (ed. L. Delisle, Rouen 1872) 177. The relevant part of Robert's work is also found in Haskins (1914) 91, in Minio-Paluello (1952) 267 and in Dod (1982) 54n24: *Iacobus clericus de Venetia transtulit de Graeco in Latinum quosdam libros Aristotelis et commentatus est scilicet Topica, Analyticos Priores et Posteriores, et Elencos, quamvis antiquior translatio super eosdem libros haberetur.*

Since fragments of a translation of a Greek commentary do indeed exist,⁸ the statements of the two authors, “John” the translator and Robert of Torigny, indicate that we should consider two possibilities for the commentary-situation in the 12th century:

1. James not only translated one or more Greek commentaries/strings of comments on the *Posterior Analytics*, but he also made his own commentary, presumably based on what he had learned from the Greeks.
2. James translated one or more Greek commentaries/strings of comments on the *Posterior Analytics* but did not produce a commentary of his own.

That is, “John” the translator’s information is in any case reliable, while Robert of Torigny’s credibility is uncertain. However, there is a single piece of supporting evidence, viz. a comment in an anonymous, and fragmentary, commentary on the *Sophistici Elenchi*.⁹ In a passage commenting on the *Sophistici Elenchi* 11, 171b16-18 (Bryson’s squaring of the circle), the author of this commentary, whom Ebbesen calls Anonymus Laudianus, writes:

Vel aliter: “nam et si quadratur”: id est: licet sic vere probavit circulum quadrari, quod videtur hic affirmare Aristoteles et affirmat Iacobus in commento super *Posteriora Analytica*, “tamen quia non secundum rem”, ut prius expositum est, “ideo sophisticæ”.¹⁰

This reference to *Iacobus in commento super Posteriora Analytica* would, according to Ebbesen, prove the case in favour of possibility no. 1 above, if it can be established beyond reasonable doubt that it does in fact

⁸ On these fragments, cf. Ebbesen (1976) 89-107; Rossi (1978); Rossi (1981) 19-21; Ebbesen (1990); Ebbesen (forthcoming).

⁹ Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud.misc. 368: ff. 2r-7v & 220r-221v. Information about this ms. can be found in Ebbesen (1977). I have inspected a microfilm copy of the ms.

¹⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud.misc. 368: f. 6va. The text is also cited in Ebbesen (1977) 2.

refer to a commentary by James and not to a Greek commentary that he translated. Ebbesen has two arguments:¹¹ (a) *Iacobus in commento* would be a virtually unique way of referring, if the sense was actually *Alexander in commento quod transtulit Iacobus*; (b) “Alexander” in this context would seem to be Philoponus’ commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, and nothing in Philoponus can, Ebbesen says, be construed so as to make him say that Bryson *vere probavit circulum quadrari*. In addition, (c) Ebbesen points out to me in conversation that there is solid evidence that James wrote a commentary on the *Elenchi*, so James did in fact write his own commentaries. It would not have taken much bad luck for us to have lost all the vital traces of the *Elenchi*-commentary, and this would have put us in a situation very similar to the one we are in concerning the commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*.

Before I attempt to refute these arguments, I shall state the reasons why I believe that possibility no. 2 above is certainly *a priori* the most plausible.

First, the evidence is, as Ebbesen himself admits, meagre.¹² That is, at present Robert of Torigny’s and Anonymus Laudianus’ comments are the only possible hints that such a commentary by James ever existed.

Second, it is on all accounts somewhat surprising that the *Posterior Analytics* was not in general use until the 13th century. It is, of course, true that the early 12th century may have been dominated by Augustinian theories of science that were not easily compatible with the Aristotelian ones. But it was also a period very much occupied by science and theories of science in general, and not least scholars were interested in the value of demonstrative science.¹³ The *Posterior Analytics* must have been considered an extremely interesting text, in particular when seen in relation to Euclid’s *Elements*, Boethius’ *De Hebdomadibus* and scattered remarks in other Boethian writings, all of which were well-known and used in the 12th century; and if James had produced a commentary on the

¹¹ Ebbesen (1977) 3.

