It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that the true identity of Oecumenius was established and that his work became available. Up to that point in time, many scholars mistakenly thought that he lived in the tenth century and was the author of several commentaries on Acts, the Pauline corpus, and the Catholic Letters. It was, therefore, quite a dramatic event when his commentary on Revelation, known only from fragments and excerpts, was found through a chance discovery by the well-known German theologian Diekamp. While paging through a 1749 catalogue of manuscripts of the library in Turin, he noted in codex gr.84 the existence of a Greek commentary on Revelation written by one Oecumenius. The existence of the commentary had previously not been noticed because the name of Oecumenius was not listed under its Index Scriptorum. Diekamp subsequently visited Turin, where he examined the manuscript (now known as Taurin.84–T). It was, disappointingly, only partially complete because an earlier scribe regarded Rev 1–14 as fulfilled prophecies and consequently simply omitted them. Diekamp subsequently also found three other similarly incomplete manuscripts in Rome (Vatic.1426 [now known as V], a copy of it, and Vat. Ottob.gr.126-128 [now known as O]). Noting that manuscript V stemmed from Messina, Diekamp continued his search there among manuscripts of the dissolved convent of Saint Salvatore in the university
library. He finally discovered (in his own words as “a happy surprise”) a manuscript (codex Mess.S.Salvatore 99 [now known as M]) containing the complete text of the commentary.

Diekamp’s intention to publish an editio princeps of the commentary did not materialize, but in 1901 he reported his discovery in an interesting article and offered a first evaluation of the manuscripts (“Mitteilung über den neuaufgefundenen Commentar des Oekumenius zur Apokalypse,” in Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 43 [1901]: 1046–56). This article convincingly argued that Oecumenius and his commentary on Revelation were more important than previously thought. In 1913, Hoskier, a prolific text critic, was introduced to Diekamp’s discoveries by Mercati, the erudite Vatican librarian. Hoskier later on published the editio princeps of Oecumenius’s commentary in 1928 as The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse Now Printed for the First Time from Manuscripts at Messina, Rome, Salonika and Athos edited with Notes. This edition was strongly criticized, among others, in a book review by Heseler, a German scholar (Philologische Wochenschrift 26 [1930]: 772–78), who concluded that it lacked scientific rigor. In 1999, Marc de Groote, known for his scholarly research on Oecumenius, published an improved version based on an exhaustive list of manuscripts (nine main and twenty-nine secondary versions; see M. de Groote, ed., Oecumenii commentarius in Apocalypsin [Leuven: Peeters, 1999]). This fine and carefully produced text should now be regarded as the definitive edition. However, de Groote provided no translation and wrote his edition in German. With this English translation by a New Testament scholar, Suggit, based on de Groote’s text, the complete commentary of Oecumenius is, for the first time, accessible to English-speaking readers and, for that matter, generally in translation. The short introduction by Suggit, a very able translator, also introduces readers to some seminal issues previously mostly discussed in German scholarly works. William C. Weinreich, in his 2005 edition of Revelation in the important Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series (Thomas C. Oden, general editor) also included passages from Oecumenius’s commentary in English translation, taken from a “rough” English translation by Clifford H. DuRousseau (also based on de Groote’s text) but does not offer a translation of the whole commentary.

The discovery of the manuscripts by Diekamp brought about a thorough reevaluation of the person and work of Oecumenius. It became clear that he, first of all, should be dated much earlier than the tenth century. Oecumenius noted in his introduction that he wrote his commentary five hundred years after Revelation (Oec. 1.3.6), which meant that he produced it at least by the end of the sixth century (as is thought, e.g., by de Groote, who dates him after 553 C.E.). But there are scholars who argue that he wrote his commentary earlier. Historical documentation of an Oecumenius who lived at the beginning of the sixth century and who wrote a commentary on Revelation, leads them (e.g. J. C.
Lamoreaux and Suggit) to identify him as the author of this commentary and thus to date him even earlier.

This dating further meant that Oecumenius’s work was the oldest extant Greek commentary on Revelation. That there are only a few other later Greek commentaries, such as the ones by Andreas of Caesarean Cappadocia in the sixth century and the much later one by Arethas of Caesarean Cappadocia, written in the tenth century (both acquainted with Oecumenius’s commentary), makes his work even more important. His historical status is also enhanced because he is now dated much closer to Origen and thus becomes an important source for evaluating the conflict with Origen. Oecumenius’s commentary is also a significant source for the study of the church fathers because of his extensive allusions to and quotations from their works. The commentary has been valued in New Testament studies because of its early uncial text of the Apocalypse, which was especially useful in the light of the problematic state of the Apocalypse’s text. His work also contains some of the arguments (based on contents, function, and ecclesiastical use) that were used to defend the book of Revelation against its critics and that ultimately contributed to its inclusion in the canon of Christian Scriptures in the East.

This translation of Oecumenius’s work offers valuable insights into the way early Christians interpreted the Bible and especially Revelation as a controversial and difficult text. Despite the commentary’s ideological character, evident from the way in which monophysitism and Oecumenius’s own orthodox position functions in it, useful perspectives on early Christian exegesis can be gained from it. Oecumenius engages in debate with critical readings of Revelation. He responds, for example, to doubts about Johannine authorship of Revelation because of differences between Johannine texts, to the chiliastic interpretation and to the *Naherwartung* that some readers read into the text. Although he expects the second coming of Christ (e.g., *Oec.* 1.15; 2.7) and vigorously defends the resurrection of the body (11.10), he tones down any imminent expectation of the end and refrains from calculating end events. He further offers interesting suggestions on the symbolic meaning of numbers and colors. At the same time, Oecumenius as a Greek from Isauria in Asia Minor shared the same location as the author of Revelation and thus provides an insider perspective on the way in which Christianity in the provinces continued to experience oppressive Roman rule.

