

ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA

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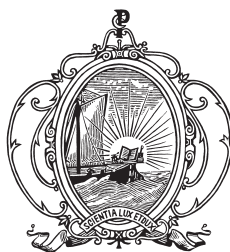
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NONNUS OF PANOPOLIS IN CONTEXT IV

Poetry at the Crossroads

edited by

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PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

2022

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### XIII. NONNUS' INDIANS BETWEEN CONVERSION AND ACCULTURATION\*

Fotini HADJITTOFI

#### 1. Nonnus' Indians

A question mark hangs over the central event of the *Dionysiaca*, Dionysus' defeat of the Indians: is this a political allegory, with Dionysus and his army standing in for the Byzantine empire and the Indians for Sassanian Persia, as Pierre Chuvin has argued,<sup>1</sup> or is it, rather, a religious allegory, with the Indians representing the nations uninstructed in the "true" religion (that of Dionysus/Christ), who are then led from their spiritual darkness into the light – a reading that was put forward most recently by Anna Lefteratou?<sup>2</sup> Or could these two models be working in tandem?

Before examining in more detail what happens to the Indians *after* they are defeated, it is important to take a brief look at Nonnus' representation of Dionysus' arch-enemies. While there has been some important research on this topic, the sheer complexity in the Indians' characterization has not been fully appreciated. On the one hand, Nonnus' insistence on the Indians' black skin and woolly hair is consistent with an increasingly racist view of blackness in Late Antiquity. Nonnus' attitude is certainly compatible with the evidence presented in John Morgan's seminal article (including references to the Greek novels and to Perpetua's vision in which she defeats a black Egyptian)<sup>3</sup> and in Gay Byron's more detailed study of symbolic blackness in early Christianity.<sup>4</sup> To this rich material we can add, for example, the fifth-century hexameter rendition of the crossing of the Red Sea by Avitus of Vienne, who draws a correlation between the Egyptians' dark skin and their evil nature,<sup>5</sup> or, geographically closer to Nonnus, the dialogue (recorded in Coptic) between

\* I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia), Portugal, through the project PTDC/LLTLES/30930/2017 (national funds).

<sup>1</sup> See CHUVIN 1991, *Mythologie et géographie*, pp. 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> See LEFTERATO 2016, *Dionysus' "Catabasis" to India*. Cf. SHORROCK 2011, *Myth of Paganism*, pp. 109-112.

<sup>3</sup> See MORGAN 2005, *Le blanc et le noir*.

<sup>4</sup> BYRON 2006, *Symbolic Blackness* analyses symbolic usages of Egyptians and Ethiopians in early Christianity; e.g. the Ethiopian woman as a symbol of dangerous sexuality; blackness as a symbol of intra-Christian opponents or external persecutors. For the symbolic blackness of Ethiopians in Cyril of Alexandria see LEFTERATO 2016, *Dionysus' "Catabasis" to India*.

<sup>5</sup> See Avitus, *De Spiritalis Historiae Gestis* 5.517-518, with comments in ROBERTS 1983, *Rhetoric and Poetic Imitation*, pp. 50-54.

Theophilus of Alexandria and a desert monk, where the Archbishop doubts whether a black Ethiopian or a leper can possibly preserve the image of God.<sup>6</sup> In addition to their blackness, some of Nonnus' Indians, especially the chieftains, are presented as gigantic creatures, resembling Typhoeus and uttering similarly theomachic insults against Dionysus.<sup>7</sup> A host of negative adjectives characterise the Indians, individually or collectively, as "senseless",<sup>8</sup> "unjust",<sup>9</sup> "ignorant of piety",<sup>10</sup> or "ignorant of justice".<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, however, and as H el ene Frangoulis has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> the Indians' moral behaviour is not all that different from that of Dionysus and his troops. Just as the pitiable lamentations of Indian women echo those of non-Indian characters, Dionysus is as licentious as (if not more so) the Indian men who want to rape his Bacchantes.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Nonnus transfers the myth of a daughter's paradoxical breastfeeding of her own father, to prevent him from dying of starvation in prison, from the Roman Pero (or Perus) to the Indian Eerie is also indicative of a willingness to see exemplary filial piety among Dionysus' enemies.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the collective characterisation of the Indians through negative adjectives can be called into question by anti-Dionysus speakers, who evoke a more traditional, utopian stereotype of India by calling its people "pious", "just", and "blameless".<sup>15</sup> While such declarations are far less frequent than the pro-Dionysus line, they may suggest that the collective portrayal of a whole nation in such stark terms can only be a matter of perspective.

<sup>6</sup> See the hagiographic *Life of Aphou* 10, translated in VIVIAN – GREER 2004, *Four Desert Fathers*, p. 185. While the monk's opinion that all humans bear the image of God prevails at the end, it is important that for Theophilus black skin and leprosy function as equivalent, visible markers of sin.

<sup>7</sup> See *Dion.* 34.180-183 for Morrheus, *Dion.* 47.626 for Orontes and *Dion.* 22.140-141 for Thureus. Gigantic stature, however, is also to be found in many of Dionysus' allies. On the overall difficulty in distinguishing Dionysus' allies from his enemies based on their attributes see HADJITTOFI 2016, *Major Themes*, pp. 139-143.

<sup>8</sup> *Dion.* 14.274, ἄφρονες Ἴνδοί.

<sup>9</sup> *Dion.* 34.221, ἄναξ ἀθέμιστος (of Morrheus).

<sup>10</sup> *Dion.* 13.20, εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον ... γένος Ἴνδῶν.

<sup>11</sup> *Dion.* 13.3, δίκης ἀδίδακτον ὑπερφιάλων γένος Ἴνδῶν. For a fuller list of such adjectives and their attestations see FRANGOULIS 2009, *Les Indiens chez Nonnos*, nn. 7-21.

<sup>12</sup> See FRANGOULIS 2009, *Les Indiens chez Nonnos*; cf. FRANGOULIS 2010, *Les Indiens dans les Dionysiaques*.

<sup>13</sup> The adjective γυναιμανής is applied equally to both; see FRANGOULIS 2009, *Les Indiens chez Nonnos*, n. 51; nn. 63-69 on the universality of the lamentations.

<sup>14</sup> Nonnus' story of Tectaphus and Eerie is told in *Dion.* 26.110-138. See DEONNA 1955, *Deux  tudes*, pp. 5-50 for the Roman legend of the noble daughter Pero or Perus, who similarly saved her mother or father from starvation.

<sup>15</sup> At *Dion.* 23.318 Oceanus calls the Indians φ otas ἀμεμφ ας. For Hera the Indians are both "mild" and "blameless" (*Dion.* 31.86, Ἴνδους μελιχίους και ἀμεμφ ας); later in the same speech she characterises them as pious and just (*Dion.* 31.93-94, εὐσεβίη δ  μεμηλ otas  κτανεν Ἴνδούς, ἰ οὖς τάχα πασιμέλουσα Θ  μις μαιώσατο μαζ  ). For India as a utopia in general and the justice of its people in particular see the detailed discussion of STONEMAN 2019, *The Greek Experience of India*, pp. 238-253.