¹² Ebbesen (2004) 72n10. He does, however, consider it conclusive, and Dod (1982) 54 seems to accept the argument.

¹³ On treatments of scientific theories in the 12th century, cf. Burnett (1988).

Posteriora, this would presumably have removed the cause of the fear that the “French masters” (*Franciae magistri*) felt as regards lecturing on this text.¹⁴ Of course, there is clear evidence that this fear could not be removed by just any commentary; for the translation of “Alexander” obviously did not. But “Alexander” was originally a Greek commentary not specifically designed to accompany the Latin translation,¹⁵ as one by James’ presumably would have been, and furthermore it cannot be established that James translated an entire commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*.¹⁶ In any case, it is rather strange that the Aristotelian text was apparently not accompanied by a commentary throughout the 12th century, had one existed. Therefore, if one disregards Robert of Torigny and the Anonymus Laudianus, the probability is clearly in favour of possibility no. 2 above.

¹⁴ See the text in note 6 above. Cf. also John of Salisbury’s remarks on the *Posterior Analytics*: Ioannis Saresberiensis *Metalogicon* IV.6.1-20 (ed. Hall & Keats-Rohan), p. 145: *Posteriorum vero analeticorum subtilis quidem scientia est, et paucis ingeniis pervia. Quod quidem ex causis pluribus evenire perspicuum est. Continet enim artem demonstrandi, quae prae ceteris rationibus disserendi ardua est. Deinde haec utentium raritate iam fere in desuetudinem abiit, eo quod demonstrationis usus vix apud solos mathematicos est, et in his fere apud geometras dumtaxat. Sed et huius quoque disciplinae non est celebris usus apud nos, nisi forte in tractu Hiberno, vel confinio Africae. Etenim gentes istae astronomiae causa, geometriam exercent prae ceteris. Similiter Aegyptus, et non nullae gentes Arabiae. Ad haec liber quo demonstrativa traditur disciplina ceteris longe turbatior est, et transpositione sermonum, traiectione litterarum, desuetudine exemplorum, quae a diversis disciplinis mutuata sunt, et postremo quod non contingit auctorem, adeo scriptorum depravatus est vitio, ut fere quot capita tot obstacula habeat. Et bene quidem ubi non sunt obstacula capitibus plura. Unde a plerisque in interpretem difficultatis culpa refunditur, asserentibus librum ad nos non recte translatum.*

¹⁵ The simple fact that it is no longer extant (except for some fragments, see note 8) proves that it did not fulfill its purpose.

¹⁶ See the remarks in the first part of this article. Ebbesen also acknowledges the possibility that James did not translate the entire commentary, cf. Ebbesen (1981, 1) 287: “The Westerners also knew a commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* that Jacobus had translated from the Greek. [...] [T]he remaining fragments quite clearly show that it was Philoponus’ or consisted mainly of extracts from his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*.” See also Ebbesen (1982) 108-9.

Robert of Torigny can be rather easily dismissed, I submit.¹⁷ First of all, it is uncertain what *commentatus est* means in this context.¹⁸ It might mean “wrote commentaries”, but perhaps it could also mean “translated commentaries”, and Charles Burnett has even suggested that it means “revised [the text of the *Organon* that he had translated]”.¹⁹ But even if it means “wrote commentaries”, which is after all the most likely interpretation, Robert is not a reliable source. Thus, in the very same quotation, he states that “an older translation of these same works was in existence” (*antiquior translatio super eosdem libros haberetur*). But probably no such translation of the *Posterior Analytics* existed, not in the mid 12th century at any rate. Boethius may have translated the text, but “John” the translator explicitly states that there is only fragmentary evidence for the text, and John of Salisbury, who does not name the translators, writes as if only two translations were in existence: one that we can easily identify as James’ and the one produced by “John” the translator.²⁰ Furthermore, if *commentatus est* is intended to mean “wrote commentaries”, it might also be significant that Robert does *not*, then, mention the Greek commentaries that James translated, attested by “John” the translator and by the fragmentary evidence. To me, this strongly indicates that Robert has confused author and translator regarding the commentary.²¹

¹⁷ See also Ebbesen (1976) 9, which antedates his discovery of Anonymus Laudianus, for rather sceptical remarks as regards the existence of a commentary by James on the *Posterior Analytics*.

