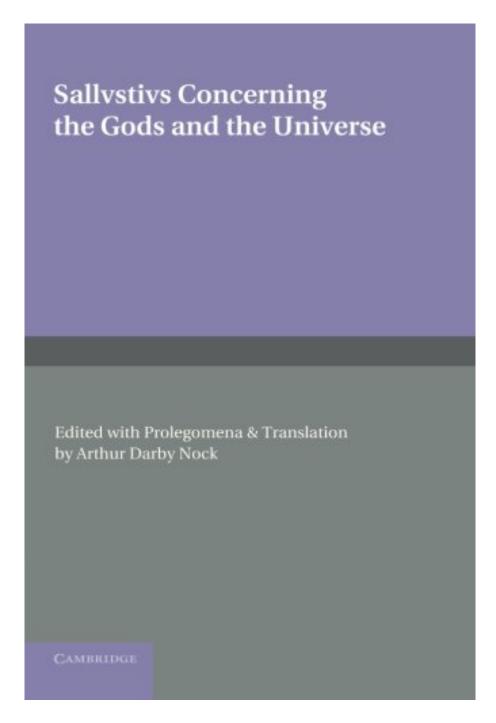
Sallvstivs Concerning the Gods and the Universe

Edited with Prolegomena & Translation by Arthur Darby Nock

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Originally published in 1926, this book contains the ancient Greek text of the fourth-century treatise Concerning the Gods and the Universe by Sallustius. Nock provides an English translation on each facing page, as well as a critical apparatus and a detailed set of prolegomena on the historical background, sources, style and transmission of the philosophical essay. This book will be of value to anyone with an interest in late Roman philosophy and in the pagan response to early Christianity.

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"A Compendium of Platonism"

By Johannes Platonicus

The Neoplatonist Sallust more than likely wrote this work, "On the Nature of the Gods and the Universe," during the reign of the emperor Julian (361-63 AD). It may have been written in reaction to the rising tide of Christianity, in order to promote the pagan reforms of Julian. Nevertheless, the reader will find here a compendium of the Platonic philosophy, as Sallust comprehended it through the works of his predecessor, Iamblichus. The student of Plato will find several ideas to play with in this treatise; and the assiduous collector of Greeco-Roman literature could hardly go without this on the shelf. Although Platonism during this time was becoming an esoteric sect full of commentators bent on orthodoxy rather than free thought, Sallust's work is still unique if taken into context. "On the Nature of the Gods and the Universe," is interesting as a piece of religious propaganda and enlightening as a brief compilation of Platonic thought. Also included here in Thomas Taylor's volume are the wise sayings of Pythagoras as recorded by Demophilus, several hymns by the great Proclus, and five hymns by the scholar Thomas Taylor himself. This is a definite piece of Hellenism for the philosophical and literary enthusiast, and it is thoroughly recommended.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Ian Myles Slater on: Men, Gods, and the Cosmos

By Ian M. Slater

Since Amazon from time to time sweeps up reviews of different translations of the same work and lumps them all together, I should specify that I am reviewing "Sallustius Concerning the Gods and the Universe," edited with Prolegomena and Translation by Arthur Darby Nock (Cambridge University Press, 1926; first paperback edition, October 2013). (Note that the actual book cover and title page offer the name as "SALLVSTIVS," with the classicizing v-for-u which beginning Latin students often find annoying.)

The present volume runs to about 170 pages, of which about two thirds are front-matter, and supporting apparatus such as indexes. "Concerning the Gods and the Universe" is a Greek tractate offering a philosophical defense of "the Old Religion" (or "paganism") in the face of Christianity. It probably was written during the reign of the Emperor Julian "the Apostate" (361-363), who tried to reverse Constantine's official promotion of Christianity. A heading to one of the manuscripts attributes the work to a certain "Saloustios." The most likely author is one of two contemporary imperial officials with the name Sallustius, probably the one whose name is given in Latin (but not Greek) sources from the period as Sallutius.

Nock accepts an older proposal that the work was written around 363 AD, and while Julian was still alive; with the note that, based on his linguistic and stylistic tests, it could date anywhere from 300 to 430. He assumes that the little book was never officially "published," and perhaps never polished by the author, due to Julian's death, and the return of Christianity to imperial favor.

The approach taken by Sallustius (whoever he was) to understanding the diverse religions of the Roman Empire is somewhat eclectic, or syncretic, but in the main it represents Neo-Platonism in the somewhat popularized form current in Julian's circle. For those already familiar with the history of philosophy in late Antiquity, this means that the ritually-inclined Iamblichus is bigger influence than the elitist mystic, Plotinus. (For those who aren't, this is probably a distinction without a difference.) He relies extensively on the use of allegory to deal with the often-embarrassing mythologies, assimilating the ancient gods and their rituals to the most advanced philosophy of the day. (E.g., sacrifices are not needed by the changeless and perfect gods, but are needed by humans to "animate" the mere words of their prayers, which are themselves a means of union with the divine, not petitions which the gods will answer.)

The text had previously been translated into English twice. The first, in 1793, was by Thomas Taylor ("the Platonist" / "of Norwich," 1758-1835), with supplementary neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic materials. The second was in 1913 by a leading British classicist, Gilbert Murray, (1866-1957), in his "Four Stages of Greek Religion," later expanded as "Five Stages of Greek Religion" in 1935 (the rest of the volume is based mainly on a lecture series Murray had delivered at Columbia University in 1912), and slightly revised with a new Preface in 1951. Both of these translations are available in Kindle and other digital formats, including (the first and second editions of) "Stages of Greek Religion," which sometimes is credited to Sallustius rather than Murray.

Taylor's version reads fairly well, and, as mentioned, is included with a group of somewhat-related texts, but it is based on obsolete editions of the Greek original, and the eighteenth-century English may put off some readers. Taylor refers to Sallustius' near-contemporaries and contemporaries as Pythagoreans and Platonists, German scholarship not having yet arrived at the New (neo) distinction between the classical philosophers and their latter-day interpreters.

Murray's version, originally made in 1907, is charming -- I find it more readable than Nock's -- but really needs to be read in conjunction with the rest of "Five Stages...," which stands in for a dedicated commentary. In the 1951 preface to "Five Stages," he singles out Nock's edition and translation for praise.

Nock (1902-1963) was a Cambridge-trained classicist, who spent most of his career at Harvard. He developed a reputation as an authority on the literature of the early Christian era -- see, for example, his "Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background," a 1963 compilation of earlier writings (and other titles on his Amazon page).

Nock provides a full Greek text, newly edited from a (then) recently-identified manuscript of better quality than that used in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, with a English translation on facing pages. It is preceded by an introduction ("Prolegomena") surveying the main issues raised by the short work, as well as such issues as language and style, the manuscript transmission and probable authorship. He made ample use of prior scholarship (although he makes a point of saying that he did not consult Taylor, or the other eighteenth-century translations, into German and French).

The "Prolegomena" also includes a chapter-by-chapter (at times paragraph-by-paragraph) summary and commentary, with ample references to classical, late-antique, and early Christian works (plus Philo of Alexandria) which may have influenced Sallustius, or may clarify or amplify his concise text. Thanks to this approach to the problem, the actual Greek text and the translation are free of exegetical notes, making the work much easier to read than with a running textual and interpretive commentary.

A not-very comprehensive-search on my part indicates that there has been one further edition, with a translation into French, published by Collections Bude in 1960 (not seen). There was also a French treatment of the text (which I have not seen either) by Nock's some-time collaborator, A.-J. Festugiere, apparently published in 1944.

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