A more remarkable, and less noticed, feature in Nonnus' representation of Indian characters is that they are often compared to the famous Achaeans of the *Iliad* and the Trojan Cycle in general. It must be significant that such comparisons consistently equate Indians with Achaean characters and not Trojans. In *Book 28*, the Indian Phlegius is wounded and seeks shelter underneath his brother's shield. Immediately he is compared to Teucer, who takes refuge under Ajax' shield in *Iliad* 8.266 (*Dion.* 28.55-60):<sup>16</sup>

Ἄμφι δέ οἱ μόθος ὄρτο πολύθροος. Ἀκρότατον δέ (55)  
 Δεξίοχος Φλογίοιο μεσόφρυον ἔξυσε χαλκῶ,  
 πλῆξας ἄκρα μέτωπα διχαζομένης τρυφαλείης.  
 Αὐτὰρ ὁ ταρβήσας, ὀλίγον γόνυ γουνὸς ἀμείβων,  
 μηκεδανῆ κεκάλυπτο κασιγνήτοιο βοείη, (59)  
 Δαρδανίης ἄτε Τεῦκρον διστευτήρα γενέθλης (61)  
 εἰς σάκος ἑπταβόειον ἐδέχνυτο σύγγονος Αἴας, (62)  
 πατρώη συνάεθλον ἀδελφεὸν ἀσπίδι κεῦθων. (60)

Dexiochus grazed the forehead of Phlogius, and his blade cleft the helmet and cut the brow: the wounded man, startled, moved back step by step and took shelter behind his brother's great shield, as Ajax used to receive his kinsman Teucer, that shooter of arrows against the Dardanian nation, under his seven-hide shield, and sheltered his brother and comrade under his father's targe.<sup>17</sup>

A newly wedded Indian woman lamenting her husband's death is said to be "another Laodameia" mourning her Protesilaus (*Dion.* 24.190-195):

Βαρυτλήτων δὲ γυναικῶν (190)  
 ἦ μὲν ἐὼν στενάχιζεν ἀδελφεόν, ἦ δὲ τοκῆα·  
 ἄλλη ποικιλόδακρυς ἀνεστεναχίζετο νύμφη  
 νυμφίον ἀρτιχόρευτον εὐοικότα Πρωτεσιλάω,  
 ἄλλη Λαοδάμεια· νεοζεύκτοιο δὲ νύμφης  
 ἄπλοκος ἀκρήδεμνος ἐτίλλετο βότρυς ἐθειρήσ. (195)

Women in heavy affliction mourned one her brother, and one her father; there was a bride bathed in tears lamenting her bridegroom lately wedded with dancing, another Laodameia with her Protesilaus: the new bride unveiled, unkempt, tore the clusters of her hair.

A proud Indian who sees his companions killed and cannot bear the sight commits suicide. Even though he is explicitly "born of barbarian blood and bred in

<sup>16</sup> For the text of the *Dionysiaca* I use the Budé edition (VIAN ET AL. 1976-2006, *Nonnos, Dionysiaques*). Translations are taken and occasionally adapted from the Loeb (ROUSE 1940, *Nonnos, Dionysiaca*).

<sup>17</sup> GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, pp. 220-221 briefly discusses this passage and points out that the narrator does not reserve Iliadic comparisons for the Dionysiac army. The other simile she adduces in this context, however, the comparison of a quick runner to the Iliadic Iphiclus (*Dion.* 28.284-287 ~ *Il.* 23.636) does not seem to me to belong in the same category, since the one who is compared to Iphiclus is not the anonymous Indian, as Geisz claims, but rather the Dionysiac fighter Ocythous, as *Dion.* 28.288 makes clear.

barbarian manners”, after slaying himself by the sword he becomes “another Menoiceus” and shows himself a new Ajax, but one that is notably sane (*Dion.* 23.52-75):

Καί τις ἐοὺς ἐτάρους δεδοκημένος Ἴνδὸς ἀγῆνωρ  
 τοὺς μὲν κτεινομένους δολιχῶ δορί, τοὺς δὲ μαχαίρη,  
 ἄλλον οἰστευθέντα χαραδρήεντι βελέμνω,  
 τὸν δὲ πολυπλέκτῳ δεδαῖγμένον ὄξει θύρσῳ, (55)  
 Θουρέϊ νεκρὸν ὄμιλον ἐδείκνυεν. Ἀχνύμενος δὲ  
 τίλλε κόμην, φλογερῶ δὲ χόλου βακχεύετο πυρσῶ,  
 σφίγγων καρχαρόδοντι μεμυκῶτα χεῖλα δεσμῶ.  
 Καὶ ταχὺς αὐτοφόνον μιμούμενος Ἴνδὸν Ὀρόντην,  
 βάρβαρον αἶμα φέρων καὶ βάρβαρον ἦθος ἀέξων, (60)  
 ἄορ ἐὸν γύμνωσεν, ἀπορρίψας δὲ χιτῶνα,  
 ἄρεος ἀρραγῆς ἔρκος, ἀλεξητήρα βελέμνων,  
 καὶ ξίφος ἀπτοίητος ἐφ’ κενεῶνι πελάσσας  
 ὕστατὴν ταχύποτμος ἀγῆνορα ρήξατο φωνήν· [...] *[...]*  
 Ἔννεπε κυανῆς κατὰ γαστέρος ἄορ ἐρείσας (70)  
 τολμηραῖς παλάμησιν, ἄτε ξένον ἄνδρα δαΐζων,  
 καὶ θάνεν αὐτοδάικτος ἐν ἀντιβίοισι Μενοικεύς,  
 αἰδόμενος μετὰ δῆριν ἰδεῖν ἔτι Δηριαδῆα·  
 ὄμμασι δ’ ἀκλαῦτοισι θελήμονι κάτθανε πότμῳ,  
 καὶ μανίης ἀπάνευθεν ἐφαίνετο χάλκεος Αἴας. (75)

Some proud Indian seeing his companions killed by long spear or sword, struck by a missile rock, pierced by the sharp leaf-wrapt thyrsus-wand, pointed out to Thureus the heaps of corpses – then in anguish tore his hair, bit his lips deep and was dumb, wild with blazing indignation. Born of barbarian blood and bred in barbarian manners, he quickly followed the example of Indian Orontes and killed himself. Baring his sword, he stripped off the corselet, that impregnable defence in battle which kept off the missiles, and undismayed set the blade to his flank, as he uttered a last proud speech before the quick stroke of death [...]  
 As he spoke, he thrust the sword down into his dark-skinned belly with resolute hands, as if he were piercing a stranger, and died self-slain, another Menoiceus among his foes, ashamed to look again upon Deriades after this battle; died a willing death with tearless eyes, and showed himself a brazen Ajax but that he was not mad.