¹⁸ See the text in note 7.

¹⁹ Burnett (1996) 24.

²⁰ See the texts in notes 6 and 14. On a possible translation by Boethius, cf. Dod (1970) 1-3.

²¹ Dod (1970) 157n16 is, in my opinion, too lenient: “Strictly speaking, the phrase ‘super eosdem libros’ implies an older translation of all four works mentioned, but in practice one can allow some latitude. Robert could well have been content to write ‘super eosdem libros’, although knowing it was only approximately true.”

The Anonymus Laudianus is much more important, and I agree with Ebbesen²² that the “Iacobus” so casually referred to must almost certainly be James of Venice. However, I do not accept his arguments.²³

(*ad a*): *Iacobus in commento* is certainly a very unfortunate phrase, if one wants to say “James’ translation of ‘Alexander’s’ commentary”, but I can think of at least one very plausible explanation: This kind of error may simply have arisen through a mistaken reading of a heading. Ebbesen himself used this line of argument in another article as an ingenious way of explaining at least partly how Philoponus may have become “Alexander” in the Latin tradition.²⁴ Ebbesen conjectured that a title like Ἰωάννου τοῦ Ἀλεξανδρέως σχολικαὶ ἀποσημειώσεις might have become effaced in the first words, and thus someone might have “emended” Ἀλεξανδρέως into Ἀλεξάνδρου. Any heading that includes two names, *viz.* the author and the translator, will be at an even greater risk of becoming distorted than the Greek example, no matter how the Latin is formulated, thus confusing the roles of the two persons (perhaps even erasing one completely, as in Ebbesen’s Greek example).²⁵ Ebbesen has later discovered evidence that indicates another explanation of how Philoponus became “Alexander”,²⁶ but this explanation too involves conjectures concerning problems with headings: namely that (a) in the Latin version of Michael of Ephesus’ commentary on the *Elenchi* the author was called simply “Ephesius” in accordance with Greek practice, and some scribe or scholar “misread it as ‘Aphrodisius’ or took it to be a

²² Ebbesen (1977) 2-3.

²³ Described above and in Ebbesen (1977) 3.

²⁴ Ebbesen (1976) 90.

²⁵ Concerning the Greek example, it should perhaps be considered that even Philoponus’ Greek title would almost certainly have included two names, *viz.* his own as well as Ammonius’ (see *CAG*. XIII.3, ed. M. Wallies, Berlin 1909, p. 1.1-4: ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΩΣ ΣΧΟΛΙΚΑΙ ΑΠΟΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΕΙΣ ΕΚ ΤΩΝ ΣΥΝΟΥΣΙΩΝ ΑΜΜΟΝΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΕΡΜΕΙΟΥ ...). This would seem to make the “Ἀλεξανδρέως into Ἀλεξάνδρου”-explanation a little more difficult, but since Ebbesen has now withdrawn the argument (see the following), this is not important. Furthermore, the part concerning the unreadable heading is still as such a valid argument for possible corruptions.

²⁶ Ebbesen (1996) 255-7.

corruption of ‘Aphrodisius’²⁷ and thereafter (b) Philoponus’ commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, which must then have been anonymously transmitted in the same ms., was attributed to “Alexander” on the basis of the *Elenchi* attribution. This may be correct, but it only takes a second copy of the anonymously transmitted Philoponean commentary and another kind of mistake by the scribe to produce a commentary by James instead of “Alexander”; for instance, one may arrive at a misattribution based on James’ name found elsewhere in the ms., e.g. he might have known, or been able to read, “Iacobus” (*translatus a Iacobo?*) but not “Ephesius”; or he might have known that James had some role to play in producing the commentary but not the exact nature of this role; and other explanations are also possible. Thus, a confusion of author and translator may well have occurred, and very likely that is also what we find in Robert of Torigny’s text (see above).