It is, however, in terms of its hermeneutics that this early commentary will elicit special interest, especially now that early Christian exegesis is increasingly being researched. The commentary contains many examples of imaginative allegorical interpretations, when, for example, he interprets the millennium (Rev 20:2) in “mystical fashion” as the binding of the devil during the time of Christ’s incarnation (after which the devil was unbound). But at times he also follows a conventional approach when he, for example, reads Revelation
in terms of its genre as prophecy encompassing past, present, and future events. In this regard, his constant and extensive use of Hebrew Scripture, and especially its prophetic texts as intertext for Revelation, is striking. It reveals how early readers recognized Hebrew Scripture as a necessary foil for the interpretation of Revelation.

The commentary further displays a keen historical awareness. Oecumenius repeatedly illuminates the text simply by framing it with historical detail. Thus he remarks that John was banished in the time of Domitian to live on Patmos, which was “a small and desolate island” (Oec. 2.13). He also reflects historically on the number of churches mentioned in Revelation—as was more than once done in early Christian exegesis of Rev 1–3—and why some churches in Asia were left unmentioned. He further relates several passages in the book to Roman persecution and individuals. For Oecumenius, the reference to the seven hills in Rev 17 “is a very clear indication that he is speaking about Rome, for Rome is described as seven-crested, and no other city is so called” (Oec. 9.12). When he discusses the ambiguous remark in Rev 17:10 about five of seven kings who had already fallen, a sixth one that is reigning, and one that has to come, he carefully identifies them. The five are Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Severus, and Decius, Valerian (253–260 C.E.) is the one who remained. The one “yet to come” was Diocletian (245–312 C.E.), who was emperor from 284 to 305. Oecumenius is, however, aware that Diocletian’s long reign does not fit the remark in Rev 17:10 that this king will “last for only a little while.” He then, once again historically, explains the “little while” as referring to the time period in which Diocletian actually persecuted Christians during the last two years of his reign (see Oec. 9.13.6). This historical reading obviously becomes problematic as he allegorically draws the symbols of the text into his own history, far beyond the horizon of the original author and audience. A “historic” reading in the case of Oecumenius implies much more than simply illuminating the original communication setting of Revelation.

Closely linked to this is his symbolic and especially his “mystical” reading of Revelation that to a large extent reflects the Alexandrian exegetical tradition and that qualifies his historical awareness. He assumes his readers will be “attempting to interpret spiritual things to be spiritual and wise regarding divine matters” (Oec. 1.1.3). The readers need to read the text with a particular preunderstanding and in order to promote their own spirituality, since the text finds its highest fulfillment in creating a transformative experience of spiritual blessings in its readers (e.g., Oec. 1.5; 2.7; 11.12, 16; 12:5). This mystical reading qualifies his historical work in other ways as well, since it implies understanding the text in terms of the contemporary situation of the readers. In his discussion of the gematria-reading of 666 in Rev 13:18, which was “a well-worn method of reckoning known to people,” he observes, for example, that this number applies to many names and titles, such as that of Lampetis, Benedict, and Titan. “Since, then, many names have been proposed, anyone can apply to the accursed demon the one that is most
appropriate” (Oec. 8.5.3–9). With this remark Oecumenius once again seeks to promote through his symbolic reading a contemporary religious understanding of the text, something that is in line with the way in which the author of Revelation read and used his own sources.

There are many other perspectives in Oecumenius’s commentary that illustrate its significance and that ask for further reflection. But contemporary readers will, in the light of the growing debate about Revelation’s violent language, be especially interested to observe how Oecumenius struggled to interpret violent passages in Revelation. He was driven to cope with them in terms of his own positive image of God’s benevolence, as is, for example, evident in his discussion of the remark in Rev 18:4–8 about repaying Babylon double for her evil deeds. This double rendering, he writes, should not be seen as meaning twice as much. Such an interpretation would be out of tune with God’s benevolent character and with the fact that God punishes much less severely than the offense merits. His understanding of God’s benevolence was also the reason why he combined in a rather convoluted manner the motif of eternal punishment with the apokatastasis doctrine in his comments on the fifth seal (Oec. 5.19.1–4).

All these remarks illustrate some of the rich contents and insights that the commentary contains. The translation, part of the well-known and important series The Fathers of the Church, is attractively and neatly presented. The translator added a select but updated bibliography with an introduction that contains brief but apt and insightful comments. In it he accounts for some of the seminal issues in contemporary research on Oecumenius and his commentary. This includes a discussion of Oecumenius’s identity, his theology, his relationship with Origen, his hermeneutical methods, his text of Scripture, and the manuscripts of the commentary, concluding with some notes on his translation. There are also useful indices of proper names and scriptural references. On each page there are footnotes that contain mostly scriptural references (following some of Hoskier’s and de Groote’s references). The translation itself reads fluently even though the translator intended to give a literal rendering “without being too ponderous” (16).

This first translation in English or, for that matter, in any modern language of the first Greek commentary on Revelation is truly an important publication. It broadens access to and further empowers research on one of the earliest learned interpretations of Revelation.