Finally, the anonymous Indian who is struck by desire for a fallen Bacchant is explicitly just like Achilles (ὧς περ Ἀχιλλεύς) seeing “another Penthesileia” (*Dion.* 35.27-30):

Καὶ νύ κε νεκρὸν ἔχων πόθον ἄπνοον, ὧς περ Ἀχιλλεύς,  
 ἄλλην Πενθεσίλειαν ὑπὲρ δαπέδοιο δοκεύων  
 ψυχρὰ κονιομένης προσπτύξατο χεῖλα νύμφης,  
 εἰ μὴ Δηριαδῆος ἐδεΐδιεν ὄγκον ἀπειλῆς. (30)

Then he would have felt desire for a lifeless corpse, as Achilles did – seeing a new Penthesileia on the ground, he would have kissed the cold lips of the girl, prostrate in the dust, had he not feared the weight of the threat of Deriades.

This striking use of *antonomasia* brings to the fore what Simon Goldhill has recently termed Nonnus' "preposterous poetics", that is, the "typological" way in which the epic alludes to events which within its own chronology have not yet happened.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, and in these particular cases, this trope has the effect of placing in the same position inconsequential or even anonymous Indian characters with the most noteworthy Greek heroes, going so far as to imply that the Indians are sometimes superior. Thus, whereas Ajax commits suicide after he has gone mad and brought shame onto himself, his Indian counterpart is distraught because of what has happened to his companions. By comparison to the Indian, the Greek Ajax seems rather self-obsessed.

Remarkably, then, Nonnus' representation of Indian characters oscillates between two mutually exclusive discourses: one which marginalises and dehumanises them as the symbolically black manifestations of impiety and another which can recognise in them exemplary piety (Eerie as the Roman Pero) or which sees in them the paradoxically original iterations of famous Achaeans' deeds (in the cases of *antonomasia* outlined above). The only safe conclusion regarding Nonnus' India is that this is no longer a land infested with strange creatures and natural wonders,<sup>19</sup> and any reference to Indian races of hybrid monsters – an integral part of the ethnographic tradition on India for many centuries – has been expunged from the main narrative.<sup>20</sup> As Pierre Chuvin points out, even the description of the country's mythical wealth in precious stones is very much restrained.<sup>21</sup> Nonnus' India is, in fact, more like that of the Christian and near-contemporary Cosmas Indicopleustes. As Grant Parker says,<sup>22</sup> it suited Cosmas' cosmological purposes to present an India that was still exotic, but not extraordinary in the way the ethnographers had portrayed

<sup>18</sup> See GOLDHILL 2015, *Preposterous Poetics*.

<sup>19</sup> In this respect the *Dionysiaca* can be differentiated from earlier works like Heliodorus' *Aethiopia* and Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which are important in advancing the late antique trend of cultural pluralism, but still present Ethiopia and India as (more or less) fantasylands. See, e.g., the presence of the miraculous *pantarbe* stone in both works; Heliod. *Aeth.* 8.11, and Philostr. *V A* 3.9. ELSNER 1997, *Hagiographic Geography*, p. 36 notes on Philostratus, "the relevance of India and Egypt (indeed of philosophy and holiness themselves) are only to be measured in terms of their effect on Graeco-Roman religion at its twin centres – the hallowed sanctuaries and festivals of Greece, and the city of Rome." On the markedly different geography of the *Dionysiaca* see HADJITTOFI 2007, *Res Romanae* and HADJITTOFI 2011, *Nonnus' Unclassical Epic*, esp. pp. 40-41 on Greece as a land of criminals and monsters. On Nonnus' (hardly unexpected) references to the Indian elephant, an animal which long inhabited the Roman visual imaginary, see MIGUÉLEZ-CAVERO 2014, *Natural Histories*, pp. 265-277.

<sup>20</sup> On such stereotypes in ethnographical descriptions of India see ROMM 1992, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 82-120; CAMPBELL 2006, *Strange Creatures*, pp. 112-132; STONEMAN 2019, *The Greek Experience of India*, pp. 254-285. On Strabo's description of India see CLARKE 1999, *Between Geography and History*, pp. 305 and 326-328.

<sup>21</sup> CHUVIN 1991, *Mythologie et géographie*, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> See PARKER 2008, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 142.

it.<sup>23</sup> Cosmas' sixth-century *Christian Topography* describes a land which is within the limits of normality,<sup>24</sup> and of course within the reach of the Christian missionaries, whose work Cosmas seems to endorse.

Nonnus' inclusion of miraculous elements is similarly limited to a bare minimum and mostly confined within the catalogue of Indian troops in *Book 26*.<sup>25</sup> A catalogue of enemy forces, however, is precisely where poets would be expected to insert some wondrous ethnography anyway. It is useful to compare Nonnus' catalogue of Indian troops with Silius' catalogue of Carthaginians and their allies in the *Punica* (3.223-405) – a historical epic, describing well-documented events and a geographical area familiar to the Romans. In Silius, then, we find an enemy leader of gigantic stature (3.262-264); a strange form of mining (3.265-267: Ethiopians digging up iron by placing magnet next to it); and a nation of snake-charmers (3.301-303). Silius also speaks of races that eat strange foods: in 3.310-311 the Autololes eat the lotus plant; in 3.360-361 the Massagetæ bleed their horses to feed themselves. Similarly, Nonnus mentions Areizanteia, where people drink honey from the honey-dripping tree (26.183-200). Finally, Silius describes lands where customs are reversed: in 3.340-343 the Celts think it honourable to be eaten by vultures instead of being buried; in 3.344-356 Galician women do all the ploughing and agricultural work while their men stay indoors.<sup>26</sup> It is only slightly more paradoxical to find in Nonnus' catalogue that in the island of the Graiai some men breastfeed their children (26.52-54). Given the wildly unrealistic descriptions that were current in ethnographical writings on India, Nonnus' catalogue seems positively tame.

Perhaps the only significant exception here is Nonnus' inclusion of the Ouatoikoitai, a race of men who sleep lying on their long ears (*Dion.* 26.94-97):

Τοῖσι συνεστρατόωντο καὶ ἄνδρες Οὐατοκοῖται,  
οἷσι θέμις δολιχοῖσιν ἐπ' οὐασιν ὕπνον ἰαυεῖν. (95)

<sup>23</sup> On the differences between ethnographical descriptions in secular and Christian texts see also KÖNIG 2009, *Novelistic and Anti-novelistic*, who points out that the Apostles in the Apocryhal Acts are not interested in ethnographic description: as ethnography reinforces the dominant Graeco-Roman civilisation, to which the Apostles are indifferent (if not hostile), they cannot themselves participate in providing ethnographic commentary on the lands they visit.