Furthermore, Ebbesen has himself found another example in which a Greek commentary has mistakenly been attributed to a Latin author. Thus, in a Munich-ms., we find a scholium on the *Posterior Analytics* I.12, 77b27, with the text: *Boethius in commento primi libri Posteriorum*. The reference is actually to John Philoponus’ (“Alexander’s”) commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*.²⁸ Of course, Boethius was by far the most famous Latin commentator, and commentaries of uncertain authorship were always likely to be attributed to him; but if it is possible to argue, as Ebbesen does in his 1977-article, that the James in *Iacobus in commento* must be James of Venice, since he was the only one with a sufficient reputation, I do not see why something similar does not apply to this situation. That is, even though James is not, of course, entirely in Boethius’ league, the basis of the argument that *Iacobus* in the fragmentary *Elenchi*-commentary must be James of Venice, because he is very well known,²⁹ also supports the further argument that he may have

²⁷ Ebbesen (1996) 256.

²⁸ Ms. München, BSB clm 14246: 8r. For updated information, see Ebbesen (forthcoming).

²⁹ Ebbesen (1977) 2-3: “Now, of course many a scholar wore the name of Jacobus, but the fact that Anonymus Laudianus does not qualify him in any way seems to indicate

been credited with the commentary (at least partly) *because* of his fame. In conclusion, I think that the attribution of a commentary to James made by an unknown author is much too fragile evidence to support the theory. A lot of commentaries of the Middle Ages were anonymously transmitted; some remained so, while others were eventually (sometimes not before modern times) attributed, rightly or wrongly, to someone of the relevant period, usually a figure of some stature. Perhaps one should also consider that foreign texts were particularly likely to become misattributed, because the original commentator was sometimes virtually unknown. This is well-attested for both the Greek and the Arabic texts.³⁰

(*ad b*): The second argument in favour of a commentary is that the comment on Bryson's squaring of the circle is not found in Philoponus, and therefore the *Iacobus in commento* cannot refer to James' translation but should be taken at face value and accepted as solid evidence in favour of a commentary by James. I have an initial worry about whether it really could not be gathered rather easily from Philoponus' commentary, simply through a somewhat superficial reading, that Bryson *vere probavit circum quadrari*.³¹ For instance, one might try reading through Philoponus' summary of Alexander of Aphrodisias' comment on Bryson's proof,³² and in particular the concluding lines (111.30-1): τῷ κύκλῳ ἄρα ἴσον τετράγωνον ἔστι ποιῆσαι. ὁ μὲν οὖν Ἀλέξανδρος οὕτως. One has to keep the initial lines (111.20-1: ὁ δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος φησι τὸν Βρύσωνα ἐπιχειρῆσαι τετραγωνίσει τὸν κύκλον τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον) in mind to realise that this is not Alexander's own conclusion but rather a summary of Bryson's argument; on a superficial reading, then, the text affirms that Alexander said that Bryson showed how to square the circle, and so it is in complete accordance with Anonymus Laudianus. And if the factual

that some unusually authoritative Jacobus is meant. [...] I have little doubt, then, that the 'Jacobus' whose commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* is cited must be Jacobus Veneticus."

³⁰ For the Greek, Ebbesens own work on "Alexander" is of course a case in point; for the Arabic, cf. Bloch (2007) 182-3n179.

³¹ *Contra Ebbesen* (1977) 3.

³² *CAG*. XIII.3, ed. M. Wallies, Berlin 1909, p. 111.20-31.

content of Anonymus Laudianus does not disagree with certain readings of Philoponus' commentary, this by itself refutes Ebbesen's second argument.