<sup>24</sup> *Book 11* of the *Topography* is a treatise on the plants and animals of India. The only ones he mentions that do not live there in reality are the hippopotamus and the unicorn, but Cosmas admits that he has not seen them. Nonnus also mistakenly claims that the hippopotamus lives in the Indian river Hydaspes (26.235-244), because he considers the Nile and the Hydaspes two branches of the same river. This was, in fact, a common misconception in the ancient world. See MAYERSON 1993, *A Confusion of Indias*; GIGLI PICCARDI 1998, *Nonno e l'Egitto*, p. 76; and ROMM 2008, *Travel*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>25</sup> On Nonnus' Indian catalogue and its possible sources see MIGUÉLEZ-CAVERO 2008, *Poems in Context*, pp. 275-276; FRANGOULIS 2010, *Les Indiens dans les Dionysiaques*.

<sup>26</sup> For Silius' reliance on ethnographic sources on the Iberian Peninsula and his predilection for indigenous town names with an exotic ring see MAYORGAS RODRÍGUEZ 2017, *Reimagining Hispania*. On the Roman avoidance of extreme polarity cf. CLARKE 1999, *Between Geography and History*, p. 215: "the barbarian enemy had to be capable of becoming a Roman citizen, and even a Senator in the future."

Τοὺς μὲν Φρίγγος ἔκανε καὶ Ἄσπετος εἰς μόθον ἔλκων  
αὐχήμεῖς τε Δάνυκλος ὁμόστολος ...

With them marched the Ouatocoitai, the Ear-sleepers, men whose way it is to sleep lying upon their long ears. These were led to the war by Phringus and Aspetus and haughty Danyclus.

This race of Ear-sleepers shows up frequently in classical descriptions of India.<sup>27</sup> In the *Dionysiaca* they only appear here, in the context of the catalogue, never to be heard of again. It should also be noted that this people's oddly long ears, while extraordinary, are not threatening to their status as humans, unlike other characteristics that made India's traditional "strange creatures" lack ontological security. The legendary Indian Cynocephali or Dog-heads, whom Nonnus does *not* mention, are sometimes referred to as men, and sometimes as animals due to their lack of human speech.<sup>28</sup> In the fifth century AD, Augustine still wonders: "What shall I say of the Cynocephali, whose dog-like head and barking proclaim them beasts rather than men?" (*City of God* 16.8).

The persistence of the tradition regarding the existence of these creatures is indeed astonishing, but it is important to highlight the new concerns and attitudes that take root in the fifth century. In the passage from the *City of God* quoted above, Augustine goes on to say: "But whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in colour, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast."<sup>29</sup> In precisely the same period the legend of St. Christopher begins to circulate in the Eastern Mediterranean: St. Christopher was said to belong to the tribe of Cynocephali; he was converted to Christianity, and later became a martyr.<sup>30</sup> It seems that at the time of Nonnus and Augustine, Christian authority, taking on the role and ambitions of the Roman Empire, sought to stretch itself to the edges of the world,<sup>31</sup> thus making everybody, even dog-headed men, a possible target for conversion. Although, as we have seen, Nonnus does not include in his epic any Indian races that would not comfortably fit within the category of "human", it would also be possible to detect this new ideology of Christian imperialism in the *Dionysiaca*, if we chose to read the poem and its central event, the Indian war, as a poetic and fantastical version of the

<sup>27</sup> See Ctesias' *Indica* 50, and Plin. *HN* 7.2.

<sup>28</sup> Plin. *HN* 7.2 refers to them as men; Ael. *NA* 4.46 as animals. See CAMPBELL 2006, *Strange creatures*, pp. 114 and 118.

<sup>29</sup> Translation taken from *NPNF* 1-02 (SHAFF 1887).

<sup>30</sup> On the legend of St. Christopher see RACINE 2006, *Geography, Identity*.

<sup>31</sup> See MERRILLS 2005, *History and Geography*, pp. 26-28. On the gradual spread of Christianity to the lands beyond Persia see now ANDRADE 2018, *The Journey of Christianity*. On the development of a Christianised imperialism, starting in the late-fourth century, and the lingering Christian ambivalence towards Roman imperialism itself see POLLMANN 2011, *Unending Sway*.

attempt to spread the “true” religion into the furthest reaches of the world.<sup>32</sup> But is such a reading warranted by the text?

## 2. Conversion or Acculturation?

There is very little in the *Dionysiaca* to indicate conversion, or, at least, conversion as a modern audience would recognise it.<sup>33</sup> Dionysus does not preach his “Gospel” to the Indians – or anybody else for that matter. Even though Zeus proclaims in *Book 13* that his son’s mission will be to “teach all nations the rites danced by night and the wine-dark fruit of vintage” (13.6-7, *καὶ ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξει | ὄργια νυκτιχόρευτα καὶ οἴνοπα καρπὸν ὀπώρης*),<sup>34</sup> and Dionysus echoes this plan when he says later on that the captive Indian should “learn Dionysus’ rites danced by night” (*Dion. 27.214, ὄργια νυκτιχόρευτα διδασκέσθω Διονύσου*), nowhere is such “teaching” actually portrayed. The Indians are not explicitly instructed; they neither “see the light” nor “find Dionysus”, like some modern Christian converts “find Jesus”. Collective conversions appear even in the earliest Christian texts, where many among the apostles’ audiences are said to have “heard, believed, and been baptized”.<sup>35</sup> Such a development, however briefly described, would have been part of the horizon of expectations of Nonnus’ audience, and yet it is entirely absent. Even if earlier, Classical Antiquity did not have a notion of conversion as a sweeping “reorientation of the soul”,<sup>36</sup> such a paradigm was already in place by the fifth century,<sup>37</sup> and Nonnus could have chosen to portray the Indians receiving

<sup>32</sup> See STROUMSA 2009, *The End of Sacrifice*, pp. 100-105, with further bibliography on the process by which Christianity’s universalism leads to a dynamic of proselytism and intolerance towards those who do not accept its message.

<sup>33</sup> More on ancient notions of conversion below.

<sup>34</sup> For emphasis on this command in relation to Mat. 28.19-20, *πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*; see LEFTERATOU 2016, *Dionysus’ “Catabasis” to India*, n. 55; also KAUFFMAN 2016, *Nonnus’ Dionysiaca*, p. 748. The latter also draws connections with Eusebius’ portrayal of Constantine as “the emperor chosen by God to conquer and convert the world” (p. 745), and points out (pp. 767-769) that when Iris delivers Zeus’ message to Dionysus, she does not mention rites and teachings, but only violence and annihilation (*Dion. 13.19-20, τεὸς γενέτης σε κελεύει | εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον ἀιστῶσαι γένος Ἰνδῶν*). Dionysus might only receive these genocidal instructions, but he is also doubtlessly aware of his “civilising” and “converting” mission, as *Dion. 27.204-215* (among other passages) suggests.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., *Acts 18.8, καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν Κορινθίων ἀκούοντες ἐπίστευον καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο*.

<sup>36</sup> This is the argument of the classic work by NOCK 1933, *Conversion*; quote from p. 7. Note, however, that from the Hellenistic period onwards some philosophical schools stipulated a “protocol of conversion”, which involved conscious deliberation, contrition, and true change in worldview; see ATHANASSIADI 2015, *Christians and Others*, pp. 25-28. The novelistic *Joseph and Aseneth* also portrays the heroine’s conversion to Judaism in a way that clearly entails a “reorientation” of her soul, but the date of this text is much debated.

<sup>37</sup> Even scholars who argue that the idea of conversion needs to be “retired” for the early Christian period acknowledge that by the fifth century (as Augustine’s example shows) “conversion” can be used in the same way we understand it today; see FREDRIKSEN 2006, *Mandatory Retirement*, p. 233.

Dionysus' message, or learning from him and changing their ways, or modifying their customs to suit their new religious identity.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, the defeat of Nonnus' Indians leads directly to a kind of Roman-style acculturation. One of the Indian chieftains (paradoxically, the most bloodthirsty one)<sup>39</sup> is appointed governor, and there follows a feast where the two former enemy armies take part (*Dion.* 40.234-238):

Παυσάμενος δὲ γόοιο, καὶ ὕδατι γυῖα καθήρας,  
ὤπασε λισσομένοισι θεοῦδέα κοίρανον Ἰνδοῖς, (235)  
κρινάμενος Μωδαῖον· ἐπὶ ξυνῶ δὲ κυπέλλῳ  
Βάκχοις δαιτυμένοισι μιῆς ἤσαντο τραπέζης  
ξανθὸν ὕδωρ πίνοντες ἀπ' οἰνοπόρου ποταμοῦ.

Now resting from his grief, he cleansed his body with water, and assigned a governor for the Indians, choosing the god-fearing Modaeus; they now pacified touched one table with banqueting Bacchoi over a common bowl and drank the yellow water from the wine-breeding river.

If the point here is that even the bloodthirsty Modaeus has been converted to the religion of Dionysus and has miraculously become “god-fearing” from one moment to the next, it is a point that remains surprisingly understated.<sup>40</sup> Scholars have sometimes noted how striking it is that the end of Dionysus' campaign in India omits any clear markers of religious conversion.<sup>41</sup> Bernardette Simon rightly points out that only a hundred lines earlier Protonoe, the daughter of Deriades and wife of Orontes, fears that she will have to perform Dionysus' mysteries (*Dion.* 40.152) – no such performance or initiation into Dionysiac mysteries ever materialises.<sup>42</sup> Again, the ethnographic tradition on Dionysus' conquest of India offered a host of possibilities, which Nonnus conspicuously refuses to take up. Arrian's *Indian History* presents a Dionysus who is true to his mission of conversion: he teaches the Indians how to venerate the gods (and especially himself) and how to perform his dances and rituals.<sup>43</sup> Nonnus'

<sup>38</sup> This last option would have been especially appropriate for such a collective “conversion” on a massive scale. See MCLYNN 2003, *Seeing and Believing*, pp. 251-252 on Procopius' references to the conversion of entire populations or towns under Justinian: the new converts are always said to change their *ἔθη* (“a cluster of specific practices”).

<sup>39</sup> SHORROCK 2007, *Nonnus, Quintus*, pp. 386-387 notes that he appears only once more in the epic (at 32.165-167), “where he is described as a fierce warrior who enjoys bloodshed more than anyone else and prefers fighting to feasting.”

<sup>40</sup> More on miraculous conversions below.

<sup>41</sup> VIAN 1988, *Les cultes païens*, p. 405 speaks of a “desacralization” of Dionysus' campaign, as the god acts more like a general.

<sup>42</sup> See SIMON 1999, *Nonnos de Panopolis*, pp. 128-129 with further bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> Notice the recurrence of the verb διδάσκω in relation to Dionysus in *Historia Indica* 7.8-9, καὶ θεοὺς σέβειν ὅτι ἐδίδαξε Διόνυσος ἄλλους τε καὶ μάλιστα δὴ ἐωυτὸν κυμβαλίζοντας καὶ τυμπανίζοντας· καὶ ὄρησιν δὲ ἐκδιδάξει τὴν σατυρικήν, τὸν κόρδακα παρ' Ἑλλήσι καλούμενον, καὶ κομᾶν [Ἰνδοῦς] τῷ θεῷ μιτρηφορέειν τε ἀναδειῖται καὶ μύρων ἀλοιδᾶς ἐκδιδάξει. In *Anabasis* 6.3.5 Arrian describes the Indians as particularly “fond of the dance” (φιλορχήμονες) as a result of Dionysus' campaign there.

Dionysus is anything but a teacher. On the other hand, Arrian has Dionysus install one of his own companions, “the most Bacchic one” (8.1, τὸν βακχωδέστατον), as king of India. Nonnus’ elevation of a local Indian to the rank of king or governor seems, by comparison, to evoke a more contemporary Roman mindset of military and political assimilation.<sup>44</sup>

Even before we get to the Indians’ defeat, we already have an example regarding the fate, and exceptional mobility, of one particular Indian after the end of the war. In the catalogue of Indian troops, we are informed that after his victory Dionysus will take an extraordinarily pious Indian chieftain with him, and re-settle him in Thebes (*Dion.* 26.66-71):<sup>45</sup>

Παλθάνωρ πρόμος ἦεν, ὃς ἔστυγε Δηριαδῆα  
ἦθεσιν εὐσεβέεσσιν ὁμοφρονέων Διονύσῳ.  
Τὸν μὲν ἄναξ Διόνυσος ἄγων μετὰ φύλοσιν Ἰνδῶν  
ἄλλοδαπὸν ναετῆρα λυροδομήτῳ πόρε Θήβῃ·  
καὶ Δίρκῃ παρέμιμνε λιπὼν πατρῶον Ὑδάσπην, (70)  
Ἄονίου ποταμοῖο πίων Ἰσμῆνιον ὕδωρ.

Their leader was Palthanor, a man of god-fearing ways, who hated Deriades and was of one mind with Dionysus. After the war, Dionysus took this man with him and settled him as a foreign dweller in lyre-built Thebes; there he remained beside Dirce, and drank the Ismenian water of the Aonian river, having left his native Hydaspes.