But even if one grants that Philoponus' commentary does not contain anything to the effect that Bryson *vere probavit circulum quadrari*, I believe that there are other problems which make the argument uncertain. First, the summary of the Aphrodisian commentator might be particularly important in another respect as well, since the Latins attributed the first translated commentary of the *Posterior Analytics* to him. Thus, it seems unlikely that the passage on Bryson in the Latin version referred directly to Alexander in the third person, since that should have revealed to the readers that he was not himself the author of the commentary. Therefore, since the Latin version of Philoponus is likely to have been somewhat different from the Greek version at least in this particular passage, we are not in a position to use the "*licet sic vere probavit circulum quadrari*"-statement to claim that the commentary referred to is *not* "Alexander"/Philoponus, that is, in the Latin version. Of course, one cannot completely exclude the possibility that the Latins simply disregarded this difficulty when reading through the text, but it seems more reasonable that the translator, scribes or later scholars would have altered at least this particular part of the passage. Second, one should also consider the possibility that Philoponus was not the direct exemplar from which the translation was made, or rather: that Philoponus was the direct source, but perhaps in a copy that had been through the hands of Byzantine editors, who, as Ebbesen has himself pointed out elsewhere,³³ are in the habit of inserting new material in old commentaries without any scruples. Philoponus wrote in the 6th century, whereas James did not translate the commentary until the 12th, and it is therefore quite possible, or even likely, that more than one alteration, addition and/or omission had been made in James' copy. Since we do not know the Greek

³³ Ebbesen (1976) 90 (on the Latin fragments of Philoponus' commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*): "Almost all the fragments can be demonstrated to be faithful translations of Philop. *APo.* [...] Minor deviations are easily accounted for if we consider the way Byzantine scholars 'edited' old texts inserting new materials at will."

exemplar, we cannot say to what extent this had occurred before the Latin translation was made.

(*ad c*): Concerning the last argument, that James certainly produced a commentary on the *Sophistici Elenchi*, and thus did write his own commentaries, I acknowledge that it strengthens the case in favour of a possible *Posteriora*-commentary as well. But it must also be remembered that the respective fates of the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Sophistici Elenchi* were very different in the 12th century. For whereas the latter text immediately became popular, the former was little known and hardly used until the 13th century. Thus, many aids to the study of the *Elenchi* were produced already in the 12th century, and therefore James' commentary is likely to have become obsolete very quickly. The *Posterior Analytics*, on the other hand, was badly in need of precisely such a commentary throughout the 12th century, and scholars generally feared the text. Had James actually written a commentary, it is likely, I think, that the early reception of the *Posterior Analytics* would have looked somewhat different with more work being done on the text throughout the 12th century. Therefore, I do not believe that this third argument is convincing either.

Finally, and more generally on the possibility of a commentary by James, it seems mildly strange that the only presently known reference to this commentary should be found in an English 13th-century commentary on the *Sophistici Elenchi*, while the Parisians, who certainly knew the *Posterior Analytics* itself about 1150, seem never to have used the commentary. And furthermore, if the commentary was in England in the early 13th century, one would have expected that Robert Grosseteste, who was extremely well-informed about texts and translations from Greek and Arabic,³⁴ had known it; but apparently he did not.³⁵ On the other hand, he knows at least parts of "Alexander".³⁶ Therefore, it seems to me also

³⁴ Cf. Bloch (forthcoming 2).

³⁵ If Anonymus Laudianus was a pupil of Grosseteste, a possibility that Ebbesen (1977) 4-9 discusses, then it would seem even more incredible that Grosseteste had not seen James' commentary, if it was known to his pupil.

³⁶ See the articles referred to in note 8.

from these general considerations that the commentary referred to is probably not by James himself but rather by “Alexander”, perhaps on the basis of faulty information in a ms. title (see above).³⁷

The early Latin reception of the *Posterior Analytics* is a difficult but fascinating subject on which much work still needs to be done. I cannot claim that it has now been conclusively established that James of Venice did *not* write a commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*; the evidence is simply too meagre for this. But at least I hope to have shown that it must still be considered rather doubtful whether such a commentary ever existed.

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³⁷ Since James is known to have produced a commentary on the *Elenchi*, one might also speculate that Anonymus Laudianus’ reference is a mistake for this commentary. It is perhaps, then, interesting that Aristotle discusses Bryson in both the *Posterior Analytics* and in the *Elenchi*. Still, I prefer the “Alexander” explanation that I just provided.

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