Whatever the reasons behind Palthanor’s relocation (was it a mark of honour or meant to strengthen Dionysus’ position in Thebes?),<sup>46</sup> it is clear that this Indian chief is not converted by Dionysus and *then* resettled. He is rewarded, if his resettlement is indeed a reward, for the piety he always possessed: at the beginning of the war Palthanor already hated his Indian king. In other words, there is no fundamental change in his behaviour or beliefs, which, on the little information we have, rather seem to remain constant.

Three Books after the end of the war we find some Indians fighting on the side of Dionysus against Poseidon for the hand of Beroe. This Indian contingent is placed under the command of Dionysus’ ally Proteus (*Dion.* 43.227-229):

Ἀμφὶ δέ μιν στεφανηδὸν ἐπέρρειον αἴθοπες Ἴνδοί  
Βάκχου κεκλομένοιο, καὶ οὐλοκόμων στίχες ἀνδρῶν  
φωκάων πολύμορφον ἐπηχύναντο νομῆα.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. CLARKE 1999, *Between Geography and History*, p. 215.

<sup>45</sup> For the after-war migrations of two chieftains from Dionysus’ army, Cretan Asterius (13.241-252) and Phrygian Priasus (13.520-545), and how these subvert classical distinctions between centre and periphery see HADJITTOFI 2011, *Nonnus’ Unclassical Epic*, pp. 32-34.

<sup>46</sup> For strategic relocations of whole populations by the Byzantine state see CAMERON 2006, *The Byzantines*, p. 9.

Round him in a ring rushed the swarthy Indians at the summons of Bacchus, and crowds of the woolly-headed men embraced the shepherd of the seals in his various forms.

Again, this seems to indicate acculturation or, at any rate, political and military submission, rather than conversion. A defeated nation is expected to provide soldiers and fight at the pleasure of its conqueror. What is rather more surprising is that some 150 lines before this passage, in the brief catalogue of Dionysus' troops, the Indian contingent is furnished with its own, local leader (*Dion.* 43.62-66):

πέμπτης δ' ἡγεμόνευε Μελάνθιος, ὄρχαμος Ἴνδῶν,  
ὄν τέκεν Οἰώνη Κισσηιάς· ἀμφὶ δὲ κούρω  
φυταλιῆς πλέξασα θυώδεος ἄκρα πετήλων  
σπάργαλα βοτρύονετα πέριξ εἰλίξατο μήτηρ, (65)  
ὕϊέα χυτλώσασα μέθης ἐγκύμονι ληνῶ.

Melanthius was captain of the fifth, an Indian chief and the son of Oenone the Ivy-one/the one from Cissa: his mother had wrapt her boy in leafy tips of the sweet-smelling vine for swaddlings, and bathed her son in the winepress teeming with strong drink.

This Melanthius is a veritable enigma. First of all, it makes all the difference that the manuscript reading ὄρχαμος Ἴνδῶν is maintained in 43.62. In his edition Friedrich Graefe had emended Ἴνδῶν to ἀνδρῶν, a correction that among other editions is only adopted in Domenico Accorinti's BUR text. Had we not read the later passage about the unambiguously Indian troops ("swarthy" and "woolly-headed") fighting for Dionysus (in 43.227-229), the inclusion of Indians in the Dionysiac catalogue might have looked suspicious. As it is, Melanthius needs to remain "chief of the Indians" and not emended to a generic "chief of men". His very name, "the black flower", is, after all, supremely appropriate for Nonnus' persistently dark-skinned Indians.<sup>47</sup>

What is strange about Melanthius is his background story. We are told that his mother had swaddled him in vine leaves when he was a baby and bathed him "in the winepress teeming with strong drink". There is no indication that a whole generation has passed between Dionysus' conquest of India and his war against Poseidon. The events are narrated as if they take place one very soon after the other. It is also repeatedly highlighted throughout the poem that the Indians do not know wine and Dionysus will be the first one to introduce it in this country. So, how is it possible that an Indian character recently or not long ago recruited by Dionysus already has an exemplary Dionysiac ancestry and infancy? In what follows I will consider two possible answers, one centring

<sup>47</sup> There is an Indian chieftain called Melaneus in *Dion.* 26.257. Paretymologically, the Indian Morrheus' name could also mean "dark"; see LEFTERATOU 2016, *Dionysus' "Catabasis" to India*, n. 39, with further bibliography.

on the name of Melanthius' mother and one on his own name. Neither of the two, however, will be entirely satisfactory and, ultimately, a further re-evaluation of Nonnus' attitude towards the question of conversion will be necessary.

Melanthius' mother is called Oenone, the "Wine-dark-one". Her name is obviously Dionysiac and would hardly be fitting for an Indian character. The only other female name in the poem to have οἶνος in its etymology is the Oenanthe who appears as one of the nurses of Dionysus at *Dion.* 14.225 and later as one of his warrior-Bacchantes at *Dion.* 29.253. Oenone is further qualified as Κισσηιάς. This epithet could mean a number of things: "the one of the ivy" is a possibility that builds on her name's association with wine, and *might* indicate that this woman is not a mere mortal but a tree nymph.<sup>48</sup> At *Dion.* 22.84-113 Nonnus had presented an Indian Hamadryad who gave precious information and instructions to Dionysus against the army of her own country.<sup>49</sup> As a tree nymph, an Indian Oenone would always have had access to superior, Dionysiac knowledge, and would not be bound by the rules of her land. But Κισσηιάς could also mean "the one from Cissa". The Homeric epithet Κισσηίς (used for the Trojan Theano at *Il.* 6.299), although usually glossed as "the daughter of Cisseus",<sup>50</sup> was later adapted by Aeschylus, who gave it the meaning of "Persian", with "Cissa" now denoting the region of Susa.<sup>51</sup> Through the epithet Κισσηιάς Nonnus could be signalling that Melanthius' mother was not a native Indian, but an immigrant. A possible explanation for Melanthius' paradoxically Dionysiac infancy, then, is that his mother possessed Bacchic knowledge, either because of her privileged link with nature as a tree nymph or because she came to India from a more "civilised" part of the world.<sup>52</sup> In any case, the narrator's insistent claim that all Indians were entirely ignorant of Dionysus is undermined: if we decide to read Melanthius' family background this way, we will have to admit that the narrator constructed a "hard border" around the Indians in order to conceal such cases of hybridity (how can we

<sup>48</sup> This is the interpretation favoured in Rouse's 1940 Loeb translation, which renders Κισσηιάς as "the Ivy-nymph". A νύμφη Κισσηίς scourges Lycurgus, appropriately enough using ivy (κισσῶ), at *Dion.* 21.88-89.

<sup>49</sup> On this Indian nymph and representations of tree nymphs in Indian art see STONEMAN 2019, *The Greek Experience of India*, pp. 91-95.

<sup>50</sup> See the D Scholia's definition: Κισσηίς: Κισσέως θυγάτηρ Θεανώ. The Suda and Hesychius (*s.v.*) transmit the exact same definition. Later authors also call Hecuba Κισσηίς; see, e.g., Nicander Fr. 62.

<sup>51</sup> Aeschylus' fragmentary *Memnon* presented its protagonist, who in every other version of the myth is Ethiopian, as a Persian, and his mother as a native of Susa. See Strabo 15.3.2, λέγονται δὲ καὶ Κίσσιοι οἱ Σούσιοι· φησὶ δὲ καὶ Αἰσχύλος τὴν μητέρα Μέμνονος Κισσίαν.

<sup>52</sup> On the eminently civilised reception of wine in the areas of Asia Minor and Syria, as opposed to the violence and resistance that characterise the Hellenic "centre", see HADJITTOFI 2011, *Nonnus' Unclassical Epic*, pp. 37-38.

know if Melanthius is the only exception?),<sup>53</sup> and to champion his god's (and by extension his own) originality on false, or at least very questionable, premises.<sup>54</sup>

Melanthius' own name opens the door to another possible interpretation. The similarity with the name of the Odyssean goatherd Μελανθεύς does not seem to be significant in any way.<sup>55</sup> A more meaningful connection can be made with the Μέλανθος or Μελάνθιος who is the protagonist of the Athenian myth that provides the aetiology of the Apatouria festival.<sup>56</sup> In the fuller version of the story,<sup>57</sup> this hero, who will be called here simply Melanthus, came from Pylos and was a descendant of Nestor. Having been expelled from his native land by the Heraclids, Melanthus settled in Athens, where a war was raging against Boeotia for the possession of a territory called Οἰνώνη. At some point it was agreed that the war would be decided in a duel between the Athenian and Boeotian kings. As the Athenian king, Thymoites, was too afraid (or too old) to face off the Boeotian Xanthus ("Blonde"), he offered the kingship to whom-ever would take his place in the duel. The "black flower" Melanthus thus entered the duel representing the Athenian side and, at the end, defeated Xanthus, but not entirely through his own valour. The legend says that, as he approached the Boeotian king, he shouted that his opponent was not playing by the rules because he had brought along an assistant who was standing behind him. Surprised, Xanthus turned around to see if anybody was indeed behind him, at which point Melanthus stroked and killed him. In some sources Melanthus' cry was simply a ruse meant to distract his opponent; in others he cried out because he had really seen somebody behind Xanthus – either a ghost or Dionysus carrying a black shield.<sup>58</sup> In any case, Melanthus' victory gives rise to the festival of the Apatouria (paronymologically connected with the ἀπάτη in the duel) and the foundation of a shrine for Dionysus Melanaegis ("of the black shield") or Melanthides.

<sup>53</sup> Concealing hybridity is, of course, one of the main functions of all borders; see, e.g., BOYARIN 2004, *Border Lines*.

<sup>54</sup> On this reading, the fact that Dionysus brings to India knowledge that is already there is reminiscent of Pantaenus' zealous mission to preach Christianity in India: according to Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.10.3), when he arrives, Pantaenus finds that Bartholomew had already brought the Gospel to the Indians and taught it to them in Hebrew.

<sup>55</sup> Hom. *Od.* 17.212; for the connection see ACCORINTI 2004, *Nonno, Dionisiache (XL-XLVIII)*, *ad loc.*

<sup>56</sup> For an overview of the sources and an attempt to reconstruct the earliest version see HALLIDAY 1926, *Xanthos-Melanthos*. For a more recent reading of the myth in an initiatory context see BEDNAREK 2014, *Mélange of Melanaegis and Leukaspsis*, who also draws a connection with the duel between Hector and Achilles in *Iliad* 22.

<sup>57</sup> The Augustan-era mythographer Conon; see *FGrH* 26 F 39, preserved in Phot. *Bibl.* 186.138b.

<sup>58</sup> Conon (see n. above) mentions a ghost (φάσμα τι). The Suda (*s.v.* Ἀπατούρια), the *Etymologicum Genuinum* (alpha 1576), and the Scholia in Aristophanes' *Peace* (*Sch. Pac.* 893a) mention Dionysus bearing a black shield. Other sources claim Melanthus lied.

Strikingly, this myth is also alluded to in the *Dionysiaca*, in 27.301-305, where Zeus exhorts Athena to help her brother “of the black shield”, the “Apatourian” son of Thyone, who one day will save Athens by chasing away the Boeotian chieftain.<sup>59</sup> The Athenian Melanthus or Melanthius, who was, therefore, known to Nonnus and his audience, presents an intriguing nexus of associations with his Indian namesake: they are both linked with Dionysus, and both so in a military context; both have connections with feminine names which have οἶνος in their etymology; finally, the blackness suggested by their shared name is significant in both cases: for the Indian Melanthius because it supposedly evokes the colour of his skin; for the Athenian because it creates a starker opposition to the “blonde” Xanthus. Yet, the two figures cannot be one and the same man. The connections, intriguing as they might be, are not enough to suggest identification, and Zeus’ prophecy in *Book 27* clearly places Dionysus’ intervention in the Athenian war against Boeotia in a future (27.303, ῥύσεται) that will never be narrated within the epic.<sup>60</sup> The fact that the poem creates an Indian character using elements that evoke a future Athenian hero is typical of its destabilisation of the categories of centre and periphery and of past and future, but still leaves the Indian Melanthius’ Dionysiac background largely unexplained within the few verses dedicated to him in *Book 43*.

The elliptical narrative concerning Melanthius is, I suggest, indicative of how Nonnus’ Indians can be “converted” at the exact same time as they are absorbed into Dionysus’ “empire”; that is, they become exemplars of their new “religion” the very moment their allegiance shifts from one leader to the other.<sup>61</sup> Conversion and acculturation turn out to be two sides of the same coin. Just as the bloodthirsty Modaeus miraculously became a god-fearing governor carrying out Dionysus’ wishes immediately as the war ended – and with no proselytising or lengthy process of acculturation having been portrayed –, the “converted” Melanthius miraculously acquires a background story that suggests he is, and always has been, a copy of Dionysus, even when he did not in fact *know* Dionysus. The late antique Christian narratives which present conversion as a miraculous event are illustrative of a mindset for which Christian conversion can also be a sort of mystery that bypasses knowledge and

<sup>59</sup> *Dion.* 27.301-305, αἰγίδα σεῖο τίναςσε προασπίζουσα Λυαίου, | σεῖο κασιγνήτου μελαναίγιδος, ὅς σεο πάτρην | ῥύσεται ἐξελάσας Βοιώτιον ἡγεμονῆα | καὶ μέλος ἀείσει ζώαργιον ἀστός Ἑλευθοῦς | πιστὸν ἀνευάζων Ἀπατούριον υἷα Θυώνης.

<sup>60</sup> It might be possible to imagine this Indian Melanthius as the paradoxically original iteration of his more famous Athenian namesake, in the manner of the Indians who prefigure Achaean warriors (see above), but this is not explicitly stated in the poem, and the main feat for which the Athenian is known, the duel, is patently lacking here.

<sup>61</sup> In the same period correct religion gradually becomes interwoven with allegiance to the emperor and empire and, conversely, unauthorised religion is equated with treason; see the sorcery trials of 371-372 AD in Antioch, under the reign of Valentinian and Valens, described by Ammianus Marcellinus in *Res Gestae* 29.1.4-29.2.28.

intentionality,<sup>62</sup> even while a highly more “interiorised” and intentional model of conversion had already been established.<sup>63</sup> Such a late antique narrative is the martyrology of St. Philemon, dating from the fourth century, which tells a story allegedly taking place in the third century, during the persecutions of Diocletian, in the Egyptian city of Antinoopolis.<sup>64</sup> Philemon was a former mime actor turned flute player,<sup>65</sup> beloved by the people, and a pagan. As Diocletian’s decrees commanded that all of the emperor’s subjects sacrificed to the gods, Philemon was bribed to don the outfit of a Christian deacon named Apollonius and perform the sacrifice in his place. Apollonius, the deacon who was too fearful of martyrdom, puts on Philemon’s clothes and keeps his flutes. Philemon appears before the judge disguised and with his face covered, but while preparing for the sacrifice through which he would pledge his allegiance to the emperor and his gods, he all of a sudden becomes a true Christian and refuses to sacrifice.

Philemon’s disguise results in a near comedy of errors, as the judge struggles to establish the culprit’s identity. After determining that he is, in reality, the famous flute player, the judge becomes convinced that his charade is a joke, and informs Philemon that he will be tortured and killed if he is serious. Philemon is, of course, entirely serious and wants to die a martyr. At this point, the exasperated judge informs Philemon that, even if he is tortured and killed, he will not be a martyr, because technically he is not a Christian – he has not yet been baptised. Philemon was apparently unaware of this bureaucratic detail. He asks for a Christian to step forward and baptise him, but of course nobody does so. Philemon then prays; a cloud descends, rains upon him, and he declares himself baptised. Turning down the judge’s pleas for him to think of his popularity and success and reconsider his decision, Philemon denounces his past and asks God to burn his flutes. Indeed, a second cloud, this time of fire, descends from the heavens and burns the flutes in the very hands of Apollonius, who now repents and also wants to die a martyr. A heroic death awaits both the flute player and the deacon.

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g., the late ancient martyrologies in which mime actors pretending to be Christian catechumens being baptised on stage truly become Christians when they are dipped in the water. For an overview of this type of story see LIM 2003, *Converting the Un-Christianizable*. For emphasis on the lack of intentionality in these conversions see ELM 2003, *Marking the Self*.

<sup>63</sup> For the emergence of this intentional model in Late Antiquity see above, esp. n. 37.

<sup>64</sup> The text can be found in *Acta Sanctorum 7* (March, vol. I), pp. 751-753 in Latin, and pp. 887-891 in Greek. According to ATHANASSIADI 2015, *Christians and Others*, pp. 29-30 the third-century edict of Decius set up religion as a pre-requisite of patriotism, and created “a new social and political order which prescribes, and eventually imposes, conformity with the state ideology.”

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of Philemon’s martyrdom with emphasis on his professions and especially his role as a buffoon (*stupidus*) in theatrical mimes see HADJITTOFI – SIVAN (2020), *Staging Rachel*, pp. 321-323.

This story of miraculous conversion, and others like it,<sup>66</sup> demonstrate that late antique Christian conversion is not necessarily a process of conscious and intentional realignment of the self.<sup>67</sup> Although the most famous late antique Christian convert, Augustine, undergoes a transformation from within, not all conversions (real or imagined) stem from the self. As the story of Philemon suggests, it was still possible for a late antique audience to imagine a genuine conversion in which the new Christian was “recruited” almost against his will and ignored the very basics of Christianity. What these stories of conversion perform is a dramatic social and/or political relocation.<sup>68</sup> Philemon becomes an enemy of the emperor the exact moment he joins the ranks of Christ. He condemns his former life as an actor and flute player by asking for his flutes to be burnt on the spot. Just as the socially marginal actor or flute player becomes re-centralised as a Christian martyr (that is, a copy of Christ) from one moment to the next, the geographically marginal Indians are instantaneously transformed into Dionysus’ followers and alter egos; in both cases the radical relocation bypasses the converts’ own agency and comprehension.

This miraculous type of late antique conversion, which starts from the divinity rather than the self, could be part of the reason why Nonnus does not need to present Dionysus as a teacher and the Indians as initiates to his mysteries. The increasingly strong link between “correct” religion and patriotism or loyalty to the “right” emperor means that the very moment Nonnus’ Indians follow Dionysus and not Deriades, their change of political allegiance also indicates a change of religious allegiance, irrespective of how much they actually know of or have been “enlightened” by Dionysus. This is, after all, the age when the “seal of baptism” and the emperor’s seal become conceptually interchangeable.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> ELM 2003, *Marking the Self*, pp. 56-61 considers the story of St Pelagia the mime actress and prostitute, who quit her profession to become the hermit Pelagios the moment she was instantaneously, and almost miraculously, converted by Nonnus the bishop. See also JACOBS 2016, *Epiphanius of Cyprus*, p. 89 for the “several not-quite conversions” of a Jewish man called Joseph who “was deemed worthy of holy baptism” when some Jews threw him into a river to drown after they found him reading borrowed copies of the Gospels. If being thrown into the river is considered to be his definitive conversion, it certainly was forced upon him.

<sup>67</sup> In any case, ancient people (and in many parts of the world modern ones too) had limited freedom to choose their religion; see CAMERON 2015, *Christian Conversion*, p. 14. Even Church Fathers, however, saw the catechumens’ active participation in their conversion as secondary to the divinity’s powerful intervention; see ELM 2003, *Marking the Self*, pp. 63-68 on Gregory of Nazianzus’ views on baptism.

<sup>68</sup> On the impact of social and political power on the religious landscape and how this intertwining can result in false conversions (which are not, however, my concern here) see, e.g., ANDO 1996, *Pagan Apologetics*, pp. 199-205. For conversion as a “fundamental political realignment” see MCLYNN 2003, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 252; as a “political flashpoint” that turns the convert into a hybrid (following postcolonial criticism) see NASRALLAH 2006, *The Rhetoric of Conversion*, p. 467, with further bibliography.

<sup>69</sup> See ELM 2003, *Marking the Self*, p. 65. HERNÁNDEZ DE LA FUENTE 2020, *A Dionysian μετάνοια* appeared too late for me to engage with it meaningfully.

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